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# The Nature of Poetics

Cognitively challenging and constantly (re)examined by poetics, “nature” writing reveals the complex dynamic network of relations between the natural and the “technical” dimensions of poetics. (...) Probably if this term were not used for other purposes, we would talk about poetics as biotechnology.

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# The Nature of Poetics

Tomasz Mizerkiewicz

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*Literary texts which address and engage with the subject of nature, documenting the experience of nature and questioning the boundary between the human and the more-than-human, seem to touch upon poetics not only as far as the so-called “eco-poetics” is concerned, but also in general. Cognitively challenging and constantly (re)examined by poetics, “nature” writing reveals the complex dynamic network of relations between the natural and the “technical” dimensions of poetics. Poetics develops in the midst of the interactions between the human and the more-than-human, and the two constantly exchange agencies. Only at certain times in its history could it appear to be the domain of reason, and these approaches were repeatedly undermined, showing dependencies, analogies, and unnoticed genealogies leading to natural sources. Probably if this term were not used for other purposes, we would talk about poetics as biotechnology.*



*The complex relation between the natural and the technical can be observed today in their many historical forms. Marcin Leszczyński shows how ancient and modern astronomical theories inspired Adam Mickiewicz's and Juliusz Słowacki's Romantic poetry. Joanna Soćko writes about the connections between human immanence and the opposing transcendence which ultimately culminate in "dirty" transcendence, the literary images of which she examines, demonstrating that they remain in constant productive contact. Recapitulating the theoretical findings of ecocriticism, Patryk Szaj shows how literature and literary studies engage with environmental "hyperobjects" (Timothy Morton's term), insofar as poetry cannot be separated from the decisive, impactful, influence of nature. And since we are constantly reminded of and come back to the stories of nature taking its terrible, if unconscious, revenge on humanity, researchers also turn to images of the terrifying, untamed and defiantly more-than-human nature (Agnieszka Budnik's article on Henry David Thoreau and Stanisław Witkiewicz, Bartosz Kowalczyk's essay on Lovecraft). Anna Gawarecka also engages with this question in her text, writing about a Czech novel about an aquarius who decides to become a terrorist, which shows the theme of nature-as-a-threat in a new light. Respectively, film is also able to show nature which imposes its laws on people in a very creative manner – Marek Kaźmierczak writes about the adaption of Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz's novel Znachor [The Quack], analysing the powerful image of the significant dependence of the human on the more-than-human.*

*Two translations of Croatian ecocritical texts are of special importance in this issue of Forum of Poetics. Goran Đurđević and Suzana Marjanić comment on parallel (but not necessarily convergent) research fields. Drawing on different corpora of texts and different traditions of cultural relations with nature, Đurđević and Marjanić reveal different natures of poetics, but together they respond to the "acceleration" of disturbing ecocritical reflection.*

*Polish criticism also engages in a dialogue with the problems raised by Đurđević and Marjanić. Piotr Bogalecki meticulously reconstructs the beginnings of Krystyna Miłobędzka's poetry, with particular focus on the poetically discovered intersections between the human and the more-than-human. Katarzyna Niesporek writes about Tadeusz Śliwiak's poetry and his image of nature wounded by people. Klaudia Jakubowicz, on the other hand, writes about the images of waste in the works of the Nobel Prize winner Olga Tokarczuk, who runs a personal campaign against plastic. Marek Hendrykowski, in turn, looks at the issues at hand from a completely different perspective, describing his personal, and very emotional reaction, to Joanna Rajkowska's art installation Rhizopolis. Reviews of two monographs devoted to the works of Andrzej Stasiuk (Paweł Dziel) and the multidisciplinary works by Witkacy (Aleksandra Kosicka-Pajewska) only seemingly concern other matters, since Stasiuk is one of the most consistent contemporary Polish nature writers, and the problem of the "shadow" in Witkacy's works immediately evokes the boundary between the human and the more-than-human.*

*It is sometimes said that nature has claimed its own. In this issue of Forum of Poetics, nature claimed its own in poetics.*

# *The Time is Out of Joint.*

## Anthropocene and Ecocentric Reading of Literary Texts

Patryk Szaj

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these are those things that *will have had to have been*, that *will have had to yet occur*<sup>1</sup>

Evelyn Reilly

How then to write literary criticism in a time of acknowledged mass extinction without just seeming absurd? How far is such writing vulnerable to the claim that we are still denying or negotiating with the Anthropocene by trying to squeeze it into conventional categories? The insidious effect of the Anthropocene, as an emergent phenomenon with drastically revisionist after-effects, is that what most people take for normality must drift towards being a form of environmental denial<sup>2</sup>.

Timothy Clark

### Anthropocene's hauntology

On 21st May 2019, the Working Group on the Anthropocene recommended to officially recognize a new geological epoch (29 out of 33 members voted in favor of this recommendation)<sup>3</sup>. Regardless of whether this term<sup>4</sup> is accurate, the awareness that the Holocene – an epoch of a stable

<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Reilly, *Apocalypse* (New York: Roof Books, 2012), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 48–49.

<sup>3</sup> See “Working Group on the ‘Anthropocene’”, b.d., <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>.

<sup>4</sup> See Ewa Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka. Retoryka i marazm antropocenu* [Man's epoch. Anthropocene's rhetoric and stagnation] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018), 77–103.

climate conducive to the development of human civilizations and life – is over, is an incentive to reorient research interests of not just environmental<sup>5</sup>, but also general humanities. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne, editors of *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis*, identify two powerful, convincing claims expressed in the Anthropocene hypothesis, which cannot be ignored by the humanities and social sciences: one, people have become a telluric force, transforming the way the Earth functions, and two, the human (and inhumane, one might add) inhabitants of the planet will experience a global environmental change of unprecedented speed and scale<sup>6</sup>. This means that a new geological regime has come. In a smaller, human dimension, it also means the ultimate question of a “modern constitution” that will demand the treatment of society and nature as two separate orders, and to limit the agency of human actions only to the former (and to simply ignore the agency of non-human actors)<sup>7</sup>.

“«*The time is out of joint*»: time is *disarticulated*, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down, *deranged*, both out of order and mad. Time is off its hinges, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted”<sup>8</sup> – Jacques Derrida wrote in 1993. It seems that today those (not early) considerations have only become more up to date; Anthropocene is the time of disaster, but also *a disaster of time*. If etymologically *katastrophe* means “overturning, a sudden turn”, a catastrophe of time boils down to denying its very linearity: it turns out that it simultaneously runs in several directions. Anachrony, dislocation, *dis-locatio* (literally disturbance from a proper, original, or usual place or state: rejection of phantasmic proximity of the “current” and the “present”) concerns time as such, and instead bonding it anew, we should radically reconsider its disadjustment with itself.

Is it not what experiencing Anthropocene is about? Clive Hamilton stresses that the term does not simply mean *advancing* escalation of the environmental-climate crisis, but a paradigmatic change of planetary climate conditions: *disarticulation* in the functioning of the Earth system understood as a whole. The Great Acceleration – the period which started after WW2 – is considered one of the most stratigraphically reliable moments of the beginning of the Anthropocene<sup>9</sup> – hence it divides the history of the Earth into two mismatched parts<sup>10</sup>. Authors of one of the most cited papers on the Anthropocene, *The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?*, Will Steffen, Paul Crutzen and John McNeill, write about a “planetary shift”, i.e., a deep transformation of the relationships between humanity and all the other

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino, eds., *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (London-New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Clive Hamilton, “A New Anthropocentrism”, in *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (Crows Nest: Allen&Unwin, 2017), who states that the Anthropocene is more likely to develop a “new Anthropocene” than posthumanist tendencies.

<sup>6</sup> Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne, “Thinking the Anthropocene”, in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, edited by Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3–4.

<sup>7</sup> See Bruno Latour, *Nigdy nie byliśmy nowocześni. Studium z antropologii symetrycznej* [We have never been modern], translation into Polish by Maciej Gdula (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Widma Marksa. Stan długu, praca żałoby i nowa międzynarodówka*, translated into Polish by Tomasz Żałuski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2016), 42. English version: *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (Psychology Press, 1994), 18.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Will Steffen et al., “The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration”, *Anthropocene Review*, 2015. The tables presented in the paper, clearly indicating exponential growth in various socio-economic trends and trend of Earth systems after 1950, are especially instructive.

<sup>10</sup> Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth. The Fate of the Humans in the Anthropocene* (Crows Nest: Allen&Unwin, 2017).

actors of this world: “Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary terra incognita”<sup>11</sup>. The problem is not that cumulative effects of anthropopressure are increasingly more poignant, but that they result in a complete unpredictability of what will happen with Earth’s systems in the next few decades. Jason W. Moore, a critic of the term “Anthropocene”, is of a similar opinion. He states that “The news is not good on planet Earth. Humanity—and the rest of life with it—is now on the threshold of what Earth system scientists call a «state shit»”<sup>12</sup>. Finally, Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall observe that the basic premise of all Anthropocene theories is the conviction of a complete break with the past and an irreversible change of the human condition<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, it can be said that the Anthropocene is the destination of modernity. Regardless of whether it is true that we have never been modern (Bruno Latour<sup>14</sup>), or whether we have – for a short while (Timothy Morton<sup>15</sup>), it is certain that we will never be modern again: linear human history has been broken by deep geological time. Earth has once again become a full-fledged actor responsible for – according to Latour – “a surprising inversion of background and foreground” that has taken place; now “it is *human* history that has become frozen and *natural* history that is taking on a frenetic pace”<sup>16</sup>.

We should add that for a long time climate experts have been stressing that climate changes are *nonlinear*, which means that they are not directly proportional to initial climate conditions. This is because of negative and positive feedback loops, i.e., when the climate system responds in a way which weakens or reinforces the effect of the factor which disturbs the balance. In the Anthropocene there are mostly positive feedback loops, because anthropopressure disturbs the fast carbon cycle<sup>17</sup>, consequently affecting the slow carbon cycle as well, i.e., the “processes of carbon exchange over long (thousands and hundreds thousand years) time («geological» time)”<sup>18</sup>, and which play the role of thermostat for the Earth. What is significant, feedback loops differ in terms of how fast they work – some operate on a geological scale, over thousands of years, whereas others operate on a human scale, over a few years or even a few weeks, whereby in principle positive feedback loops manifest themselves faster than negative<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>11</sup>Paul Crutzen, Will Steffen, and John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?”, *Ambio* 8, No 36 (2007): 614.

<sup>12</sup>Jason W. Moore, “Introduction: Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism”, w *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>13</sup>T. Boes and K. Marshall, “Writing the Anthropocene: An Introduction”, *The Minnesota Review* 2014, No 83 (2014): 62. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Human Condition in the Anthropocene”, *The Tanner Lectures in Human Values*, 2015.

<sup>14</sup>Latour, *Nigdy nie byliśmy nowocześni. Studium z antropologii symetrycznej* [We have never been modern].

<sup>15</sup>Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1–24.

<sup>16</sup>Bruno Latour, “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene”, *New Literary History* 45, No 1 (2014): 12.

<sup>17</sup>See e.g. Crutzen, Steffen, and McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?”; Justin McBrien, “Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene”, in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 116–37.

<sup>18</sup>Magdalena Budziszewska, Aleksandra Kardaś, and Zbigniew Bohdanowicz, (eds.) *Klimatyczne ABC* [The ABC of climate] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2021), 39.

<sup>19</sup>See Budziszewska, Kardaś, and Bohdanowicz, 186–92.



Another climatology notion indicating the nonlinearity of climate change is the concept of planetary critical points, i.e., threshold points for given parameters, the value at which an increment for the control variable (e.g., temperature) triggers a larger change in the response variable through feedbacks in the natural Earth system itself in such a way that it seeks a different balance<sup>20</sup>. The process is thus irreversible (in terms of human time scales). Moreover, “notifications” sent by planetary boundaries are, so to say, late: we only learn about a critical point being reached when it is too late to stop the consequences<sup>21</sup>.

In Earth-system science there is also the concept of nine planetary boundaries proposed in 2009 by Johan Rockström and his team – crossing these boundaries can cause a nonlinear, sudden environmental change. Three of them, climate change, disturbed nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, and biodiversity loss have already happened. Three more, ocean acidification, depletion of freshwater, and changes in land use (related to deforestation and development of agriculture) are worryingly close to their critical thresholds<sup>22</sup>. All these transformations are irreversible, which is why the editors of *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis* are unafraid to claim that the Earth system has already entered a different trajectory than in the Holocene – and it is moving fast along it<sup>23</sup>.

The authors of the textbook *Klimatyczne ABC* [ABC of climate] employ a graphic contrast which visualizes the pace at which this process is happening in terms of geological categories: “moving from the last ice age meant an increase in average temperatures by 3-3.5 degrees Celsius over circa eight thousand years, which gave various species much more time for migrations etc. Currently we are dealing with such a change over 100-200 years”<sup>24</sup>. In this context, Timothy Morton’s words are worth quoting:

I read that 75 percent of global warming effects will persist until five hundred years from now. I try to imagine what life was like in 1513. Thirty thousand years from now, ocean currents will have absorbed more of the carbon compounds, but 25 percent will still hang around in the atmosphere. The half-life of plutonium-239 is 24,100 years. These periods are as long as all of visible human history thus far. [...] But 7 percent of global Warming effects will still be occurring one hundred thousand years from now as igneous rocks slowly absorb the last of the greenhouse gases. I have decided to call these timescales the *horrifying*, the *terrifying*, and the *petrifying*<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>20</sup>See Budziszewska, Kardaś, and Bohdanowicz, 32–35.

<sup>21</sup>For example, this is the case with Greenland’s ecosystem, as announced in 2020 by Michaela King and her team. This means that Greenland’s ice will not stop melting, even if we stopped all greenhouse emission: every year more ice melts than new snowfall can make up for (Michaela D. King et al., “Dynamic ice loss from the Greenland Ice Sheet driven by sustained glacier retreat”, *Communications Earth & Environment* 1, No 1 (2020). The continental ice sheet of West Antarctica is also inevitable (Marcin Popkiewicz and Szymon Malinowski, “Rozpad lądolodu Antarktydy Zachodniej nieunikniony” [The disintegration of West Antarctica’s continental ice sheet is inevitable], *Nauka o klimacie*, 2015, <https://naukaoklimacie.pl/aktualnosci/rozpad-ladolodu-antarktydy-zachodniej-nieunikniony-77>.)

<sup>22</sup>See Johan Rockström et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity”, *Ecology and Society* 14, nr 2 (2009).

<sup>23</sup>Hamilton, Bonneuil, and Gemenne, “Thinking the Anthropocene”, 11.

<sup>24</sup>Budziszewska, Kardaś, and Bohdanowicz, *Klimatyczne ABC*, 96.

<sup>25</sup>Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 58–59. The last adjective – *petrifying* – is crucial for Morton, because it alludes to the fact that human remains also become fossils over deep geological time.

So, we live in at least two times simultaneously: in “regular” human history, and in geohistory, which is (seemingly) taking place alongside us<sup>26</sup>. The deep geological future is already here. Paradoxically, this future comes from the *past* – each ton of CO<sub>2</sub> (or its equivalent in the form of greenhouse gases) has been released into the atmosphere since the 18th century. In Derrida’s words: “[...] what seems to be out front, the future, comes back in advance: from the past, from the back”<sup>27</sup>.

However, if hauntology<sup>28</sup> helps us understand that “time is out of joint”, it gives one more lesson: a lesson in protest against apocalyptic logics. The end of the world (as we know it<sup>29</sup>) is not an end of the world (in general): specters that haunt us come both from the past and the future (what will come in the future [*l’à-venir*])<sup>30</sup>: messianic promise for all people... and, what was foreshadowed in Derrida’s<sup>31</sup> subsequent works, non-people, or monstrous new forms of categorization, domestication, and colonization). Hence the Anthropocene is not just crisis time, it is also *kairotic* time: a turning, critical point, a time that indicates the urgency of challenges and the necessary, ultimate, conclusive decision, on which the future depends – not just for humanity, but for all actors of this world. This aspect is stressed by Michael Northcott, who states that we can no longer understand time in terms of *chronos* (“successive cyclical passing of day and night, moment by moment, generation by generation”), but rather in terms of *kairos* (“moments in time which herald great or sudden change, or the need for change”<sup>32</sup>). In Derrida’s words: “In the experience of the end, in its insistent, instant, always imminently eschatological coming, at the extremity of the extreme today, there would thus be announced the future of what comes”<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>26</sup>See Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Klimat historii. Cztery tezy” [The Climate of History: Four Theses], translated into Polish by Magda Szcześniak, *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2014): 168–99.

<sup>27</sup>Derrida, *Widma Marksa. Stan długu, praca żałoby i nowa międzynarodówka*, 30. [Page 10 of the English version]

<sup>28</sup>On hauntology see e.g. Jakub Momro, *Widmontologie nowoczesności. Genezy* [Hauntologies of modernity. Origins] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2014); Andrzej Marzec, *Widmontologia. Teoria filozoficzna i praktyka artystyczna ponowoczesności* [Hauntology. Philosophical theory and artistic practice of post-modernity] (Warszawa: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2015); Agata Bielik-Robson and Piotr Sadzik, (eds.). *Widma Derridy* [Derrida’s specters] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018). On employing Derrida’s thought in conceptualizing the Anthropocene’s problems see e.g. the thematic issue *Deconstruction in the Anthropocene* *czasopisma Oxford Literary Review* 34, No 2 (2012); Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2014); Boes and Marshall, “Writing the Anthropocene: An Introduction”.

<sup>29</sup>See Immanuel Wallerstein, *Koniec świata jaki znamy* [The End of the World as We Know It], translated into Polish by Michał Bilewicz, Adam W. Jelonek, and Krzysztof Tyszką (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Scholar, 2004); Claus Leggewie and Harald Welzer, *Koniec świata, jaki znaliśmy. Klimat, przyszłość i szanse demokracji* [The End of the World as We once Knew it: the Climate, the Future and the Prospects for Democracy], translated into Polish by Piotr Buras (Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2012).

<sup>30</sup>Derrida, *Widma Marksa. Stan długu, praca żałoby i nowa międzynarodówka*, 14.

<sup>31</sup>See Jacques Derrida, *L’Animal que donc je suis* (Paris: Galilée, 2006); Jacques Derrida, *Séminaire La bête et le souverain*, t. 1 (Paris: Galilée, 2008); Jacques Derrida, *Séminaire La bête et le souverain*, t. 2 (Paris: Galilée, 2010).

<sup>32</sup>Michael Northcott, “Eschatology in the Anthropocene: From the Chronos of Deep Time to the Kairos of the Age of Humans”, in *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*, red. Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne (London-New York: Routledge, 2015), 107.

<sup>33</sup>Derrida, *Widma Marksa. Stan długu, praca żałoby i nowa międzynarodówka*, 70–71 [Page 37 of the English version]. It is especially crucial for e.g. postcolonial ecocriticism focused on environmental justice issues and (human and non-human) climate migrations. See e.g. Andrew Baldwin, “Postcolonial Futures: Climate, Race, and the Yet-to-Come”, *ISLE Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 24, No 2 (2017); Serpil Oppermann, “Introducing Migrant Ecologies in an (Un)bordered World”, *ISLE Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 24, No 2 (2017).

From this perspective Boes and Marshall's reinterpretation of the Anthropocene is very interesting. They point out to the fact that the names of three previous geological epochs – the Pliocene, Pleistocene and Holocene mean “new time”, “newer time”, and “completely new time”, respectively. Thus, the Anthropocene can be understood not only as “man's epoch” (including all of its anthropocentrism and exceptionalism), but as the “time of new man”, *anthropos kainos*<sup>34</sup>, man more-than-human, sympoietic<sup>35</sup>, associated with other actors of this world.

Morton's reflection goes in the same direction. He puts forward a provocative thesis that the end of the world has already happened. What he means is the phenomenological concept of the world, which has become inoperative with the arrival of hyperobjects – products of the Anthropocene which escape human understanding and control, going beyond human spatiotemporal scales<sup>36</sup>. For “the world” was something that – according to Martin Heidegger's famous lesson<sup>37</sup> – “belonged” only to man, whereas the other actors were either “impoverished” in it (e.g., animals), or completely deprived of it (e.g., inanimate matter). According to Morton, this “world” has not just come to an end – it never existed. From the perspective of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, “Human beings lack a world for a very good reason: because *no entity at all* has a world”<sup>38</sup>. Instead of “the world” there is closeness, connection, mixing, entanglement, “a number of unique beings (farmers, dogs, irises, pencils, LEDs, and so on) to whom I owe an obligation through the simple fact that existence is coexistence. I don't have to run through my worlding checklist to ensure that the nonhuman in question counts as something I could care for”<sup>39</sup>.

The end of the world has happened for one more, no less important reason. Referring to the findings of quantum physics, Morton proves that the linear concept of time is a purely aesthetic phenomenon. Time turns out to be folded in a Derridean style – it does not play the role of “background” where the existence of things takes place. Quite the opposite: every object exists in its own temporality, and different temporalities are constantly overlapping. Hyperobjects, i.e., “entities that are massively distributed in time exert downward causal pressure on shorter-lived entities. Thus, one vivid effect of global warming has been phenomenological asynchrony: the way plant and animal life events have gone out of sync”<sup>40</sup>. Hence the horrifying, the terrifying, and the petrifying temporal scales of the Anthropocene. When I look at petroleum, I look into Earth's past. When I burn fossil fuels, the past is drilling into my present. This is why the end of the world is not a sudden, apocalyptic event – it is

<sup>34</sup>Boes and Marshall, “Writing the Anthropocene: An Introduction”, 61.

<sup>35</sup>On sympoiesis, see Donna J. Haraway, “Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene”, in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).

<sup>36</sup>On hyperobjects see also Anna Barcz, “Przedmioty ekozagłady. Spekulatywna teoria hiperobiektów Timothy'ego Mortona i jej (możliwe) ślady w literaturze” [Objects of eco-annihilation. Timothy Morton's speculative theory of hyperobjects and its (possible) traces in literature], *Teksty Drugie* 2 (2018): 75–87.

<sup>37</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt-Endlichkeit-Einsamkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983).

<sup>38</sup>Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*, 108.

<sup>39</sup>Morton, 125.

<sup>40</sup>Morton, 67.

something that stretches into deep geological time. This – as Morton puts it – is the “spectral” reality of the Anthropocene<sup>41</sup>.

## Ecocriticism in the times of the Anthropocene

So – how to conduct literary studies in times of a planetary environmental-climate crisis? Is it not true that literary studies, uninterested in the paradigmatic shift in the Anthropocene, seem anachronistic – not in the hauntological, but axiological sense: inadequate for today's challenges? Is it not true that modes of anthropocentric reading constitute shrinking from responsibility? And finally: is it not true that Anthropocenic discourse has posed serious challenges to ecocriticism so far?

Timothy Clark is among scholars who are trying to answer these questions. He treats the Anthropocene as a “threshold concept,” and questions the basic dogma of ecocriticism (as explained by Lawrence Buell) according to which the ecological crisis is also a crisis of the imagination<sup>42</sup>, and of questions such as “can poetry can save the Earth?”, “can the act of writing and careful reading save the planet?”<sup>43</sup>. According to Clark, too many ecocritics have fallen prey to the illusion that environmental problems can be solved using cultural means, whereas “exaggerating the significance of the imaginary is related to reinforcing something like a diversionary side-show, blind to its own insignificance”<sup>44</sup> compared to the power of the material means of production, eating habits, energy consumption, reproductive trends, etc. This kind of awareness has been present in ecocriticism for a long time now – for example, already in 2002 Kate Rigby stressed that “it is important to acknowledge the influence of social, political and economic structures in the perpetuation, transformation and displacement of those vies of nature which are conveyed by the texts of culture”<sup>45</sup>, also the growing methodological awareness of ecocriticism related to evolution from the first to the fourth wave<sup>46</sup> was concerned with identifying its own weaknesses. Nonetheless, according to Clark crossing the threshold of the Anthropocene has completely turned the tables:

<sup>41</sup>Morton, 194.

<sup>42</sup>Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2. In an interview with W.S. Merwin conducted by Julia Fiedorczuk there is an even stronger statement: “tylko wyobraźnia może nas uratować” [Only imagination can save us] (W.S. Merwin and Julia Fiedorczuk, “Już tylko o ogrodach” [Only about gardens now], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 2013, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/juz-tylko-o-ogrodach-19688>).

<sup>43</sup>See John Felstiner, *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Ken Hiltner, “General Introduction”, in *Ecocriticism. The Essential Reader*, edited by Ken Hiltner (London-New York: Routledge, 2015) (the second quotation: Aleksandra Ubortowska, “‘Mówić w imieniu biotycznej wspólnoty’. Anatomie i teorie tekstu środowiskowego” [Speaking on behalf of the biotic community. Anatomies and theories of the environmental text], *Teksty Drugie*, No 2 (2018): 18).

<sup>44</sup>Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, 21.

<sup>45</sup>Kate Rigby, “Ecocriticism”, in *Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century*, red. Julian Wolfreys (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 157. See also “Reconnecting the Social and the Ecological” from the same text.

<sup>46</sup>See e.g. Ubortowska, “‘Mówić w imieniu biotycznej wspólnoty’. Anatomie i teorie tekstu środowiskowego” [Speaking on behalf of the biotic community. Anatomies and theories of an environmental text].

The Anthropocene names a newly recognized context that entails a chastening recognition of the limits of cultural representation as a force of change in human affairs, as compared to the numerous economic, meteorological, geographical and microbiological factors and population dynamics, as well as scale effects, such as the law of large numbers that arise from trying to think on a planetary scale<sup>47</sup>.

It is those effects of scale that are central to Clark's considerations. His starting point is a reference to the concept of the three levels of complexity of technology/human interactions by Braden R. Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz<sup>48</sup>. Level 1 is about instrumentally treating technology as a simple tool. On level 2 this tool is incorporated into complex sociotechnical systems, which are less predictable and more complex. On level 3, complications and unpredictability have even more serious implications – it is the level of radical contingency, which Clark compares to Morton's hyperobjects due to the fact that it escapes our capabilities to model, predict, or even understand.

While interpretations related to levels 1 and 2 dominate in traditional cultural, political, and ecological models – as well as in traditional literary studies – “a growing number of events and problems of the Anthropocene are appearing on level 3, rendering those ways of thinking which are limited to levels 1 and 2 archaic, even if those levels still describe the ways most people think.”<sup>49</sup> As Allenby and Sarewitz explain, if one understands it, it is not true – and if it is true, you cannot understand it<sup>50</sup>.

In Clark's reflection, multidimensional contradictions between the human and planetary scales come to the fore. He establishes “terrestriality” as the norm which he – similarly to Morton – contrasts with “the world”. It is mostly about the need to extend the “normal” temporal and spatial scales of the Anthropocene, and the fallacy of commonsensical conceptualizations of “the world of life”, and at the same time Earth's agency as a(n) (menacing and *sovereign*, as Latour would put it<sup>51</sup>) actor. Importantly, the non-intuitive character of this extension results not only from cultural habits, but from deeper evolutionary conditionings of *Homo sapiens*. From the evolutionary perspective, we are adjusted to reacting to sudden, direct threats, rather than those that are long-term and abstract. The thing is that the Anthropocene reveals something like an ironic “double entanglement” between the biological limitations of human perception and the extent to which this perception is maladjusted to the detachment that is taking place:

We understand distance, time, and breadth in terms of the given dimensionality of our embodied existence [...]. This is not a merely cultural matter, susceptible of change by cultural means, but a given, unavoidable mode of reading things [...]. The Anthropocene entails the realization how deeply this scale may be misleading [...]<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>47</sup>Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, 21.

<sup>48</sup>See Braden R. Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz, *The Techno-Human Condition* (MIT Press, 2018).

<sup>49</sup>Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, 9.

<sup>50</sup>Allenby i Sarewitz, *The Techno-Human Condition*, 186.

<sup>51</sup>Latour, “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene”, 6.

<sup>52</sup>Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, 30.



It forces one to look critically also at many insights formulated by more recent currents of ecocriticism. Clark remains skeptical of, for example, material ecocriticism, and the concept of embodied embeddedness, which on the one hand are trying to restore the relationship between man and other matter (simultaneously highlighting the agency of the matter itself)<sup>53</sup>, and on the other, are characterized by “transcendental stupidity”<sup>54</sup> – being limited to the closest “world of life”: actors with whom we are directly connected. Similarly to Morton, Clark thinks that the world understood in this way is at best an epiphenomenon, and at worst – a phantasm concealing elusiveness, intellectual difficulty, and the non-intuitive nature of everyday life in the Anthropocene. Latour puts the same question analogically: “things have become so urgent and violent that the somewhat pacific project of a contract among parties seems unreachable. War is infinitely more likely than contract. [...] Words such as *symbiosis*, *agreement*, *accord*, all those ideals of deep ecology smack of an earlier, less benighted time. Since then everything has taken a turn for the worse”<sup>55</sup>.

Those latter qualities are related to the “emergency” status of the Anthropocene as an event whose newness does not find any adequate discourse. By any means, the Anthropocene can be called an effect of a radical and unpredictable emergency in the condition of the world, a proliferation of a situation of the third level of complexity<sup>56</sup>. It is this emergency that decides the anachrony inscribed in the Anthropocene’s condition: our cognitive, ethical, political, social, etc. paradigms prove to be deeply inadequate for the challenges we are facing. This also applies to hitherto reading norms and beliefs regarding the conditions that a reliable interpretation of literary texts should meet:

The cognitive and ethical claims of the Anthropocene underline just how deeply a text is not completely “understood” by being resituated solely in the cultural context of its time of production. It jumps out, lingers and may have unexpected consequences<sup>57</sup>.

Interpretation as a kind of activity merging together different senses of a literary text is in opposition to the Anthropocene’s lesson – “ecocritical reading cannot just be some act of supposed retrieval, but now becomes also a measure of irreversible break in consciousness and understanding, an emergent unreadability”<sup>58</sup>. A postulate of reading a text in a way accommodating for cumulative effects of scale, which “at a certain, indeterminate threshold, numerous human activities, insignificant in themselves (heating a house, clearing trees, flying between the continents, forest management), come together to form a new, imponderable physical event, altering the basic ecological cycles of the planet”<sup>59</sup>. Interpreting literary texts with this awareness means implementing mass- and multiple-scale reading, despite the fact that divergent scale effects are incompatible as they escape traditional plots limited to interpersonal

<sup>53</sup>See e.g. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, ed., *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

<sup>54</sup>Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, 38.

<sup>55</sup>Latour, “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene”, 5.

<sup>56</sup>Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, 47.

<sup>57</sup>Clark, 65.

<sup>58</sup>Clark, 62.

<sup>59</sup>Clark, 72.

dramas, and even inventive models of zoo- or eco-poetics<sup>60</sup>. Clark distinguishes three interpretative scales: the first is related to experiences of an individual protagonist or protagonists of a text, the second – the most common in literature studies – extends to national cultures and its representatives in terms of space, and in terms of time to a certain “historical period” significant for the text’s message. In the context of the Anthropocene, the third is the most important and at the same time most difficult to imagine: in it, the effects of scale cumulate and start to slowly overshadow conventional reading. In terms of time, it can stretch over *at least* several centuries, and in terms of space – over the whole planet. It is also the scale which takes on a dehumanized outlook on human actions.

For example, let us consider a poem by Julia Fiedorczuk from the volume *Tlen* [Oxygen], *Płynie Wisła, płynie* [Vistula is flowing, flowing]:

across the Polish land  
if anything is alive there  
it will soon die<sup>61</sup>

Here the first case is actually irrelevant – indirect lyric poetry indicates a reflection that goes beyond the individual level, momentarily referring to the second scale: the poem alludes to a patriotic hymn by Edmund Wasilewski both in terms of content and form, including its characteristic syncope rhythm. But why does the text employ this intertextual reference? In answer to this question, I need to turn on the third scale: I am beginning to consider such issues as like the contamination of groundwater with side-effects of industrial meat production, soil eutrophication due to nitrogen-phosphorus fertilizers (one of the three crossed planetary boundaries), biodiversity loss (second out of three crossed planetary boundaries), and finally steppe-formation and increasingly burdensome droughts (“all time low” levels of water in the Vistula announced every year).

Actually, Fiedorczuk’s poem is not representative for Clark’s considerations. What he intends is to also include texts that were beyond the scope of the interests of traditional ecocriticism (e.g. they did not match the definition of “environmental texts” by Lawrence Buell<sup>62</sup>, although we should bear in mind that second-wave ecocriticism postulated reading texts which were not explicitly about “nature”, and that Buell also coined the term “ecological unconsciousness”<sup>63</sup>), i.e., an ecocritical interpretation of any kind of texts, *especially*

<sup>60</sup>See e.g. Kate Rigby, “Earth, World, Text: On the (Im) possibility of Ecopoiesis”, *New Literary History* 35, No 3 (2004); Anna Barcz, *Realizm ekologiczny. Od ekokrytyki do zookrytyki w literaturze polskiej* [Ecological realism. From ecocriticism to zoocriticism in the Polish literature] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Śląsk, 2016); Anita Jarzyna, *Post-koiné. Studia o nieantropocentrycznych językach (poetyckich)* [Studies in non-anthropocentric (poetic) languages] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2019); Julia Fiedorczuk and Gerardo Balrán, *Ekopoetyka. Ekologiczna obrona poezji* [Ecopoetics. Ecological defense of poetry] (Warszawa: Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego, Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2020).

<sup>61</sup>Julia Fiedorczuk, *Tlen* (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2009), 23:  
po polskiej krainie  
jeśli coś w niej żyje  
to niedługo zginie.

<sup>62</sup>See Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden-Oxford-Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

<sup>63</sup>Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 18–27.

those whose discourse remained blind to environmental issues. So, when I read, say, *Baśń o wężowym sercu. Słowo wtóre o Jakóbie Szeli* [Tale of snake's heart. Second word about Jakób Szela] by Radek Rak, on the first scale, to me it is a story about the bizarre connection between the lives of Jakób Szela and Wiktoryn Bogusz, on the second scale – a narrative about nineteenth-century serfdom relationships, which were soon to be abolished, although they would leave a deep impression on Polish culture. On the third scale I start to consider the broader context: internal colonization of Poland by the aristocracy, the semi-peripheral status of Polish culture in the contemporary capitalist system-world; the exports of grain and wood, which fed Eastern Europe and constructed European ships sent to colonize the world, exchange goods with Columbia, and to exterminate native peoples of both Americas; the planetary unification of plants and animal species which followed; the structural similarities of the lives of peasants and Black slaves working on plantations in both Americas; “cheap culture” ideology<sup>64</sup> – and so on. In short: I start to place this story in the context of the Capitalocene, which many scholars blame for today's environmental-climate crisis.

Is this an overinterpretation? Of course. The thing is that the Anthropocene calls for an environmental, climatic, more-than-human, creative overinterpretation in a sense proposed by, among others, Jonathan Culler or Colin Davis. The “twist” here is that it is impossible to read literary texts only on the level of their intentionality, which is a well-learned lesson (also by ecocriticism<sup>65</sup>) in deconstruction. However, Clark's proposal has far further-reaching implications. If every kind of writing exposes itself to a free game of signs, then it is also an argument against naïve ecocriticism that wants to change our cultural habits and develop “ecological awareness”; if all actors of this world say something – as biosemiotics claims<sup>66</sup> – then their message is also subject to dissemination, they cannot be treated as focused, meaningful, complete information. This is why, e.g., Morton criticizes “ecomimesis”, commonly applied in ecocriticism, which is about the substantial conceptualization of nature as something tangible, omnipresent, possible to experience directly, and as such inevitably anesthetized<sup>67</sup>. Boes and Marshall seek to replace it with “ecodiegesis” – writing which does not imitate “nature”, instead giving the planet and its actors their own voice, as well as indicating an inevitable narrative distance that denies the illusion of immersion in the world of life<sup>68</sup>.

<sup>64</sup>See Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, “Tania natura” [The Rise of Cheap Nature], in *O jeden las za daleko. Demokracja, kapitalizm i nieposłuszeństwo ekologiczne w Polsce* [A forest too far. Democracy, capitalism, and ecological disobedience in Poland], edited by Przemysław Czapliński, Joanna B. Bednarek, and Dawid Gostyński (Warszawa: Książka i Prasa, 2019).

<sup>65</sup>See e.g. Serpil Oppermann, “Rethinking Ecocriticism in an Ecological Postmodern Framework: Mangled Matter, Meaning, and Agency”, in *Literature, Ecology, Ethics: Recent Trends in Ecocriticism*, edited by Timo Müller and Michael Salter (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012), 35–50; Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

<sup>66</sup>See e.g. Wendy Wheeler, “The Biosemiotic Turn: Abduction, or, the Nature of Creative Reason in Nature and Culture”, in *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, edited by Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (Charlottesville-London: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

<sup>67</sup>See Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature. Rethinking Ecological Aesthetics* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>68</sup>Boes and Marshall, “Writing the Anthropocene: An Introduction”, 64.

However, if Clark encourages us to read any literary text anachronistically, then another scholar interested in reorienting ecocriticism, Lynn Keller, focuses on poetry after 2000, when the term “Anthropocene” was already popularized by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer<sup>69</sup>. The author of *Recomposing Ecopoetics* dubs it “self-conscious Anthropocene”:

I have coined the phrase “self-conscious Anthropocene” to provide a term, distinct from the label for geological era that may have begun centuries ago, that foregrounds this very recent awareness. It identifies the period since the term Anthropocene was introduced when, whether or not people use that word, there is extensive “recognition that human actions are driving far-reaching changes to the life-supporting infrastructure of Earth”<sup>70</sup>.

In the introduction, similarly to Clark, Keller stresses the necessity to extend the scope of ecocriticism’s interests, so that it is not limited to the traditional *nature writing* or *ecopoetics*, but instead includes any texts of the “conscious Anthropocene” indicating man’s comprehensive impact on the planetary system of the Earth. This is not just about the representations of this influence (scalar changes of the Anthropocene make such a presentation impossible), but also about experimental-avant-garde poetry crossing the borders of (human) communication. As explained by Evelyn Reilly, the aim is to develop a new *ecopoetics*, which would help realize the full implications of our position as those who use the language of animals in a world that consists of mutual dependencies; *ecopoetics* has to be a question of finding formal strategies, which result in a broader change of paradigm, and actually participate in undermining the aesthetic use of nature as a mirror for human narcissism<sup>71</sup>.

Hence, Keller proposes redefining the role of *ecopoetics*, which rather than practicing *ecomimesis* (presenting “pure nature”) should point out contamination in two senses of the word: 1) connecting human and non-human actors, the impurity of the nature-culture division, 2) completely literal contamination: the fact that with air we also breathe in particulate matter, that even the most “organic” food can contain micro- or even nano-plastic, that the seas have been acidified by absorbing excessive anthropogenic greenhouse gases – and so on<sup>72</sup>. Thus, a poet becomes someone like a “radical epistemologist”<sup>73</sup>, or – as I would put it – a radical hermeneutist, who on the one hand points out the need to extend “understanding” to non-human actors, and on the other – highlights the aporeticity of this claim.

<sup>69</sup>Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, “The Anthropocene”, *IGBP Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000).

<sup>70</sup>Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (Charlottesville-London: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 1. Keller quotes one of the most important papers from the starting point of the Anthropocene debate: Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene”, *Nature* 519, No 7542 (2015): 171–80. Authors propose year 1610. Chakrabarty writes about a similar “epoch awareness” of climate change, Chakrabarty, “The Human Condition in the Anthropocene”.

<sup>71</sup>Evelyn Reilly, “Eco-Noise and the Flux of Lux”, in *Eco Language Reader*, edited by Brenda Iijima (Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2010), 261.

<sup>72</sup>In his dark ecology project, Morton goes into a similar direction. See Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>73</sup>Joan Retallack, “What Is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?”, *Jacket* 32 (2007), <http://jacketmagazine.com/32/p-retallack.shtml>.

Where does this aporeticity come from? Similarly to Clark, for Keller scalar changes are a fundamental aspect of the Anthropocene: mixing highly contradictory scales – temporal, spatial, technological, environmental, or those referring to human agency. The Anthropocene's self-awareness thus requires thinking in terms of both far broader and far smaller scales than those we are used to due to the ideology of human exceptionalism. Especially that – as Derek Woods observes – they do not function like the cartographic scale which can be zoomed in or out, all while maintaining the right proportions<sup>74</sup>. To the contrary, the non-cartographic concept of scale points out to the fundamental lack of linearity – this is why the planetary scale means twisting the human scale.

Moreover, it turns out that human agency is in fact not human, because it constitutes a sum of terra-forming assemblies consisting of humans, non-human species, and technology<sup>75</sup>. Moreover, all this causes cognitive and affective “scalar dissonance” – an unpleasant tension resulting from the contradiction between small individual agency and the huge collective impact of humanity on the Earth system: “as we collectively lurch into one tipping point after another, each of which has cascading consequences we can barely comprehend, the individual feels tiny and helpless”<sup>76</sup>. The other side of this coin is the loss of the sense of individual responsibility for the climate crisis. For example: the more people participate in the globalized model of consumerist society, the smaller the individual responsibility, the bigger cumulative effect of their actions.

Hence, Keller no longer encourages “ecological overinterpretation”, instead studying the texts of the conscious Anthropocene – experimental works that investigate the entanglement of human and non-human actors in the scalar consequences of the existence of hyperobjects (Kacper Barczak's work would be close to that<sup>77</sup>), that form affective inter-species communities (Ilona Witkowska's poetry<sup>78</sup>), that cross the border of human language and strive for inter-species “bio-semiotic translation” (in the Polish context Urszula Zajączkowska's works are the closest to that), and ultimately that take the “cosmic”, dehumanized perspective close to Clark's third scale (for example *Cielenie lodowca* [Calving] by Marcin Ostrychacz, *Nebula* by Anna Adamowicz, or *Zakłady holenderskie* [Dutch bets] by Radosław Jurczak)<sup>79</sup>.

<sup>74</sup>See Derek Woods, “Scale Critique for the Anthropocene”, *Minnesota Review*, No 83 (2014): 133–42.

<sup>75</sup>Woods, 134.

<sup>76</sup>Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*.

<sup>77</sup>See e.g. Jakub Skurtys, “Pieśń kopalni i tworzyw sztucznych (wokół ‘Wierszy organicznych’ Kacpra Bartczaka)” [Songs of fossils and plastics (on “Organic poems” by Kacper Barczak)], in *Ekokrytyka* [Ecocriticism] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo WBPiCAK, 2018), 22–36.

<sup>78</sup>See e.g. Dawid Kujawa, “Od stawania-się-zwierzęciem do stawania-się-molekularnym. Poezja w ujęciu ekozoficznym” [From becoming-an-animal to becoming-molecular. Poetry from the ecosophical perspective], in *Ekokrytyka* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo WBPiCAK, 2018), 81–91; Monika Glosowicz, “Wspólnoty afektywne. Ilona Witkowska” [Affective communities], in *Maszynerie afektywne. Literackie strategie emancypacji w najnowszej polskiej poezji kobiet* [Affective machineries. Literary strategies of emancipation in the modern women's poetry] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2019), 198–223.

<sup>79</sup>See also Julia Fiedorczuk, “Poezja samoświadomego antropocenu” [Poetry of self-conscious Anthropocene], in *Prognoza niepogody. Literatura polska w XXI wieku* [Bad weather forecast. Polish literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century], edited by Maciej Jakubowiak and Szymon Kloska (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2020), 81–93. Fiedorczuk also proposes other ways of translating Keller's ideas into the context of the Polish poetry.



However, from a slightly different perspective, “the Anthropocene’s awareness” remains a false one, unless it indicates the catastrophic agency of the capitalist system. We should remember that Derrida’s reflection regarding twisting time happened in the name of being faithful to a *certain* legacy of Marx, and – as it would seem – this legacy is worth investigating also due to the scalar effects of the Anthropocene. Hence, when I read e.g., *Bailout* by Tomasz Bąk, to me it is not just a story about the consequences of the 2008 economic crisis (Clark’s second scale), but – and perhaps predominantly – a criticism of Capitalocene. In this text I find enough about the temporal inadequacy of short-term gains and long-term consequences of capitalist production to say that Bąk writes – among other things – about a “metabolic split” between capital and the planetary system, without which it is impossible to understand the reasons of the environmental-climate crisis<sup>80</sup>.

### The Anthropocene and the possibility of another literary history

Perhaps the most confusing scalar effect of the Anthropocene is the realization that it defined the condition of life on Earth before anyone was aware of it. If we have been living in the “conscious Anthropocene” since 2000, then its menacing (or rather “humenacing” to refer to Michał Pranke’s successful neologism<sup>81</sup>) specter must have been around at least since 1945 (beginnings of the Great Acceleration). *The past has been here for a long time*. Derrida called this state of affairs a “peep-hole effect”: we do not see who is looking at us, “the Thing meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there”<sup>82</sup>.

Does this mean that the Anthropocene is not calling for a new, anachronistic history of literature? Is it not true that the (contaminated) light it throws on the modern constitution, ideology of progress, emancipatory movements limited only to human actors etc., also entails reevaluation of hitherto historical-literary conclusions and environmental-climate over-interpretation of potentially any text written after 1945? Should we not repeat the question about the possibility of another history of literature? Especially that when it was first asked by Teresa Walas (*notabene*: the same year when Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* was published), she already observed that history “can be shaped as parallel and overlapping courses of events of different size and level of vividness”<sup>83</sup>.

<sup>80</sup>See e.g. John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015). Also Crutzen, Steffen and McNeill point out that the system of Earth operates on completely different temporal scales than economic systems (Crutzen, Steffen, i McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?”, 619). See also Hamilton’s ironic observation that the climate crisis does not result from malfunctioning markets – they are the consequence of markets functioning too well: their metabolism is much faster than that of the Earth’s system (Hamilton, “Human Destiny in the Anthropocene”, 35).

<sup>81</sup>Michał Pranke, *Rant* (Łódź: Dom Literatury w Łodzi, 2018), 30.

<sup>82</sup>Derrida, *Widma Marksa. Stan długu, praca żałoby i nowa międzynarodówka*, 26. [Page 6 of the English version]

<sup>83</sup>Teresa Walas, *Czy możliwa jest inna historia literatury?* (Kraków: Universitas, 1993), 131.

In other words, it would be about the “anachronistic reading” postulated also by Joseph Hillis Miller, based on the premise that creative anachrony is immanently inscribed into every literary text: “it is always possible that new, unforeseen contexts will alter the text retrospectively, giving it changed and perhaps prophetic force”<sup>84</sup>. This is how, according to Clark, “retrospective ironies of the Anthropocene” work, exposing any human activity to the contingency of deep geological history<sup>85</sup>. And it is those retrospective ironies that should encourage a new, post-1945 history of literature.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>84</sup>Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, 63. See also J. Hillis Miller, “Anachronistic Reading”, *Derrida Today* 3, No 1 (2010): 75–91.

<sup>85</sup>Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, 129. In a way, this is not shocking – is it not what Charles Sanders Peirce’s limitless semiosis is about?

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# KEYWORDS

ecocriticisms

Anthropocene

**ABSTRACT:**

The first part of the paper offers a theoretical consideration of the Anthropocene as an epoch in which human and geological times have radically mixed. It outlines insights formulated within the Anthropocene discourse, as well as findings of climatology. They encourage developing the Anthropocene's hauntology as an epoch in which "the time is out of joint". The second part of the paper applies theory to literary studies practice (especially in terms of ecocriticism). Author reconstructs proposals to practice ecocriticism in the times of the Anthropocene formulated by Timothy Clark and Lynn Keller, and undertakes initial attempts at translating them into the Polish context.

## HAUNTOLOGY

## g e o h i s t o r y

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# Dirty Transcendence: Remnants of the Sacred and Changes in Contemporary Ecopoetics

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Tomas Tranströmer, whose poetry is influenced by the austere landscape of the Swedish coast, in his poem *From March 1979* seems to suggest that it is not easy to “read” nature unequivocally. The date in the title places a hypothetical experience in time. Accompanied by a poetic reflection, it becomes a commentary on the nature of more-than-human communication:

Weary of all who come with words, words but no language  
I make my way to the snow-covered island.  
The untamed has no words.  
The unwritten pages spread out on every side!  
I come upon the tracks of deer in the snow.  
Language but no words.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tomas Tranströmer, “From March 1979”, *The Guardian*, 6 October 2011.

In this poem, the Nobel prize winner contrasts human language with the silence of nature – the latter is devoid of words which are the most important carriers of meaning for man; yet, it communicates better or more than human messages subject to the laws of inflation and overproduction. When read in the context of the theory of the sign, the tracks of deer (*språk*) become language; they become a trace which refers to the being that left it. On the other hand, the words (*ord*) refer only to one another; they are based on dictionary definitions and circulate in sentences which claim them as complex systems of references. Such a perspective suggests that the wear and tear to which words are subjected is caused by the rift between the content and the living subject who makes the signs. And although this poem fits into the romantic *topos* of nature that is a refuge from the tiring, industrialized and technologized human world, it is also a meta-literary reflection on the natural landscape as a place where one looks for a source of meaning that could feed the weakening power of communication.

Wisława Szymborska, in her poem *I'm working on the world*, writing about “soliloquies of forests,” “the epic hoot of owls,” and “crafty hedgehogs drafting aphorisms after dark,”<sup>2</sup> draws attention to the potential power of language hidden in nature. However, like Trans-trömer, she suggests, and writes in *The Silence of Plants*,<sup>3</sup> that in the reality known to us, nature would never use actual “words.” Like snow and hoofprints, nature transcends human verbalization. However, the most acclaimed poets of the late twentieth century, including Seamus Heaney, wish to “tune” the poetic language to nature. Heaney wished that the pen in his hand would work like his father’s and grandfather’s spade, sinking into the ground, piercing peat. What, however, would correspond in this analogy to potatoes dug out by his ancestors – potatoes that are as cool, hard, and unreadable as a stone from Wisława Szymborska’s poem?<sup>4</sup>

In all poems, nature resists language, nevertheless suggesting that some non-discursive meaning is hidden in hard or soft, wet or dry matter, whose character gives meaning to poetic tropes and metaphors. Its unreadable core seems to constitute the transcendent “other” which is always outside the human discursive universe but may nevertheless influence the systems of references that exist within it. The natural environment is “external” to the human world defined as a linguistic construct. In this context, I would like to reflect on the applicability of the category of transcendence in relation to selected twentieth-century and twenty-first-century poems, assuming that the transformations of the “transcendent” paradigm may shed new light on the transformations in contemporary ecopoetics.

<sup>2</sup> Wisława Szymborska, “I’m working on the world”, in: *Poems New and Collected* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Wisława Szymborska, “The Silence of Plants”, in: *Poems New and Collected* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 269.

<sup>4</sup> See: Wisława Szymborska, “Conversation with a stone”, in: *Poems New and Collected* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 62-64.

## Reconfigurations of transcendence

“Transcendence” is a problematic term that has been subjected to many redefinitions and revaluations in the long history of philosophy and religion. Presented for centuries – in various “forms” – as a privileged mode of existence of eternal and perfect beings and shedding light on the passing and imperfect things of “this world,” in the nineteenth century it was “challenged” by both G.W.F. Hegel, for whom philosophy became speculation about the death of God, and Friedrich Nietzsche, who identified the idea of God with restrictions that people imposed on themselves, learning to finally reject them. The classic notion of transcendence has been marginalized as the secularization processes began to gain prominence.<sup>5</sup> Modernity, as suggested by Hans Jonas, is defined by unconditional immanence, allowing us to address the problem of our being-in-the-world without referring to miraculous interference because the world is “left to itself.”<sup>6</sup>

This does not mean, however, that postmodern humanities have abandoned questions pertaining to the transcendent mode of existence. The editors of *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry* (published as part of the *Religion and Postmodernity* series) identified two main contemporary transcendent paradigms. The first, associated with such thinkers as Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, is associated with the belief that the existing ideas about transcendence were not sufficiently transcendent, which stems from a distrust of language. Concepts referring to “wholly other,” *différance*, Derridean *khôra*, or “God without being” were deconstructed and thus the existing categories used in philosophy and theology to reflect on transcendence were reformulated. This led John Caputo and Michael Scanlon to introduce the category of “hypertranscendence.”<sup>7</sup> The second “post-transcendent” tendency is associated with such thinkers as Gilles Deleuze and Luce Irigaray and centers on contemporary reflection on the rehabilitation of materialism, insofar as all kinds of transcendence are inherently immanent. This paradigm was described extensively by Patrice Haynes, who called it “immanent transcendence.” This category was founded on the belief that “theorizing matter in contemporary continental philosophy often involves some sort of transvaluation of transcendence.”<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, as Caputo and Scanlon write, “the word ‘transcendence’ (...) is a relative term. It depends upon what is being transcended or gone beyond. It can mean transcending the subject (...), the self (...), beings (...), the sensible world (...), Being.”<sup>9</sup>

Ecocriticism, having developed in conjunction with structuralism and poststructuralism, from the very beginning faced the problem of the status of extra-textual reality. On the one hand, the environmental humanities could not reduce nature to a linguistic construct.

<sup>5</sup> See: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 618–75.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Jonas, *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, ed. Lawrence Vogel (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 134.

<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Scanlon and John D. Caputo, *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Patrice Haynes, *Immanent Transcendence: Reconfiguring Materialism in Continental Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Scanlon and Caputo, *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, 15.



On the other hand, the discipline found it difficult to avoid referential and essentialist approaches. Therefore, taking as my starting point poetic intuitions and bearing in mind the two shifts in contemporary approaches to the category of transcendence (which moved away from the shortcomings of language towards a new understanding of matter), I would like to propose an alternative view of the relationship between textual representations and the natural environment. In the most general sense, I see the human universe of signs, linguistic systems, and symbolic references, which determines the acquisition of knowledge about the “external” world (the world that is not part of this universe), as immanent. This perspective corresponds to some extent to Charles Taylor’s concepts of “exclusive humanism” and “our universe of buffered selves.”<sup>10</sup> In his book *A Secular Age*, Taylor tried to prove that the processes of secularization and the development of science which changed the way in which we see the world proceeded concurrently with the process of assigning all human agency to the human mind. This led to a rift, a buffer, between man and the world.

Similarly, notwithstanding the traditional understanding of the term, I see as transcendent everything that transcends the human universe of signs – especially material reality, which is an irreducible point of reference for man. On the one hand, it resists language as the non-discursive “other.” On the other hand, it determines the existence of the immanent human world, which is our proper element. Nature seems to play a special role in the hierarchy of such “transcendent beings.” First, because, as more-than-human, it represents the more-than-human. Secondly, and this is a fundamental question, it conditions human life on the biological level. Such a redefinition of transcendence corresponds to the findings made by sociologists who studied a representative group of non-believers from Denmark, Sweden and Estonia (secularized countries with vast pristine areas). In the article *The relocation of transcendence*, we learn that – at least in the context of people living in Denmark, Sweden and Estonia – the experiences related to transcendence shift from the sphere of the sacred to that of nature.<sup>11</sup> However, my approach to immanence and transcendence is not identical with the worldview traditionally associated with Anglo-Saxon Romanticism or American transcendentalism, which recognize the sacred in nature but also postulate transcending the sensual order of things. The difference between these approaches is determined, in my opinion, by a different understanding of immanence.

Respectively, the distinction between transcendence and immanence presented here is by no means a theory of perception; rather, it is a working diagnosis – a reformulation of a certain cultural legacy, a dualism, which needed to be transgressed. This reformulation seems important to me, however, because although the distinction between immanence and transcendence is purely technical, it still means that, as I hope to demonstrate, the attributes traditionally ascribed to both elements of this dichotomy are still valid.

<sup>10</sup>See: Charles Taylor, “The Bulwarks of Belief”, in: *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25–89.

<sup>11</sup>See: D. Thurffell et al., “The Relocation of Transcendence: Using Schutz to Conceptualize the Nature Experiences of Secular People”, *Nature and Culture* 14, no. 2 (01 2019): 190–214, <https://doi.org/10.3167/nc.2019.140205>.

## The Eye and the Window: The legacy of modernist poetry

In her debut collection of poems, published at what is now considered the beginning of the Great Acceleration, Elizabeth Bishop commented on an ordinary fishing scene. The poem opens with the boastful: “I caught a tremendous fish,”<sup>12</sup> which suggests a hypothetical victory of man over nature: man’s technical superiority which earns him a reward. When the fish is pulled out of the water, it ceases to be a part of nature: no longer in its element, it turns into an “object”<sup>13</sup> that is observed, emphasizing the ambiguity inscribed in the initial line (after all, one can also “catch an image” or “catch a glimpse;” the “I” is also a homophone of the noun eye). The image of the fish constructed in the lines that follow is not a simple description. It is meant to fill the reader with disgust: skin hangs “in strips/ like ancient wallpaper,”<sup>14</sup> it is covered in brown spots, the gills inhale “terrible oxygen” and are “fresh and crisp with blood;” they can also “cut so badly.” The x-ray eye of the lyrical I also describes the inside of the fish – “the coarse white flesh packed in like feathers” and the eye – but only from the outside, because the fish does not look back at the lyrical I. The fish’s irises are “backed and packed/ with tarnished tinfoil/ seen through the lenses/ of old scratched isinglass.”<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the “I” focuses on the “five old pieces of fish-line” and “five big hooks” in the animal’s mouth, which are “like meals with their ribbons.”<sup>16</sup> Who ultimately wins in this duel? There is, after all, something repulsive about this “trophy;” something that prevents the “I,” similarly to five other fishermen who came before, from claiming the fish. This mysterious quality reveals to us yet another ambiguity inscribed in the opening line (“I caught a tremendous fish”): the fish is not only big but also powerful. The word “tremendous” evokes fear. Although it is held in the hand, the fish may be associated with the elusive Moby Dick – the whale is as white as the meat of the animal that was finally released and not eaten by humans. Despite human interference in the natural world (as evidenced by the hooks in the fish’s mouth and the fact that “oil had spread a rainbow around the rusted engine”) and despite the fact that the fish has been caught and “did not fight,” the *mysterium tremendum* personified in it cannot be transcended. It turns out to be as pointless as Ahab’s desperate quest in Herman Melville’s novel. Although the sensual description captures the dramatic nature of the scene and allows the reader to “feel” the different textures, the mysterious core personified in the described animal is left untouched.

Scott Knickerbocker analyses the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop in his book *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language*. He also analyses the works of several American poets, demonstrating how they combine their interest in nature with “linguistic scepticism,”<sup>17</sup> expressed as artifice. Knickerbocker also comments on the “organic formalism” of 20th-century confessional poetry and the American tradition of (ecological) nature writing. The ecopoetic

<sup>12</sup>Elizabeth Bishop, “The fish”, in: *Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 43.

<sup>13</sup>Bishop, 44.

<sup>14</sup>Bishop, 43.

<sup>15</sup>Bishop, 43.

<sup>16</sup>Bishop, 44.

<sup>17</sup>Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 13.

value of his chosen examples is to be determined not so much by the subject matter, but by the emphasis on the materiality of language itself, both through formal measures stimulating the senses of sight and hearing and through style “infused with the natural world.”<sup>18</sup> As such, stylistic tropes, although infused with original meanings, return or reflect the gaze, presenting people with the image of their internal states. They are symbolically “attractive” because they refer to natural matter and, as such, constitute an inalienable linguistic proof of the existence of the “transcendent” world of nature. Knickerbocker calls this process of “the re-materialization of language,” in itself a “response to more-than-human nature,”<sup>19</sup> “sensuous poesis.” It does not so much reflect the world, but, with the use of the aforementioned formal poetic tools, “enact[s], rather than merely represent[s], the immediate, embodied experience of more-than-human nature.”<sup>20</sup>

Knickerbocker’s view of ecopoetics corresponds to the structure of the poetic epiphany, which Ryszard Nycz brilliantly analyses in Polish literary studies. Nycz draws attention to the modernist redefinition of the category of “epiphany.” it transformed from a romantic individual insight into the order of existence which transcends the senses into a strictly secular concept, which refers to “not directly visible,” “particular,” “contingent” or “embodied” reality.<sup>21</sup> As Nycz writes:

The poetics of epiphany is a set of convictions whose source is modern literature and its view of poetic language and writing as endowed with extraordinary status, at the center of which lie those ‘epiphanies’, i.e. descriptions of intense, fragmented, instantaneous traces of the extraordinary value of everyday existence of individual things.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most important examples of Polish modernist poetry of this type for Nycz were the works of Bolesław Leśmian – perhaps the most interesting 20th-century Polish “nature poet.” As Leśmian writes in the poem *Łąka* [The meadow], “słowami przez okno w świat wygląda” [he uses words to look through a window into the world]. As Michał Markowski argues, Leśmian uses language to show, and not merely represent, the world.<sup>23</sup> Leśmian not only embodied in his poems but also commented on the phenomenon captured by Knickerbocker, emphasizing the sensuality of words that come alive in a poem through rhythm. The words in his poems are “cheekily colourful,” “boldly intertwined” and take on a “real form.”<sup>24</sup> The reality of this form, however, is not based on mimetic properties, but on the sensuality of poetry itself. It evokes “the original song without words,”<sup>25</sup> which, as Leśmian writes inspired by Henri Bergson,

<sup>18</sup>Knickerbocker, 185.

<sup>19</sup>See: Knickerbocker, 2.

<sup>20</sup>Knickerbocker, 13.

<sup>21</sup>Ryszard Nycz, “Poetyka epifanii a modernizm: od Norwida do Leśmiana” [The poetics of epiphany and modernism: From Norwid to Leśmian], *Teksty Drugie : teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja*. 4 (1996): 21.

<sup>22</sup>Nycz, 22.

<sup>23</sup>Michał Paweł Markowski, *Polska literatura nowoczesna: Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy* [Modern Polish literature: Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy] (Kraków: Universitas, 2007), 105.

<sup>24</sup>Bolesław Leśmian, “Z rozmyślań o poezji” [From reflections on poetry], in: *Szkice literackie* [Essays on literature], ed. Jacek Trznadel (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2011), 60.

<sup>25</sup>Bolesław Leśmian, “Przemiany rzeczywistości” [Transformations of reality], in: *Szkice literackie*, ed. Jacek Trznadel (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2011), 44.

comes from the “illogical spheres of existence” and transcends “the boundaries of grammar and syntax,” and simply cannot be confined to a logical sentence.<sup>26</sup> The tone of this original song resonates in the human soul, but only momentarily comes to life in poetry, when it “animates” words, thus manifesting its presence within the human linguistic universe. As such, the sensual, “re-materialized” poetic language is for Leśmian a bridge between immanence (rationally comprehensible human world) and transcendence (non-logical, extra-linguistic life): “Linguistic creativity and writing are inextricably linked with poetic creativity. It is an excellent thing, not only in terms of literature but also biology. It is a triumph of man over himself; the essence of one’s being is extended into more-than-animal worlds.”<sup>27</sup>

Such a relationship between immanence and transcendence may explain why poets associated with the trend which, for the sake of simplicity, I will call after Knickerbocker “organic formalism” focused mainly on evoking “sensuous effects” (the experience of communing with nature). In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram, an American ecologist and philosopher, to whom Knickerbocker refers, emphasizes (like J.W. Herder) the biological origin of language. Abram argues that the formation of a distinct “human-only” world went hand in hand with the adoption of an arbitrary system of signs used by humans to communicate. The process of improving the technique of writing effectively meant a governed human universe. Abram perceives this process as a kind of trap:

Caught up in a mess of abstraction, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities.<sup>28</sup>

The process of poetic “re-materialization” of language corresponds to the ritual relation with transcendent non-linguistic reality. This is more or less how the British artist David Jones put it. Jones claimed that figurative language, based on references to matter, is a quasi-sacramental (in the Catholic sense of the word) evocation of reality: therefore, symbols which refer to nature seem to be more effective than a different kind of reference.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most interesting poets of the second half of the twentieth century, who creatively reflected on this dependency, was the attentive reader of Jones — R.S. Thomas. Thomas was a keen observer of the wild, rugged Welsh landscapes and the harsh living conditions of local farmers. The motif of glass and the surface of water found in his poetry, which could serve both as a window and a mirror, also referred to his poetic language. The poet writes in his autobiographical collection *The Echoes Return Slow*: “both window and mirror. Was he unique in using it as a window of an asylum, as glass to look through into a watery jungle, where life preyed on itself, ferocious yet hushed as the face of the believer, ambushed in a mirror?” Thomas further adds: “so much easier for the retired mind to lull itself to sleep among the

<sup>26</sup>Leśmian, 45.

<sup>27</sup>Leśmian, “Z rozmyślań o poezji”, 71.

<sup>28</sup>David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language In The More-Than-Human World* (New York: Random House, 1997), 22.

<sup>29</sup>David Jones, “Art and Sacrament”, in: *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings*, ed. Harman Grisewood, 2017, 174.

reflections.”<sup>30</sup> The word “believer” is not used by accident in this quote; as a pastor, Thomas more than once problematized transcendent religious views, drawing attention to the human tendency to create God in his own image. Reflection – representing human experience in language – seems inevitable. What is important for Thomas, however, is this double referentiality, which allows him to see beyond the vague outline of the human face the more-than-human reality which corresponds to the traditional notion of transcendence. Therefore, when Thomas reflects on the environment transformed by human civilization and the mechanization of farm work, which he valued because it fostered a close (though neither easy nor sentimental) relationship with nature, he asks: “Is there a contraceptive/for the machine, that we may enjoy / intercourse with it without being overrun / by vocabulary?”<sup>31</sup>

Thomas also investigates the relationship between poetic language and the materiality of nature. Writing about the atomic bomb and the potential threat of a nuclear war, the poet referred to himself, as if by necessity, the “composer of the first radioactive verses.”<sup>32</sup> This declaration is connected with his most recognizable formal feature, the use of enjambment, insofar as the poet divides sentences into lines in such a way as to give their individual parts a meaning that is often incompatible with the logical order of the sentence. For example, the ending of the poem *The Signpost*, published in the volume *Frequencies*, reads: “Time / is a main road, eternity / the turning that we don’t take.”<sup>33</sup> Thomas often refers to experiences which are not sensual but still affect man who is not able to process them rationally. This example illustrates the poetics of Thomas quite well. Distrustful of linguistic devices conveying transcendent reality, he refers to non-intuitive, sometimes aporetic, aspects of material sciences to poetically emphasize the apophatic nature of the sacred.<sup>34</sup>

## The poetics of the Anthropocene

The beginning of the 21st century is often seen as a conventional yet important turning point. Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer introduced the word Anthropocene in 2000. The understanding that human interference in the natural world is comparable with geological forces leads to serious redefinitions within the relationship between the immanence of the human universe of signs and the transcendence of the more-than-human reality of nature. The concept of nature as an inexhaustible reservoir of more-than-human beauty, a refuge from the human world and a mystery, as it falls apart. Nature is exploited; it is reduced to satisfy human needs or replaced with artificial, more comfortable, materials, and thus the transcendent in nature withers, breaks into pieces and, in general, undergoes secularization (in its redefined understanding).

<sup>30</sup>R. S. Thomas, “The Echoes Return Slow”, in: *Collected Later Poems, 1988-2000* (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), 48.

<sup>31</sup>R. S. Thomas, “Counterpoint”, in: *Collected Later Poems, 1988-2000* (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2013), 115.

<sup>32</sup>Thomas, “The Echoes Return Slow”, 49.

<sup>33</sup>R. S. Thomas, “Frequencies”, in: *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 344.

<sup>34</sup>See: Joanna Soćko, *Poezja (meta)fizyczna: materialność w twórczości R. S. Thomasa* [(Meta)physical poetry: materiality in the works of R. S. Thomas] (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN Wydawnictwo, 2017).

Importantly, the consequences of the Anthropocene are a threat to humanity. The anticipated consequences of destroying and rebuilding pristine wild areas make man somewhat paradoxically aware of his irreducible biological (and thus vulnerable) nature, which previously seemed to be limited to some “external” more-than-human reality. No wonder that the humanities revisit traditional indigenous models of ecological knowledge, developed on the basis of animistic practices combined with the sacralization and the tabooisation of nature.<sup>35</sup> Religious laws and rituals which limit human interference in nature are still perceived by modern “Westerners” as “superstitious.”<sup>36</sup> However, the model of communing with nature, which they propose, is appreciated more and more in the context of the extended anthropocenic suicide.

The new nature of the relation between man and nature in the Anthropocene is reflected in twenty-first-century ecopoetics. In the book *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*, Lynn Keller discusses the works of such poets as Forrest Gander, Ed Roberson, Adam Dickinson, and Jorie Graham and demonstrates that in contemporary poetry nature is always discussed in the context of human interference. In the introduction, Keller discusses Evelyn Reilly’s brilliant poem *Wing / Span / Screw / Cluster (Aves)* from the volume *Styrofoam* (2009). The poem, in a thought-provoking form, juxtaposes slogans, images and symbols which evoke flying. This poetic patchwork is visible in the title. Words related to flying or birds intertwine in it. The final word, *aves*, refers primarily to the taxonomic name of birds. It may also invoke the street (short for avenue) and the Latin greeting commonly associated with Mary and the Annunciation. Two images which appear before the text of the poem refer to all three connotations. The first image shows a bird carcass on a road (“one of about 51,900 Google image search results for “roadkill + bird”). The second is a photograph of Giovanni Bernini’s famous 17th-century sculpture the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. This juxtaposition reflects the “clash” between the sacred and the profane, which lies at the heart of Reilly’s poem. Keller argues that Saint Teresa “represents the longing for transcendence of one’s earthly condition – a focus that distracts human attention and care from this world on which the survival of human and nonhuman animals depends.”<sup>37</sup> This is certainly one valid interpretation. However, it seems to me that in Reilly’s poem the relationship between transcendence and immanence is much more complex, and the attributes of transcendence are not limited to the separate sphere of the sacred. On the contrary, the poem demonstrates that transgression, something that we seek as humans, blurs the boundaries between “here” and “there,” which ultimately leads to the “profanation” of the unattainable “beyond,” whatever it may be. It is represented in the poem through the image of levitating cosmic debris which represents the remnants of human expansion.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup>See: e.g. Raymond John Pierotti, *Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, and Evolutionary Biology* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>36</sup>I use this phrase as a simplification and a mental shortcut, bearing in mind that the current rehabilitation of the so-called indigenous ecological knowledge does not concern the religious context of its acquisition and practice.

<sup>37</sup>Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018), 21.

<sup>38</sup>Evelyn Reilly, “Wing/Span/Screw/Cluster (Aves)”, in: *Styrofoam* (New York: Roof Books, 2009), 28–29.

The form of the poem also refers to transgression, specifically, as regards representation. The poem is formatted like an Internet page (*the actual.entangle / man (sic) to aves (sick)*<sup>39</sup>), short sentences read like Internet entries, and entire phrases quoted from the Internet *verbatim* evoke, as Keller writes, “the nonlinear modes of information organization and transmission we depend on this era of globalized commerce and consumption.”<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, such formal experiments demonstrate that linguistic and symbolic representations, human connections and interactions, have been transferred into the virtual “cloud,” which is nevertheless still traditionally associated with the sacred and the transcendent. The re-location of the redefined immanent into the domain of “everything that flies” highlights its problematic relationship with hummingbirds, which, even though they move their wings the fastest in the world, may cease to exist in the near future: *Yet still.humming in fastest ::: 1200/ min (heart-beat) 50/sec (wingbeat)*.<sup>41</sup>

Blurring the boundary between immanence and transcendence also complicates linguistic self-identification validated by distinguishing between the self and the “other” (non-human/ more-than-human). In Polish poetry, it is clearly visible in the works of Kacper Bartczak, Anna Adamowicz, Ilona Witkowska and Monika Lubińska. In a different poem (devoted to, among other things, the “extinction” of certain aspects of language, such as “subjections of the subject”), Evelyn Reilly comments on this crisis of self-identification: “Self follows a thread of narrativity/ only to crash against the glass/ of non-transparent communication/ The shock continues at least a century.”<sup>42</sup> Monika Lubińska expands this metaphor, encouraging the reader to identify with the person in a mermaid costume who “palcuje okna szklanki lustra” [fingers the windows of a mirror glass].<sup>43</sup> This image only seemingly refers to a game children would play – it points to the disturbing process of self-discovery (realizing that one is a human-animal / cultural-biological / immanent-transcendent hybrid) which disturbs visual perception. That is why when “mijasz półtłuste wieprzowe/ usługi ubojowe coraz częściej/ myślisz że szyby mętnieją” [you pass semi-fat pork / slaughtering services more and more often / you think that the windows are getting cloudy],<sup>44</sup> and finally “łapią cię żaby” [frogs catch you] and “palce powieki kleją śluzem” [your fingers glue your eyelids with slime].<sup>45</sup> And although the “I” in one of the poems claims that “chciałaby mieć pewność siebie/ nie rzadziej niż raz na/ zawsze” [they would like to be self-confident / at least once/ and for all],<sup>46</sup> the poet makes it clear that the constitution of the autonomous subject – looking at one’s reflection in the more-than-human material, showing one’s entire self – is illusionary when you are aware of the deep dependence between what we do to the environment and animals and who we – as biological beings – are: “byłam zygotą kobietą zarodkiem chłopcem/ wieprzowiną drobiem

<sup>39</sup>Reilly, 28.

<sup>40</sup>Keller, *Recomposing Eco-poetics*, 23.

<sup>41</sup>Reilly, “Wing/ Span/ Screw/ Cluster (Aves)”, 29.

<sup>42</sup>Evelyn Reilly, “Yet the Wor(l)d Can Still Be Very Pretty”, date of access: 15 April 2021, <https://www.poetryproject.org/publications/poems-texts/yet-the-wor-l-d-can-still-be-very-pretty>.

<sup>43</sup>Monika Lubińska, “podaj liczbę” [give me a number], in: *Nareszcie możemy się zjadać* [We can finally eat one another] (Łódź: Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich. Oddział : Dom Literatury, 2019), 5.

<sup>44</sup>Lubińska, 6.

<sup>45</sup>Lubińska, 6.

<sup>46</sup>Monika Lubińska, “-”, in: *Nareszcie możemy się zjadać* (Łódź: Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich. Oddział : Dom Literatury, 2019), 10.



[...]/rodziłam roboty które nic nie jadły/ a produkowały elektrośmieci” [I was a zygote woman an embryo boy / pork poultry [...] / I gave birth to robots that did not eat / and still produced electro-waste].<sup>47</sup> In a different poem, Lubińska writes: “jestem w ciąży z fasolką szparagową/ i nie wiem czy to bezpieczne dla środowiska” [I am pregnant with green beans / and I do not know if it is safe for the environment].<sup>48</sup> She questions and challenges the autonomy of the human body, which is already signaled in the title of the volume, *nareszcie możemy się zjadać* [we can finally eat one another].

The vision of life as eating which questions the possibility of constituting an autonomous and independent (human) subject is also visible in the “posthuman”<sup>49</sup> poetry of Kacper Bartczak, in which food turns out to be the only sovereign.<sup>50</sup> According to the French etymology of the word, a sovereign is something supreme, most important, superior. One of Bartczak’s most recent volumes of poetry focuses on the “supreme food,” which refers to the most important Christian sacrament – the Eucharist. The concept of a transcendent God who, paradoxically, turns into food which brings together the human (but already saved, and therefore transcendent) body and a wheat wafer in order to instill in the mortal body some divine immortality – thus creating an organic community of the body and the church – lies at the heart of all essential transformations that blur all possible boundaries between the transcendent and the immanent. In the processes of these transubstantiations, only a poem may become autonomous. Redefining Christian conventions, the poem is a word that becomes flesh. It is in fact performative, symbolic and material – it is a “poem-organism”<sup>51</sup> that not so much connects but mixes these spheres in the shared bloodstream. In this way, the poem becomes a new form of incarnation, but derives its vitality from the “ciała niechwalebego/ bo mojego”<sup>52</sup> [unworthy/ body of mine] made of various textures, which – unlike in Christian symbolism – is a mixture of natural and plastic materials, and its ultimate form is the result of various “worldly” political, social and economic forces. The poem “saves” because it organically incorporates this immanent sphere into the material (the real), and the most important manifestation of “more-than-human” nature is the organic force forging the poem’s cyborg body, which brings to mind the tiger from William Blake’s famous poem (although devoid of its fearful symmetry).

Leśmian’s poems were reminiscent of Bergson’s *elan vital*, “songs without words” which through poetry could revive “the logical domain of existence,” allowing man to achieve the epiphanic moment of self-awareness. The poems of “organic formalists,” such as Bishop and Thomas, evoked the material and the real in order to locate man in those spheres. However,

<sup>47</sup>Lubińska, 10.

<sup>48</sup>Monika Lubińska, “niepokalane poczęcie” [immaculate conception], in: *Nareszcie możemy się zjadać* (Łódź: Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich. Oddział: Dom Literatury, 2019), 15.

<sup>49</sup>See: Wit Pietrzak and Uniwersytet Łódzki, “Poezja poczłowiecza: «Pokarm suweren» Kacpra Bartczaka” [Post-human poetry: Kacper Bartczak’s ‘Food Sovereign’], *Er(r)go: teoria, literatura, kultura*. 2019 (2019): 153–63.

<sup>50</sup>See: Kacper Bartczak, *Pokarm suweren* [Food sovereign] (Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie, 2017).

<sup>51</sup>See: Jakub Skurtys, “Pieśń kopalin i tworzyw sztucznych (wokół «Wierszy organicznych» Kacpra Bartczaka)” [A song of minerals and plastics (Kacper Bartczak’s ‘Organic Poems’)] in: *Ekokrytyka*, ed. Krzysztof Wojciechowski, 2018, 33.

<sup>52</sup>Kacper Bartczak, “Konsubstancje” [Consubstances], in: *Pokarm suweren* (Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie, 2017), 5.

in the poems of the “anthropocene poets” such a dichotomy is untenable. In the context of the redefined concepts of immanence and transcendence, the Anthropocene is the opposite of the epiphany. “Anthropocene poems” present human expansion as a profane invasion into the transcendent sphere of the “more-than-human,” which so far has been protected by the laws of tradition and rituals, making people feel that they are part of something greater; something that is fundamental to their existence. Disturbing the division between immanence (a universe of measures, signs and symbols) and transcendence is visible in, as Anna Kałuża puts it, “contingent” poetics.<sup>53</sup> As the name suggests, it is based on random juxtapositions and materialized in arbitrary arrangements. Immanence and transcendence do come together but it happens at the cost of the immanent order of language, as demonstrated by numerous anacolutha, the breakdown of syntactic forms and the ambiguity of representations. Reilly, Lubińska and Bartczak show that we can no longer distance ourselves from the world, adopting a point of view that would make it possible to show the world or oneself in a wider perspective. Our hybrid bodies and the world appear to be Timothy Morton’s “hyperobjects;” they adhere to any other object they touch but we cannot see them in their entirety.<sup>54</sup> However, the remnants of religious mentality – in the form of processed phrases and profane references – suggest that the attempts to reconstitute literally any point of reference are being made. It demonstrates that there is a high price to pay for such formal (and disillusioned) experiments.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>53</sup>See: Anna Kałuża, “Szacunki ryzyka” [Estimated risk], date of access 15 April 2021, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/8549-szacunki-ryzyka.html>.

<sup>54</sup>See: Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

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# KEYWORDS

*ecopoetics*

*immanence*

TRANSCENDENCE

**ABSTRACT:**

The analysis of a number of late 20<sup>th</sup> century nature poems allows the author to redefine the traditional concepts of transcendence and immanence in the context of post-secular studies and the broadly defined new materialism. The article argues that the reformulation of these categories allows one to map the dynamic changes in the 20th-century and 21st-century eco-poetics. The analysis of selected poems written by poets who are well aware of the limits of language, allows the author to draw attention to the debate around the concept of the Anthropocene, a significant turning point in itself. The article discusses current poetic tendencies, taking into account the impact of the Anthropocene.

*anthropocene*

## POSTSECULARISM

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# The Despotic Eye?

## Romantic Scientification of the Vision of Nature (Słowacki–Bacon, Mickiewicz–Kepler)

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Describing his trip through France to the Alps in July 1790 in book six of the *Prelude*, William Wordsworth explains how his view of the highest mountain in Europe changed when he saw it with his own eyes:

From a bare ridge we also first beheld  
Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved  
To have a soulless image on the eye  
Which had usurped upon a living thought  
That never more could be. (VI, 525-529)<sup>1</sup>

The summit of Mont Blanc is “unveiled” to the travelers, but this moment of revelation comes as a disappointment, as the image perceived by the senses is “soulless.” The eye registers only external reality (Wordsworth is not concerned with the brain which interprets the image, and, as we know today, it is the brain that processes visual stimuli). In book twelve, the poet writes

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, “The Prelude”, in: *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis, vol. III (Penrith: Humanities-Ebook, 2009), 231. PDF.



that it is “the most despotic of our senses” (XII, 129).<sup>2</sup> Unmediated, uninformed by cultural filters, the eye shows the radical otherness of the mountain landscape, as independent of the human mind and “soulless.” The “real” image has replaced preconceived ideas, turning into a “usurper.” “Real” nature is thus seen as an intruder in the world of the mind and imagination.

In John Maxwell Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*, Professor David Lurie also gives a university class on book six of the *Prelude*, perhaps anticipating how reality unmediated by cultural matrices (especially literary, and in particular Romantic, models) shall dramatically change his private life, destroying previous illusions, including those concerning the relationship between man and nature which he shaped under the influence of Wordsworth’s poetry. Lurie sees in this fragment of the *Prelude* the need to combine the sensuous, banal, and clear image of the world reflected by the retina with archetypes of imagination, that is, invisible ideas. What is unsettling about Lurie’s class, however, is that in his interpretation of Wordsworth’s poetry, he tries to send a message to one of his students, Melanie, whom he had seduced and with whom he is having an affair. He establishes a connection between his immoral actions and Wordsworth’s romantic poetry, seeking to redeem himself. Indeed, he thus presents his actions not as purely physical and sensuous but as rooted in greater ideas and archetypes. Lurie uses Romantic literature (such as Byron) to disguise shameful reality, applying a distorting cognitive filter. In the postcolonial context present in the novel, Lurie seems to use Western European traditions, including archetypes from Romantic poetry, to justify his actions, distorting reality and extenuating his relationship with a black South African student.

Coetzee in *Disgrace* critiques false post-Romantic consciousness which (perhaps even cynically?) makes use of archetypes-turned-clichés and thus distorts the image of reality. Respectively, in the *Prelude*, Wordsworth openly shows the authentic cognitive dissonance between “bare reality,” between nature that may be experienced through the senses, and imagination and cultural matrices. The lyrical I stages a genuine confrontation, which will later aid him in developing a new approach towards nature.

In this text, I shall examine how the image of nature in Romanticism was filtered through cultural matrices – especially those formulated in connection with the development of natural sciences, most often considered in terms of purely “material” cognition provided by the senses. This notwithstanding, contrary to popular belief, it was not dismissed.<sup>3</sup> I shall discuss the works of two Polish Romantic poets, Mickiewicz and Słowacki, demonstrating how the image of nature is mediated through scientific cognition, i.e., a cognitive matrix imposed by culture.

<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth, 322.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the following critical works on Polish Romanticism: Ewa Kochanowska, *Romantyczna literatura wobec nauki. Henryk Ofterdingen Novalisa i Genезis z Ducha Słowackiego* [Romantic literature and science: Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and Słowacki’s *Genesis from the Spirit*] (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT – Wrocławskie Wydawnictwo Oświatowe, 2002); Agnieszka Czajkowska, “Poeci uczeni”. *Związki nauki i literatury w twórczości romantyków* [“Poets scholars:” Science and literature in the works of Polish Romantic poets] (Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo im. S. Podobińskiego Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie, 2016); Marek Dybizbański, *Romantyczna futurologia* [Romantic futurology] (Kraków: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Polonistyki Krakowskiej, 2005); *Poezja i astronomia* [Poetry and Astronomy], ed. Bogdan Burdziej and Grażyna Halkiewicz-Sojak (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2006); Juliusz Gromadzki, “*Genезis z Ducha a teorie ewolucji przyrodniczej*” [*Genesis from the Spirit* and theories of evolution], *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, no. 1/2 (2000);

I aim to demonstrate that Romantic poets did not necessarily hide the fact that they explored nature indirectly, often with the help of cultural matrices (and science). Although Romantic poetry was somewhat consumed by the anxiety of influence, the anxiety of being influenced by the external world, it did not always defend itself against cultural and scientific models which could undermine its authentic and direct contact with a given phenomenon. Such influences and models were not necessarily seen as distorting reality. The Romantic turn to the outside world (and not only towards the “I”) involved both the senses and the mind – the image of nature was thus co-created by the eye and ideas, mimeticism and constructionism.

Nature in Romanticism, as Maria Janion observes, was “exceptionally conditioned by human, historical ways of seeing, perceiving and understanding it,”<sup>4</sup> including scientific and empirical perception. It should be emphasized, however, that such dependencies and cultural models were not so much deconstructed as, more often, naturalized. Poets created the illusion that they communed with nature, exploring it spontaneously and directly.

Nature in this article, as in Romanticism, will be defined very broadly, as the entire natural world, including the cosmos, i.e., the entire physical reality (man was considered a part of nature, although his status was complicated because he also created culture and changed nature<sup>5</sup>). The Vilnius *Dictionary of the Polish Language* from 1861 defines nature as “the entire material or physical world, in the broadest sense; all universes perceived by the senses in space and time (planets, suns, etc.); and forces acting in them (gravity, coherence, electricity, etc.).”<sup>6</sup> Maria Janion further notes that “Cosmos [...] has become the nature of Romantic poets.”<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising considering that in Greek nature or “*physis* could [...] refer to the entire cosmos.”<sup>8</sup>

In the present text, culture, including science, will not be examined in opposition to nature. Indeed, the “nature-culture” dichotomy has been questioned before.<sup>9</sup> Ecocriticism deconstructs such binary divisions and questions outdated concepts of nature, as demonstrated by, for example, Julia Fiedorczuk in *Cyborg w ogrodzie* [Cyborg in the garden]: “The most endur-

<sup>4</sup> Maria Janion, “Kuźnia natury” [Forge of Nature], in: *Prace wybrane* [Selected works], vol. 1: “Gorączka romantyczna” [Romantic fever] (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 276.

<sup>5</sup> See: Julia Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie. Wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* [Cyborg in the garden: Introduction to ecocriticism] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2015), 43–45.

<sup>6</sup> Quote after: Antonina Bartoszewicz, “Natura” [Nature], entry in *Słownik literatury polskiej XIX wieku* [Dictionary of Polish literature of the nineteenth century], ed. Józef Bachórz and Alina Kowalczykowa (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1991), 596.

<sup>7</sup> Janion, “Kuźnia natury”, 279. Julia Fiedorczuk, in turn, points out that one of the meanings of “nature” distinguished by Raynold Williams “appears with the advent of the Renaissance and the birth of modern science. Nature is then defined as an object of research, a set of laws, and, over time, a synonym for logic and order. Such a definition of nature refers to what was not created or processed by man and is gradually turning into an antithesis of culture, in the sense of ‘wildlife’” (Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie*, 40–41).

<sup>8</sup> Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa, Elwira Buszewicz, Justyna Dąbkowska-Kujko, “Twórcy doby wczesno nowożytnej w poszukiwaniu natury” [The artists of the early modern era in search of nature], in: *Obraz natury w kulturze intelektualnej, literackiej i artystycznej doby staropolskiej* [The image of nature in the intellectual, literary and artistic culture in Old Polish literature], ed. Alina Nowicka-Jeżowa, Elwira Buszewicz, Justyna Dąbkowska-Kujko, Aleksandra Jakóbczyk-Gola (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2021), 16.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 13 (Latour has also coined the hybrid concept of “nature-culture”); James J. Bono, “Science Studies as Cultural Studies”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Science*, ed. Steven Meyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 158.

ing element of Western thought about the place of man in the physical world is the binary division into and between «nature» and «culture».<sup>10</sup> Nature and culture are interdependent, and science influences the poetics of nature. Traditionally, however, scientific knowledge was perceived as a product of nature and not culture; it was independent of scientists, nature itself was its source and science was only its spokesman.<sup>11</sup> Galileo defined science in such terms; he believed that scientists should read the Book of Nature, unmediated and unaffected by human interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Questioning Kant's great division between nature and culture, Bruno Latour and Michel Callon changed the perception of science, arguing that scientific knowledge is not produced by nature but by society.<sup>13</sup> These examples demonstrate that science may be defined as either "closer" to nature or culture. Romantic poets knew that science was closer to culture, that it was produced by man who was, after all, culturally conditioned and his cognitive horizons were defined by specific cultural paradigms (e.g., Enlightenment realism and materialism).

Many critics tend to focus on and emphasize the fact that nature and metaphysics are united in Romanticism, as we move from the mechanistic to organicist vision of nature that can be read through "signs" (nature is a "book" that can be read by exceptional individuals). It should be noted that critics focus on the antinomy between nature and culture, sometimes emphasized in Romanticism (dating back to J.J. Rousseau and F. Schiller), and the belief that the book of nature cannot be read through cultural codes (especially not through science, not through "the looking glass and the eye of the wise man") but through imagination or feeling ("feeling and faith"). Romantic poets aimed to read the book of nature "not, as it was in the past, by referring to the rational and unchanging laws of nature, but by relying on intuition, inspiration, and genius to explore its secret forces."<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, and perhaps in opposition to such observations, it should be noted that also in Romanticism, the scientific approach to natural phenomena became an inspiration for poets,<sup>15</sup> influencing their view of nature, which was not "natural" at all. The illusion of spontaneous and direct contact with nature and its representation becomes apparent when one examines the cultural (and scientific) influences involved in creating the images of nature. Nature in Romanticism was therefore not "natural," and Romantic expressivism (also, as we will see, in such manifestos of Romantic individualism as the Great Improvisation in Part III of *Forefathers' Eve*) was embedded in a complex web of scientific and poetic ideas about nature and the cosmos.

It should be noted that, of course, the "eye" of science (or, indeed, "the looking glass and the eye of the wise man") is not a purely mechanical instrument, uninformed by social and cultural relations, showing the image of the external world without any filters or diffractions. Science is culturally conditioned and shapes our view of surrounding nature in correlation

<sup>10</sup>Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie*, 34.

<sup>11</sup>Andrew Pickering, "From Science as Knowledge to Science as Practice", in: *Science as Practice and Culture*, ed. Andrew Pickering (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 20.

<sup>12</sup>Bono, "Science Studies as Cultural Studies", 159.

<sup>13</sup>Pickering, "From Science as Knowledge to Science as Practice", 21.

<sup>14</sup>Antonina Bartoszewicz, "Natura", 594.

<sup>15</sup>See also, among others, Ewa Kochanowska's and Agnieszka Czajkowska's studies mentioned in footnote 3.

with cultural values, assumptions, and worldviews.<sup>16</sup> A clear example of this in relation to the scientific perception of the natural world is the image of nature as a woman formulated by Francis Bacon (to which Juliusz Słowacki referred) and analyzed by Evelyn Fox Keller.<sup>17</sup> Keller looks at this allegedly objective and scientific image of nature from a feminist perspective, emphasizing the relationship between the knowing mind and known nature. For Bacon, scientific knowledge is associated with power, control, and domination over the natural world. Mediated through social models and structures, nature is a bride who needs to be tamed, shaped, and subordinated by and to the scientific mind. In *Temporis Partus Masculus* (The Masculine Birth of Time) from 1603, subtitled “The great instauration of the dominion of man over the universe,” Bacon shows how to find the way to the bride’s hidden chambers. He rejects the metaphor of rape and violence, introducing a complex and subtle metaphor of sexual dialectics. One can only master nature by obeying its laws. The philosopher locates the concept of nature in gender power relations, pointing out that the metaphor of seduction fails. Male and active science may only triumph when the mind also becomes female, i.e., obedient, clean, receptive, and open. Dominion over nature may be achieved only when one obeys its laws. However, the ultimate goal (in accordance with the laws of nature itself!) is to reduce nature to an inferior subservient role.

Naturally, Bacon’s theory of nature is based on the assumptions about nature itself, which are, implicitly, revealed in the role assigned to the (male) scientific mind. Socially constructed gender roles affect the way nature is presented in the scientific discourse that aspires to objective truth. Nature becomes a cultural construct. Bacon himself, paradoxically, postulated that the mind should be cleared of pre-assumptions and idols in order to accept the thing in itself. However, he seemed to pay attention above all to earlier quasi-scientific concepts, failing to notice how the image of the natural world is distorted by social factors. He criticized Plato, who, as he believed, created the illusion that truth “lives” in our minds and is not derived from the world outside the I. Assuming that the mind could be self-sufficient was a mistake because the universe (including the natural world) would be then created by the human mind, endowed with god-like prerogatives. Thus, similarly to Wordsworth in the *Prelude*, Bacon examines how *a priori* notions influence the perception and description of nature. Wordsworth could not accept the “bare reality” of nature, a reality that was not filtered through the prism of cultural archetypes and imaginations, while Bacon rejected all *a priori* cognitive models which distort the image of nature (as it turns out, however, he was unconsciously conditioned by them as well).

Juliusz Słowacki commented on the philosophical concepts of Francis Bacon in his *raptularius* [*Notes for the planned study*]. The poet wished to use his notes to write a philosophical study (he only managed to write a plan and a draft). It should be noted that although critics and scholars

<sup>16</sup>See: Bożena Płonka-Syroka, “Imputacje kulturowe w kształtowaniu się obrazu natury w myśli europejskiej od XVI do końca XIX wieku. Zarys zagadnienia” [Cultural imputations in shaping the image of nature in European thought from the 16th to the end of the 19th century], in: *Człowiek wobec natury – humanizm wobec nauk przyrodniczych* [Man versus nature: Humanism versus natural sciences], ed. Jacek Sokolski (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2010). Płonka-Syroka refers to “cultural imputation” in science, drawing on: Wojciech Wrzosek, *Historia – Kultura – Metafora. Powstanie nieklasycznej historiografii* [History – Culture – Metaphor. The rise of non-classical historiography] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2010).

<sup>17</sup>See also: the view of science as socially and culturally determined – Bruno Latour, Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

have pointed out that Słowacki studied Bacon, the poet in fact read Joseph de Maistre's *Examen de la philosophie de Bacon, ou l'on traite différentes questions de philosophie rationnelle* (Paris 1836, vol. 1-2), which is a very critical overview of Bacon's philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Maistre emphasized the role of *a priori* ideas and principles that influence our perception of external reality. Bacon, naturally, was an empirical scholar. Maistre rejected the idea that our senses and experiences could be the source of all our knowledge of the outside world and nature. He also criticized Bacon for "*organum novum*" and his inductive method (which he treated as a syllogism) and Słowacki paid attention to this. Słowacki used Bacon's inductive method, i.e., the investigative method which involves moving from observation of details (known and recognized facts) to general conclusions, in his notes on "natural sciences." The poet wrote that "forms should be discovered through inductive reasoning,"<sup>19</sup> and starts his description of different species of plants with describing the climate and the struggle between spirit and nature, which he considers an axiom and *a priori* knowledge.<sup>20</sup> The poet starts his description of leaves (of a weed, an oak, a rose) with identifying the spirit (great or strong) and its path, which, in turn, allows him to describe the leaf. It is surprising that Słowacki moves from the invisible (and *a priori*) to the visible, to the direct observation of the natural world, as if his goal was to show in depth what is visible to everyone. While Maistre criticized Bacon for materialism, for not looking beyond nature itself and for eliminating metaphysics from science, Słowacki wanted to use Bacon's method to show, paradoxically, the spiritual in the natural world. Słowacki employed Bacon's method, rejecting the conclusions – this is how we can explain Słowacki's unexpected interest in Bacon's materialistic philosophy. On the other hand, the poet did not abandon his belief in *a priori* knowledge, especially as regards the role of the spirit, which does not result from scientific experiments, but is acquired in a different way, through intuition or revelation.

In his description of atoms and the world of nature, Bacon referred to the ancient myth of Cupid, who, before he became a chubby child with a bow and arrows, was one of the oldest gods. He came into existence asexually, at the same time as Chaos, with whom he created all the other gods and all that exists. In a different version of the myth, Cupid hatched out an egg laid by the Night. Słowacki quotes this story after Bacon, observing that "Bacon has misinterpreted this theogonic myth about Cupid written by poets," but he does not explain why and how exactly. Drawing on Maister, Słowacki adds that, according to Bacon, Cupid is only matter, and looking for Cupid's ancestors could be detrimental to philosophy. If the poet agreed with Maistre's arguments, his basic objection against Bacon was the belief in the eternity of

<sup>18</sup>Jarosław Ławski in his excellent book points out that these were notes from Bacon's *Silva Silvarum* (Jarosław Ławski, *Ironia i mistyka. Doświadczenia graniczne wyobraźni poetyckiej Juliusza Słowackiego* [Irony and Mysticism: Borderline Experiences in Juliusz Słowacki's Poetic Imagination] (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku 2005), 529). Słowacki, however, noted only the title of this work, and copied only fragments from the two-page *Magnalia naturae* directly from Bacon. *Magnalia naturae* may be found in Bacon's works after the unfinished novel *New Atlantis* (unexpectedly published together with *Silva Silvarum*). We know this because at the end of his handwritten notes in French from Maistre's book, Słowacki quotes *Magnalia* in English, and Maistre made a very biased and scornful translation of the fragment quoted by Słowacki). Ławski also quotes Henryk Biegeleisen who points to the fact that Słowacki did not rely on Maistre in this case: "Extensive excerpts from Bacon and Hegel testify to the fact that the poet was thinking independently; because he often argues with both philosophers and refutes their statements" (Ławski, 425). Still, Słowacki directly quoted excerpts from Maistre's book, criticizing Bacon.

<sup>19</sup>Juliusz Słowacki, *Dzieła wszystkie* [Collected works], ed. Juliusz Kleiner (Wrocław: Zakład im. Ossolińskich, 1955), vol. XV, 435.

<sup>20</sup>Słowacki, 433-434.

matter, which has no cause (apart from God itself), and seeking God (the father of matter, i.e., Cupid) should not be the subject of scientific research. It all boiled down to a mechanical, inescapable, and blind law of nature. Modern science should “bracket” metaphysical entities in its examination of the world of nature – Bacon did it literally, writing in brackets (which Maistre called absurd) “(for we always except God),” because there can be no cause in nature.<sup>21</sup> The principle of describing the world without resorting to non-physical causes later became the basis of methodological positivism and was adopted by both science and theology. Słowacki examines how the world of nature may be described without referring to supernatural forces, which may nevertheless be found in “this theogonic myth (...) written by poets.” Indeed, the myth draws on ancient cultural codes, addressing the questions of cosmogony, the paradigm of modern science and its approach to the study of nature. Moreover, the poet in his mystical works intended to use this paradigm of materialistic modern science, which supposedly rejected the study of the spiritual. This is indicated in *Notes for the planned study*, in which Słowacki refers to Bacon a number of times, providing page numbers from his *raptularius* (42-43) which contain excerpts from Maistre’s book: “The beginning of the Spirit. 42 Spiraculum;” “The beginning of matter 42, (hylé) 43;” “Cosmogony 1. 42-43 Bacon objection of disorder;” “Final causes. 43 Bacon. The relationship of this philosophy with religion;” “Philosophy 42.” Why did Słowacki study Maistre and Bacon, the materialistic experimental philosopher, in his “Genesis from the Spirit” period when he believed that nature and history were essentially animated by the Spirit? It should be added that we do not see Maistre’s critical (often scornful) approach to Bacon (Maistre makes only one neutral comment: “Bacon does not explain this well [...]”<sup>22</sup>) in Słowacki’s notes. What is more, Słowacki, without comments, but clearly intrigued, also quotes those fragments from Bacon’s study that Maistre critically or scornfully called absurd, e.g., regarding anthropomorphism, endowing God with a human form, or identifying Cupid with matter and not looking for his ancestors (he also ignores the comments about Bacon being godless and about not referring to a Higher Power in the study of origins of the natural world which Maistre deemed important). Clearly, however, on the basis of this empirical and inductive philosophy, Słowacki wants to construct his own model of interpreting reality (above all, however, of spiritual reality). It can only be presumed that the poet intends to transgress Bacon’s philosophy, nevertheless building his spiritual vision of the world on it.

A similar approach towards scientific discoveries, which should be studied in more depth in relation with the Spirit, can be seen, for example, in Słowacki’s comments on the scientific experiments on the forces operating in nature published in the press:

26. Jan. 1846. Constitutionel – Revue scientifique Faraday’s discovery – electricity and magnetic force and light – even the transformation of electromagnetic forces into light – the Frenchman concludes that it may be used to study magnetism – what a fool! it will help you discover the spirit – and tell you what you are<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Quote after: Joseph de Maistre, *An Examination of the Philosophy of Bacon Wherein Different Questions of rational Philosophy are Treated*, trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal, Kingston, London and Buffalo: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998), 210.

<sup>22</sup>Słowacki, *Dzieła*, 431.

<sup>23</sup>Juliusz Słowacki, *Raptularz 1843-1849 [Raptularius 1843-1849]* ed. Marek Troszyński (Warsaw: Topos, 1996), 99.

In a letter to Zygmunt Krasiński, written in Paris on February 19, 1846, Juliusz Słowacki comments on the Paris scientific experiment with magnets and their influence on polarized light, admitting that it filled him with “the most terrible fear.”<sup>24</sup> He feared that the experiment would confirm the existence of a law, which he himself had been preparing to announce for the past four years. He was relieved, however, when the French scientists finally announced that the results of the experiment would help them discover the laws of electromagnetism. Słowacki observed that the French scientists did not recognize the spiritual implications of their discovery and, like barbarians, lacked the form that could show its true meaning and move the audience. They lacked the form that Słowacki was trying to design in his poetry.

In *Dialog troisty* [Three dialogues], Słowacki emphasizes that modern science is detached from the Spirit and ignores the metaphysical perspective:

Helion

Chemistry prides itself on inventing atoms ... yet it sees no connection with the spirit in them ... indeed, its discoveries challenge the spiritualism of the world and allow philosophers to argue against it ...

The philosopher

An atom, i.e., a small unit of matter or gas, is only the seventh child in the process in which the Spirit is born ...<sup>25</sup>

Francis Bacon opposed spiritualism. The philosopher in Słowacki’s text explains that he knows how the spirit is born, and that he made this discovery “in a flash of genius, almost unintentionally.”<sup>26</sup> Real knowledge of the laws governing nature does not have to be rooted in science, although it can be seen that Słowacki, contrary to the findings of empirical sciences, tries to use them, and not oppose or ignore them, to discover the rules governing the natural world (as seen in *Notes for the planned study*). The spiritual image of nature may also be created with the help of science, even if its conclusions seem to oppose Słowacki’s vision of reality.

Słowacki also copied Maistre’s comments about Bacon’s “cosmogony” in his notes. The poet might have been fascinated by the vision of the universe based on the cleansing nature of fire – whose nature is purified the farther it moves away from the Earth (on the moon, then on other planets, and finally on the Sun). Astronomy as a science based on observation but not on experiments (it has only recently gained the status of an experimental field) was particularly susceptible to quasi-scientific speculation. Bacon’s philosophy in this respect, of which Maistre approved, was not materialistic but poetic and could illustrate the evolution (the genesis) of the Spirit:

<sup>24</sup>*Korespondencja Juliusza Słowackiego* [Juliusz Słowacki’s letters] ed. Eugeniusz Sawrymowicz, vol. II (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1963), 122.

<sup>25</sup>Juliusz Słowacki, [*Dialog troisty z Helionem, Helois i przeciwnikami*] [Three dialogues between Helion, Helois and their opponents] in: *Dzieła wszystkie* [Collected works], ed. Juliusz Kleiner (Wrocław: Zakład imienia Ossolińskich, 1954), vol. XIV, 234. Translated by M. Olsza

<sup>26</sup>Słowacki.



Cosmogony – fire on the earth – its cleansing nature increases the higher it moves – and so the Moon is a pale flame – Mercury is more vivid and alive – Venus is on fire – the Sun is completely pure and free. Jupiter is everlasting and peaceful by itself. Saturn is absorbed by stars.<sup>27</sup>

In poetry, astronomical discoveries were often inextricably linked with cultural codes, astronomical *topoi*, and the poetic appeal of stars and planets. Sometimes outdated, yet still popular, astronomical observations “co-existed” with newer discoveries, or even proved more popular. For example, Adam Mickiewicz in the Great Improvisation in Part III of *Forefathers’ Eve* refers to various models of the cosmos. Słowacki seriously considered Bacon’s cosmogony, which, of course, could not gain universal recognition (it would be unimaginable not only in the 19th century, but also earlier, to think that the Moon is not the satellite of the Earth but a fireball), and Mickiewicz also referred to outdated ideas about the cosmos, which, however, had survived much longer in culture than in science due to their aesthetic appeal – as such, they constitute a cultural code that was used to construct a certain image of the universe which also communicated the values inherent to it. Additionally, as we will see, Mickiewicz referred to more contemporary astronomical concepts of Johannes Kepler, confronting two orders of the cosmos and two axiological systems.

Numerous critics have discussed the question of the cosmos in Mickiewicz’s works, also in the Great Improvisation, in detail.<sup>28</sup> However, no one asked the fundamental question: why did Mickiewicz refer to an archaic vision of the cosmos that no one believed in anymore? Why did “the discarded image” (discussed by C.S. Lewis) provide a cosmological frame for the Great Improvisation?<sup>29</sup> Consequently, isn’t it then possible to read the Great Improvisation “in brackets” and associate it more with the realm of the imagination, since it was located in a cosmos made of outdated assumptions? Such a reading would help explain and “disarm,” for example, the feeling that some readers, including Adam Ważyk, seem to have about the artificiality of the represented world and the cosmic scale of the protagonist.<sup>30</sup> Placing the Great Improvisation on the mythical and symbolic cultural plane changes the perception of the protagonist, “visibly growing in space” until he reaches the “cosmic size” of Conrad.<sup>31</sup> The space of myth and symbol generates meanings related to the structure and order of the cosmos. This could be another reason behind Mickiewicz’s interest in old cosmic *topoi*, especially since in

<sup>27</sup>Słowacki, *Dzieła wszystkie*, vol. XV, 430. Translated by M. Olsza.

<sup>28</sup>See, for example: Marta Piwińska, “Mickiewicz’s jazdy gwiazd” [Mickiewicz’s star motions], in: *Romantyzm – Poezja – Historia. Prace ofiarowane Zofii Stefanowskiej* [Romanticism – Poetry – History: Works honoring Zofia Stefanowska], ed. Maria Prussak and Zofia Trojanowiczowa (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2002); Włodzimierz Szturc, “Kosmos w *Dziadach* Adama Mickiewicza” [Cosmos in Adam Mickiewicz’s *Forefathers’ Eve*], in: *Mickiewicz. W 190-lecie urodzin* [Mickiewicz: Celebrating the 190th anniversary of his birth], ed. Halina Krukowska (Białystok: Dział Wydawnictw Filii UW, 1993); Mirosław Strzyżewski, “Wokół harmonii sfer w *Wielkiej Improwizacji* Adama Mickiewicza” [Musica universalis in Adam Mickiewicz’s Great Improvisation], in: *Romantyczne sfery muzyczne. Literackie konteksty idei musica instrumentalis* [Romantic Musical Spheres: Literary contexts of musica instrumentalis] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2010); Bolesław Oleksowicz, “Kładę me dłonie na [...] szklanych harmoniki kręgach” [I lay my hands upon [...] the crystal wheels of the harmonica], in: *Dziady, historia, romantyzm. Studia i szkice* [*Forefathers’ Eve*, history, romanticism: Studies and sketches] (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2008).

<sup>29</sup>Clive Staples Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

<sup>30</sup>Adam Ważyk, *Cudowny kantorek* [Wonderful cabinet] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1979).

<sup>31</sup>Ważyk, 44, 66. According to Ważyk, the image of Conrad in space would break “all the rules of the poetic hyperbole” (Ważyk, 44).

Part III of *Forefathers' Eve* and other texts he criticized modern astronomy for ignoring the meanings which he found important, for ignoring the metaphysical aspects of life (in this respect he was similar to Słowacki, though the visions of spirituality created by both poets varied), for stopping short of asking about the source and purpose of the cosmos.<sup>32</sup>

Mickiewicz writes about the cosmos through the prism of culture and science, referring to ancient images, poetic cosmological conventions, and cosmic topoi. The traditional poetic images and symbols are not “staffage” but help the poet interpret the cosmic order, man’s place in it, and his relationship with the transcendent. Mickiewicz, however, does not stop there – he adds new metaphors and images (harmonica) to the cosmic tradition, without compromising its integrity. Additionally, he refers to more contemporary astronomical discoveries that challenge the old order of the universe. They are associated with the romantic rebel Conrad:

A Master, I reach out my hands to the sky,  
To the very heavens, and touch the stars on high –  
Upon those glassy stops I lay my hands:  
With my soul’s free, sudden play  
I spin the stars my way (Scene II)<sup>33</sup>

I came armed in the whole might of thought,  
That thought, Thy thunderbolts to earth which tore,  
Opened Thy deep seas and the planets’ lore! (Scene II)<sup>34</sup>

Analyzing the vision of the cosmos in the Great Improvisation, critics have primarily referred to the ancient model of the cosmos, especially the Pythagorean model, and compared it with the Newtonian model. The harmony and order of the cosmos, in keeping with the concept

<sup>32</sup>Part Three of *Forefathers' Eve*, “Prologue, Lithuania:”

“The sun has set,” astronomers can see  
From towers, and cry-but wherefore, none can say.  
Shadows conceal the earth, and people sleep:  
But why they sleep, to seek out no one dares;  
Unconscious as they sleep, unconsciously  
They wake; nor wonder at the Sun’s most strange  
But daily Face: for Light and Darkness keep  
Their watch-but where the Chiefs who bid them  
change?

(Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers' Eve*, trans. by Count Potocki (London: The Polish Cultural Foundation, 1968), 131).

*Pan Tadeusz* (Book Eight):

Now the astronomers regard planets and comets  
just as plain citizens do a coach;  
they know whether it is drawing up before the king’s palace,  
or whether it is starting abroad from the city gates;  
but who was riding in it, and why, of what he talked with the king,  
and whether the king dismissed the ambassador with peace or war  
—of all that they do not even inquire.

(Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, trans. by George Rapall Noyes (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1917).

<sup>33</sup>Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers' Eve*, 167.

<sup>34</sup>Mickiewicz, 169-170.

of *musica universalis*, were emphasized – much in contrast with the rebellious individual.<sup>35</sup> I would like to expand on these original findings by referring to a different tradition in modern astronomy (Johannes Kepler, with whose theory Mickiewicz could have been familiar, having read Jan Śniadecki's works).

Mickiewicz referred the old model of the universe, which was attractive in poetical terms, confronting it with newer scientific discoveries, which better corresponded to the internal conflict experienced by the Romantic protagonist. Modern scientific discoveries influenced the Romantic poetics of images of nature and the cosmos, pointing to how dynamic, chaotic, and disharmonious it was. The ancient visions of the universe ignored anomalies in orbital motions because they would challenge belief in a perfect world and the perfection of its Creator. Stars and planets were to move in perfectly circular orbits, which reflected the perfect harmony of the universe.

Contrasting different models of the cosmos, demonstrating the discrepancies between poetic, beautiful, and yet outdated ideas about the universe and modern science, points to the discrepancy between Romanticism and earlier visions of man and reality, the discrepancy between different visions of the cosmos, nature and God. Mickiewicz studied the works of Śniadecki and referred to "stars' and planets' axle-tree."<sup>36</sup> He must have known that modern astronomy investigated the anomalies in planetary orbits. The study of the "imperfections" questioned the alleged harmony and perfection of the cosmos, and thus its Creator. The distortion of the ideal vision of the universe is also visible in Conrad's actions. As a Romantic individual, he introduces an unpredictable rhythm, breaking out of the limitations and order of the world.

Adopting the old cosmic model, Mickiewicz takes into account changes related to the irregular motion of planets and stars. Conrad speeds up and slows down the motion of stars: "With my soul's free, sudden play/ I spin the stars my way."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Mickiewicz could have referred to both stars and planets, since planets were also called stars at the time. Conrad would thus disturb the cosmic order, changing the rhythm of the day and night, disturbing the order on Earth and creating chaos. This vision only corresponds to the Ptolemaic model, with a stationary Earth at the center and stars moving on the canopy of the sky (Conrad does not interfere with the movement of the Earth, which Mickiewicz wanted to do in *Ode to Youth* – then, the apparent movement of stars in the sky would change). Respectively, when Mickiewicz writes about "stars," he may actually mean planets. Samuel Bogumił Linde observes that "stars, or celestial bodies, are divided into static bodies and planets."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Karol Wyrwicz argues in *Geografia powszechna* [Geography] from 1773: "some stars are motionless [,] there also stars that move which we call Planets."<sup>39</sup> Jan Śniadecki also distinguishes between two types of stars,

<sup>35</sup>Strzyżewski, *Romantyczne sfery muzyczne*, 80. See also: Szturc, "Kosmos w *Dziadach*" and Piwińska, "Mickiewicz i jazda gwiazd".

<sup>36</sup>Mickiewicz, *Dziady*, 157.

<sup>37</sup>Mickiewicz, *Dziady*, 159.

<sup>38</sup>Samuel Bogumił Linde, *Słownik języka polskiego* [Dictionary of the Polish Language], vol. I, part II (Warsaw: Bogumił Linde, 1808), 808.

<sup>39</sup>Karol Wyrwicz, *Geografia powszechna czasów teraźniejszych* [Contemporary Geography] (Warsaw: Drukarnia I.K.Mci i Rzeczypospolitej in Collegio Soc. Jesu, 1773), 606.

calling planets and comets wandering stars: “The stars that shine, which seem to us static, are called fixed or stationary stars (*Stellae fixae, étoiles fixes*) [...] Stars that do not shine [...] and move, changing their position in the sky, are called wandering stars, planets or comets.”<sup>40</sup>

If, therefore, Mickiewicz referred to planets (or planets and stars in the contemporary sense of the word), whose motions were fascinating for astronomers, then the Great Improvisation could be read in the context of newer astronomical discoveries. The Copernican revolution, questioning earlier speculations, left us with one very important question: what sets planets in motion? It was only with the help of Newton’s revolutionary new physics that the divine “first cause” propelling the celestial spheres could be replaced. When Conrad assumes the role of *primum movens*, he considers himself to be God’s equal – they both rule over the physical world (and because Conrad controls the physical world, he should also rule over human souls). However, before Conrad can sing his “disharmonious” song, he upsets the motions of celestial bodies, accelerating and slowing down their course. Aristotle and Ptolemy could not explain the physical causes behind irregular planetary motions, concentrating solely on the movement towards the west in relation to the center. Their cosmological models were expanded into complex systems with many epicycles and eccentrics intended to explain, among others, the apparent retrograde motion of planets. It was Johannes Kepler who used physical analysis to simplify these complex models, introducing elliptical orbits (instead of circular orbits, which symbolized perfection) and unnatural, or enforced, motion. He explained changes in speed and the direction and trajectory of orbiting planets. At the same time, he looked at the extraterrestrial world from the perspective of the laws governing the human world and combined earthly and cosmic laws, abolishing the division into the earthly and the “celestial.” As such, he put an end to the earlier separation of astronomy from physics and philosophy of nature (and such an approach is reminiscent of the Romantic portrayal of nature as “one Life”). Respectively, Kepler did not try to justify the discrepancies between theory (the perfect harmonious cosmos as a reflection of the perfect nature of its Creator) and actual astronomical observations. He showed that the observable eccentricities in planetary motions result from the fact that they slow down at the apocenter of the orbit and speed up at the pericenter. He published his observations in 1609 in *Astronomia Nova*; however, Kepler’s laws of planetary motion were universally accepted only in the 1680s and the 1690s.<sup>41</sup> As a Neoplatonist, he continued to search for the mathematical harmony of the universe and nature, and though the sun was placed at the center of his cosmos as the seat of God, he based his research on observational data.

In the Great Improvisation, Conrad interferes with the movement of the stars (or planets), reducing and increasing their speed. Modern science, including, for example, Kepler’s findings,<sup>42</sup> modified old notions about the unchanging and harmonious order of the cosmos which often

<sup>40</sup>Jan Śniadecki, *Jeografia, czyli opisanie matematyczne i fizyczne ziemi* [Geography: Mathematical and physical description of the earth] (Wilno: Józef Zawadzki, 1818), 5-6.

<sup>41</sup>Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 225.

<sup>42</sup>Jan Śniadecki had a very good opinion of Kepler (if Mickiewicz knew about Kepler’s findings, then perhaps he read about them in Śniadecki’s study), for example: “Eliminating prejudices about uniform and circular planetary motions which Copernicus took from Ptolemy made Kepler truly great, as he finally sealed the decline and fall of ancient science” (Jan Śniadecki, “O Koperniku” [About Copernicus], in: *Dzieła Jana Śniadeckiego* [The works of Jan Śniadecki], edited by Michał Baliński, vol. II (Warsaw: August Emmanuel Glücksberg, 1839), 138).

ignored astronomical facts that contradicted the ideal model, such as comets or meteors (previously explained as sublunary phenomena). In the Great Improvisation, the Romantic soul and modern science (which still refers to the old world) unexpectedly meet. The ancient image of the universe, preserved in culture, is confronted with modern scientific achievements and the Romantic worldview. The new image of the cosmos corresponds to new Romantic sensitivity, and perhaps it also influenced it.

Agnieszka Czajkowska wrote about planetary motion in Mickiewicz's works in relation to the aphorism *Ruch mądry* [Wise movement] ("Mędracy prawdziwie wielcy, jak niebieskie ciała, / Zdają się stać, gdy każde z nich leci i działa" [Truly great wise men, like celestial bodies / seem to stand still when in fact they are moving and working]<sup>43</sup>). The apparent motion and immobility of celestial bodies are of great importance in the interpretation of the ideological and cultural meanings of the image of the cosmos – also in the context of modern astronomy and Kepler's findings – therefore I should start by commenting on Czajkowska's observations about the "common belief in the immobility of planets" and "popular and false notions" about the "fixed position of planets in the sky, as seen with the naked eye."<sup>44</sup> Planets are called planets because they are celestial bodies in motion (as opposed to stars which appear to remain in the same position as compared to other stars). The Greek expression *πλανήτες αστέρες* means "wandering stars," because they were discovered to move in relation to the so-called fixed stars (*απλανείς αστέρες*, i.e., *stellae fixae*). Their motions at a given moment may only be registered through the telescope, but it is easy to see changes in their position in the sky over time. In *Ruch Mądry*, Mickiewicz did not refer to the opposition between popular and scientific knowledge, but to the opposition between appearances and truth, emphasizing that true wisdom is not always seen by everyone. The poet draws an analogy between the image of the cosmos (endowing it with a purpose, since the celestial bodies are "working") and earthly reality.

We can find many more such cosmic analogies in Mickiewicz's (and Słowacki's) Romantic works – and they are not only poetic ornaments, which contribute to the poetics of the text, but universal cosmological principles. In *Pan Tadeusz*, we can see Zosia, around whom hens and ducks gather in a circle, which brings to mind the model of the cosmos.<sup>45</sup> *Pan Tadeusz* also playfully engages with the cosmic harmonica found in the Great Improvisation. *Musica universalis*, however, appears to be different:

In the air an immense cloud of insects gathered and whirled about,  
playing like the music of the spheres;  
Zosia's ear distinguished amid the thousand noises  
the accord of the flies and the false half-tone of the mosquitoes. (Book Eight)<sup>46</sup>

The analogy between the circle formed by insects and that of celestial orbits is not, in the light of other analogies of astronomical provenance, purely ornamental. It points to the unity of

<sup>43</sup>Czajkowska, 84.

<sup>44</sup>Czajkowska.

<sup>45</sup>See: Czajkowska, 89.

<sup>46</sup>Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, 182.

and deeper connections in the cosmos.<sup>47</sup> Modern astronomy discovered that the same laws (especially the universal law of gravity) operated in the sublunar and lunar world. The solar system has its counterparts not only in Jupiter and its system of moons (this discovery effectively challenged the belief in the unique status of the Earth), but also in everyday life, which runs its harmonious course in Mickiewicz's poem. Thus, it should be argued that from the point of view of poetics, the motif of the harmonica is not only a simile or a metaphor but almost a metonymy – it is synecdoche *pars pro toto*. It is not a distant association based on similarities but on actual connections – based on the same universal laws that govern the cosmos as a whole. The vision of infinity in Romanticism, explored through modern science, could be marked by fear, but also, as we can see, it could lead to its explorations with a view to challenging the indifference of the cosmos (Conrad commented on this indifference and silence in Part III of *Forefathers' Eve*). Literature, and culture as such, provided different readings of scientific facts, as evidenced not only by the different visions of the cosmos in the *Great Improvisation* and in *Pan Tadeusz*, but also in Słowacki's reading of Bacon.

The images of nature or the cosmos were sometimes shaped and mediated in Romanticism by scientific theories, and their reception in culture. At the same time, they influenced culture and society and the ways in which these images functioned. The (micro) models of the solar system in *Pan Tadeusz* were supposed to strengthen the sense of social order (e.g., the seating of guests at a table) and universal harmony (the comet-Napoleon destroyed this cosmic order, but it also points to the analogies between the earth and the sky). In the *Paris Lectures*, Mickiewicz talks about the convergence of European politics and the evolution of the universe:

Scholars and astrologers claim that the planets closest to the sun are destined to take its place someday. The Slavs have always gravitated and still do (!) towards the West. [...] Perhaps we now the least about the morality and mentality of these peoples. The European spirit keeps them, so to speak, at a distance and excludes them from the Christian community.<sup>48</sup>

We can also see analogies between the scientific models of the cosmos and the social, political, and economic reality in Słowacki's works. In a letter to Józef Komierowski dated September 30, 1848, Słowacki writes:

Alas, you are not far away from this tower in Toruń, where one man once conceived in himself – the synthesis of physical knowledge of the entire world – and provided a foundation for everything we know today – because even contemporary industry is based on gravity, one national center tries to make the biggest possible impact – because even the Prussian Zollverein – and Italian unification we are witnessing – are rooted in the knowledge of the solar system and the laws of physics – and take Copernicus as their progenitor.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Critics refer the harmonica in *Pan Tadeusz* but this motif is not important in itself – it is mentioned in the discussion of Part III of *Forefathers' Eve*.

<sup>48</sup>Adam Mickiewicz, *Wykład I* [Lecture One], in: *Dzieła, wydanie rocznicowe* [Collected works: Anniversary edition] (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1997), vol. VIII, 15-16.

<sup>49</sup>*Korespondencja* [Letters], II, 221. Alexander von Humboldt wrote about the role of gravity in the works of Copernicus in his monumental study *Cosmos*, which Słowacki read. See also: Jan Tuczyński, "Kopernikanizm Słowackiego" [The Copernican Revolution in Słowacki's works], *Zeszyty Naukowe Wydziału Humanistycznego Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego*, no. 10-11 (1986), 311-319.

The analogy points to the hidden reality and invisible forces operating in the world (gravity, electricity, magnetism) – they operate both in physical reality, in nature, and in human reality. Astronomical theories can be used to discover the fundamental unity of all aspects of reality, be it spiritual, moral, social, political (Italian unification) or economic (Zollverein, i.e., the Prussian customs union). Indeed, such an approach was popular in Romanticism and Polish Romantic poets were not the only ones to trying to explain the world with the help of astronomy – the solar system was supposedly also the inspiration behind the system of checks and balances in the American constitution.<sup>50</sup>

The analysis of the relationship between the scientifically constructed image of nature and literature in Romanticism reveals a unique feedback. Science, rooted in culture and society, often constructed models of the cosmos and nature determined by the dominant values, stereotypes and cognitive patterns at a given time in a given culture. Such models, in turn, were meant to legitimize and justify the social order from which they originated – they could also be used to shape the future, pointing to changes brought about by the fundamental forces of nature (as we saw in the *Paris Lectures*, they were a source of hope for nations deprived of independence and sovereignty).

In Romanticism, especially in its first phase, the lesson drawn from nature was also strongly associated with folklore. Nature was a source of moral laws, and access to it was provided to those individuals whose lives were not corrupted by civilization. *Rusalki* and ghosts, metamorphoses in nature, folk fantasy stories – these were no longer, as in the Enlightenment, superstitions but supernatural stories that helped one understand the world in a way that did not conform to the rationalist vision of reality (these folk beliefs were sometimes animistic in nature and had little to do with Christian religion.) It was the people who were able to discover the spiritual side of nature, its mysterious hidden life. It seems that Romanticism (especially in its later phases, as indicated by Słowacki) tried to discover the mystery of nature not only through the folk “feeling and faith” but also in a different way – referring to, for example, science that could correspond to the spiritual dimension of the world. It turned out that one could learn about the unity of the world from various sources, from the beliefs held by the people who were in direct contact with nature and from scientific observations, interpreted in the right way.

Oftentimes, before Romantic poets managed to discover the unity of the world in contact with nature, they felt it was separate from them and autonomous (it did not conform to archetypes, patterns, ideas), and tried to overcome it, just like Wordsworth’s in his vision of Mount Blanc in the *Prelude*, quoted at the beginning. What is external to us requires a re-

<sup>50</sup>Kuhn, 263. In British culture, astronomy had an even more practical dimension related to navigation, thus giving rise to imperialism and colonialism. (see: Dometa Wiegand Brothers, *The Romantic Imagination and Astronomy. On All Sides Infinity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)). In his *Paris Lectures*, Adam Mickiewicz also quoted Kazimierz Brodziński, who claimed that the Polish nation was “the Copernicus of the moral world,” because “Copernicus destroyed old superstitions, pointing to the sun as a common focus for the planets; the Polish nation pushed its homeland towards the center of a great whole, and just like Copernicus was a philosopher, the Polish nation was the ‘Copernicus in the moral world’” (Mickiewicz, *Dzieła*, vol. VIII, 23). Jarosław Ławski calls such an approach “planetary historiosophy” (Jarosław Ławski, *Mickiewicz. Mit – historia. Studia* [Mickiewicz. Myth – history. Studies] (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersyteckie Trans Humana, 2010), 242).



sponse of the senses, a cognitive response of the mind, and finding the right means of expression.<sup>51</sup> The despotic eye, the inevitability of discovering the world through the senses (often equated with scientific cognition), troubled Romantic poets, but ultimately it was tamed by culture with its archetypes, ideas, and perceptions. Even scientific cognition itself, which was sometimes identified with a purely material perception of only the physical side of reality, was rooted in culture and society. Moreover, it then provided material for a new poetics of nature and new cultural codes. Thus, old astronomical theories (attractive in terms of poetics and aesthetics, though widely rejected) co-existed in poetry alongside newer discoveries (Kepler). It was possible to combine modern empiricism and materialism with spiritualism using the same method (inductive reasoning). Indeed, the most important poets of Polish Romanticism, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, in the fundamental works of the canon of Polish Romantic poetry (Part III of *Forefathers' Eve*, planned works on genesis, *Genezis z Ducha* [Genesis from the Spirit]), strongly emphasized that the images of nature they presented were indirect (Słowacki even studied scientific treatises), which was a breakthrough in the expressivist vision of Romantic poetry, based on the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling (Wordsworth), naturalness, and directness. Two scholars who were the contemporaries of William Shakespeare (1564-1616), Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and Francis Bacon (1561-1626), significantly influenced the formation of the Romantic imagination and the visions of nature in Mickiewicz's and Słowacki's works.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>51</sup>See: Stephen Gaukroger, "The Discovery and Consolidation of a Scientific Culture in the West in the Modern Era", *Historically Speaking* 4, no. 2 (2013), 18-20.

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# KEYWORDS

*Adam Mickiewicz*

FRANCIS BACON

**Juliusz Słowacki**

*Johannes Kepler*

## **ABSTRACT:**

The article discusses and deconstructs the nature-culture dichotomy, examining how the image of nature in Romanticism was filtered through cultural matrices, especially in connection with the development of natural sciences, and the concept of cognition, which was most often perceived as based on the senses. Science, rooted in culture and society, and various cultural codes influenced a new poetics of nature. The analysis of the works by Mickiewicz and Słowacki demonstrates that old astronomical theories (attractive in terms of poetics and aesthetics, though widely rejected) co-existed in poetry alongside newer discoveries (Kepler), ultimately allowing poets to combine modern empiricism and materialism with spiritualism using the same method (inductive reasoning).

*literature and science*

## ASTRONOMY

## NATURE AND CULTURE

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

Marcin Leszczyński – 1979, Polish and English philologist, assistant professor at the Department of Comparative Studies of the Institute of Polish Literature at the University of Warsaw. His research interests include Polish and English Romantic literature, comparative literary studies, comparative discourse studies, literature and science studies. He is the author of: *“Lutnia szalonego barda”. Metaliterackie aspekty poematów dygresyjnych Byrona i Słowackiego* [‘Lute of a mad bard.’ Metaliterary aspects of digressive poems by Byron and Słowacki] (2014) and the co-editor of *Poemat dygresyjny Juliusza Słowackiego. Struktura, konteksty, recepcja* [Juliusz Słowacki’s digressive poem: Structure, contexts, reception] (2011; co-editor: M. Kalinowska) and *Między dyskursami, sztukami, mediami. Komparatystyka jutra* [Between discourses, arts, media: Comparative studies of tomorrow] (2017; co-editors: E. Szczęsna, P. Kubiński). |

# “Not Enough for a Trace”.

## On *Spis z natury* [Register from nature] and Other Early Poems by Krystyna Miłobędzka

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Otwarte drzwi [Open door]. To the text!

A recipe for a poem? Simple:

taking the most humble object, the most everyday action, and trying to consider it afresh, abandoning every habit of perception, and describing it without any verbal mechanism that has been worn by use. (...) Suddenly we discover that existing could be a much more intense, interesting and genuine experience than that absent-minded routine to which our senses have become hardened<sup>1</sup>.

Although this quote by Italo Calvino refers to *The Pleasures of the Door* by Francis Ponge, it could also introduce *Spis z natury* – the debut book of poems by Krystyna Miłobędzka, written in the mid 1960s (although unfinished, and as such unpublished at this time). Reconstructed by the author in cooperation with her publisher, Jarosław Borowiec, it was released in mid-2019 in an eye-catching, richly illustrated<sup>2</sup>, three-volume edition. One cover-jacket contains: *Anaglify* [Anaglyphs], *Małe mity* [Small myths], and an interview with the poet, entitled *Jesteś samo śpiewa* [You are self-sung]<sup>3</sup>. *Anaglify* constitutes the core of the volume; it consists of 40 untitled poems written

<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, *Po co czytać klasyków*, trans. Anna Wasilewska (Warszawa: PIW, 2020), 248. English translation by Martin McLaughlin, *Why Read the Classics?* (Boston: Mariner Books, 199), 316.

<sup>2</sup> The thoughtful cover design, which reflects the structure of the volume, is by Marcin Markowski.

<sup>3</sup> Krystyna Miłobędzka, *Spis z natury. Anaglify, Małe mity, Jesteś samo śpiewa*, edited by Jarosław Borowiec, (Lusowo: Wolno, 2019). Because each volume has its own pagination, henceforth I shall use abbreviations: A – *Anaglify*; M – *Małe mity*; JS – *Jesteś samo śpiewa* (with page numbers). Additionally, Z refers to: Krystyna Miłobędzka, *Zbierane 1960-2005* (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2006).

in prose. Because Miłobędzka published 23 of them in *Przed wierszem. Zapisy nowe i dawne* [Before the poem. New and older works] (1994), and then in subsequent editions of her collected poems, the cycle is well-known by her readers and critics, unlike *Małe mity*, which constitutes the second, far shorter volume, and contains only nine, previously unpublished texts, which have not been discussed to date (except for reviews of the whole volume). According to the editor's note, four of them had their first printing in the 1960s (*Ziemia* [Earth], *Mały traktat o wyobraźni* [A small treatise on imagination], *Kołysanka* [Lullaby], *Spis z natury* [Register from nature]), whereas the rest were in Miłobędzka's archive, copied from typescripts and manuscripts: four poems from the cycle *Ptasie obrazki* [Bird pictures] (*Wróble* [Sparrows], *Łabędź* [Swan], *Orzeł* [Eagle], *Flaming* [Flamingo]) and the three-part *Małe mity*, which is also the title of the book of poems<sup>4</sup>. In this essay I would like to investigate those texts and several other early poems by Miłobędzka, which have been published but are not included in the reconstructed volume, in order to uncover the nature of her early-1960's poetics. This is when observation of nature comes to the fore, which is why today we are inclined towards reading it through the prism of ecocriticism: as ecopoetry, which goes beyond the horizon of what is human, takes on a non-anthropocentric perspective. I wonder whether the split of the debut *Spis z natury*, resulting in such a clear division of the volume in half, is a kind of crack, distorting the seeming obviousness of such a picture. What is the source of myths – even "small" ones – in Miłobędzka's poetry, and what function are they supposed to have? Can a mythical order agree with the domain of what is perceptible, which is constitutive for *Anaglify*: the kingdom of individual organisms, elements of inanimate nature and objects "existing unambiguously", observed by the poet not just "from outside", but also "from inside" (A 7)? Maybe *Małe mity* was created according to a different recipe than the quote opening this paper? However, if this is the case, then why do parts of *Anaglify* and *Małe mity* seem almost identical to us? Why is the one-sentence-long part of *Spis z natury* (*Małe mity*), which rhymes perfectly with *The Pleasures of the Door*, not an anaglyph? In order to see that they are similar to each other, we do not need to "hold a door in your arms" and "[seize] one of these tall barriers to a room by the porcelain knob of its belly"<sup>5</sup>:

An open door is a mirror, where unreflected people appear (M 19).

is an open book a mirror, where unreflected poems appear?

*Jeszcze inaczej zgubione* [Lost in yet another way].  
Poems from "Twórczość"

Because Miłobędzka's poems in question were first "reflected" in the press, I would like to start with a few references which allow one to ask about the character of *Spis z natury* in a slightly different way. It would be misleading to suppose that this publication included all her early poems, whether those that meet the requirements of the *Anaglify* cycle in the first volume, or those which do not (and which do not have much in common with one another, apart from the time they were published), or even those in the second volume, under the title *Małe mity*, which was ascribed

<sup>4</sup> The first, much shorter version of "Małe mity" was published on 15 August 1965 in *Siódmy Głos Tygodnia* (No. 33 (1965): 8), a literature extra of *Głos Szczeciński*.

<sup>5</sup> See Francis Ponge, "Rozkosze drzwi", Polish translation by Anna Wasilewska, *Literatura na Świecie*, No. 9-10 (2006): 6. English version translated by C.K. Williams [PZ].



to it years later. It is a different matter, further complicated by the uncertain “textual status” of Miłobędzka’s debut cycle (analyzed by Adam Poprawa), its intentional “fragmentary” character and deviations in subsequent versions of the texts. Due to these reasons, Poprawa claims that “already at the beginning *Anaglify* were meant to be a collection not to be put together”; the book of poems does not constitute “one, consistent whole”<sup>6</sup>. We should add that when working on the 1994 selection, Miłobędzka included the poem *Pióro* [Feather] published in 1966 in the November issue of “*Twórczość*” magazine; it would seem that originally it was not an anaglyph – we learn from the editor’s note from *Spis z natury* that the texts from the cycle “have never had separate titles” (JS 34). Moreover, an analysis of the cycle shows that a first-person subject in the singular does not reveal itself there – which is the case in the text that interests me (“I listen »feather« and look »feather«. I say squeezed”, A 58); in no anaglyph can we find such a long and complex sentence as here (the initial sentence is six-verses long). Its title was replaced by the incipit *Stawia dwa znaki gwałtowne* [Writes two signs violently]; however, the poem concluded the selection proposed by Miłobędzka. As noted by Borowiec, the anaglyph opening with *Dzieciom nie wolno opowiadać* [Children are not allowed to tell stories] (first printing in “*Współczesność*”, 23, 1960) goes in the opposite direction. It was later included in Miłobędzka’s theater script, *Siała baba mak*<sup>7</sup> [An old lady was sowing poppies], and hence not included in *Spis z natury*. I mention this because the idea of *collecting* Miłobędzka’s concise *oeuvre*, and thus reconstructing *Spis z natury* as a whole, seems to be against the idea of *losing* surplus, unnecessary words, and sometimes even whole texts – such as in the case of *Jeszcze inaczej zgubione*, crossed out from subsequent editions of *Pokrewne*<sup>8</sup> [Affined]. In an interview included in *Spis*, the 86-year-old poet emotionally reveals: “For years I have crossed out words from my texts, so that only the necessary ones are left. In the book which I know to be my last, I manage to put myself and my life in six<sup>9</sup> words – »wind, I lived/sand after I am gone«” (JS 7). However, perhaps Miłobędzka is inviting us to look at her entire creative path by defining the 2008 book of poems as her “last book” (let us hope she is wrong!) and agreeing to a reconstruction of her unpublished debut?

If yes, then we should remember those texts which were not included in *Spis z natury*, although they could have been due to the time they were written. Not counting early poems published in local periodicals of limited range and availability<sup>10</sup>, in the 1960s Miłobędzka published at least four important poetic texts, which have not appeared in any of her later books and have ultimately been forgotten. If *Spis* had a register of her early works, those poems – similarly to the already mentioned

<sup>6</sup> Adam Poprawa, “Na początku było inne. *Anaglify*” [In the beginning there was other], in *Miłobędzka wielokrotnie* [Miłobędzka many times], edited by Piotr Śliwiński (Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2008), 96, 99.

<sup>7</sup> See Krystyna Miłobędzka, *Siała baba mak. Gry słowne dla teatru* [An old lady was sowing poppies. Word games for theater] (Wrocław: A, 1995), 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> The poem was first printed in *Poezja* (No 8, 1968, 38), and in the book of poems *Pokrewne* it was placed before *W gospodarstwie* [At a farm] and it clearly referred to it; it ended with “Such a shame, to put NOTHING in your mouth”, to which the last verse of *W gospodarstwie* answers: “My task: to prepare NOTHING for every living creature that would eat such a poor shell” (Krystyna Miłobędzka, *Pokrewne* (Warszawa: Czytelnik 1970), 41-42). The word NOTHING is the only one written in majuscule in the whole book of poetry.

<sup>9</sup> Polish: “Wiatr, którym żyłam/ piasek po odejściu” [PZ].

<sup>10</sup> Among others, two urban poems published in *Rocznik Nadnotecki* (t. I 1966: 212): “Piła” and “Widok z hotelu” [Hotel view] display a close affinity with Przyboś’s poetics, and may constitute an illustration for Joanna Orska’s considerations, situating Miłobędzka’s poetry in constructivist poetics. See Joanna Orska, *Performatywy. Składnia/ retoryka, gatunki i programy poetyckiego konstrukttywizmu* [Performatives. Syntax/ rhetorics, genres and programs of poetic constructivism] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2019).

*Dzieciom nie wolno* and *Jeszcze inaczej zgubione* – should have been mentioned. The poet's disdain for reprinting her early poems may be justified in the case of those written when she was young; however, the four poems in question were appreciated in the literary monthly "Twórczość", important at the time. As Miłobędzka recalls in an interview with Borowiec: "Being published in «Twórczość» was an elevation for me; at the time I knew I was in one of the best possible places. I owe it greatly to Ziemowit Feddecki, editor of poetry in the magazine, who believed in those texts [*Anaglify* –P.B.] from the very beginning" (JS 15). A two-part poem *Klee* was published in "Twórczość" in December 1962, poems *Małże* [Clams] and *Widziane w ogniu* [Seen in fire] – in February 1965, and *Patrzące chwytyliwie* [Looking in a catchy way] – in November 1966. Miłobędzka's decision not to include those texts in the reconstructed book of poems seems to be of a structural character: those texts are neither *Anaglify*, nor *Małe mity*, for their poetics would be different – they would not meet the requirements of either of the two poetic cycles. However, perhaps an analysis of those excluded poems would allow one to retrospectively identify the determiners of *Anaglify* and *Małe mity*.

Similarly to *Pióro*, the poems listed here are located between Miłobędzka's debut cycle, the "plant" (*Roślinne* [Plant], *Chlorofil* [Chlorophyll], *Ogród* [Garden]) and "animal" groups (*Jaskółki* [Swallows], *Kogut* [Rooster], *Wilk* [Wolf], *Dzięcioł* [Woodpecker]), and prose poems from *Pokrewne* (1970). Although they are based on the same concept and similar poetic sensitivity as *Anaglify*, and Calvin's formula ("consider it afresh, abandoning every habit of perception, and describing it without any verbal mechanism that has been worn by use") seems to match them as well as Ponge's poem (to which it originally refers), some minor stylistic shifts can be observed, which make those texts unusual to a far greater extent than *Anaglify*, written in a purposefully simplified language. Declarative statements dominate the narrow repertoire of syntax structures of *Anaglify*, as opposed to the questions that dominate *Małże*:

Motionless, wingless, eyeless, featherless – perhaps they will fly? Limey birds on limestone. Slipped between land and water (in a hard rind), paused and frozen, multiplied by rind in rinds. Seeds too hard. From how many flickers of water will they come true, how many flickers of water will they absorb, how much humble sand do they destroy? Entangled into how many flickers of the sea? Into loose sand? The borderline of land and water: a shape ready to fly<sup>11</sup>.

In turn, in *Widziane w ogniu*, unlike in *Anaglify*, there are numerous intrusions, signaled mostly by double hyphens, which were single in the debut cycle, serving only prosodic functions:

Red, they break in the air, dropped by the flame – red buds, leaves, branches – soft forest wall, lifted by the heat. Those animals ran there again – found only in smell – waiting, black, frozen, patient – to come out of the night of coal, for skin again, teeth again, for oneself wolf, oneself doe. In one scent does float through wolves, frozen in rush, connected with slow motion, touching bodies, sleepily coasting the taste of salt and grass. This animal is familiar, the only one<sup>12</sup>.

*Patrzące chwytyliwie* also contains elements absent from *Anaglify*: a clear first-person perspective (with the already mentioned exception of *Pióro*), ellipses and neologisms ("sharpfully", "alweverywhere").

<sup>11</sup>Krystyna Miłobędzka, "Małże", *Twórczość*, No. 2 (1965): 30.

<sup>12</sup>Krystyna Miłobędzka, "Widziane w ogniu", *Twórczość*, No. 2 (1965): 30.

Hard phloem, growing densely, sharply, alverywhere. How to recognize its sudden lives, which beyond twilights, when a blade has enough drawing for its own grass; which beyond the night, when morning washes away color in a biting well of flowers?

I am pulling off shells, piercing through tissue, drilling white flesh: they are falling down, whirring on the brass of leaves into hands darkened into a trunk<sup>13</sup>.

In the quoted poems from *Spis z natury* we can also find a clear radicalization of non-anthropocentric investigations of Miłobędzka's poetry. Those were only initiated in *Anaglify*, conducted within an epistemological (subject-object) frame of a cycle. So far, they have been highlighted in the reception of *Spis z natury*, realizing a scenario pointed out by Krzysztof Hoffman in his discussion of the book: "Those poems could become a tasty morsel for fans of novelties in humanities – such as posthumanism, turn towards things, or ecocriticism. And it is not that those theories have nothing important to say, but that Miłobędzka had walked those paths at least half a century before they became fashionable"<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, in order to capture Miłobędzka's precursory role in Polish ecopoetry in a satisfactory way (as argued by Jakub Skurtys<sup>15</sup>), we should trace the evolution of themes related with nature, plants, and animals in her 1960's texts – taking into consideration the forgotten poems quoted above. Resigning from the first-person perspective, characteristic for the lyrical confession style, and leaning towards impersonal forms that pretend to be clichés (especially with *one*), allow one to describe objects, creatures or phenomena isolated from the world ("If one really likes cacti or has doubts whether they are happy in their pot, one should tear off their spikes", A 11; "One puts dry jasmine in hot water", A 15; "First thing: if one has a giant emerald at home, one should peel it piece by piece", A 17; "One collects rescued roses in aluminum bubbles. One puts a label on the top", A 21, etc.) which is all among the constitutive characteristics of *Anaglify*. On the other hand, in the quoted poems from "Twórczość", elements of the represented world clearly connect with one another: entities lose their individuality, they seem to permeate and combine with one another, presenting themselves no longer as isolated, but as connected and affiliated, constituting parts of a bigger whole on a deeper level. *Małże*, "entangled in flickers of the sea", displays similarities not only to "seed" and "sand", but also to birds (they turn out to be "limey birds on limestone").

<sup>13</sup>Krystyna Miłobędzka, "Patrzące chwytliwe", *Twórczość*, No. 11 (1966): 63-64.

<sup>14</sup>Krzysztof Hoffmann, "Mistrzynie Krystyna Miłobędzka. Alchemiczka poezji z nową publikacją *Spis z natury*" [Krystyna Miłobędzka, the Champion. Poetry alchemist with a new publication of *Spis z natury*], *Gazeta Wyborcza. Poznań*, 6.08.2019, <https://poznan.wyborcza.pl/poznan/7,36000,25063141,mistrzynie-milobedzka-alchemiczka.html>. Similar argumentation can be found in Anita Jarzyna's review. She reads *Spis z natury* as an "interestingly up-to-date in the face of Anthropocene-related considerations" and shows "how we abuse nature" (Anita Jarzyna, "Na nowo. Wokół *Spisu z natury* Krystyny Miłobędzkiej" [Anew. On *Spis z natury* by Krystyna Miłobędzka], *Zamek Czyta*, 16.10.2020, <http://www.zamekczyta.pl/na-nowo-wokol-spisu-z-natury-krystyny-milobedzkiej/>). Karolina Górniak-Prasnal interprets Miłobędzka's debut cycle in terms of the turn towards things; according to her, "*Anaglify* should be considered in the context of those trends in the latest culture studies which take non-anthropocentric perspective" ("*Rzeczy, które się do nas zbliżają – Anaglify* Krystyny Miłobędzkiej" [Things that approach us – *Anaglify* by Krystyna Miłobędzka], *Wielogłos*, No. 2 (2017): 64). Even earlier, Anna Kałużna pointed to "a non-anthropocentric, ahumanistic attitude", which can be connected with "new ecology" in her book *Wielkie wygrane. Wspólne sprawy poezji, krytyki i estetyki* [Great victories. Common issues of poetry, criticism, and aesthetics] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2011), 150.

<sup>15</sup>See Jakub Skurtys, "Zamiast Szymborskiej? Krystyna Miłobędzka i źródła współczesnej ekopoezji w Polsce" [Instead of Szymborska? Krystyna Miłobędzka and sources of contemporary ecopoetry in Poland], *Przestrzenie Teorii* 28 (2017). In his review of *Spis z teorii*, he also asked about its significance for "increasingly more popular" ecopoetry; rightfully noting Miłobędzka's early skepticism regarding the possible "dialogue with non-human actors", he added: "this does not mean that her poetry does not belong to categories related to the ecological turn, to sensitizing to nature, paying equal attention to all living creatures (the *akin*, as stated by the title) and destroying the hierarchical chain of being, up until changing the functioning of the poem itself" (Jakub Skurtys, "Cały inwentarz pojęć" [A whole inventory of notions], *Odra*, No. 10 (2019): 104).

In *Widziane w ogniu* "buds, leaves, branches" are a "soft forest wall". Animals running away connect with each other in an even clearer way: "In one scent does float through wolves, frozen in rush, connected with slow motion, touching bodies, sleepily coasting the taste of salt and grass. This animal is familiar, the only one"<sup>16</sup>. The subject of *Patrząc chwytniowie* who uncovers this deep unity can no longer calmly "watch and describe" from a safe distance – it is embodied by a dramatic question: "How to recognize?". In answer, he allows the "sudden lives" of a wooden "phloem" to make the language bizarre, to require new words, syntax, categorizations and a new title from it, which goes beyond what readers are used to: what looks at who, what catches (us?)?

### *Oczy nie widzą głęboko. Sponge and clover*

The difference between *Anaglify* and the poems discussed above would be similar to that between Ponge's short, model "centripetal" texts from *The Voice of Things* and his "centrifugal", fragmentary, open texts in motion, in accordance with the directive of *Expressing Fury* which "take on a challenge accepted by language"<sup>17</sup>. Although the main idea would remain the same – as Ponge himself explains, to "imagine a sort of writing (new) which, situating itself more or less between the two genres (definition and description), would take from the first its infallibility, its indubitability, its brevity also, from the second its respect for the sensory aspect of things ..." – with its subsequent explorations the attitude towards writing would change, which, taking the side of things, more and more clearly transforms, diversifies, changes something in the language<sup>19</sup>. Ponge concludes that as a result being on the side of things equals considering words"<sup>20</sup>.

I keep returning to Ponge, because I cannot resist the impression that Miłobędzka as a novice poet – a graduate of Polish philology, in a relationship with Andrzej Falkiewicz, who at the time wrote almost exclusively about French drama – might have known Ponge's works, and thus she may have engaged in a creative dialogue with him in her prose poems (apart from Polish poets representing the genre, such as Herbert or Różewicz). We do not appreciate poetic "influencology" too much today, and indeed, its findings sound all too often like a "tinkling cymbal" in literary histories; however, in this case it would be about love. The interview with Miłobędzka reveals that *Anaglify* was motivated by love; she sent them by post to her future husband, which she recalls today as "a sudden literary opening, which gives love" (JS 10). As Anita Jarzyna concludes, "in fact, by finding a language for two people, Miłobędzka found her own (first) poetic

<sup>16</sup>Although according to Jarzyna, Miłobędzka combined "birds and trees, or people and mushrooms" in order to show the "planet as a hyperorganism (...) engulfed in endless connections" already in *Anaglify*, neither the texts to which Jarzyna refers (see A 40, incipit "In winter birds whether trees died" and A 51 "mushrooms are forest statues of people"), nor in any other *Anaglif* do we deal with such clear "connections" as in the poems discussed here, which were not included in the debut cycle; neither birds and trees, nor people and mushrooms are by any means "connected" – "one".

<sup>17</sup>Francis Ponge, "Expressing fury", translated into Polish by Krystyna Szeżyńska-Mackowiak, *Literatura na Świecie*, No 9-10 (2006): 65. Writing about "centripetal" and "centrifugal" texts, I am referring to an inspiring essay by Edward Stankiewicz from 1982, "Centripetal and centrifugal structures in poetry", translated into Polish by Paweł Wawrzyszko, in *Poetyka i sztuka słowa* [Poetics and the art of word] (Kraków: Universitas, 1996), 103-134).

<sup>18</sup>Francis Ponge, "My Creative Method", translated into Polish by Jan Maria Kłoczowski, *Literatura na Świecie*, No 9-10 (2006): 109.

<sup>19</sup>Ponge, "My Creative Method": 110.

<sup>20</sup>Ponge, "My Creative Method": 115.

language”<sup>21</sup>. It is possible to imagine that there was a third language – Ponge’s. A selection of his poems translated into Polish by Zbigniew Bieńkowski was published in the fourth issue of “*Twórczość*” in 1957, and three years later those poems were included and discussed in a separate chapter of *Piekła i Orfeusze* [Infernos and Orpheuses]<sup>22</sup>. It is possible to trace relationships between various works of Miłobędzka and Ponge: between *Piekła i Orfeusze* and *Anaglify*; between Ponge’s water Poems (such as *Banks of Loire*) and Miłobędzka’s observations from her stay in Rewa (incipits: *Na piasku nad morzem* [On the sand by the sea], *Meduzy drażnią dłonie* [Jellyfish irritate hands], *Mina morska jest krępa* [A naval mine is stocky]), and the already mentioned *Małże*; between Ponge’s *Oranges* and Miłobędzka’s “an orange juice bottle” (A 8); between Ponge’s observations regarding a bird skeleton in *Notes on a sketch of a bird* and the “white skeleton” from Miłobędzka’s *Kolibry* [Hummingbirds] (A 20); between his *Sea coast* and her “borderland of sea and water” from *Małże*; between Ponge’s *Butterfly* (“A flying burning match, which doesn’t spread any fire (...) a tiny sail mistreated by the wind”<sup>23</sup>) and Miłobędzka’s *Butterfly* (“It opens its wings, ready to fly. How lightly are they carrying it? God’s faces, fear of eyes, unsupported colors”, A 43). Even if we are not dealing with an influence (and fear of influence) and Ponge was not the one responsible for inspiring Miłobędzka’s poetic imagination, a comparative analysis of the poems listed above is nonetheless an interesting topic. Apart from some clear differences, I believe it would also reveal not only genological and linguistic similarities, but also a deep convergence in terms of their ideas regarding poetry’s tasks, its attitude towards reality, and the character of language-world relations. It can be supposed that Miłobędzka could endorse excerpts of *My Creative Method* quoted above, whereas things in her poems can be discussed in a similar way as Derrida writes about Ponge: that a thing is not something that adapts to rights, needs to be discussed in an objective (adequate) way or vice versa – subjective (anthropomorphic). According to Derrida, first and foremost, a thing is something else completely. Without words, not saying anything about oneself, it turns towards oneself and oneself only, in all one’s irreplaceable individuality and loneliness. We owe a thing our unconditional respect, which is not mediated by any general law; individuality and difference are also the rights of a thing<sup>24</sup>.

If this is correct, then apart from the dialectics of the whole and the fragmentary characteristic for *Anaglify*, a different dialectics would be constitutive for Miłobędzka’s 1960’s poetic investigations: one of difference and repetition, idiom and institution, novelty and tradition. From this perspective her early poetry would be *par excellence* neo-avant-garde, situating itself in a consciously selected line of artistic investigations<sup>25</sup>, whereas its subsequent, constantly repeated “attitude towards things” would constitute differentiating repetitions of earlier attempts. The resulting, increasingly more open text would become a text in motion, successively losing simplicity and co-

<sup>21</sup>Jarzyna.

<sup>22</sup>See Zbigniew Bieńkowski, “Parti pris poezja Ponge’a” [Parti pris Ponge’s poetry]; in *Piekła i Orfeusze. Szkice z literatury zachodniej* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1960), 443-454.

<sup>23</sup>Francis Ponge, “Butterfly”, translated into English by Vadim Bystritski [PZ].

<sup>24</sup>Jacques Derrida, “Sygnowane Ponge” [Signsponge], translated into Polish by Stanisław Cichowicz, *Literatura na Świecie*, No. 8-9 (1988): 308. Paraphrase in English based on the Polish translation [PZ].

<sup>25</sup>Regardless of the myth of a “separate poet” present in later reception of Miłobędzka’s works, it seems that in her early works she felt a clear connection with the avant-garde tendencies of the post-war poetry; it is meaningful that in 1963 in her first program statement regarding – as she put it – Tuwim’s and Gałczyński’s poems “written across”, she reached for the collective subject: “Today we, drilling into each poetic emotion, do not understand the meaning of such works, we read it as making music with proper names, names of emotions and things” (Krystyna Miłobędzka, “W dziesiątą rocznicę [On the tenth anniversary]. Gałczyński – Tuwim”, *Twórczość*, No. 12 (1963): 26).

herence, and going beyond divisions increasingly more successfully: between entities and things, which they discuss, between subject and object, between each text (resembling a limitless poem more and more), between genre models, verses, sentences, syntax groups, parts of speech, and ultimately – lexemes<sup>26</sup>. It would no longer be a work of looking – poetry of the eye, to which the title of the volume refers, and which would stem from phenomenological reading<sup>27</sup> – and would become a poetry of words. After all, the title – *Spis z natury* – leads us to words (and later – an inventory, register, or encyclopedia), similarly to the word "zapisy" [entries] used by Miłobędzka to refer to her poems. Not finding her own way in the existing ways of speaking, and thus recognizing the "internal development of own art" as "the need to speak new" (Z 121), Miłobędzka chooses to write – an action in which, as she confesses, she "can twist words, break down used clusters, combine opposites" (JS 6). It is writing that "drills into" observations – and it is only in writing that a connection becomes possible: "I am organically connected with my writing. I write almost with my whole body – it is my body that has this text, this picture. This is not a matter of head alone; it is the matter of tenderly connecting with the other" (JS 7). Thus, what is impossible to talk about should be written down. In such a conceptualization there would be no contradiction between *Anaglify*, which tries to stand on the side of things, and the poems from *Pokrewne, Dom, pokarmy* [Home, foods] and *Wykaz treści* [List of contents], which are "dramatically agrammatical" and make "an impression of untamed mediocrity"<sup>28</sup>; there is no contradiction between the non-anthropocentric perspective of their reception proposed today, and the motherlike-childlike convention that is dominant in the listed books of poetry, between the turn towards things and the avant-garde, between new ecopoetry and good old linguism. No sponge can erase this connection.

Thus, instead of a sponge, I reach for a clover (four-leaf?) – and with it for Miłobędzka's other, this time clearly stated inspiration. The text is entitled *Klee*:

1

Will thinking have enough eyes for flooding the world?

Eyes cannot see deep, they see what is near or far, which is why so many coastlines, so many crushed seas.

Too many times met by itself to take root. Shifted through seasons of the year. It approached itself incessantly, too light, until it changed into wind. How much air did it have to go through so that it has become impossible to find a name for it?

2

Fire has been lit – brass masks are fuming. A piece of ice has been placed in the fire – a face is becoming livid. Fear is dividing into separate parts. Fear is looking deep<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>26</sup>Orska writes about poems from *Dom, pokarmy* (1975) which were created in this way: "Miłobędzka leaves us with an impression that we are dealing with a sentence «under construction» – started many times, developed in different directions, corrected in multiple ways" (Orska, 114).

<sup>27</sup>See Jacek Gutorow, "Glif", in *Wielogłos. Krystyna Miłobędzka w recenzjach, szkicach, rozmowach* Multivoice. Krystyna Miłobędzka in reviews, sketches, conversations], edited by Jarosław Borowiec (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2012), 17-30.

<sup>28</sup>See Stanisław Barańczak, "Dramatyczna agrammatyczność" [Dramatic agrammaticality], in *Wielogłos. Krystyna Miłobędzka...*, 46.

<sup>29</sup>Krystyna Miłobędzka, "Klee", *Twórczość*, No. 12 (1962): 37.



In her poetry, Miłobędzka, who does not like “making music with proper names”, she uses very few last names (with the exception of Sylvia Plath and “Yoshimoto, master of butoh” – Z 238), and apart from the jocular *Wiersz dla Bashō* [A poem for Bashō], they never appear in titles. For those reasons, the above poem from 1962 would be exceptional – which perhaps is the reason why eight years later, when it was included in *Pokrewne*, it lost both its title and half of its size. Miłobędzka also decided to use inversion, as a result of which the phrase *Eyes cannot look deep* became the incipit (see Z 41); she also erased the sentence “How much air did it have to go through so that it has become impossible to find a name for it?”, which seems especially significant in the context of “losing” Paul Klee’s name, Miłobędzka’s favorite artist. When asked about having an “affinity in visual arts”, she told Borowiec that:

Always Paul Klee. I sometimes forget about him. Now you reminded me about drawings I have not seen in a while. (...) There is this story by Klee about the drawing from *Creative Confession*. There is a field, you can see a cloud... Only lines – this line is this, that line is that. I think it is an encounter between childish drawing and an artist who is aware of his works – unusual in Klee. Why am I telling you about this? Because in his drawings I find what I am sometimes lucky enough to write in my texts<sup>30</sup>.

Miłobędzka also pointed out the childish aspect of Klee’s drawings in 1995 in an interview with Sergiusz Sterna-Wachowiak; referring to his small-format works, such as *Avant la neige*, she said: “There is very little, but a lot is happening, at least for the viewer and inside the painting”<sup>31</sup>. This formula might as well be a self-characterization of Miłobędzka’s works, whose “childishness” is also closely related to the activity of “an artist aware of his own work”. The reference to *Creative Confession* is also meaningful. Although in Poland the essay was published only in 1969 in an edited volume entitled *Artyści o sztuce* [Artists on art] (translated into Polish by Jolanta Maurin-Białostocka), at the very beginning of Miłobędzka’s activity, it was then published as *Credo artystyczne* [Artistic credo] in 1961, translated by Waław Niepokólczycki in “Więzi” (issue No. 4), a year before Miłobędzka’s poem was published – coincidentally? – next to a translation of Ponge’s poems. It may be supposed that the second part of *Klee* would be an ekphrasis, perhaps the only one in Miłobędzka’s poetry, whereas the first part can be read as a poetic answer to Klee’s considerations.

*Creative Credo* opens with a frequently cited formula: “Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible”<sup>32</sup>. It constitutes both criticism of non-reflective looking (“And what about the beholder: does he finish with a work all at once?” – Klee asks, and then answers: “Often yes, unfortunately.”<sup>33</sup>), and an apology for looking deep: “let us (...) take a little journey to the land of better understanding”, says Klee in the introduction<sup>34</sup>. “Eyes cannot see deep”, Miłobędzka agrees, and having accepted the invitation, she makes “thinking” the subject of her poetic

<sup>30</sup>Jarosław Borowiec, *Szare światło. Rozmowy z Krystyną Miłobędzką i Andrzejem Falkiewiczem* [Grey light. Interviews with Krystyna Miłobędzka and Andrzej Falkiewicz] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2009), 143.

<sup>31</sup>“Wiersza nie można zapisać, bo trzeba by było zapisać wszechświat. Z Krystyną Miłobędzką rozmowa Sergiusz Sterna-Wachowiak” [A poem cannot be written down, you would have to write cosmos down], in *Wielogłos. Krystyna Miłobędzka...*, 610.

<sup>32</sup>Paul Klee, “Credo artystyczne”, translated by Waław Niepokólczycki, *Więzi*, No. 4 (1961): 81. English version: Reed Enger, “Creative Credo, Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible.” in *Obelisk Art History*, <http://arthistoryproject.com/artists/paul-klee/creative-credo/> [PZ].

<sup>33</sup>Klee: 83.

<sup>34</sup>Klee: 81.

considerations rather than "looking". Klee writes that this is the first "action" which precedes everything else ("first a thought manifests itself", "thought can be considered first"<sup>35</sup>). The opening question – "Will thinking have enough eyes for flooding the world?" – which initiates a number of aquatic metaphors ("so many coastlines, so many crushed seas"), could answer the challenge from the conclusion of the essay: "to let oneself be carried by the refreshing sea, a broad river, or a delightful stream, like this diversified aphoristic art of graphics"<sup>36</sup>. However, where does "flooding the world" come from? Why is she writing about "crushed seas"? And what "changed into wind", travelling the world, unable to "find a name"? The direction of Klee's considerations, connecting an artist's work – creation – with the Biblical story of the creation of the world, seems to provide answers to those questions. Pointing out to the key role of motion, he believes that "The Biblical story of Creation is a good parable for motion", adding that "The work of art, too, is first of all genesis; it is never experienced purely as a result"<sup>37</sup>. Defining a work of art as "a formal cosmos" consisting of such elements as "numbers and letters", he adds that "in the end a formal cosmos is achieved, so much like the Creation that a mere breath suffices to transform religion into act"<sup>38</sup>. In the end he claims that:

The relation of art to creation is symbolic. Art is an example, just as the earthly is an example of the cosmic.

The liberation of the elements, their arrangement in subsidiary groups, simultaneous destruction and construction towards the whole, pictorial polyphony, the creation of rest through the equipoise of motion: all these are lofty aspects of the question of form, crucial to formal wisdom; but they are not yet art in the highest sphere. A final secret stands behind all our shifting views, and the light of intellect gutters and goes out.<sup>39</sup>

### *Małe mity. From life of the earth*

Let us put forward a (small) thesis: Klee's concept of art as playing with final things may have inspired not only the forgotten poem from "Twórczość" analyzed here, but also poems from *Małe mity*; openly engaging in that "game" would constitute the determiner of this cycle, making it different from *Anaglify*. Attempts at reducing the difference between two parts of *Spis z natury* to a set of oppositions –nature-nurture, myth-nature, anthropocentrism-nonanthropocentrism, humanism-posthumanism etc.–would be misguided. In *Małe mity* Miłobędzka starts a journey whose later stages can be understood by analyzing poems from "Twórczość" (*Małże, Patrzące chwyliwie, Widziane w ogniu*): a journey of "setting free" perceived elements of the world, "grouping" them into more "complex divisions", and ultimately "reconstructing as a whole", which required Miłobędzka to undertake increasingly more complex formal measures and a radical opening for possibilities offered by the neo-avant-garde linguistic poetry

<sup>35</sup>Klee: 83.

<sup>36</sup>Klee: 86.

<sup>37</sup>Klee: 84.

<sup>38</sup>Klee: 85.

<sup>39</sup>Klee: 85-86.



(Białoszewski, Karpowicz). In *Małe mity*, Miłobędzka experiments with rewriting Biblical motifs in such a way; similarly to *Creative Credo*, they dominate the cycle, which on the other hand contains hardly any elements from Greco-Roman mythology. Using a pen of poetic imagination (whose significance is stressed by Miłobędzka in *Mały traktat o wyobraźni*) they were “written down from nature”. “Written down” – not registered or “recreated”, but “made visible”, “created”, made real by writing “From nature”, because they were there before, on earth, here, not elsewhere; earth is the leitmotif of the cycle and the proper cosmos of Miłobędzka’s poetry. The formula which constitutes the title of the volume and the concluding poem is not a coincidence; it expresses the idea behind *Małe mity*, which aims to go beyond the nature-nurture, subject-object, thing-word opposition; the mythical and religious is revealed here as earthly, natural in such a way that one has an impression that two orders closely, almost organically connect with each other. And yet the presence of the mythical is perceptible – and although in trace amounts, hardly outlined, hidden, this presence differentiates *Małe mity* from *Anaglify*.

*Ptasie obrazki* – the closest to the debut cycle poems from *Małe mity* – are written into the Biblical perspective via individual formulations. In the final verse of *Wróble*, whose existence (according to Miłobędzka) is defined by waiting (“One is waiting for a horse to pass, for cherries and grains”), she writes: “During waiting one says very many things. This is how waiting becomes as significant as final things” (M 11). *Łabędź* opens with a periphrasis: “Majestic, feathery boat separated from the coastline on the second day of creation” (M 12), whereas “thanks to flamingos one can believe in pink glasses, and hence also in the existence of the paradise” (*Flaming*, M 14). Also *Ziemia* [Earth] which opens the discussed cycle with the incipit “Where to find the first place of pain?”, in which Earth – “heavy, calm, not understanding the violence of waters” – just like its Creator “not included in anything” and “spread with all lives” (M 5) – “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind” (Genesis 1,11<sup>40</sup>) refers to the first day of creation. The unsettling *Kotysanka* (M 17) inspires messianic associations: its “light, pellucid” protagonist (the Good Shepherd?) enters a “herd”, walks “between lush and soft animals” (sheep?), “beats light after light”, until they “lie down, relaxing their backs along the road”. However, the one that comes turns out to be “more menacing than the night”, and his actions (“he deprived rivers, worn off with thirsty tongues, of depth”) resemble the Messiah from Ephraim’s house rather than that from David’s<sup>41</sup>. A clearer concept opens the already mentioned poem *Spis z natury*:

Lean legs of a crucified tree are hanging on the wardrobe door. Long, even, dried torso, some knees bent inwards. Hips could in the place of protruding bumps (M 18).

A suggestive juxtaposition of a wooden wardrobe with the crucified Christ inspires Biblical references in later parts of the poem describing subsequent elements of a house; the passion motif seems to be continued with “a deep crack from ears to the nose”, “an open wound”, and “longitudinal bunch of muscle of reed and sawdust” (M 19), whereas “heat circulating the living clay” (M 18) again refers to the story of creation. The poem’s strength stems from the fact that the

<sup>40</sup>English Standard Version (EVS) [PZ].

<sup>41</sup>See e.g. Gershom Scholem, *Basic Concepts of the Kaballah*, translated by Juliusz Zychowicz (Warszawa: Aletheia, 2015), 200-202.

cited phrases refer to (respectively): a "horse head in a frame" hanging on a wall, the "wall, visible due to its deformity", and finally (typical for a fan of Białoszewski!) a consistently personified "furnace" with a "throat" and "a dark chamber, or lighter than heart" (M 18-19). However, the most obvious invitation to playing with final things can be found in the titular *Małe mity*:

## I

He then took a lump of clay into his hands, this could also  
be a stone, barbwire, grapevine –  
and he passed on labyrinths pressed on his fingers.  
it happened at the beginning and this is surely why until  
today we do not know who he was. It is supposed:  
leaning, no smile, he may have said something,  
or it may have been just a look.

## II

He stopped the boat for a moment, in silence they went into  
the water, they made a huge circle with themselves. They did  
not want to catch that fish at all. They only ambushed it.  
They waited. And when the fish fell down on the sandy  
shore, one of them approached it and outlined it  
precisely. At the same time the fish already had  
an idea of human suffering. With no possibility to  
escape it slowly ossified into white tools  
of crime – nails, spears, cross.  
And they said that a sand fish is not enough for a trace  
of fish and not enough for a trace of man. And they kept catching  
living fish, and eating dead fish. And sand? Sand  
became useful for making glass.

## III

Trees were the highest place of life on earth:  
its juices could only reach that place. Birds  
knew that. And those who had the power to cut  
trees, invented higher and higher places.  
Now they are flowing, flowing alone through dead constructions  
(M 8-9).

We can easily identify the Biblical periscopes. The first part of *Małe mity*, similarly to the fragments quoted above, is a return to Bereshit – it tells the story of what was happening at the beginning, placing clay in the hands of the Creator in line with the Bible. The longest, second part, belongs to the New Testament: apart from references to Christ's passion, it also refers to the apostles catching fish – but it also alludes to Christ writing on the ground and to the so-called *Eucharistic speech* from John 6. Finally, in the last part we can recognize Babel – but also the Flood. However, identifying those stories is only the beginning; in order not to flow through the poem like through a "dead construction", it should be seen as an effect of poetic work on myth, which presses itself on its surface, and in

the deep structure. The most obvious opposition organizing the latter manifests itself in the whole cycle: positively valued smallness appears in titles, and in the contents of most poems. Sometimes – like in *Wróble* – smallness is juxtaposed with greatness (“Life of sparrows consists of completely small expectations. They do not make plans for migrations in the fall, which is why they do not experience massive anxiety”, M 11) – and it manifests itself in the form of short poems, or poems divided into short parts. However, there is a more significant opposition to be found in *Małe mity* – of life and death, of the living and the dead – which answers the theme of creation. In fact, Miłobędzka’s biophilic 1960’s and 1970’s poetry may be considered vitalist *par excellence*. The elements of the two oppositions are put together in such a way that life situates itself on the side of the small (*Mały traktat o wyobraźni* concludes with a generalizing paraphrase: “a completely small trap, from which life begins”, M 6), whereas the big seems to connect with death and disease (the “physical greatness of an eagle” can only be admired “in an asylum for mad kings or in educational morgues” *Orzeł*, M 13), as well as with violence (the “majestic” *Łabędź* becomes a protagonist of “legends” about “almost human cruelty” M 12) and ideology (“The way flamingos walk is concerning – in a flock they start to march”, M 14). This juxtaposition (small-living vs. huge-dead) also organizes the order of the analyzed poem: the nameless Creator bends over small things (“a lump of clay”, “a grapevine”, etc.), whereas the “higher and higher” human constructions made in order to surpass trees are in fact dead. If we consider *Małe mity* a triptych (and they refer to this form: the longest part, a New Testament scene, is placed between two from the Old Testament), it should not be surprising that we will find their most important formula in the middle: “And they said that a sand fish is not enough for a trace of fish and not enough for a trace of man. And they kept catching living fish, and eating dead fish”. We can hear echoes of “I am the bread of life” (John 6:48), where the contradiction of food – life-giving and deadly – is used multiple times, not only thanks to Bible-like styling which is more evident than in other parts of the poem<sup>42</sup>. However, this is perverse: the evangelical antithesis makes sense for bread or water, but it does not for fish, which need to be killed before consumption. Additionally, worldly food is juxtaposed to God’s Word, and the outline of a dead fish on “the sandy shore”. Although it is difficult to imagine that the resulting “sand fish” becomes living food, it definitely constitutes – like the neo-avant-garde *land art* interventions – a borderline realization, which Miłobędzka clearly suggests; her sand fish is not enough for a trace of fish (after all, it is man-made), and “not enough for a trace of man” (because man only outlined the animal in the sand). Moreover, fish (ἰχθύς) as an acronym of “Iesus Nazarenus, Rex Iudaeorum” refers to Jesus and is a symbol of Christianity. Following its first – Christological – meaning, it is hard not to think that if Jesus does not appear in the second part of the poem as man, perhaps is in fact the mysterious fish, which inspires a striking reaction from the fishermen: “He stopped the boat for a moment, in silence they went into the water, they made a huge circle with themselves. They did not want to catch that fish at all”. The circle could be a reference to a sacrificial circle, and breaking it – like in Girard – would happen due to Jesus’s salvation mission: “fish already had an idea of human suffering” and it washes ashore. However, it seems that the theological reading would be less interesting than a historicized one: not referring to God Incarnate, but subject to Christianity’s secularizing processes, which – like in Gianni Vattima’s hermeneutics – would agree to its own weakening and dying. In the disenchanted world of “dead constructions”,

<sup>42</sup>“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life” (John 6: 27); “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died (John 6: 49). “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6: 51); “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread[c] the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever” (John 6: 58). The opposition of living and “dead” food appears in the Gospel of John multiple times also in the case of “living water”, e.g. John 6: 10.

where things lost their mythical meanings, and "sand became useful for making glass", the Creator can be talked about only apophatically ("we do not know who he was"), and the "labyrinths pressed on his fingers" show fingerprints rather than Image and Likeness.

The end of the poem seems to leave no doubts that the end of understanding nature as a book and its progressing exploration have negative consequences (or even apocalyptic – the flood). The word "alone" in "Now they are flowing, flowing alone through dead constructions" also points to alienation – without God and faith in Nature the river of time carries us further and further away from 'life on earth'... Does the possibility to undertake the topic of secularization in an affirmative way stem from those pictures? Vattimo perceived secularization as Christianity's proper significance, also relating to art (and thus – literature); art is neither able nor obliged to serve the function of «new mythology», rational religion<sup>43</sup>. *Małe mity* is clearly not meant to be the "new mythology" of our times. Nonetheless, the fact that it ironically distances itself from Christianity's "major narratives" may be treated as an attempt at deconstructing this narrative – a differentiating repetition in which (as befits a neo-avant-garde intervention), criticism goes hand in hand with affirmation, and destruction –and hence with creation. *Małe mity* could be a model text of micrology – a "small literary form" characterized by somewhat perverse "micropoetics", requiring the difficult art of "microreading" from the reader which could reveal Great Things<sup>44</sup> to them. And perhaps even microteology – on the one hand helping us realize the uncertain status of theological discourse, and on the other, thanks to its literary character, being a testimony and tribute to fragile truth and hopeful human existence<sup>45</sup>?

If the answer to those questions is positive, it is because the nature of the poetics of the discussed poems does not allow it. How was *Małe mity* created? It is not based on big myths, and then written into texts about nature, like riddles, in order to invite the reader to give the right answers. The titular formula of "writing from nature" indicates the rather opposite tendency – this "anaglyphic" observation of nature allowed one to see the seeds of myths in it. However, this does not mean that the assumed reading of *Małe mity* would lead to classifying them, i.e., in a register similar to *Systema Naturae* by Linnaeus. Although the poetic language of *Małe mity* – not as connecting and uniting as in *Pokrewne* and *Dom, pokarmy* – is nonetheless close to the language of *Anaglify*. *Małe mity* is different from *Anaglify* in terms of its multiple-level thematic structure, which requires the reader to seek metaphorical meanings not only within each level (perceptible – nature – myth – Christianity – history), but also between them. This implies a complex metaphorical activity, connoting symbolic rather than allegorical qualities, new myths, produced by the poet via differentiating repetitions of the Biblical material rather than the existence of purely religious contents, hidden under pictures observed in nature. Although this construction is made of allegedly "dead", secularized religious-mythical elements by seemingly worn off poetic devices, repeated after the avant-garde, it turns out to be surprisingly alive and fertile in terms of meaning. Affirming the secular lack of certainty which today reopens metaphysics in a new way, Julia Kristeva writes:

<sup>43</sup>Gianni Vattimo, *Poza interpretacją. Znaczenie hermeneutyki dla filozofii* [Beyond Interpretation. The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy], translated into Polish by Katarzyna Kasia (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), 63-64, 86.

<sup>44</sup>Aleksander Nawarecki, "Mikrologia, genologia, miniatura" [Micrology, genology, miniature], in *Miniatura i mikrologia literacka* [Literary miniature and micrology], vol. I, edited by Aleksander Nawarecki (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2000), 18.

<sup>45</sup>Michał Paweł Markowski, "Teologia, dyskurs, zdarzenie" [Teology. Discourse, meaning], in Maciej Bielawski, *Mikroteologie* (Kraków: Homini, 2008), 226.

The remains of the ontotheological continent, too rapidly decreed sunk, seem less and less like “dead letters” and more and more like laboratories of living cells whose exploration might allow us to clarify present aporias and impasses<sup>46</sup>.

This is what Miłobędzka’s poetry does with the discursive, “dead constructions” of myth, religion, and theology (which indeed to many of us are “dead fish”); by writing them down, it makes them alive, transforms them into a living world full of meaning, and hence creates them anew – yes, small, tiny, but thanks to that also childishly energetic, active, all-pervasive, lively. “Myths have no end!” (JS 17) – Miłobędzka says in an interview with Borowiec, almost like Jesus placing a child in front of us:

There is no end to questions about the beginning of everything. Each thing and universe. What came first, where is this life hidden? Every child surely knows that. I – child – like every child, have my own ideas of life of everything. Adults call it personification. Myths have no end! (JS 17).

Thus, by diminishing the Great Story of Christianity, Miłobędzka does not liquidate it; she makes it weaker by repeating it, thus leading it to its place – on earth. Reminding us about the fundamental connection between nature and myth, *humus* (earth) a *humilitas* (humbleness), her poetry would be consistently humble, and as such, kenotic in its deep structure (incorporating the divine into the earthly, physical, “the first matter of the word”, JS 7), and postsecular in its meaning (functioning on remnants of secularized Christianity, preserving their – blissfully reduced – contents in its small forms). Thus, in fact the discussed cycle would situate itself “at the beginning”. While *Anaglify* would open Miłobędzka’s poetry to nature and the world of things, *Małe mity* would complete her exposition with the theolinguistic theme, resonating (typically *piano*) in all her poetic works, culminating in *Pamiętam. Zapisy stanu wojennego* [I remember. Poems from martial law] and *Dom, pokarmy*; the latter closes with one of the most unusual postsecular forms of Polish poetry: “Do I believe in God? I only cover him, but I do not believe. Which is very good, I can finally look after something huge” (Z 142)<sup>47</sup>. However, it is only the combination of those perspectives in the uniting formula of *Spis z natury*, reading the two parts comprising the reconstructed book of poetry, together with poems which were excluded from it, allows the reader to see the fundamental unity of Miłobędzka’s poetic project, suggested by Paul Klee’s *Creative Credo* with the crucial combination of an artistic act with creation. As Miłobędzka put it in a comment regarding *Małe mity*, presenting it as “first attempts at capturing the whole”, “understanding the unclear whole in which one exists”: “I feel equal to all living creatures. We are all one living organism” (JS 22)<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>46</sup>Julia Kristeva, *This incredible need to believe*, translated by Beverly Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press 2009), 57.

<sup>47</sup>I have analyzed postsecularism in Miłobędzka’s poetry in: Piotr Bogalecki, *Szczęśliwe winy teolingwizmu. Polska poezja po 1968 roku w perspektywie postsekularnej* [Lucky faults of theolinguism. Polish post-1968 poetry in the postsecular perspective] (Kraków: Universitas, 2016), 181-200; Piotr Bogalecki, „Boga zastąpił światem. Wiara i świeckość w poezji Krystyny Miłobędzkiej” [I have replaced God with the world. Religion and secularity in Miłobędzka’s poetry], in *Literatura a religia. Wyzwania epoki świeckiej* [Literature and religion. Challenges of the secular age], vol. II: *Literatura polska po 1945 roku – kierunki, idiomy, paradygmaty* [Polish literature after 1945 – directions, idioms, paradigms], edited by Agnieszka Bielak, Łukasz Tischner (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020), 321-350.

<sup>48</sup>The first, shortest version of the poem “Małe mity” from *Siódmy głos tygodnia* [Seventh voice of the week] can be considered meaningful proof of the unity of Miłobędzka’s early poetry – in place of its first part (inc. “He then took hands”) we can find... an anaglyph about brooches (inc. “Brooches used to live freely”, A 45).

*Porzucone niepotrzebne* [Left behind, not needed]. After hymn

This equalization would remain fragmentary or even illusive in Miłobędzka's poetry, if the notions of nature, whole, or creation functioned within traditional metaphysics, idealizing frames. The kenotic narrative, weakening it, would not include the natural world; the peculiar naturalization of religion would not be accompanied by religionizing nature and the world of things. However, Miłobędzka, striving towards the first days of creation, does not make such a mistake, and the book's titular text, in which passion-related metaphors are applied to a tree, plants, and a horse, as well as a furnace and a wall (M 19), could be the first proof of that. Another one can be provided by the titular poem of *Małe mity*, if we open ourselves to the possibility of an even more radical reading of the suffering, lifeless fish that appears in its central part. What if that fish was Christ rather than his symbol – personified, "fallen" into the depths of creation, and consumed to deliver many? Such a reading – religious, although non-anthropocentric, shifted towards animal theology, accentuating, among others, the motif of the Christ-like suffering of animals<sup>49</sup> – is made possible thanks to the multilevel structure of the poem. Miłobędzka would not be herself if she had not complicated also the linearity of the great disenchantment narrative in a subtle, yet meaningful way. God creating the world takes in his hands not clay or stone, but barbwire (M 8) – which inspires very specific associations – definitely not with paradise. Placing it "at the beginning" – not by surrounding Eden with it, but replacing the human clay with it, highlights one of the leitmotifs of the analyzed poetry, resonating throughout *Małe mity* (it is not a coincidence that they open with a question about "the first place of pain"), and present also in many other poems in *Pokrewne* and in *Klee*, where the ability to look deep is defined as belonging to fear. For Miłobędzka's early poetry would also be poetry of pain, and this pain, together with the accompanying emotions, would connect both cycles of *Spis z natury*. Miłobędzka confesses: "I have known what pain is since the very beginning. Pain of things abandoned, redundant, of crippled beings. It can be seen almost in every *Anaglif*" (JS 21). Doomed to literary nonentity, the final, crossed-out line of *Klee*: "Fear is dividing into separate parts. Fear is looking deep" – would perfectly summarize the evolution of Miłobędzka's early poetry: the fragmentary poetics of *Anaglify*, still based on a series of divisions (out of which the most significant, although camouflaged one, is the presence of the subject-object dichotomy) would be gradually replaced with a vitalist poetics of connectivity, observable in the discussed poems from "Twórczość", *Pokrewne* and *Dom, pokarmy*, whose rule is defined by Miłobędzka in the following way: "Everything connects with one another here, everyone tells themselves the world in a wordless agreement" (JS 24). It is symptomatic that she supported those words with a memory of her infant son crying because of cries of "animal children" on their way to a slaughterhouse. "And this quiet human baby answers with cries. In this life, barely starting, connection with other lives in nature is incredible. Also with their fear and pain" (JS 24).

*Mały traktat o wyobraźni* (M 6) also introduces us to the "sticky" depths of fear and pain. This is the nature of Miłobędzka's poetics: the text does not need to be only about a sundew (which we can deduce from its contents, although the name *Drosera* does not appear in the text), nor an apology of imaginations with clear metaliterary connotations (imagination-poetry), nor even – as Miłobędzka says in an interview with Borowiec (JS 22) – erotic ("Because maybe it is not a sundew? Maybe it is a sexual act between a man and a woman?") JS 22), i.e., a poem about

<sup>49</sup>See e.g. Andrew Linzey, *Animal Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 64-67.

perception (“And maybe only a register of senses which are catching a picture”, JS 22). *Traktat* can also be a kenotic text: about the slow descent of an incarnate God, “pushed lower and lower”, who has to agree to a “cup with earth”, and death “from which life begins”? However, it is only the juxtaposition of the great kenosis story with a small bug sucked in by a flower, with which Miłobędzka starts her game with final things, that she achieves it. And in her comment on *Mały traktat*, before referring us to the much bigger and younger *Życie nigdy się nie kończy* [Life never ends] by Willigis Jäger, she expresses the wisdom of her small biophilic poetry in the most concise way: “Something that is born, is simultaneously something that dies – and it is one” (JS 23).

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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# KEYWORDS

*Małe mity*

ECOPOETRY

Krystyna Miłobędzka

Paul Klee

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper is an attempt at reconstructing the poetics of early texts by Krystyna Miłobędzka, mostly the book of poems *Spis z natury*, written in 1960s – Miłobędzka's poetic debut, unpublished at the time. By reading together the two poetic cycles comprising it – *Anaglify* and *Małe mity* – the author stresses the need to extend the non-anthropocentric reading to *Anaglify* with a postsecular interpretation implied by the multilevel structure of *Małe mity*. The paper also discusses four poems by Miłobędzka – *Małże*, *Widziane w ogniu*, *Patrzące chwytliwe* and *Klee* – published in 1960s in “*Twórczość*” magazine, not included in any book of poems. This allowed to identify possible relations between Miłobędzka's early poetry and works by Francis Ponge and Paula Klee.

*Spis z natury*

## FRANCIS PONGE

## NEO-AVANTGARDE

## postsecularism

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# Ecocritical Reading of Vladan Desnica's Novel *Pronalazak Athanatika* [The Discovery Of Athanatik]\*

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The 1970s opened new roads and formulated new beliefs about human beings and the world. Socially and politically they derived from the events of 1968 and the changes attempted by student demonstrations, from growing colonization and the liberation of Third-World countries, and from resistance to American intervention in Vietnam and fears about a possible nuclear war between cold war rivals, as well as from the oil (energy) crisis. Such times, accom-

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Darija Đurđević and Professor Jožici Čeh Stergar for their assistance in procurement of literature, my colleague Vinko Tadić on wise advice, especially regarding historical sources, and Assistant Professor Suzana Marjanić and Assistant Professor Miranda Levanat-Peričić on their assistance in the formulation of this paper, as well as anonymous reviewers and editors on their constructive, creative and well-intentioned advice and patience.

panied by technological developments based on the advancement of the natural and technical sciences, the appearance of numerous inventions which made everyday life easier, and the accelerated creation of consumer society opened new possibilities for the creation of the world in line with contemporary challenges and issues which enabled the appearance and the beginning of ecological (green), feminist (gender and women's), peace (anti-war) and other movements. They look at the everyday with different eyes and open up space for new topics, allowing for the introduction of Postmodernism. And within Postmodernism the way was paved for, among other things, cultural studies, popular culture, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, linguistic turn, discourse analysis and many other subdisciplines, directions of study and theoretical and methodological innovations.<sup>2</sup>

Ecocriticism, as one of the more recent approaches, has opened different perspectives for cultural analysis – namely, the analysis of literature and the visual arts in the context of their contact with nature. The term was devised by William Rueckert in his article “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” from 1978. He defined it as a connection between ecological concepts and literature.<sup>3</sup> The first attempt at linking nature and literature, according to Peter Berry and Domagoj Brozović was Karl Kroeber's “‘Home at Grasmere’: Ecological Holiness”, published back in 1974.<sup>4</sup> Cheryll Glotfelty, the editor of *The Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, gives the following definition:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies... all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature...<sup>5</sup>

This subdiscipline gained prominence in the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s and 2000s, when relevant professional associations were founded (ASLE<sup>6</sup> and EASLCE<sup>7</sup>), and proceedings published. American ecocriticism is directed toward nineteenth-century authors and their writing about nature (interpretation of wilderness, landscapes, motifs and themes), interpretation of what their orientation toward nature means, and celebration of

<sup>2</sup> In the vastness of titles on changes in different aspects of social reality in the seventies see: Thomas BORSTELMANN, *The 1970s. A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, Princeton 2015. and Niall FERGUSON et al. (ed.), *The Shock of the Global. The 1970s in Perspective*, Harvard 2011.

<sup>3</sup> William RUECKERT, “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, *Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm), Athens, Georgia 1996, 107.

<sup>4</sup> Peter BERRY, *Beginning Theory. An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester – New York 2009, 240; D. BROZOVIĆ, “Čitati zeleno”, 29. See also Karl KROEBER, “‘Home at Grasmere’: Ecological Holiness”, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 89/1974, no. 1, 132–141.

<sup>5</sup> Cheryll GLOTFELTY, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis”, *Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm), Athens, Georgia 1996, XVIII. pp.xviii-xix.

<sup>6</sup> For the organization *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment* see their official homepage <https://www.asle.org>.

<sup>7</sup> Data on the professional association *European Association for Study of Literature Culture and Environment* are available on: <https://www.easlce.eu>.

nature as such, while British ecocriticism is more oriented toward the relationship between culture and nature through the prism of anthropocentric threats to nature (namely, the environment). One of the challenges, in Domagoj Brozović's opinion, is the lack of a core methodological and terminological literature,<sup>8</sup> practices and patterns. Therein one of the crucial questions is who or what is at the center of ecocritical reading of literary works: man or nature? Ecocritics interpret nature and culture as phenomena, not as linguistic, artificial constructs.<sup>9</sup>

The relationship between nature and culture in ecocritical readings of literary works encourages analysis of Vladan Desnica's novel *Pronalazak Athanatika*. The writer's initial idea of a cure for immortality and the changes it caused in the world is a good basis for interpretation of the interrelations between culture and nature, and observations about nature as a subject, not only as a marginalized object.

The paper comprises three thematic units: an ecocritical approach to a thematic cycle (life – death – immortality) compared to *Homo Deus* by Yuval Noah Harari; an ecocritical analysis of rain as seen from the point of view of Susan Farrell's ideas; and an analysis of *Pronalazak Athanatika* in the context of two dystopian ecological/environmental novels in contemporary Croatian literature, *Planet Friedman* by Josip Mlakić and *Mjesečev meridijan* (The Moon Meridian) by Edo Popović, with a comparison to ecocritical readings of Louise Squire.

## 2. Life – Death – Immortality: an Ecocritical Approach to *Pronalazak Athanatika*

Already in prehistory people had created a binary system comprising life and death. And while the first binary of that system could clearly be discerned as man's birth and life, the other one – death – remained mysterious, mystical and challenging. For those reasons stories of immortality and the search for immortality as a victory over death of sorts appears in numerous myths, religions, works of art and literary works.<sup>10</sup> In certain mythologies immortality is connected with certain plants, spatial characteristics (mountains, sea, unknown areas) or with the lives of heroes and gods.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, most monotheistic religions perceive

<sup>8</sup> Lately significant advances have been made in the field which is evident in the works of Derek Gladwin with a comprehensive bibliography and Simon C. Estok. See: Derek GLADWIN, "Ecocriticism", *Oxford Bibliographies* (<http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0014.xml>); Simon C. ESTOK, "Teorija s ruba: životinje, ekokritika, Shakespeare", *Kazalište*, 11/2008, no. 35–36, 84–97.

<sup>9</sup> See: D. BROZOVIĆ, "Čitati zeleno", 29–35.

<sup>10</sup> See: Jacques CHORON, "Death and Immortality", *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (ed. Philip P. Wiener), vol. 1, New York 1974, 635–646 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070311081839/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/DHI/dhi.cgi?id=dv1-76>).

<sup>11</sup> For example *Epic of Gilgamesh* or *A Journey to the West* reveal images of a quest for immortality in Sumerian, and in Chinese mythology. The problem of the immortality phenomenon in Greek mythology is presented in the Myth of Sisyphus and his capture of Thanatos which stopped the dying of humans until Thanatos was freed. See: Reginald CAMPBELL THOMPSON, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: Complete Academic Translation. Translated from cuneiform tablets in the British Museum literally into English hexameters*, London 2007.; Wu CHENG'EN, *A journey to the West*, Beijing 1955.; "Sisyphus", *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sisyphus>).

death as a continuation of life in another world, depending on the circumstances and earthly life of a person.<sup>12</sup> In the contemporary twenty-first-century world, the story of immortality has resurfaced. Immortality is today not related to the discovery of a certain flower or leaf of a plant, to eating certain foods (fruit or vegetables), or going to the mountains or unknown places, as was the case in the pre-modern world. Instead it is related to attempts at prolonging human life through the use of different technological possibilities, including artificial intelligence, inventions, robots and similar novelties.

The second binary pair, which stems from the first (i.e. man's striving toward immortality), concerns a basic issue in ecocriticism, that is, the relationship between culture and nature. This dichotomy is best defined by William Howarth, who describes an eco critic as "a person who judges the merits and faults of writings that depict the effects of culture upon nature, with a view toward celebrating nature, berating its despoilers, and reversing their harm through political action."<sup>13</sup>

Writer Vladan Desnica dealt with death and immortality in many of his works, choosing them as a key topic, most prominently in his unfinished novel *Pronalazak Athanatika*. This short novel is structured as a dialogue between a narrator and Krezubi (Toothless man), the narrator's acquaintance who elaborates a new idea, namely, the plot of an unwritten novel. The story is set in an unidentified future (Desnica phrases it as "a few centuries into the future")<sup>14</sup>, in an unnamed and unknown land wherein a medication (a vaccine) is invented to cure death. Desnica's terminology should be underlined, as Krešimir Nemec argues, since the writer used the following terms: *medication*, *hormone* or *X factor* instead of elixir to refer to the invention of *athanatik* (the name itself reveals what the medicine is about: *a thanatos* – against death), as well as *permanent regeneration* or *endless duration* instead of immortality.<sup>15</sup> He thus additionally stresses the scientific element of the medication – in addition, he literally says that the medication is a product of scientific research – which differentiates Desnica from traditional approaches to immortality and searches for elixirs.

The plot further points to social and economic consequences. Initially, the invention led to euphoria, joy and celebration, which soon started to change with the introduction of state control. It was thus revealed that not all lives are equally valuable. Immortality is realized through a special institution called "Exemption from death:", which has generated different social groups (classes) eligible for the reception of *athanatik* in different ways. The structure is pyramidal and hierarchical and presents a flow of power from the president and prime minister downwards. Such a principle is justified in the novel by a common environmental

<sup>12</sup>This is in Christianity manifested as the existence of afterlife in terms of heaven, purgatory (recognized only by Catholics) and hell; Islam has a similar concept with *Jannah* (heaven) i *Jahannam* (hell), while in Judaism there are *shamayin* (heaven) and *gehenna* (hell). Similar concepts exist in Buddhism and Hinduism with different versions of hell with *Naraka* being the most well known. For details on afterlife see: "Zagrobni život", *Hrvatska enciklopedija* (<http://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=66705>).

<sup>13</sup>William HOWARTH, "Some Principles of Ecocriticism", *Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (ur. Cheryll Glotfelty i Harold Fromm), Athens, Georgia 1996, 69. See also: Tjaša TRČEK, *Ekokritika – upodobitve narave v izbranih mladinskih delih*, diplomski rad, Univerza v Ljubljani, Pedagoška fakulteta, 2016, 3.

<sup>14</sup>Vladan DESNICA, *Pronalazak Athanatika*, Zagreb 2006, 8.

<sup>15</sup>Krešimir NEMEC, "Pronalazak Athanatika – između utopije i distopije", in: V. DESNICA, *Pronalazak Athanatika*, 87

problem: a lack of sufficient quantities of food. Introduced measures lead to violence, theft, cheating, murder, rebellions and revolutions. The result is the establishment of a totalitarian state under the dictatorship of Maman-Mamon, who controls the life and death of his citizens. There soon follow murders, conflicts, and reuse of gas chambers, as well as the division of people in two groups: mortals and immortals. Even though the medication has been perfected into two subtypes – subtype A (which was effective in all kinds of death including violent death) and subtype B (which was effective only in death by natural causes) – the condition did not improve because of the lack of food and the consequences of medication-related disturbances) caused additional problems. The end sees the destruction of the medication, i.e., people choosing mortality over immortality. The relevance of the topic at the beginning of the twenty-first century is reinforced by the appearance of the international bestseller by Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, titled *Homo Deus* with the meaningful subtitle *A Brief History of Tomorrow*. It is a sequel to his first bestseller *Sapiens*, subtitled *A Short History of Humankind*. In *Sapiens* Harari explains, by presenting four revolutions – cognitive, agrarian, unificational and scientific – how humanity reached its present level, while in *Homo Deus* he tackles the issue of the future.<sup>16</sup> In the Introduction, Harari gives a short overview of history from the point of view of victory over war (he states that chances of suicide are far greater than of death in war), hunger (there is more overweight than hungry people), and disease (most contagious, epidemic diseases have been eradicated). That part of the book, as Tizian Raspor argues, is characterized by optimism.<sup>17</sup> The first chapter is actually Harari's explanation of humanity's past, from the beginning of *Homo sapiens* until the present day, where he labels man the most powerful being on Earth. Echoing what he stated in *Homo sapiens*, the author explains that this as the result of the creation of the collective imagination, which was converted into myths, thus enabling the creation of an interconnected community comprising people unknown to one another other. Such a situation enabled the creation of nations, money, religion, human rights, laws and the like. Among other terms, he singles out the term "algorithm" as a source of conclusions and decision-making (instead of intuition). In the second chapter, he takes a step further, showing unreconciled differences between power and sense, stating that by choosing power an individual comes closer to the status of a divinity (in traditional religions) because he manages to control and coordinate different processes. In the last chapter, he discusses the idea of dataism (data religion) as a new "religion" based on the power and importance of information and the projection of a future in line with new technological achievements stating the consequences on social processes with the possible additional rise of social inequalities.<sup>18</sup>

The most important subchapter for our topic is titled "The Last Days of Death." Harari presents his thesis on immortality with a story about the sanctity of human life, which is evident

<sup>16</sup>Yuval Noah HARARI, *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*, Signal Books 2011. See also: Goran ĐURĐEVIĆ, "Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: kratka povijest čovječanstva*, Fokus, Zagreb 2015, p. 479.", *Historijski zbornik*, 68/2015, no. 1, 203–205.

<sup>17</sup>Tizian RASPOR, „Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus. Kratka povijest sutrašnjice*, Croatian translation: Marija Perišić, Fokus komunikacije, Zagreb 2017, p. 461“, *Historiografija.hr* (<http://www.historiografija.hr/?p=5663>).

<sup>18</sup>Yuval Noah HARARI, *Homo Deus. A Brief History of Tomorrow*, HarperCollins, 2018. See also: Goran ĐURĐEVIĆ, "Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: kratka povijest sutrašnjice*", *Ekonomika i ekohistorija*, 13/2017, 177–178.

in numerous legislative acts as well as in everyday life. He stresses, however, that religions (Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism) have a different attitude about death because without it a whole series of religious concepts held in those communities – including heaven, hell and reincarnation – becomes impossible. Contemporary man, according to Harari, dies as a result of technical problems – the heart stops beating, a central artery gets clogged, cancer cells spread all over the body, the heart is not getting enough oxygen, or there is a genetic mutation of cells. His thesis on death can best be summarized as follows: “If traditionally death was the speciality of priests and theologians, now the engineers are taking over.”<sup>19</sup> He believes that there is always a technical problem in the background, even when it is adverse weather conditions, car accidents and similar adversities that bring death as a result. He argues that *Google*, a search engine and one of the most powerful companies, has invested a lot of funds in research and the fight against death, engaging two prominent scientists and “promoters” of immortality – Ray Kurzweil and Bill Maris. Furthermore, Google is not the only company from Silicon Valley investing in such research. Immortality will generate different social changes in job selection, career course, marriages and family structure, and in parenting. Harari ends the chapter with a warning about what might happen once science creates the conditions for immortality. He assesses that there will be conflicts, wars and fights for immortality, which will cast a shadow on the conflicts fought thus far, as the fear of death will be replaced by wars, that is, fights for immortality.<sup>20</sup>

Comparing the two authors, Desnica and Harari, it becomes evident that, irrespective of the time difference, they are both writing about the same thing from a similar viewpoint, yet with different results. They both write about immortality as a phenomenon of the future based on science and technology. And this is where we encounter the first difference: Desnica places the source of immortality in a medication, while immortality is for Harari related to technological advancement (organ replacement surgery as a result of the development of robotics and healthcare technology products). The principle of immortality medicine points to a link between a traditional understanding of reaching immortality (medicinal herbs and certain foods) with the attainments of that age (the invention of a medication). In other words, Desnica approaches the issue of immortality and mortality as an illness of a kind, and imagines what kind of events and consequences a preventive medication, one that prevents death and dying, might have. Harari's approach is similar to that of contemporary engineers. He looks at the human body as a mechanism with parts that have an expiration date, and are upon expiry replaced, which makes the mechanism more or less permanent. Desnica makes an interesting connection between tradition (a unique concoction which he calls a medication) and a scientific approach (systematic research, invention) in his approach to mortality. He thus made a bridge between tradition and the latest approaches, such as Harari's. In Desnica's *Pronalazak Athanatika* there is a contrast between a medication and an invention, which is always a product of technological and scientific work, and is thus as an idea (and realization) distant from traditional quests for cure for immortality in nature (by choosing a certain herb, travelling in distant, exotic and unknown places). This detachment, irrespective of its partially still leaning on tradition (since it is a concoction we are talking about), reveals the extent to which man

<sup>19</sup>Y. N. HARARI, *Homo Deus*, 26.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, 25–30.



has, through planning and producing *athanatik*, abandoned nature as an entirety in which he lives and acts, and of which he became the hegemon.

Both Harari and Desnica see mortality as a scientific and technical problem which can be solved with the development of science and technology. Such an approach to death as an illness, a technical lack, and envisioning a solution in that direction points to the exclusion of man from nature (whose life cycle is delimited by birth, life and death) as its superior, that is, its master, who creates a solution for the extension of life and the absence of death. Other animate beings have no possibility of achieving immortality, which additionally separates humankind and disrupts its relations with nature, revealing the domination and creating antagonisms between man and others (whereby I understand all animate and inanimate beings and all of nature). The expectations which people have, at the peak of cultural and scientific achievement and immortality, lead to unexpected consequences: alienation from nature (and thus also man), which results in disrupted relations toward nature (as well as society in terms of the creation of totalitarian regimes).

The second difference is to be found in the term “immortality”. In Desnica’s text the invention of two types of *athanatik* (A and B) refer to different types of death – of natural causes and violent (that is, unnatural) death. Harari, on the other hand, has a reservation toward unnatural death believing that some people shall die in accidents and war conflicts, and therefore uses the term “non-mortality” instead of “immortality”.

The third part refers to consequences. Immortality for Desnica in this novel has a pessimistic character because equality is lost in death, which leads to the creation of large social differences in power structures, which ultimately leads to the creation of totalitarian regimes which, initially controlling life, lead to an all-encompassing control of life and death. This erases all hope of equality (equality in death and the interpretation of life on earth in the afterlife gave comfort and hope to numerous religious inhabitants of the planet). However, Desnica’s ending opens a possibility of a positive ending, even though people are mortal once again. In Harari’s text immortality is (as a phenomena of the future) also given pessimistic characteristics because it is not deemed a final goal, but a means of creating *Homo Deus* out of *Homo sapiens*. Immortality fits into a whole as the first element in a sequence: immortality, happiness, divinity. In an interesting sentence, Harari shows what immortality could be (and to whom): “If Kurzweil and de Grey are right, there may already be some immortals walking next to you on the street – at least if you happen to be walking down Wall Street or Fifth Avenue.”<sup>21</sup> He thus stresses social stratification with regard to immortality, since those with the greatest amount of money will secure the said privilege. Also, as a historian he is aware of former fights and conflicts within societies and states, as well as between individual states, and assesses that great wars and conflicts will arise in the fight to reach immortality.

Such cataclysmic predictions are given by both Harari and Desnica. They both see immortality as a source of new, even fiercer and more dangerous wars whose intensity and meaning shall surpass all previous conflicts. Accordingly, additional social stratification will arise. However,

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 27.

Desnica and Harari foresee different results: in Desnica's text it leads to the creation of totalitarian regimes, while Harari assumes there will be a war with an uncertain ending because instead of the former economic inequality there is now biological inequality. The pessimism of both authors is connected with alienation from nature. As far as the nature – culture dichotomy is concerned, in both texts culture is in a superior position. The initial idea of man as an immortal, creator and master (in *Homo Deus*) is at its core unnatural. Because of its unnaturalness, its realization also has unnatural consequences, since both systems (totalitarian regimes and wartime events) imply supreme masters (people, namely, parts of political, military and economic elite) over others/Others (including the rest of humankind, as well as all other beings and nature).

Thus a parallel analysis of these two texts leads us to an analysis of the endings. Both authors leave open the possibility of a positive ending, namely, the possibility of choosing a positive path toward the future. The authors share a humanistic worldview which is to be incorporated into science and scientific achievements. Harari sees the right path in the choice for joint global management instead of the current national management. Desnica underlines reason and rational solution in combination with empathy as a right way into the future. The choice of a positive solution and a positive way forward that will prevent pessimism and sinking into the unnatural decadence of humanity's superiority and self-sufficiency is directly connected with renunciation of immortality as the peak of unnaturalness, which negates the connection and interrelation with nature seen as an entirety made up of man with other animate and inanimate beings.

The comparison of Desnica and Harari so far boils down to an anthropocentric approach based on the direct social circumstances of (potential) immortality. In other words, we have analyzed the cultural (civilizational) component, while the environment and nature have been neglected. The relationship between culture (civilization) and nature (environment) varies in the definitions of individual ecocritics.<sup>22</sup> Irrespective of how we interpret it, it undoubtedly exists. In both works discussed above, nature is not clearly outlined as a central subject. Rather the authors deal with the social consequences of immortality. Still, nature is not just an object, but an important factor in this interrelation. Therefore, we can ask ourselves to what extent has man decided to leave this natural cycle (constituted by him in conjunction with all animate, and consequently all inanimate beings, as well), proving his superiority (or, as Harari explicitly says, by becoming god), his manifest aspiration toward immortality. Thus man (as well as with his relationship toward diseases, hunger and overcoming natural disasters) leaves the interrelation with other living beings by becoming a superior external element. The victory over death, as an inseparable part of nature and the life cycle of all living beings, is man's victory over the mystical and the unknown, which contributes to his abandonment of his links with nature. Such an abandonment of his relation with nature, concurrently with an increase in technological achievements (both Harari and Desnica link immortality with the pharmaceutical industry, robotics and technology) results in the dissolution of existing ingrained social relations, as well as the creation of unnatural (and thus also anti-human)

<sup>22</sup>For example, Greg Gerrard believes that the challenge of ecocriticism is to always have in mind the ways in which nature is built by culture, and on the other hand, that it exists as a fact. See: Greg GERRARD, *Ecocriticism*, Abingdon 2004, 10.

interrelations, associations and social changes. Finally, betting everything available on development, technological and scientific achievement, and capital increases leads humanity into conflicts with nature wherein man cannot win, and everybody loses.

Ecological problems which should be analyzed here include the interrelation of food and the environment, and ideas about disease and animals. Desnica underlines that food was the biggest problem following the discovery of *athanatik* since Earth became insufficient to sustain the ever increasing number of people.<sup>23</sup> Immortality thus became a serious ecological problem. Desnica contrasts basic needs with the characteristics of animate beings (nutrition, namely, eating as a process of sustaining life and mortality/immortality) presenting this interrelation as a paradox, since people, wishing to attain the desired ideal of immortality and disregarding all other factors of the natural cycle, create a situation wherein there is a lack of food, which is a basic necessity for life and a prerequisite for all other achievements. It is a road toward dystopia wherein man's attempt at mastering life and death (in terms of immortality) necessarily leads to the destruction of nature, destruction of the environment and to dehumanization.

Animals are in Desnica's novel mentioned only twice. The first animal mentioned at the very beginning of the novel is a wolf, and it is mentioned in the context of the characteristics of life as it was in the past:

Human words and fears come in and out of style. What a large share of thoughts and feelings of the ancient man was occupied by the word wolf! Almost his entire life was "marked by wolf"! And who thinks about the wolf these days? Whom would it occur to fall ill of lynathropy? Man is today more afraid of death...<sup>24</sup>

The second time an animal is mentioned it is in comparison with the people in the era of the *athanatik*, who became beasts:

We have said: people have become beasts. And thus all discipline and obligations, all moral and other principles, respect, consideration, prejudices or whatever you want to call those, all of them ceased to exist. Since they were now beasts, humans did not know anymore what is reckoning, appropriateness, tactics and tactical caution, appropriate economizing of powers, or wise watching of your own head. They rushed insanely towards ruin, dying like flies – but dying.<sup>25</sup>

Mentioning a wolf in this case points to medieval images of werewolves as scary beings and the fear they generated in people in the past, which disappeared with the discovery of *athanatik*.<sup>26</sup> It is also a comparison of human behavior with a beast's, namely, it is the use of the word

<sup>23</sup>V. DESNICA, *Pronalazak Athanatika*, 21.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*, 8.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid*, 62. A very similar quote, almost identical is also on page 72, with the editor's note about the repetition of a part of a text.

<sup>26</sup>For werewolf, lycanthropy in popular culture with examples from Croatia see: Ingrid KIRŠA, *Likantropija u popularnoj kulturi*, diploma paper, University of Zagreb, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Croatian Studies, Department of Croatology, 2017.

“beast” (in its direct meaning of a genus of terrestrial mammals) as a metaphor for an unregulated, wild community or a group of individuals which functions in a dystopia in which *athanatik* has been invented and on which it has an effect, and which stands in opposition to established social norms, relations and rules of behavior. The choice of this word is important, as it has a strong symbolic message about something foreign to people. With it Desnica shows the consequences of uncontrolled technological development to be pessimism, the destruction of social norms and hopelessness. Precisely because of the natural balance between people and other co-beings (because people achieve immortality and thus become both literally and symbolically superior), a pessimistic dystopia appears as the answer, with the writer leaving the possibility of an optimistic ending.

Vladan Desnica mentions transposing certain social relations onto diseases, with certain rules being laid:

So that it does not by some wild chance happen that a patient, instead of cancer, dies of infection! Because, in the internal communication among diseases there is a gentlemen's agreement. There is no grabbing or overtaking. Perhaps only, and that in extraordinary situations exclusively, some new ill-mannered disease which does not yet know the rules of the game, might cut ahead with its fork. But gets clapped on the back of the hand immediately. Because here the perfect respect of reservations reigns. Thus, for example, if someone dies of cancer, it is completely out of the question that he might, say, have a stroke. He can French kiss the pestilent (*empestés*), he can jump head first into cold water sixteen times a day, he still will not get the plague or a pneumonia!<sup>27</sup>

The idea of presenting the relations among diseases as a transposition of social relations can be interpreted as a networking and linking of natural phenomena (which is what diseases are), animate beings (from man to different microbes, viruses and bacteria) and social relations. Thus we have a network established between nature and society, since certain social knowledge and relations can be applied to nature and vice versa, which points to the unity of all animate and inanimate beings in a single entirety, which is nature on Earth.

In Harari's text the power contained in people is a source of danger for the entire planet, and people should ask themselves if the prevention of hunger, wars and diseases, with the accompanying economic growth, is in line with the needs of the Earth. Therefore, the author believes that ecological stability should be chosen if catastrophe is to be avoided.<sup>28</sup> Immortality as an unwanted consequence carries certain ecological problems for humanity, for other animate co-beings, and for the entire planet.

### 3. Rain as an Ecocritical Phenomenon

Nature (in the widest definition of the term), with all its different natural phenomena, is relatively common in literature. Numerous writers have used natural phenomena such as rain,

<sup>27</sup>V. DESNICA, *Pronalazak Athanatika*, 15.

<sup>28</sup>Y. N. HARARI, *Homo Deus*, 23–24.

sun, snow or wind to create an atmosphere, to symbolically express a state, feeling or action, or to otherwise contribute to the action in their works. Ecocriticism is defined as a linking of nature and literature, so natural phenomena are here not reduced to an analysis of symbols, nor are they merely a backdrop to a plot.

In addition to death, which is the underlying theme in *Pronalazak Athanatika*, another natural phenomenon is important for an ecocritical reading of the novel, that is, the rain. One of the basic assumptions of ecocriticism is linking nature – including all natural phenomena – with literature. Rain appears a few times in the novel. At the beginning, a rainy afternoon is mentioned, one during which the narrator sits at a café with Krezubi. The rain is focalized through the narrator. It's been raining steadily for days. The narrator thinks about the rain as water – how is it produced, where does it come from, is there a cycle or is this new water?:

Is it possible that it is ever new, unused water – where would so much of it come from! – or is it the same, used already once, in a closed circle, through canals and outlets it flows away into some underground reservoir, where it is quickly filtered and regenerated, pumped up again, and then from underneath again poured, drained, leaked... If that is so, then really, outside of some unforeseen malfunction in the engines, there is no deliverance!<sup>29</sup>

The novel ends with rain falling evenly “as if it has always rained and as if it will rain forever.”<sup>30</sup>

Desnica looks at rain at a few levels: a) on a symbolic level, comparing it with the passage of time as a constant in which either events evolve or nothing happens, yet it flows all the same (both rain and time); b) on a natural, namely technical, level, contemplating where it comes from and how it follows the natural cycle of circulation of water in nature, whereby he imagines the process as a series of technical solutions (reservoirs, pumps, filters); c) as a link between the narrator and rain which is “typical café rain”, thus linking the beginning and the end of the novel, since the rain keeps falling throughout.

It seems important to dwell on the technical level, namely the explanation of rain as a system of technical solutions for the circulation of water in nature. In addition to giving a gradational introduction to a novel where the peak of a technological civilization creating *athanatik* will be shown, such an approach to rain as a technical solution, instead of a common natural cycle, reveals how man of the future, man of the time of the *athanatik*, sees the world around him – not as sum of natural phenomena, which stresses the negation of nature.

Natural phenomena such as rain are relatively common in literature and have different symbolic meanings. If we apply Susan Farrell's idea of linking rain with death, which is what she does analyzing *Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, to Desnica's text, his rain gets a new meaning not only as a backdrop to the plot, but also as a backdrop to the entire story about the relation between life, death and immortality. According to Susan Farrell, in *Farewell to Arms*

<sup>29</sup>V. DESNICA, *Pronalazak Athanatika*, 7.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid*, 80.

rain and death are linked through a fear of rain and the death connected with it.<sup>31</sup> This is most evident in the following quote: "...I'm afraid of the rain because sometimes I see me dead in it. ... And sometimes I see you dead in it".<sup>32</sup> If we apply that model to *Pronalazak Athanatika*, the rain at the beginning and end of the novel points to death, namely, to mortality, which is in the background of this dialogic novel, and the discussion on immortality between Krezubi and the narrator. Moreover, Desnica's words about rain being constant ("as if it has always rained and as if it will rain forever") additionally confirm this mortality, or the natural response to man's search for immortality. On the other hand, Desnica points to a problem of "malfunction and deliverance" from rain, thus showing that nature, together with its phenomenon rain, is not just a backdrop and a background to the novel's plot and to human life, but is also an active factor, equal to man and a constant in human life, shaping human life as a part of nature, which is in touch with natural phenomena (whether it be rain or death). This is the context that the beginning and end of the novel, where rain is described, should be interpreted.

#### 4. *Pronalazak Athanatika* as a Forerunner of Environmental Ecological Dystopian Novels

Contemporary Croatian literature does not abound in dystopian novels,<sup>33</sup> works in which a dystopian future would be determined by environmental/ecological factors. The most representative examples are Josip Mlakić's *Planet Friedman* and Edo Popović's *Mjesečev meridijan*. The novel *Planet Friedman* is set on the polluted planet that the Earth became as a result of the victory of Milton Friedman's economic doctrines. People are divided into a number of categories, groups or zones: A – the privileged, B – persons which might become privileged, C – discarded persons. The zones are strictly divided. Gerhard Schmidt is a central figure in the novel. Although a member of the elite, in the course of the novel – thanks to his patient Paula Bolt, a successful athletic invalid – he gets a chance to look at and grasp the lives of other, deprived social groups. In a world without emotions or books, dominated by capitalism, corporations (governed by a council of twenty-five corporations, comprised of companies such as Rosche and Natto), and reality shows as the main standards of value, a world in which being successful is the most important thing, Schmidt, thanks to books by Shakespeare and Yeats – which do not exist in zone A – which he received from Paula, discovers his human dimension. Also important is the link between Gerhard and his father Andreas, who showed humanity by bringing medicine and vaccines to the diseased and those in need from the lower group (B) during a superflu epidemic, and was therefore punished and killed for his crime of mercy. Schmidt and Paula meet Blacktooth, the leader of the rebels who prints and distributes books. However, they soon get in his way, too, because he becomes a dictator after his victory. Gerhard speaks about history as a magnetic field with two poles – revolution and

<sup>31</sup>Susan FARRELL, "Rainy Day Blues: The Role of Weather in A Farewell to Arms", *College of Charleston Blogs* (<http://blogs.cofc.edu/hons110/files/2011/10/Rain-in-Hemingway.pdf>). See: Ernest HEMINGWAY, *A Farewell to Arms*, New York, Scribner, 19257.

<sup>32</sup>E. HEMINGWAY, *A Farewell to Arms*, 54.

<sup>33</sup>For a definition of the term and differences see: Miranda LEVANAT-PERIČIĆ, "Čitanje distopija iz aspekta različitih teorija žanra: Pavličić, Suvin, Frow", *Komparativna povijest hrvatske književnosti. Vrsta ili žanr. Zbornik radova s XIX. međunarodnoga skupa održanog od 29. do 30. rujna 2016. godine u Splitu* (ed. Vinka Glunčić-Bužančić i Kristina Grgić), Split – Zagreb 2017, 249–258.

counterrevolution. *Planet Friedman* ends with Gerhard, Bruce – Gerhard's son, and Paula leaving for Ždralovi izvori (Crane's Springs), a place where they will be safe.<sup>34</sup>

Mlakić's novel has numerous references to our world and its protagonists. For example, the most powerful man is called Steven Yobs. This reveals the dystopian future as implicitly present today. The novel also encompasses the global picture wherein we find ourselves.<sup>35</sup>

Edo Popović wrote another novel, titled *Mjesečev meridijan* (The Moon Meridian), whose beginning follows Mirko Graf, a member of the Korov (Weeds) community, which grows organic products. Graf travels to Zagreb, presented as a dystopian city full of marginal social groups – the homeless, the unemployed, beggars. There he meets his acquaintance Josip Pavlović, a former SalarLab employee, now unemployed. People are divided into two groups in the novel, in accordance with their attitude toward the environment; the Poisoned – those who have destroyed the environment – and the Forgotten – those who live in central Europe in an oasis of unpolluted environment, drink water from the creeks, and feed on wild berries and animals. The main characters are a girl named Mila Salar – daughter of the SalarLab owner; the wealthy Zoran Salar, manager of the project of the Forgotten, a group of chosen men and women who live in an isolated location as pre-historical hunters and gatherers; and the young man Kaj – one of the Forgotten ones, whose father Jakov was in charge of inventing stories on the history and life of the Forgotten. The novel ends with Mirko's narrative about the Japodska valley, the place where the commune in which Mila, Josip, Kaj and others live is situated.<sup>36</sup> Popović's novel has numerous references to the present, since, in addition to certain imaginary and imagined events, it also includes events we were part of or have heard about.<sup>37</sup>

*Pronalazak Athanatika*, as a significantly older predecessor to *Mjesečev meridijan* and *Planet Friedman*, can be comparatively analyzed with the two on a number of layers. Such a comparison reveals similarities in the pattern of changes, primarily referring to ecology and the protection of nature, that is, a lack of care about the environment (pollution, a devastated environment, death-immortality). The authors create a causal series because ecological changes, as a cause lead to significant consequences in terms of social changes – manifested in a society firmly divided into two (Desnica, Popović) or three groups (Mlakić). The ultimate consequence is the creation of a totalitarian world, whether it be a dictatorship with Nazi-fascist characteristics (Desnica) or an unscrupulous corporative-capitalist world (Mlakić, Popović). The projection of an ecologically polluted future and humankind walking toward an abyss is conditioned by enemies from the past (or present). Therefore, the fears of Vladan Desnica are directed toward a possible return of Nazism and fascism, which were recent memories in his lifetime, while the texts of the contemporary writers Popović and Mlakić are directed toward the negativity of a very current corporate and capitalist world. Gradationally laid out, Mlakić's society is a link between Desnica's and Popović's society, because the novel, in addition to corporate capitalism,

<sup>34</sup>Josip MLAKIĆ, *Planet Friedman*, Zagreb 2012.

<sup>35</sup>Strahimir PRIMORAC, "Imamo li komu slati poruke u boci?", *Vijenac*, 21/2013, no. 495 (<http://www.matica.hr/vije-nac/495/imamo-li-komu-slati-poruke-u-boci-21432/>).

<sup>36</sup>Edo POPOVIĆ, *Mjesečev meridijan*, Zagreb 2015.

<sup>37</sup>Strahimir PRIMORAC, "Potraga za svijetom slobode", *Vijenac*, 23/2015, no. 561–562. (<http://www.matica.hr/vije-nac/561%20-%20562/Potruga%20za%20svijetom%20slobode/>).

also introduces a dictatorship in which knowledge, emotions and the entirety of life as designed by the Maker, Friedman, is controlled.<sup>38</sup> This is how Mlakić describes the peak of corporate capitalism, which necessarily becomes a dictatorship and has totalitarianism as its basic goal.

All three authors present the indivisibility of man and nature and the consequences of attempts at its division. A lack of ties with nature and the destruction of relations with it – treating human culture, civilization and development as superior – lead to ecological problems which are necessarily reflected in social problems. This analysis leads to a very pessimistic view of such a dystopian future – destroyed, dehumanized, unnatural and anti-natural, wherein people also have no future, having destroyed it with their unnatural behavior.

The second layer of analysis is the analysis of the time of the action and its setting. Desnica and Mlakić create a far more indefinite world, without stating the year or years in which the action is set, without a detailed description of the setting, or of the territory in which the action unfolds. The only thing that can be said is that these territories and spaces are global, and many countries can be identified with them. Popović is far more specific (Zagreb, Japodska valley, Croatia, central Europe). Time wise, the action is set in an indefinite, yet near future.

The thematic cycle of immortality – death – life is common to all three authors. Desnica bases his entire novel on the theme of immortality and the discovery of *athanatik*, while Popović touches upon immortality only marginally, with the most illustrative part being the link between immortality and money (capital), namely, the replacement of deteriorated organs. Here Popović comes close to Harari's understanding of immortality. Mlakić presents death without any emotions or empathy. He observes everything in terms of success, benefits and personal advancement through greed. In relation to Popović's and Mlakić's texts, we can talk here about mortality, namely, the death of planet Earth as a result of long-term pollution and ecological problems. Desnica foreshadows one such ecological problem in his description of the shortage of food following the discovery of *athanatik*. All three authors make a connection between the immortality of an individual and the mortality of nature, which ultimately, in the long run, leads to the mortality of humankind.

These works can also be analyzed through the binary pair: freedom – domination. Common to all three authors is the creation of a world of domination and power, where the privileged (if we imagine them as a group) dominate all others, and humanism as a determinant is completely lost in this future built on – or perhaps, better said, lost due to – ecological problems. Therefore, freedom becomes the most important term through which Desnica's, Mlakić's and Popović's texts should be analyzed. Matko Vladanović states the following of Popović's novel: "In a sea of false information, imposed and constructed identities, manipulation and propaganda the answer to the question of the meaning of freedom is different for each individual."<sup>39</sup> These words describe the notion of freedom in these works excellently, irrespective of certain common characteristics among individual characters. Between domination and superiority,

<sup>38</sup>Tea ŠITUM, "Planet Friedman", *Citajme.com* (<http://citajme.com/planet-friedman/>).

<sup>39</sup>Matko VLANANOVIĆ, "Edo Popović: Mjesečev meridijan", *Moderna vremena* (<http://www.mvinfo.hr/clanak/edo-po-povic-mjesecev-meridijan>)



as a binary pair, and freedom is in an indivisible relationship with the natural, a devastated environment. In all three works there is the domination of man (as a corporate, rational, technological being) in contrast with the freedom of other animate beings, and the freedom of man (an individual who has emotions and empathy, which make up part of the natural balance and cycle of life). Having analyzed freedom and domination, we now arrive at the issue of the authors' projections for the future and the end of the novels. Desnica's and Mlakić's endings offer optimism: in Desnica's text there is the final destruction of *athanatik*, and Mlakić opens up an unspoiled world (*Ždralovi izvori*) as a place for a new beginning, although with a degree of skepticism (an open question about messages in the bottle).<sup>40</sup> Popović's end has some optimistic inklings because it enables different ideas of freedom defined in accordance with the desires of each individual character (the journeys of Kaj and Josip, Mirko's contemplation of the future, and the places we can visit and where we can stay).<sup>41</sup> A common characteristic among all of these endings is that optimism lies in a certain form of return to nature – in Desnica it is the destruction of the anti-natural *athanatik*, which destroys the natural balance; in Mlakić it is the departure to a protected space, one wherein the natural balance is not destroyed; and in Popović, similarly, it is a journey, a search for freedom and for places with an undestroyed nature.

Using the methodology presented in her article "Death and the Anthropocene: Cormac McCarthy's World of Unliving," where she refers to the ideas of Paul Crutzen about the Anthropocene, a geological era dominated by man's impact on geological and environmental changes, and the ideas of Jacques Derrida on death, Louise Squire reframes literary theory and analysis of literary works. She analyzes a literary work by Cormac McCarthy using the experience of death as described by Jacques Derrida: "Learning to live should mean learning to die, learning to take into account, so as to accept, absolute mortality (that is, without salvation, resurrection, or redemption – neither for oneself nor for the other) ... to philosophize is to learn to die."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Squire contemplates the extent to which two Derrida's concepts of death and the archive are applicable to literary works: "the impossibility of our discovering death's 'border' as such, and, b) the 'thinking' of ends by which deconstruction becomes responsible for a future beyond experience, then the Anthropocene era may be a time wherein what we fear is contamination of the archive by the physical events it has led towards, hence it deconstructs (while we seek to reconstruct) who we [think we] are."<sup>43</sup> She wonders whether death and the Anthropocene can be linked as two concepts, and whether the concept of Derrida's archives can be read as a matrix in selected literary works (which is what she does in the works of Cormac McCarthy). Linking ecocriticism and deconstruction is an open question in the contemporary methodology of ecocriticism and the formulation of its relation with postmodernism. Irrespective of their common roots in poststructuralist analyses, postmodernism and ecocriticism differ when it comes to deconstruction. This is how Domagoj Brozović discussed it:

<sup>40</sup>J. MLAKIĆ, *Planet Friedman*, 253.

<sup>41</sup>E. POPOVIĆ, *Mjesečev meridijan*, 171.

<sup>42</sup>Qtd. After: Louise SQUIRE, "Death and the Anthropocene: Cormac McCarthy's World of Unliving", *The Oxford Literary Review*, 34/2012, no. 12, 21.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid*, 218.

What differentiates ecocriticism from mainstream Poststructuralism is the development of a mature counter-system to the postmodernist inclination to unrestrained symbolic, linguistic and cultural play, where a reconstructive approach to language with a firm support of the superstructure of nature is advocated. Behind the seemingly main ecocritical problem of the link between the environment and discourse an axiom about extra-textual and extra-discursive nature is developed which openly problematizes deconstructive erasure of the relation with a real referent which can potentially result in serious epistemological consequences for contemporary literary and cultural theory, and be the incentive for the reconstruction of the notion of poetic representation, which postmodernism treats as *a priori* inadequate. The ecocritical challenge of postmodernism and a key issue is who can discursively and materially be linked again.<sup>44</sup>

The opinion of Domagoj Brozović and the authors to whom he refers is one of the possible interpretations of the relationship between postmodernism and ecocriticism.<sup>45</sup> However, I would like to cite Timothy Morgan who believes that deconstruction is a secret friend of ecocriticism,<sup>46</sup> and say that a connection can be made between ecocriticism and postmodernism.

The ideas of Louise Squire on the link between death and Derrida's archives can be applied to ecocritical readings of the works discussed here by Desnica, Mlakić and Popović. Ecological disaster is an inevitable consequence of man's actions in the Anthropocene, and our behavior in the present and in the future shall advance this process. To what extent does it pay to live in the worlds of *Pronalazaka Athanatika*, *Planet Friedman* and *Mjesečev meridijan*? In the worlds of different types of terror, control and monitoring with very clear and pronounced divisions of people? These novels, and especially Mlakić's and Popović's novels, remind us of Derrida's idea of archives, where most characters do not have any connection to the past. Exceptions are characters who are anarchists and their leaders, later Schmidt and Paula in Mlakić, the Forgotten, Mila and Mirko in Popović, who facilitate a departure from the polluted world and planet by remembering the past and preserving certain values from the past, such as books, reading, emotions (in Mlakić), or life in harmony with nature (in Popović). In Desnica's text "promatrači" (observers) – a collective term for people "who outlive history and observe its funeral," come closest to it;<sup>47</sup> as well as the heretics who wanted to know the truth. It is precisely the connection with the past that has opened the possibility for change and optimism. I believe that the interruption of relations with nature has necessarily led to the interruption of relations with history and tradition. These relations are reflected in the pessimism awaiting us in a dystopian future. A source of optimism lies in reconnecting with nature and rebuilding relations with the past. Human emotions, empathy, individual bravery, hope and rational approach allow for traces of a better life in the future.

<sup>44</sup>D. BROZOVIĆ, "Čitati zeleno", 31.

<sup>45</sup>For different opinions on the relationship between postmodernism and ecocriticism see: Serpil OPPERMANN, "Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 13/2006, no. 2, 103–128.

<sup>46</sup>Timothy MORTON, "Deconstruction and / as Ecology", *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (ed. Greg Garrard), Oxford 2014, 291–304.

<sup>47</sup>V. DESNICA, *Pronalazak Athanatika*, 64.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

An ecocritical reading of the novel *Pronalazak Athanatika* underlines two natural phenomena. The first is the idea of death and immortality as a basic motif in the novel and the central axis of the plot. Comparing and linking<sup>48</sup> the works of Vladan Desnica and Yuval Noah Harari, we observe that both of them, having analyzed the potential of immortality, see a series of issues it opens up – from ecological and social problems to economic and political changes. Irrespective of the differences in the way immortality is achieved – Desnica's discovery of a medication or Harari's technical solutions – they both come to similar conclusions, whereby immortality is conditioned by scientific research and has widespread consequences in terms of social changes, which lead to permanent and dangerous conflicts. These conflicts stem from man's attempts at supremacy over nature and other animate co-beings, basing these attempts in the technological dimension and so-called development and advancement, exclusively. Nature becomes an object of man's road to superiority which is presented in attempts at immortality and the finding of solutions for it as the peak of technological and scientific success. Therefrom stems man's self-sufficiency, which necessarily leads to existential, and then social, crises in which that same man becomes a loser trying to rule nature, simultaneously separating himself from it.

The second phenomenon analyzed through ecocriticism is rain. I believe that with his description of rain at the beginning and end of the novel, Desnica contrasts the discussion of the narrator with Krezubi on immortality, because rain, if interpreted pursuant to the readings of Hemingway, denotes death, or in this case, the mortality of people. Rain is presented as a technical problem, and not a natural phenomenon, because man from the *athanatik* era rejects natural phenomena and interprets the world around him in terms of technological processes exclusively. This additionally underlines the separation of man from nature. By mentioning rain at the beginning and end, irrespective of the plot concerning immortality, the writer indirectly warns of the permanent mortality of man and presents nature as an active factor, and not just as a backdrop for man's actions. The question of to what extent *Pronalazak Athanatika* corresponds to the genre characteristics of speculative fiction according to the analysis of Miranda Levanat Peričić remains open:

The alternative world in these novels is twice removed from the author's empirical reality – in time, which is the future, and in nationally unmarked cultural space. Therefore, the meta-genre characteristic of dystopia in Croatian literature is reflected in the fact that the Croatian novel projects the history of the future in a different literary tradition, most commonly that to which dystopia originally belongs.<sup>49</sup>

I believe that *Pronalazak Athanatika* comes close in terms of genre to speculative fiction. Not defining the setting and time of action is indicative of this. The novel could therefore be

<sup>48</sup>For the possibility of comparing and connecting in historical studies see: Diego OLSTEIN, *Thinking History Globally*, New York 2015, 59–98.

<sup>49</sup>Miranda LEVANAT-PERIČIĆ, "Metažanrovska obilježnost spekulativne fikcije u hrvatskoj književnosti: od Šuffiaya do Mlakića", *Komparativna povijest hrvatske književnosti. Fantastika: problem zbilje. Zbornik radova sa XVIII. Međunarodnoga znanstvenog skupa održanog od 24. do 25. rujna 2015. godine u Splitu* (ed. Cvijeta Pavlović, Vinka Glunčić-Bužančić and Andrea Meyer-Fraatz), Split – Zagreb 2016, 316.

grouped among similar lines as *Planet Friedman* and *Mjesečev meridijan*. In addition to the common environmental cause of the problems, there is the social division into a privileged class – irrespective of whether or not they are immortal; it is those with social and economic power – and everyone else. The ecological cause of the problems results in social changes and an ever larger and clearer social differentiation which ends in totalitarian systems – fascism, Nazism and corporative capitalism in all its variants.

Desnica's idea about the immortality of people in comparison with the death of planet Earth is interesting and detectable in Popović and Mlakić, as well. Can the two arguments be linked? What is the maximum number of people who can live on Earth at the same time?<sup>50</sup> What impact will that have on the environment?<sup>51</sup> To what extent shall human actions and the desire for power, including immortality, contribute to the extinction of species on the planet? What will be the social consequences of the ecological changes we are witnessing (global warming, melting of glaciers, expansion of deserts, destructive storms, wars for energy sources and water, pollution of air, water and soil, overuse of natural resources, etc.)? These questions are just an incentive for contemplation and additional work, especially in the context of artificial intelligence, bioengineering and potential immortality or non-mortality in the future.

The importance of *Pronalazak Athanatika* lies in the link with the very topical issues of life and death as a relation toward overcoming death with immortality, a method for contemplating the latter which is important for its relation with Harari, as well as contemporary challenges posed by death and its avoidance. Desnica can be considered a predecessor who correlates with current scientific considerations (Harari) and literary works (Mlakić, Popović) in warning that ecology and ecological factors (immortality and population increase, lack of food) can have a serious influence on social changes, the division of power, and formulation of our future. From a work of speculative fiction, Desnica's *Pronalazak Athanatika* thus becomes a signpost for the near future and the challenges it brings. Deliberation on the choices and the humanistic outlook are steps toward a better and more enjoyable future for all of humanity, the animate world and planet Earth, which could be formulated as the joint conclusion of Vladan Desnica, Yuval Harari, Josip Mlakić and Edo Popović.

translated by Tihana Klepač

<sup>50</sup>According to UN research a significant growth to about 11.2 billion people is expected by 2100. See: *World Population Prospects. The 2015 Revision. Key Findings and Advanced Tables*, New York 2015, 2 ([https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Publications/Files/Key\\_Findings\\_WPP\\_2015.pdf](https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Publications/Files/Key_Findings_WPP_2015.pdf))

<sup>51</sup>See: Dražen ŠIMLEŠA, *Ekološki otisak. Kako je razvoj zgazio održivost*, Zagreb 2010.

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# KEYWORDS

*Vladan Desnica*

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**ABSTRACT:**

The author gives an ecocritical reading of a short, unfinished novel by Vladan Desnica *Pronalazak Athanatika* (The Discovery of Athanatik). The paper comprises three thematic units: an ecocritical approach to a thematic cycle (life – death – immortality) in the novel, compared with *Homo Deus* by Yuval Noah Harari; an ecocritical analysis of rain as seen from the point of view of Susan Farrell's ideas; and an analysis of *Pronalazak Athanatika* in the context of two dystopian ecological/environmental novels in contemporary Croatian literature, *Planet Friedman* by Josip Mlakić and *Mjesečev meridijan* (The Moon Meridian) by Edo Popović, with a comparison to ecocritical readings of Louise Squire. The author concludes that *Pronalazak Athanatika* – defined in genre terms as speculative fiction – makes Desnica a predecessor to current scientific considerations (Harari) and literary works (Mlakić, Popović) in warning that ecology and ecological factors – immortality and population increases, a lack of food, and ultimately the destruction of the planet – may have destructive effects on social change, the division of power, and the shape of the future.

## dystopia

## ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

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# Velebit And The Peripatetic Trans-Genre – From Petar Zoranić To Edo Popović\*

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*Birds do not care whether or not it's going to be cloudy, snow, rain: they always sing. Rain and bird song once accompanied me all the way from Gromovača to Zavižan.*<sup>1</sup>

I do not intend to stir confusion when defining travel writing, in this case mountaineering literature in the form of fictional and expository writing, as “peripatetic literature”, after the Peripatetic School Aristotle founded at the Lyceum. The travelogue trilogy, i.e. the trilogy of mountaineering literature by Edo Popović can be defined as peripatetic literature about Velebit. It has to be emphasized that this is travelogue or mountaineering literature with an engaged attitude toward reality, as the genre was defined by Sartre or as explained by Krleža in his *Dijalektički antibarbarus* (Dialectic Antibarbarus, 1939) – “to write tendentiously, however without a tendentious phrase.” The mountaineering trilogy by Edo Popović – *Priručnik za hodače* (The Walkers’ Manual, 2009), *U Velebitu* (In Velebit, 2013) and *Čovjek i planina: Kratki uvod u sjeverni Velebit* (Man and Mountain: Short Introduction into Northern Velebit, 2018) – relates back to its prede-

<sup>1</sup> *Pticama je svejedno hoće li oblak, snijeg, kiša ili neće: one uvijek pjevaju. Jednom su me čitavim putem od Gromovače do Zavižana pratili kiša i pjev ptica.* All translations from Croatian are mine.

cessors in the genre, by recreating some travel writings, such as the mountaineering literature of Miroslav Hirtz, on his hiking trails, and then textually in his second book *U Velebitu* from 2013. As far as Croatian mountaineering literary theory is concerned, Željko Poljak wrote systematically about it and pointed out that based on genre characteristics it comes closest to travel writing. “We can define it as a group of literary works inspired by the mountain, its beauty and power, its influence upon the life of man and history of a people” (Poljak 1994: 13). He also notes that although “numerous Croatian writers, poets especially, found inspiration in the mountains, it is hard to understand why our professional ‘official’ literary critics and historians neglect mountaineering literature. (...) Literary criticism extremely rarely takes into account contributions to mountaineering literature, and when it does they are mostly classified as travel writing” (ibid). To simplify, for example, I would classify mountaineering literature on Velebit by Miroslav Hirtz as mountaineering literature as theoretically systematised in Croatia by Željko Poljak, the main critic of the genre,<sup>2</sup> while I would classify Edo Popović’s trilogy as peripatetic literature due to the matrix of its engagement, in addition to the matrix of travel writing literature. As opposed to Zoranić’s imaginary journey formulated as an allegorical journey of enlightenment along Velebit trails (written in 1536 in Nin and published in 1569 in Venice), Edo Popović in his trans-genre *Priručnik za hodače* (2009), 440 years after Zoranić (to introduce some symbolism), with his zen-roamings on Velebit and his life principle of “voluntary poverty,” as mirrored in Henry David Thoreau’s ecological matrix, he equally discloses sociograms of both “scattered heritage” and the global world order.

Erling Kagge in his *Walking: One Step at a Time* claims that bipedalism or walking on two feet is the basis of all we have become: “First we learned to walk, then we learned to make fire and to prepare food, and then we developed language” (Kagge 2019: 15). The language created by people, Kagge continues, reflects the contention that life is a long walk. In Sanskrit, the past tense is designated by the word *gata*, which means “that which we have walked”, the future is *anāgata* “that which we have not yet walked”, while the present tense is indicated by something as natural as “that which is directly in front of us”, the *partyutpanna* (Kagge 2019: 16).

And while literary theorists will be interested in the fact that Zoranić’s *Planine ke zdrže u sebi pisni pete o pastirih, pripovisti i pritvorit junakov i deklic i mnoge ostale stvari* (*Mountains which hold songs sung by shepherds, stories and transformations of heroes and maidens and many other things*, 1504) are a masterpiece of bucolic literature which has since “the sixteenth century been reprinted about sixty times and has had a great response Europe wide” (Nemec 1999: 35), the theory of hiking literature, which in this sense can be deemed a component of ecocriticism,<sup>3</sup> shall be interested in the route of the journey, as was the case with Ante Rukavina or Željko Poljak.

<sup>2</sup> While Dean Duda in Croatian literary theory figures as a travel writing theorist, Ivan Pederin and Željko Poljak are known as historians of travel writing poetics.

<sup>3</sup> Ecocriticism as a separate section of literary criticism which originated in the 1990s (in 1996 with the proceedings edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm). Ecocritics have established their organisation – Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, and their professional magazine *ISLE Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (Tošić 2006: 43; Marjanić 2006.). The term was first used in the essay by William Rueckert *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (*Iowa Review* 9/1, 1978) (Egan 2006: 33–34). Equally, ecocriticism as a theory of study of cultural constructions of Nature in social and political contexts gave an important contribution to the understanding of Shakespeare’s oeuvre (Egan 2006). In a travel book *Čovjek i planina. Kratki uvod u sjeverni Velebit* (2018) Edo Popović mentions deep ecology as “a deeper and more spiritual approach to nature” and quotes its founder Arne Næs – “The smaller we come to feel ourselves compared to the mountain, the nearer we come to participating in its greatness” (Popović 2018: 16).

In this first Croatian (pastoral) novel, Zoranić passes through Velika Paklenica to arrive to the highest peaks of Velebit, meeting on the way shepherds and shepherdesses who talk to him about the sad fate of their heritage scattered during Ottoman conquests (Rukavina 1979: 121). He begins the journey in Starigrad, at the foot of Velebit, and goes through the gorge of Velika Paklenica across southern Velebit and Dinara to Šibenik and Nin (Rukavina 1979: 63). Željko Poljak, a theorist of mountaineering literature, points out that Zoranić's *Planine* are proof "that the tradition of our mountaineering literature is one of the oldest in the world" (Poljak 1994: 13), and that Zoranić wrote *Planine* nineteen years before Konrad Gessner wrote *Decscriptio montis Fractii iuxta Luzernam Tiguri* in Zürich, describing his climb on Pilatus mountain (1555), which is generally deemed the first example of mountaineering literature in the world (ibid.). Ivan Krajač<sup>4</sup> (*Hrvatski planinar*, 1924, 132) describes Zoranić as the first writer of mountaineering literature in our cultural circle (Rukavina 1979: 63). The first review article on Velebit as a literary topos, titled "Velebit in our literature" ("Velebit u našoj književnosti") (*Naše planine*, 7-8, 1976; *Planinar*, 4-5, 1978), was written by the writer, veterinarian and mountain climber Ante Rukavina (1928-1994). The article was subsequently published in his book *Velebitskim stazama: putopisi i eseji* (*Along Velebit trails: travelogues and essays*) in 1979.<sup>5</sup> Rukavina begins by expressing surprise over the fact that Velebit is non-existent in oral poetry because the Croatian ethno-tradition deemed it commonplace, part of the everyday. However, as opposed to oral poetry, Velebit was a theme for oral storytelling, whereby Rukavina states that the theme most often connected with Velebit are fairies – the Velebit fairies – to the extent that they were used in certain place names, for example, Vilinska vrata (The Gate of Fairies)<sup>6</sup>, since according to folk stories the fairies pass through the gate on their way to their assembly. Furthermore, Dušice (Souls) in mythical stories are places where the fairies feast, while Vilinski and Vilinski vrh (The Peak of Fairies) are places where they dance and celebrate (Rukavina 1979: 128). Rukavina states that mountaineers have paid respect to Zoranić and his *Planine* by naming the previously nameless 1712 m high southern-Velebit peak after Zoranić following a proposal by the Gospić mountaineering association on 20 May 1973 (Rukavina 1979: 123). The dedication was initiated by Ante Rukavina, and it is one of the rare ways of commemorating a writer (Rukavina 1979: 63). Rukavina's *Velebitskim stazama: putopisi eseji* can be considered a dedication to Petar Zoranić as well as all the writers and explorers of Velebit – all of its climbers. It also stems from a desire to define a clearer topography of Velebit, much in the same way in which Edo Popović's *U Velebitu* (2013), his second book on Velebit, can be considered a book about a recreated journey (a travel re-enactment of a kind) by Miroslav Hirz undertaken in 1926. In one of his articles, Ante Rukavina describes his journey along the trails hiked by Ilija Smiljanić (see: *Naše planine*, 11-12, 1975) (Rukavina 1979:

<sup>4</sup> Ivan Krajač (Senj, 1877 - Maribor?, 1945) was the first Croatian attorney, economic and financial writer, lawyer, politician and mountain climber from Senj (Wikipedia).

<sup>5</sup> Ante Pelivan states that Ante Rukavina not only described the natural beauty of Velebit, but recounted oral stories about life on the mountain, as well. His essay *Djevojčica i runolist* (A maiden and an edelweiss) (*Planinarski list*, 1, 1977) is often quoted. It depicts a relationship between a girl and an edelweiss as a plant of Velebit, a symbol of understanding between children and nature (Pelivan 1999: 188).

<sup>6</sup> According to this toponym, and in collaboration with Josip Zanki and Tomo Vinšćak, we have titled the conference organised by the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb, and the Department of Teachers and Preschool Teachers Education in collaboration with the State Archives in Gospić and the University of Rijeka (organising committee: Robert Bacalja, Josip Zanki, Tibor Komar, Tomo Vinšćak) held on 5-6 October 2012 in Lovinac and Starigrad *Vilinska vrata* (The Gate of Fairies). Radoslav Katičić titled his book *Vilinska vrata: I dalje tragovima svetih pjesama naše pretkršćanske starine* (The Gate of Fairies: Still further traces of holy poems of our pre-Christian past, 2014) after the toponym, as well.

160). At the very end of his *Priručnik za hodače* (2009), Edo Popović lists “Literature for walkers – lighter books – for a rucksack” (*Literatura za hodače – lakše knjige – za ruksak*), among which he lists Ante Rukavina’s *Velebitskim stazama* (Popović 2019: 161).<sup>7</sup>

There are numerous hiking blogs today – thus for example blogger belibeli states that Vilinski kukovi are to him the most special part of Velebit, one to which he returns often:

“By the way, the area itself is not in any way marked, and is thus inaccessible to the great part of the hiking population. It is situated on the area of Sveto brdo toward Čelavac (or the other way around), at a height of about 800 meters to about 110 meters above sea level.”<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, an anonymous female blogger noted about Tulove grede in 2005 that staying there is scary since a large area is still under land mines.

“Even though it was spring, and there were flowers all around, a certain mysterious peace reigned there, a scary peace. I did not experience war, but there, in those moments, I could clearly hear the earth roar under grenades. It was all so desolate, only the black ravens flew off the peaks of Tulove grede and circled around, like restless souls. Even now I get the chills when I remember that.”<sup>9</sup>

It can be noticed that bloggers prefer images over words, or as the above-mentioned blogger says – “I shall use a well-known saying, Images speak louder than words and try to evoke at least a part of the magic this space is infused with. Let us begin...”

## Ethnological and eco-historical travelogue

As yet another example of a travelogue on Velebit, that is, another example of peripatetic literature, I would like to single out Šime Balen’s *Velebit se nadvio nad morem: putopisni zapisi s planine* (*Velebit leans over the sea: travelogues from the mountain 1985 – first edition*) as an example of a trans-genre which inspired Edo Popović to write his Velebit trilogy (see: Popović 2009: 88). Balen’s book ends with an obituary to Dan Vukušić, a Podgorje legend (1905-1995), whom Šime Balen, a journalist, publicist, travel writer and translator<sup>10</sup> describes as one of the legendary pioneers of Podgorje, a rocky belt at the foot of the Velebit hills.

<sup>7</sup> A promotion of the reprint of the said book by Ante Rukavina was held in the Gospić Cultural and information centre on Friday, 1 July 2011. Edo Popović spoke on the occasion.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://belibeli.blogger.hr/post/vilinski-kukovi/307014.aspx>: “Inače, samo područje nije obilježeno niti jednom markacijom, pa je iz tog razloga nedostupno velikoj većini planinarske populacije. Nalazi se na području od Svetog brda prema Čelavcu (ili obratno), na nadmorskoj visini od nekih 800 metara do otprilike 1100 metara nadmorske visine.”

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://planine.mojblog.hr/arhiva-11-2005.html>: “Iako je bilo proljeće i sve u cvijeću, tamo je vladao nekakav tajanstveni spokoj, jezoviti mir. Nisam doživjela rat, ali tamo sam u tim trenucima jasno mogla čuti kako zemlja tutnji pod granatama. Sve je bilo tako pusto, samo su crni gavranovi uzletjeli s vrhova Tulovih greda i kružili naokolo, poput nemirnih duša. I sad me prolazi jeza kad se toga sjetim.” Tulove grede are otherwise known as the filming location of the most dramatic scene – the death of Winnetou’s father and sister and the death of Winnetou himself – in *Winnetou I* (1963, producer: Horst Wendlandt).

<sup>10</sup> From his bibliography I would here like to single out his translations from English to Croatian of the following authors: William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Erskine Caldwell, Frank Norris, F.S. Fitzgerald, Benjamin Franklin, etc.

It is an area, as is contextualised in the continuation of the text, differently from Vjenceslav Novak, who studied begging sociologically and eco-historically,<sup>11</sup> inhabited by Bunjevci, who migrated here from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Dalmatia running away from the Turks. Šime Balen noticed that Podgorje has kept many of its specific characteristics until the present day – “the highlander mentality, the shtokavian-ikavian dialect and some customs which differentiate them from autochthonous inhabitants of Primorje, who speak chakavian, and islanders, who derogatively called them Vlasi” (Balen 1999: 198). He lists that the inhabitants of Podgorje have kept their sense of *ljudikanje*, discussions over hearth or a campfire while the cattle grazed, where they talked “of saving Portugese sailors in the port of Jablanac and the construction of the old Church of St. Nicholas at the cemetery, or about the fight with the Dogheads and the treasure of King Bela, which he has buried somewhere near Orlovača and has been searched for tirelessly by the people of Podgorje for centuries” (Balen 1999: 199). He also states that stories from the nearer past are being told, as well, for example, about a famous squad from Podgorje named Alan. And it is precisely in these stories that an important actant of Velebit, Dane Vukušić, enters as “a fearless fighter against the Great-Serbian dictatorship, as well as against the Ustashe atrocities, and generally, against violence and injustice” (Balen 1999: 199). In the spring of 1943, upon leaving the Ustashe prison, he founded the Partisan squad Alan. This was a unique case in the National Liberation War of a member of the Croatian Peasant Party to become a political commissar of a Partisan squad (Balen 1999: 192, 202). Dane Vukušić described his wanderings about Velebit in numerous articles published in the bulletin of the Croatian Mountaineering Society – *Naše planine* (Our Mountains). He often took hikers on day trips, and scientists – zoologists, botanists and speleologists – on exploration trips. He knew Josip and Željko Poljak,<sup>12</sup> Ante Premužić, builder of the famous trail that Dane Vukušić worked on as well, Fran Kušlan, archaeologist Ante Glavičić and many other Velebit enthusiasts. As a token of appreciation for the assistance he extended to mountaineers in distress, he was given an award and a diploma by the Croatian Mountaineering Society – the only recognition he received in his lifetime. Šime Balen’s travelogue can be defined as an ethnological travelogue since it delivers important ethnographic information, such as orally transmitted stories in the chapter titled *Za Vilinskom vodicom na Rožanski vrh* (Looking for fairy water while tracking toward Rožanski peak) wherein he noted the story of a hunter from Podgorje who encountered three fairies who were not “in those heavy linen shirts, buttoned to the neck, neither in hard, thick corsets which tether breasts like an impervious armour,” but were dressed in white, light silk that was transparent like

<sup>11</sup>In the introduction to *Podgorske lutrijašice* (The lottery sellers from Podgorje) from 1945, edited by Ferdo Pucek (as was the case with the first edition of 1889, as well), Novak states that as far as childhood is concerned, he always remembers the beggars from Podgorje, pointing out, in an anthropological context, the characteristics of their physiognomy – “Hardly a day went by without me seeing those cripples in shabby clothing, despondent, of disfigured bodies as one could only imagine.” (“Malo je koji dan minuo da nisam videvao te bogalje odrpana odiela, snuždena lica, a nakažene tielom, kako su samo mogli smišljati.”) He then describes the people of Senj gifting them with bread and a few coins, and states that in his childhood fantasy he imagined Podgorje to be some kind of a beggars’ empire living off the mercy of others, underground, just as ants do in the anthill (“nekakim prosjačkim carstvom koje živi od tuđe milosti pod zemljom onako kako živu mravi u mravinjaku.”) He further states in the Introduction that as an adult he used to stay a month or two in the municipalities of Podgorje and walk about these beggars’ *ant* empire, which is how he gained insight into their way of life. From that perspective he documents two types of beggars – those who beg out of “dire necessity” (“žive nevolje”), and those who have amassed quite a fortune through begging. However, irrespective of this other group, he points out that few left Podgorje when offered to move to fertile Slavonia – “few left the sea: they grew to love the steep coves, huge ravines, angry bora and furious sea” (“al malo se tko odvrkao od mora: zavolio je divlje prodole, grдне gudure, ljutu buru i bijesno more” Novak 1945: 6).

<sup>12</sup>Josip and Željko Poljak are singled out by Edo Popović in his third book on Velebit (2018).

a veil, disclosing their fairy bodies (Balén 1999: 182; see: Marjanić 2004). True, the sighting was contextualised with the possible drunken state of the above-mentioned hunter, which is a common extra-contextual signal in such mythological, demonological storytelling (see: Mencej 2017).

In the book, Balén also gives the etymology of numerous Velebit toponyms. For example, for the toponym *Rožano*,<sup>13</sup> a huge grass land dotted with hills and valleys, he claims that some Velebit scholars derive from the word “rog”, meaning shepherd’s horn, because Rožano, as the largest cattle grazing ground in that part of Velebit, was always filled with shepherds and their horns. Others make the connection with folk stories about fairy protectors of clan and land (“vile rođenice”), while others connect it with a traditional instrument resembling the oboe played in Primorje called the *rožanice*. Still, older inhabitants of Podgorje believe that Rožano derives from the word “roža” a term assigned to all flowers by the people of Velebit (Balén 1999: 86). Thus Balén will, in a cultural encyclopaedia of Velebit, mention Vjenceslav Novak, who, in one of his stories in *Podgorske pripovijetke* (Stories from Podgorje), documented a Viennese society which began an intensive forest cutting operation on Velebit in the second half of the nineteenth century – “they built a saw mill in Štirovača, and a road for the export of lumber toward the sea was built across this part of Velebit” (Balén 1999: 15). However, exploitation continued and Balén gives a more recent example of a pathocentric encounter with the local population cutting down trees, and in the process mercilessly exploiting the work horses. I would like to underline those sentimental, realistic descriptions of “a poor animal desperately neighing under the strikes of a whip trying to lift its front legs, and when it finally managed, it stood for a second frozen, recalling one of the wounded horses from old war pictures” (Balén 1999: 174). In the context of Velebit fauna Šime Balén reminds us of the Croatian-Slovenian biologist Narcis Mršić, who obtained his doctoral degree working on the horned viper of Velebit, adding a social component – as an excellent zoologist Mršić could not find employment in Croatia, and was thus forced to leave for Ljubljana, Slovenia (Balén 1999: 45). In the context of the above-mentioned exploitation of the Velebit forests, I would like to mention a performance by Ivana Mesek at the opening of the 2013 Venice Biennale with New York artist Zefrey Throwell. It was a post/dada performance with the aim of “returning” the wood and stone belonging to Croatia or, as elaborated by Mesek:

“I love working with Zefrey. We agree in our attitude to art of which a sense of humour is an extremely important part. Today if you are not deadly serious and are not solving the fate of the world, but are engaged in humour, you are considered ‘shallow’ or a buffoon... ridiculous. Is there a more wonderful human characteristic than a sense of humour?”

Thus the two of us went around Venice looking for and detecting pieces of wood and stone that the evil Venetians had stolen from us ages ago, leaving Velebit bare. We would put those in a bag and return to Croatia.

<sup>13</sup>Rožanac peak (1638 m) is the highest peak of the Rožani and dominates that part of Velebit. What Veliki Kozjak stands for on the eastern side of Velebit, Rožanac peak means for its western side (Balén 1999: 191). In the *Priručnik za hodače* Edo Popović noted that Ante Premužić, engineer and designer of the trail, stayed in Rožanski kukovi in 1929 and wrote about it in *Hrvatski planinar* (Croatian Mountaineer) in 1930 (Popović 2009: 124).

It is difficult to rattle someone's cage during the opening of the Biennale since they are used to all kinds of 'crazy artists.' We have even attempted to pull out a wooden piling to which a carabinieri boat was tied. The carabinieri were just watching us peacefully. Anyways, we were having great fun. Dressed in Croatian checkered jerseys we definitely stood out in the crowd of 'artistic and critic crème' that has occupied the town" (Mesek 2013: 40-41).

## Edo Popović: The Velebit Trilogy

Edo Popović wrote his peripatetic trans-genre book *Priručnik za hodače* (2009) as a result of the experience of dual shock: a realization about his own diseased body (two chronic illnesses). The basis for the work in terms of travel literature was Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Thoreau was among the first to suggest the concept of civil disobedience and is considered one of the pioneers of American individualistic anarchism. Popović states that Thoreau mocked grand stone buildings (for example, Thebes, the Egyptian pyramids, the Permagon Altar) left by ancient peoples; he pointed out that he preferred to see stone where it belongs – in nature: "More sensible is a rod of stone wall that bounds an honest man's field than a hundred-gated Thebes that has wandered farther from the true end of life" (Thoreau 1971: 57). At the same time, Popović made an association with the Iapydes, who once inhabited the area bounded by the rivers Una and Kupa and the mountain Velebit, a people who were above the *trivialities of construction* (Popović 2009:127). Unfortunately, they found themselves on the way of the Roman hordes during their war path to Panonia and central Europe. The Romans also noticed their mines. The Romans devastated the Iapydean capital Metulum, shutting all the women and children in the city hall and burning them alive. Popović ironically adds that the custom of treating civilians in such a way has been preserved to the present day – from Algeria, Vietnam and Srebrenica to Chechnya and Gaza. Therefore, Iapydes did not leave much behind, probably because like the ancient Chinese they also knew that there is only one thing worth living for – life itself. Popović states that thanks to the good custom of the Iapydes of leaving the stones in peace, the Slavs, subsequent inhabitants of the area, were not particularly interested in stone masonry. Thus the cliffs of Velebit have been preserved until the present day.

As he expressed in his trans-genre book, Popović found the incentive for his travel writing journey in the works of the following mountaineers and travel writers: Sergej Forenbacher, Miroslav Hirtz, Ivan Krajač, Božo Modrić, Josip Poljak, Ante Premužić, Ante Rukavina, Radivoj Simonović and Dane Vukušić. He was above all inspired by Šime Balen's book *Velebit se nadvio nad more...: putopisni zapisi s planine Šime Balena* (see: Popović 2009: 88).

Dean Duda, among other things, a theoretician of travel writing, points out that in the course of a journey, between the rituals of leaving and returning "a possible life of literature evolves" (Duda 2012: 49). Popović thus imbues his second Velebit travelogue *U Velebitu* with memories of previous travel writers – from Petrarca and his ascent to Mount Ventoux, to the current travelogue in which he attempted to "evoke a feeling you are permeated with in an encounter with the intact, or more or less intact, nature. Usually it is defined as awe, fear,



elation, rapture, admiration, adoration...” (Popović 2013: 141).<sup>14</sup> He therefore defines his journeys across Velebit as “protean nature which prevents a man from disappearing in social roles” (Popović 2013: 141), referring to all those books he referred readers to in his literature for the rucksack at the end of the *Priručnik za hodače*. His second book on Velebit, titled *U Velebitu*, Popović devoted to Radivoje Simonović, Miroslav Hirtz, Josip Poljak and Ilija Šarinić, all explorers of Velebit. It is structured as a re-enactment of a journey undertaken by Miroslav Hirtz across the mountain. We thus follow a dual journey – that of Miroslav Hirtz, through quotations and fragments,<sup>15</sup> and that of Edo Popović, who writes his travelogue and follows the paths of Miroslav Hirtz. These are accompanied by photographs of Radivoje Simonović developed on glass and then recreated via digital camera.<sup>16</sup> As the author states, the relationship between man and mountain questions the direction our present society is taking. Therefore, Popović began the journey, as we learn in chapter one, titled “Harvesters, unmentionables and extreme jumpers. Korita – Duboke Jasle – Razvršje – Draga – Prosenjak” (“Žetelice, nespomenice i ekstremni skakač. Korita – Duboke Jasle – Razvršje – Draga – Prosenjak”), with a friend Željko Žarak. The two recreate the journey undertaken in 1926 by Miroslav Hirtz<sup>17</sup> with his friends and co-walkers: a medical doctor; a photographer; Radivoje Simonović, a geologist and author of *Velebit Guide (Vodič po Velebitu)* published in 1929; Josip Poljak, a teacher; Simonović’s longtime co-traveller Ilija Šarinić; horsemen Mile Samardžija and Ilija Čanković.

In listing them, the author documents that each participant in the unfolding narrative incidents of the travelogue is specialised for certain activity, and thus their different roles and relationships create the actant structure of the story of the journey (see: Duda 1998: 74). While they tread the Velebit wilderness (intact nature), they stress that Velebit is left unclaimed, barely divided up. In this context, Popović contrapuntally describes his experience from Vollzele, Flanders, which could not be described as wandering, since the entire landscape is intersected by the fences of private estates – “I could have walked only down the narrow asphalt corridor, the only free space in that part of Belgium” (Popović 2013:16). In *Priručnik za hodače*, in the chapter titled “Partitioning of the world” (“Parceliranje svijeta”), Popović critiques the idea of civilisation based on partitioning, negating anthropocentrism, and with it, speciesism –

“The very idea of this mammal according to which he is not a part of, but the owner of the Earth and the Universe, and that he has the right to do with them whatever he desires, is fairly sick” (Popović 2009: 23).

<sup>14</sup>This refers to a key date in the history of mountaineering. See: “Planinarstvo”, <https://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planinarstvo>

<sup>15</sup>This refers to Hirtz’s travelogue describing the trail from Gračac to do Prosenjak, published in 1936 in *Hrvatski planinar*.

<sup>16</sup>The mutual assistance provided by mountaineers and writer-mountaineers has been noted by all mountaineers. Thus, Željko Poljak states that Danijel Vukušić (1905-1995) and Šime Balen (1912-2004) helped him when he was writing a book on Velebit in 1958. And when he laid out *Velebit hiking trail* (Poljak 2017: 219).

<sup>17</sup>He was a mountaineer too, and was especially familiar with Gorski kotar and Velebit. In J. Poljak’s book *Planinarski vodič po Velebitu* (Velebit Hiking Guide, Zagreb 1929), he described the fauna of the area. At the foot of Velebit, in Jablanac, he built a summer house; today the mountaineers’ hut carries his name. See: <http://hbl.lzmk.hr/clanak.aspx?id=64>



In the third part of the Velebit trilogy Edo Popović devotes individual chapters to the Velebit bear, wolf, horned viper and insects, where he, among other things writes that Ante Vukušić, who in the third part has the role of the writer's informant, told him that "he does not remember that anyone on Velebit ever fell victim to a horned viper, bear or wolf" (Popović 2018: 71), adding that a lot more people died of poisonous mushrooms picked on the mountain. In *Priručnik za hodače* a chapter is devoted to Velebit horses and black butterflies (chapter titled "Horses and Butterflies" – "Konji i leptiri"), wherein he describes the connection between a horse and meteorology as he learned about it from Ante Vukušić –

"Until early afternoon the horses grazed peacefully in the Zavižan hollow; then they left downward toward Babrovača and the sea. In the evening it started snowing. (...) Since then, whenever I find myself on Zavižan, I ask about the horses, where they are, and whether they are grazing at the Jezera or have left seaward" (Popović 2019: 115).

Thus in the book *U Velebitu* Popović states that M. Hirtz was interested in snakes and kept recording what horseman Ilija Čanković kept telling him about snakes all the way from Gračac to Prosenjak. The result was a text titled "O kultu zmija" (On the Cult of Snakes), published in 1938 in the magazine *Priroda* (Nature), wherein he recorded a series of stories and beliefs about snakes from the Velebit area (Popović 2013: 17). Popović also documents Hirtz's passion for hunting, and how he shot birds out of pure entertainment "simply because he had a rifle" (Popović 2013: 130). It is evident that Edo Popović does not introduce a pathocentric relationship toward the killed birds. Instead he wants to know which birds Hirtz shot believing that those were not nutcrackers that were killed, as Hirtz states in his travelogue. And then, in a learned, zoological manner, yet without pathos, he continues:

"In Forenbacher's *Kompendij velebitske faune* (Compendium of Velebit fauna) and other literature 'nutcracker' is a term used to denote the Eurasian nutcracker or Eurasian jay, a bird from the Corvidae genus which plants trees (by hiding seeds in the ground like jays or squirrels, Eurasian nutcrackers actually afforest mountains)" (Popović 2013: 130).

Following a detailed enumeration of a zoological description, he concludes that Hirtz obviously did not kill a Eurasian nutcracker, but a hazel grouse,<sup>18</sup> a bird from Tetrastes genus.

In the third travelogue about Velebit, published in 2018 and titled *Čovjek i planina: kratki uvod u sjeverni Velebit*, Edo Popović included photo records by Ante Vukušić, the Velebit legend – the housekeeper at the mountain lodge in Zavižan and the manager of the Zavižan meteorological station, the highest meteorological station in Croatia, 1594 m above sea level, where in the Introduction he states that the idea for the book came to him "two or three years after he met Ante Vukušić in 2006" (Popović 2018: 7). He again frames his text with the writings

<sup>18</sup>"(*Tetrastes bonasia*), hazel grouse, a species from the family of Phasianidae, genus *Tetraonidae*" See: [\(https://proleksis.lzmk.hr/35383/Miroslav-Hirtz-gives-a-number-of-terms-for-Eurasian-nutcracker-in-Croatian-\(lješkarica-equals-lješnarka-lješnikar-lješnikara-lješnikarica-lješnjakarka-lješnjarka;Hirtz-1928-26\).For-Eurasian-nutcracker-he-also-gives-a-synonym-ljeskarska-\(ibid.\)and-gives-a-number-of-interpretations-of-which-I-shall-here-single-out-two-:Eurasian-nutcracker-\(leštarka\)-mostly-dwells-in-the-bushes-\(leštari\),-which-is-where-they-most-likely-got-the-name-from.-M.-N.-Rašković.-Lovac-I-\(1896\)-21.-Partridge-or,-as-is-usually-called,-jay,-belongs-to-genus-Phasianidae.-Z.-Turkalj.-Lov.-Rib.-Vjes.-XIV-\(1905\)-17"\)](https://proleksis.lzmk.hr/35383/Miroslav-Hirtz-gives-a-number-of-terms-for-Eurasian-nutcracker-in-Croatian-(lješkarica-equals-lješnarka-lješnikar-lješnikara-lješnikarica-lješnjakarka-lješnjarka;Hirtz-1928-26).For-Eurasian-nutcracker-he-also-gives-a-synonym-ljeskarska-(ibid.)and-gives-a-number-of-interpretations-of-which-I-shall-here-single-out-two-:Eurasian-nutcracker-(leštarka)-mostly-dwells-in-the-bushes-(leštari),-which-is-where-they-most-likely-got-the-name-from.-M.-N.-Rašković.-Lovac-I-(1896)-21.-Partridge-or,-as-is-usually-called,-jay,-belongs-to-genus-Phasianidae.-Z.-Turkalj.-Lov.-Rib.-Vjes.-XIV-(1905)-17)

of zoologist, poet and travel writer Miroslav Hirtz and the writings of Josip Poljak (*Planinarski vodič po Velebitu*, 1929), “thus wishing to preserve from oblivion the two great men of Velebit and their contemporaries” (Popović 2018: 9). In the final chapter of the book, titled “Babrovača,” which discusses the well-maintained shepherd’s huts owned by the family of Ante Vukušić, Popović states that Miroslav Hirtz devoted a significant part of his manuscript published in 1923 in *Hrvatski planinar* specifically to Babrovača and its huts, which is followed by a fragment from Hirtz’s travelogue (Popović 2018: 149). To summarize, the third travelogue sheds light on Hirtz’s and Poljak’s texts about Velebit through their textual fragments and the images as seen through the lens of Ante Vukušić.

### Towards a conclusion: the peripatetic trans-genre

As the Velebit trilogy by Edo Popović testifies, Velebit still belongs to the space of wilderness (intact nature)<sup>19</sup> since the doctrine of the “*partitioning of the world*,” to which increasingly testifies this pandemic world picture of 2020/2021. Therefore, Popović ends his *U Velebitu* (2013) with a comment on a book by the German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski *How much globalisation can we bear?*, where he demonstrates that from a term denoting an immense expanse globality became a term denoting a closed space of hysteria and an inability to act (cf. Popović 2013: 139, 213).<sup>20</sup> Edo Popović’s travelogue is a result of his social engagement, his fight against mental borders, with Velebit being seen as an open space, since – as he states – national flags are equivalent to an animalistic demarcation of space with urine. The text criticises the Chinese wall building, which became fashionable again in the last few decades: “(...) between certain countries high poles of reinforced concrete crop up, a hundred kilometres long, equipped with sophisticated devices recording even the migration of a butterfly to the other side” (Popović 2009: 24, 28). Velebit opens up as a space of freedom of movement, a free space to walk in – “large enough to walk for days, even weeks, without encountering a fence in the landscape or someone’s head” (Popović 2009:28). Much like Zoranić, through the topos of Velebit Edo Popović considers the world order (Zoranić in relation to the Venetian and Ottoman conquests). In his third travel book, published in 2018, he states that the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are characterised by the mass settlement of Podgorje and Zagora, a tendency that changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, a time when “the population is massively leaving the areas, (...) even the settlements on the coast are ever more deserted” (Popović 2018: 133). This is a reflection of the global situation: “We are witnessing a paradox – the more people there are on the Earth, the more deserted rural areas are. Everyone wants to live in the city, everyone wants urbanism and industrialised life” (Popović 2018: 133). In the harmony of deep ecology

<sup>19</sup>In the context of the word *wild* I refer to Nodilo’s etymology which claims that the word derives from Latin *divinus*: (Even though the word *div* is foreign (Miklošić, *Christ. Termin.*, s. 35), taken from the Persians, and has with the Turks entered our country, the word *divljan* is definitely Proto-Slavic, with the Indo-European base word *div*. What is now in our language *divlji* (or older version *diviji*) *ferus*, *silvester*, at the beginning it was *divinus*. *Divo*, *divъ* to Slavs means miracle” (“I ako je riječ *div* tugja (Miklošić, *Christ. Termin.*, s. 35), te uzeta od Perzijanaca, pa preko Turaka došla u naše krajeve, svakako je praslavenska riječ *divljan*, kojoj je prva osnovna indo-europsko *div*. Što je sad u nas *divlji* (starije *diviji*) *ferus*, *silvester*, to, u prvine, bijaše *divinus*. *Divo*, *divъ* u Slavenâ znači čudo.” Nodilo 1981: 26).

<sup>20</sup>See: a record on the last cattle breeders on the mountain in the 1970s (Popović 2013: 28).

Photo: Eurasian nutcracker from the book by Sergej Forenbacher, *Kompendij velebitske faune. I-II*. Zagreb: Veterinarski fakultet, 2002.



and affective ecocriticism<sup>21</sup> the author understands that earthlings are currently spending the resources of three planets Earth “and that it is only a matter of time before the Earth will go bankrupt” (Popović 2018: 134).<sup>22</sup> This travel writing trilogy, the mountaineering literature trilogy by Edo Popović, can be defined as peripatetic literature about Velebit, specifically travel writing, mountaineering literature with an engaged relationship towards reality.

translated by Tihana Klepač

<sup>21</sup>Affective ecocriticism studies the relationship between emotions and nature, finding emotions in spatial terms, and also identifies new emotions which could be more clearly understood through the lens of ecocritical theory (Bladow, Ladino 2018: 6).

<sup>22</sup>Velebit as a topos of art is equally a place of land art interventions, as Zvezdana Jembrih points out, or as Josip Zanki, a multi-media artist and a university professor, reveals in his program based on Zoranić's Planine (see: Conference *Land Art...* 2019).

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# KEYWORDS

Šime Balen

EDO POPOVIĆ

ECOCRITICISM

engaged literature

## ABSTRACT:

The article interprets Velebit as a space of peripatetic literature beginning, naturally, with Petar Zoranić's *Planine* (written in 1536 and published in 1569) wherein, in addition to a personal psychogram on conventional lovesickness ("beteg"), the author problematizes the general situation in his "scattered heritage" ("rasuta baščina") (under Ottoman and Venetian threat). As opposed to Zoranić's imaginary voyage formulated as an allegorical voyage of enlightenment along the paths of Velebit, Edo Popović, in his trans-genre *Priručnik za hodače* (The Walkers' Manual) (2009), 440 years after Zoranić (to introduce some symbolism), with his zen-roamings in Velebit and his principle of "voluntary poverty," as mirrored in Henry David Thoreau's ecological matrix, equally discloses sociograms of not only "scattered heritage", but of the global world order, as well. The trilogy of travel writings, of this hiking literature by Edo Popović, can be defined as *peripatetic literature* about Velebit. Yet it has to be stressed that these are travel writings, namely hiking literature with an engaged attitude toward reality.

# ANTE RUKAVINA

*P e t a r   Z o r a n i ć*

**peripatetic transgenre**

MOUNTAINEERING LITERATURE

## NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Suzana Marjanić – 1969, is on the staff at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb, where she realises her interests in the theories of ritual and myth, critical animal studies and the performance studies. She published the book *Voices of “Bygone Days”: Transgressions of Worlds in Krleža’s Notes 1914-1921/22* (2005), *Chronotope of Croatian Performance Art: From Traveleri until Today* (2014) and *The Topoi of Performance Art: A Local Perspective* (2017). She co-edited the collection *Cultural Bestiary* (2007) and its sequel *Literary Animal: Cultural Bestiary 2* (2012) with A. Zaradija Kiš, *The Folklore Studies Reader* (Zagreb, 2010) with M. Hameršak, *Mythical Anthology* (2010) with I. Prica, the collection *Krleža’s EU/rope furiosum* (2016) with B. Koštić and the collection *Ecofeminism: between Women’s and Green Studies* (2020) with G. Đurđević.

# An Ecocritical Study into Film Adaptation of *Znachor*, Directed by Michał Waszyński (1937)

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## Introduction

There have been two film adaptations<sup>1</sup> of the novel *Znachor* [Folk doctor] by Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz. The first, directed by Michał Waszyński and written by Anatol Stern, was made in 1937. The second, directed by Jerzy Hoffmann, and co-written by Hoffmann and Jacek Fuksiewicz, was made in 1981. Both the book and the films were well received by readers and viewers.

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “adaptation” rather than “screen version” bearing in mind the danger of deterministic reductionism, which may connote the latter term. I am not as opposed to the term “screen version” as W. Faulstich and R. Strobel; I treat each of the film adaptations of the novel *Znachor* as a hypertextual (to some degree; see Genette) reference to the source material, rather than to an original. I do not wish to “verify” the adequacy of film interpretations. I treat film adaptations of *Znachor* as relatively autonomous works in terms of plot, style, and communication, which are not based on some media transfer, but on a specific artistic vision inscribed into a specific socio-cultural context and medium. “Relatively”, for there are shared elements of the novel and its adaptations, which allow one to seek dependencies and similarities, but their scope and status do not condition nor limit, aesthetically or cognitively, the films as significant wholes. See W. Faulstich, R. Strobel, “*Uksiążkowanie*” jako problem estetyczno-medialny. *Obcy – ósmy pasażer Nostromo – studium przypadku* [“*Novelization*” as an aesthetic and media issue: *Alien – a case study*], translated by M. Kasprzyk, revised by K. Kozłowski, “*Przestrzenie Teorii*” 21 (2014), p. 232.

In 1938 Dołęga-Mostowicz published a second installment of Rafał Wilczur's story entitled *Professor Wilczur*. In the same year Michał Waszyński made a film based on the novel under the same title, written by Anatol Stern. In 1939 there was another film, made by Leopold Buczkowski and written by Dołęga-Mostowicz entitled *Testament profesora Wilczura* [Professor Wilczur's testament], released in 1942.

In studies on works by Dołęga-Mostowicz, which were aesthetically and morally disputable even when the author was still alive<sup>2</sup>, various discourses, such as social and cultural, are taken into account. Plenty has been written about *Znachor*, which has a lot of semantic potential for diachronic reading. The novel can be discussed using currently developing discourses, including the maladic discourse and its popular variants<sup>3</sup>, as well as critical discourse<sup>4</sup>. The proposal to take advantage of ecocriticism, which so far has not been considered in the case of the works by Dołęga-Mostowicz, stems from the semantic potential contained in the film adaptations, especially the 1937 one, which presents functions of presentations of nature and its relations with man which go beyond aesthetics. Illustrating the dynamics and changeability of nature not only confirmed the sensual, non-film experience of viewers, but also exposed relations between man and nature.

The aim of the present paper is to discuss a selected fragment of the 1937 adaptation from the perspective of ecocriticism. Using this example, I will show that already in the early days of cinema there were cognitively original, unorthodox ways of presenting the relationship between man and nature, which can be considered as inclusive signs introducing nature as a dramatically co-significant element of the represented world, which relativizes the anthropocentric scheme – at least to some extent. Inclusive signs understood in such a way resulted from a specific cultural tradition. In the case of the novel and its 1937 adaptation, there is no doubt that social ideas shaped by Young Poland's thought were one of the sources. The fact that the inclusive sign functioned in the area of popular culture is also important.

<sup>2</sup> In his 1935 *Przewodnik po beletrystyce* [A guide to fiction] Cz. Lechicki is critical of Dołęga-Mostowicz's works, seeing them as problematic in terms of customs and morals. See e.g. A. Tramer *Popularność literatury czy literatura popularna. Kilka uwag na marginesie „Przewodnika po beletrystyce” Czesława Lechickiego* [Popularity of literature or popular literature. Some comments on the margins of *Przewodnik po beletrystyce* by Czesław Lechicki], [in:] *Literatura popularna*, t. 1: *Dyskursy wielorakie* [Popular literature, vol. 1: Numerous discourses], edited by E. Bartos, M. Tomczok, Katowice 2013, pp. 31-39.

<sup>3</sup> Dołęga-Mostowicz's novel presents a suffering, sick person's situation (Wasył, Marysia Wilczurówna, Leszek Czyński). This topic obviously could intrigue the reader, and at the same time teach them specialist terminology, thus influencing the popular circulation of medical knowledge. See M. Szubert, *Dyskurs maladyczny – perspektywy badawcze* [Maladic discourse – research perspectives], [in:] *Fragmenty dyskursu maladycznego* [Fragments of maladic discourse], edited by M. Ganczar, I. Gielata, M. Ładoń, Gdańsk 2019, p. 23, 25.

<sup>4</sup> So far there have been no ecocritical studies into the novel *Znachor* nor its film adaptations. The present paper will discuss selected fragments, focusing on the 1937 film. However, there are publications discussing the works of Dołęga-Mostowicz, for example in the context of contemporary discourses on sexuality: S. Kwak, *Problem płci w literaturze popularnej okresu międzywojennego: samiec i impotent w prozie Tadeusza Dołęgi-Mostowicza* [The problem of sex in the interwar popular literature: male and impotent in Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz's prose], "PamiętnikLiteracki" 2012, no. 4, p. 69-81.



## Cinema as a machine

Roland Barthes described popular culture and its myth-creating potential, stressing dimensions significant in relationship to cognitive and aesthetic values<sup>5</sup>. He wrote that myth is speech – not the subject of its message, but a way of pronouncing it. In the context of the present considerations, the assumption that there are formal, not substantial limits to myth, are crucial<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the role of popular spoken media, to which I include novel and film, is creating myths. At the same time both the audio-visual message and the written word become the substance of modern man's myth – man of knowledge who respects tradition, respects the simplicity of life, is part of nature, but at the same time can do more than others, because of his knowledge and competences, and freedom from superstitions.

On the mythological level, it is the creation of modern man's myth, and more broadly – of modernity, which “heals”, “repairs”, “subjectifies” progress – that is shared by the novel and its film adaptations. Nature is present in the creation of the myth understood in such a way, which is not reduced to a melodramatic “decoration” in the presented world, as I will show on the example of the 1937 adaptation. It is the viewer who is supposed to perceive relationships between man and nature, especially when one thinks of experiencing suffering. I assume that such a perspective echoes Schopenhauer's thought, which entered the imagination of inter-war social creators via Young Poland's “peregrinations”<sup>7</sup>.

*Znachor*, which was first published in installments in “Wieczór Warszawski”<sup>8</sup>, became popular largely due to its 1937 adaptation. The author knew what readers of the magazine liked, which is probably why he decided to introduce the issue of medicine to his novel, a topic readers found interesting at the time. In general, Dołęga-Mostowicz's works registered al-

<sup>5</sup> R. Barthes, *Mitologie* [Mythologies], translated into Polish by A. Dziadek, introduction by K. Kłosiński, Warszawa 2008, p. 239.

<sup>6</sup> Idem.

<sup>7</sup> This hypothesis requires multi-aspect analyses; here I treat it as a determinant of the possible influence of a specific tradition of thinking on a text.

<sup>8</sup> A novel published in installments, i.e., so-called serial novel – was characterized by certain ambitions of its author, which manifested themselves in undertaking a current issue presented in melodramatic conventions facilitating “translating” medical or psychological knowledge into a language that allowed an easy understanding of the plot and protagonists' motivations, stylistic games (prof. Wilczur, Antoni Kosiba, Samuel Obiedziński all have their own voice. Obiedziński, who talked the protagonist into buying him vodka and dinner, talks like a criminal, whereas Wasyl Prokop – like a peasant), unexpected plot twists, increasing dramatic tension, the construction of complex characters (especially Rafał Wilczur as Antoni Kosiba; Wasyl, a suicidal victim of medical neglect, becomes an embodiment of affirmation of life once he is healed – in the novel he walks among peasants bringing grain to a mill, in the 1937 adaptation – he proudly walks to the cinema). In the same issues of the magazine where subsequent installments of the novel were published, recurring maladic discourse (to use modern language) was also present in the form of articles about diseases, as well as ads of numerous, various medical services. In this context, the novel became a “crack” enabling an insight into the interesting, mysterious, and definitely unusual world of doctors and what they dealt with. Doubtlessly the novel brought readers closer to the complexity of science – in this case, medical – showing that it was effective in situations when previously people could only hope for a miracle. At the same time, since Dołęga-Mostowicz was also a journalist, he knew the needs of mass readers, who enjoyed reading about doctors and patients. The author read descriptions of diseases, which is probably why he proposed the popular – like *Dr House* – “lesson” on medicine. Popular literature authors, who published them – among other places – in the press, were interested in scientific novelties, fun facts, sensational stories, simultaneously creating alternative, elaborate versions of press reports. See M. Kochanowski, *Melodramatyzm i powieść (Żeromski, Mniszkówna, Strug). Od rytuału do sensacji* [Melodrama and novel (Żeromski, Mniszkówna, Strug). From ritual to sensation], Białystok 2015, p. 34.

most every social, moral, political, and economic change of their times<sup>9</sup>. Doctors of various specializations advertised their services in “Wieczór Warszawski” and other contemporary magazines. In a way, the press taught specialist terminology even through ads offering medical services<sup>10</sup>. There were many articles about diseases available. Hence, I propose to treat *Znachor* as a medium for creating a social image and transmission of medical knowledge “explained” in simple terms that were easy to grasp for readers (and thanks to the adaptation – viewers), who could learn that modern medicine was effective in situations when before they could only hope for a miracle. In this context, popular literature was doubtlessly a medium, or even “promoter” of modernity. Dołęga-Mostowicz’s fame was unusual, similarly to Waszyński’s popularity<sup>11</sup>. The novel sold well, and its 1937 adaptation was a box office hit, which must have encouraged both the writer and the director to continue the story. After all, from this perspective the contemporary mechanisms of culture, similarly to those of the present-day, changed insignificantly: success was to imply another success, at the same time minimizing any financial risk related to investing in a completely new project whose reception would be difficult to predict.

Obviously, there are many similarities and differences between the literary source material and its film adaptations. Moreover, in the 1981 adaptation there are references to both the novel, and the 1937 adaptation. The first is more closely related to the novel’s hypotext than the later. All three share a similar plot scheme: the medical success of prof. dr. Rafał Wilczur – amnesia – the protagonist’s roaming about and working in the countryside – important surgeries – trial and the regaining of his identity. In Waszyński’s film there are plotlines which do not appear in the novel, such as the story of Beata, the protagonist’s wife, and her daughter Mariolka (i.e., Marysia Jolanta) who live in the countryside. In the film, Beata’s lover, Janek, dies crushed by a tree (I will return to that later) – whereas in the novel he dies of tuberculosis. In the 1981 adaptation, Beata’s and her partner’s plotlines are not included; neither is Marysia’s childhood; events preceding the protagonist’s memory loss are reduced to metonymically fictionalized pictures, based on which a viewer who does not know the source material or the 1937 adaptation can only deduce the reasons behind his tragic situation. In the novel and the 1981 adaptation, the plotline of Wilczur’s false identity is presented in a similar way; the protagonist is arrested for vagrancy, for he is unable to provide any personal data. Both in the novel and the adaptation the protagonist steals Antoni Kosiba’s documents from a police officer’s desk. In the 1937 adaptation, the protagonist becomes Kosiba after he receives documents from a fellow vagabond. In the novel, Szkopkowa owns the shop where Marysia

<sup>9</sup> See P. Śliwiński, *Dołęga-Mostowicz*, Poznań 1996; I. Poniatowska, “*Płci opętani, gęba spętani*”: tabu w powieści popularnej na przykładzie powieści Tadeusza Dołęgi-Mostowicza (“*Bracia Dalcz i S-ka*”) i Witolda Gombrowicza (“*Opętani*”) [“Possessed by sex, bound by mouth”: taboo in popular literature on the example of Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz’s (“*Dalcz Brothers and co.*”) and Witold Gombrowicz’s (“*Possessed*”) novels, “*Napis*” 2012, No 18, pp. 191-205.

<sup>10</sup> “*Wieczór Warszawski*” published ads of clinics treating arthritis; STD, stomach, bowel specialists, orthopedic surgeons treating “sport injuries, bone afflictions, deformities and fractures”, prostheses and orthopedic equipment, as well as RTG for treating heart, lungs, liver, skin, and even hair. This list is based on press advertisements published in the first issue of “*Wieczór Warszawski*” from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1936, which also published a magazine novel by Dołęga-Mostowicz entitled “*Dr. Murek Zredukowany*” <https://crispa.uw.edu.pl/object/files/102741/display/Default> (23.01.2021r.)

<sup>11</sup> Michał Waszyński directed 40 films between 1929 and 1939. His creative potential was massive. See <https://filmpolski.pl/fp/index.php?osoba=118265>. The documentary *Książę i dybuk* [The Prince and the dybbuk], 2017, by E. Niewiera, P. Rosołowski is a valuable resource on Waszyński’s persona.

Wilczurówna works and she looks after her; in the 1937 adaptation, she owns the cinema where Marysia Wilczurówna plays the piano; in the 1981 adaptation Marysia works in a shop. During the trial, both in the novel and the 1937 adaptation Dr. Dobraniecki, prof. Wilczur's former student, who is called upon as an expert evaluating Wilczur's surgeries, reveals his true identity only at the Radoliszki cemetery. In the 1981 adaptation prof. Dobraniecki reveals Wilczur's true identity in court. I point out the basic (not all) similarities and differences between the different versions in order to show that on the dramaturgic level, they are partially the same – however, as hypertexts, both adaptations focus on different plot elements of the novel and their social references. Any differences between the literary hypotext and its film hyper(trans- due to a different medium)texts present references which were important for directors and audiences at a specific socio-cultural and historical moment. However, the 1937 adaptation directly shows relations between man and nature based on mutual connections, using montage and audiovisual materials (such as outdoor images of trees or wind whistling through grass).

Adrian J. Ivakhiv, an original scholar who combines film studies with ecocriticism introduces the concept of cinema as an anthropological, geomorphic, or biomorphic machine<sup>12</sup>, using the notion of “the anthropological machine” proposed by Agamben. Ivakhiv points out three layers which permeate one another and bring film closer to the real world. However, he stresses that a moving<sup>13</sup> picture produces worlds presenting people, objects and things and creates pictures showing dependencies between them, including those between man and nature. As an anthropomorphic machine, cinema creates film versions of man or forms similar to man, thus generating a subject-world or seemingly social world; as a geomorphic machine – in the creation process of spatially organized or materially mapped object-world – it builds “geography” based on the contrast between here-ness and there-ness, as well as on relationships and distances between elements of the represented world; cinema as a biomorphic (or anamorphic) machine is revived in the creation process, allowing one to see forms which are presented as those that see and are seen, hear and are heard, similar to us – viewers who see and hear them, thus learning how to perceive what is “alive”<sup>14</sup>. In this context cinema reveals the world of subjects, objects, and things connecting them. The anthropomorphic world of Antoni Kosiba, a folk doctor, and the miller's son, Wasyl, on whom he performs a surgery, is inscribed in a countryside space, with its advantages (community life, work) and disadvantages (poverty, superstition, lack of access to medical specialists). The biomorphic perspective shows – like in the case of the 1937 surgery scene (which I will analyze later in the text) – that the distance between what is happening “here” (in a chamber, among people, during a surgery) and what is happening “there” (outside, outside the window, in nature) is not big; moreover, the distance is not shortened with conventional, melodramatically motivated aesthetic solutions, which

<sup>12</sup>A. J. Ivakhiv, *The Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema*, “Film-Philosophy” 15.1 (2011), p. 118.

<sup>13</sup>A. J. Ivakhiv stresses that movement is the key ontological category in cinema, from the perspective of which relations between film and reality, as well as between man and nature, should be studied. Ivakhiv often claims that pictures surrounding us move us, and we move with them. We begin to understand that a world filled with moving pictures transforms itself into a world of moving pictures. See A. J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of The Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press 2013, p. VII-X.

<sup>14</sup>Ivakhiv's concept is complex; here I only offer an outline. A. J. Ivakhiv, *The Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema*, pp. 118-119.

use violent natural phenomena only for illustrating Wasyl's suffering during the surgery. The biomorphic perspective creates a context in which man perceives nature and simultaneously its might, fierceness and dynamicity, learning that he is an integral part of it.

## Nature is bigger than man

Of course, the novel and its two adaptations represent the melodramatic convention from the genre perspective, which becomes a peculiar medium of socio-cultural transformations affecting the reception of the novel and its two adaptations. Melodrama allowed recipients to identify with protagonists, and thus facilitated learning about medicine or nature – for many viewers this might have been the first time they had had contact with such topics. After all, the 1937 film, similarly to the novel, was the medium of modern knowledge confronted with folk knowledge. At the same time, I disregard their artistic value.

What I am interested in here is the relationship between man and nature, significant from the perspective of ecocriticism. In the novel, it is presented as a background for man's life, its descriptions construct an emotional ambiance and help with situating events and characters – such as e.g., the description of nature on the day of Wasyl's surgery: "Meanwhile the sun emerged from the mists covering the horizon and flooded the world with its brightness. The outhouse was already full of light. Antoni, already bustling about for some time, was murmuring something to himself. Wasyl followed him with his eyes and did not speak."<sup>15</sup> The 1981 adaptation is similar; nature exposes the human drama. Each frame allows us to deduce that on the day of the surgery the weather was nice, but the operation is shown only in Kosiba's chamber in order to underline Wasyl's suffering and pain, and to illustrate the unusual skill of the folk doctor, at the same time highlighting the anthropomorphic perspective. Wasylko and Kosiba are shown close-up, using dynamic montage, which connotes strong emotions and their having to deal with danger.

The 1937 adaptation is an example of an approach that was ahead of its times, valuable cognitively, not just aesthetically. The film ceases to be exclusively an anthropomorphic machine (to paraphrase Ivakhiv); it becomes a geomorphic and biomorphic machine at least at one point, initiating the metonymic contiguity of what is human, alive and suffering, and what is living, co-significant nature, on the level of figures. It is life, presented in the film on the horizon of the man-nature relationship, that reveals their shared ontology. I appreciate the interpretative risk; at first the viewer assumes that nature is supposed to illustrate Wasyl's suffering, which is why it is strongly functionalized, hence on the stylistic level it seems to be a conventional device. And this is probably the case from the perspective of that time, but nowadays, taking advantage of ecocriticism, a complementary interpretation can be proposed.

Of course, it should be stressed that the nature of the novel makes universal rights real, it is their rule, which – like the will to live in Schopenhauer's philosophy – manifests its might

<sup>15</sup>T. Dołęga-Mostowicz, *Znachor*, Wolne Lektury, p. 38. The electronic version of the novel was published by Fundacja Nowoczesna Polska based on the 1990 Warsaw Labos edition.

in subsequent representations. Dołęga-Mostowicz shows that nature is stronger than man. Antoni Kosiba visits the village shop where Marysia works. The folk doctor immediately takes to her, and she to him. Neither of them knows the source of this strong bond, trust, and ultimately sacrifice; to perform surgery on her, Kosiba steals surgical tools from the local doctor, ending up in prison for fighting for her life. Dołęga-Mostowicz shows that the bond between father and daughter is a relationship which reflects some major natural order, and each character is just a medium of that order. Antoni Kosiba is prof. Wilczur, who lost his memory; Marysia is a daughter who has not seen her father in years, and yet – they both felt a natural bond from the onset, feeling for each other, they found each other; she in him, and he in her, they experienced love as *caritas*, which made them metaphysically identical<sup>16</sup>, and it was because a relationship between a father and his daughter belongs to the natural order. Laws connecting a father and his daughter are thus natural, which is why what is social and cultural – prof. Wilczur's wife, Beata, who by abandoning her husband and taking their daughter with her away from Warsaw is unable to destroy what is natural, i.e., the bond between a father and his daughter. On this level, nature is an ontological and ethical basis<sup>17</sup> of complex interpersonal relationships. In the film adaptations this message is reinforced by the duality of roles played by actresses who play both Beata and Marysia: Elżbieta Barszczewska (1937), and Anna Dymna (1981). In my considerations I propose to employ ecocriticism<sup>18</sup>, which I will use for discussing the portrayal of nature, focusing on the 1937 adaptation in order to show that characteristics ascribed to it, based on which man can perceive himself as part of a complex, living, and sensing whole.

Obviously, on the biggest level of generality it can be said that the novel and its two adaptations show – in the example of the protagonist – an important revaluation resulting from the transition from pre-modern to modern Poland. The novel and its adaptations open with scenes presenting prof. Wilczur performing surgery on a seriously ill patient. Prof. Rafał Wilczur and the world in which he functions are a synecdoche of modern Poland – based on knowledge and higher education, exchange of scientific thought, a convenient world; for example, in the 1937 adaptation the protagonist drives a car, has a landline at home and at work, he lives in a world free of superstitions. Antoni Kosiba is a synecdoche of pre-modern man; he functions among superstitious people for whom religious thinking is superior to, or at least as important as rational thinking (which is manifested in respect for doctor Pawlicki's authority – if he said that Wasyl would not walk again, there is no point in praying), the villagers are superstitious, they live in humble conditions, they go to their folk doctor and town using peasant wagons. Thus, it can be assumed that the protagonist, by losing his modern identity, approaches a world that is disappearing, i.e., the pre-modern world, and at the same time, facilitates the confrontation of those two parallel socio-cultural realities. Wilczur's and Kosiba's Polands meet in the same person. Ultimately modernity wins – the folk doctor is ef-

<sup>16</sup>The described relation is of a different character than the one between count Leszek Czyński and Marysia (or her urban suitors, such as Wojdyła) or the one to which Kosiba is encouraged by Zonia, a widow who lives in the miller Prokop's house, i.e., sexual love. The origin of those two types of love is probably representative of Young Poland, and through this path it resembles Schopenhauer's philosophy. See M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Schopenhauer i chuć* [Schopenhauer and lust], "Teksty" 2(14) 1974, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup>See M. Kochanowski, *Melodramatyzm i powieść*, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup>W. Howarth, *Some Principles of Ecocriticism*, [in:] *The Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Ch. Glotfelty, H. Fromm, University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. 69.

fective because he relies on his medical knowledge, which gradually returns, even if he also prescribes herbs. The trial is also a praise for modern Poland, both in the novel and its adaptations, because the state – modern, fair, passing judgment based on respect for (medical) science and scientific authority – wins. Ultimately, Antoni Kosiba is not punished. To put it simply, the novel and its 1937 adaptation are a literary and film “reportage” describing socio-cultural transformations, the everyday reality of living in pre-war Poland. The 1981 version is a peculiar “summary” of those transformations, which however are not a simple synthesis of the novel and the 1937 adaptation, for obvious reasons.

## Ecocritically

Nowadays, ecocriticism may inspire mistrust in scholars in many situations, for several reasons. First of all, the prefix “eco-” is overused in the world of marketing. For example, advertising clothes or food as “ecological” (which can have many different meanings) may cause disdain for using it and expressions containing it in the area of the humanities or social sciences. Many skeptics believe that ecocriticism is but an intellectual trend which superimposes a new conceptual network on well-established analytical and interpretative academic patterns, without any new cognitive value<sup>19</sup>. This is obviously not the case – it is enough to read academic studies on it<sup>20</sup>.

In the academic discourse there is a nature-natural science distinction<sup>21</sup>, whereas colloquially and in artistic discourses the meaning and references of those notions often overlap, they are used interchangeably and intuitively. I will continue to use those two notions as synonymous, in order not to deviate from the cognitive bases accompanying Dołęga-Mostowicz and the directors of the two adaptations. Many scholars stress that we are stuck in the nature-culture opposition<sup>22</sup>, as if we wanted to continue to think and act dichotomously, as if we could not look at living, passing, and dying biodiversity as a whole, of which man is just one element.

In literature studies ecocriticism has been employed not only to describe what refers to the natural environment today, but also to study earlier manifestations of (to put it very simply) ecological awareness. The growing amount of academic literature on the topic is huge, but also simply significant. This applies to foreign research, starting from the somewhat seminal volume edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader. Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, as well as Polish works, such as Julia Fiedorczuk’s *Cyborg w ogrodzie. Wprowadzenie do*

<sup>19</sup>In ecocritical studies, many scholars cannot free themselves from initiating world-view and political contexts, provoking and reinforcing many simplifications and stereotypes, such as that leftist scholars are supposed to be associated with a reflection focused on the man-nature relation, whereas conservative scholars – even if they accept this dichotomy – consider man superior to everything non-human. The present paper presents only a small part of the author’s research, for whom academic reflection is treated as unconditionally primary in terms of political or market expectations.

<sup>20</sup>Rich academic literature on this topic reflects the diversity of issues discussed within it. See A. J. Ivakhiv, *The Anthropogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema*, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup>For semantic relations between the two terms see, among others, A. Barcz, *Realizm ekologiczny. Od ekokrytyki do zookrytyki w literaturze polskiej*, Katowice 2016.

<sup>22</sup>W. Howarth, *Some Principles of Ecocriticism*, p. 69.

*ekokrytyki*<sup>23</sup> [Cyborg in the garden. Introduction to ecocriticism] or Anna Barcz *Realizm ekologiczny. Od ekokrytyki do zookrytyki w literaturze polskiej* [Ecological realism. From ecocriticism to zoocriticism in the Polish literature]. If we assume that the number of academic publications and the concern that one may leave out some work by an important scholar prove that a discipline is “maturing”, then ecocritical theories had matured even before they made themselves at home in humanistic and social discourses<sup>24</sup>. Ecocriticism has a short history in film studies: it represents the tradition of academic work on the man-nature relationship in cinema in different countries, so-called national cinema, and European comparative studies in film cultures. Pietari Kääpä claims that ecocritical reflection was already recognized in film studies when David Ingram published *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* in 2004 (which, by the way, is the same year when Greg Garrard published *Ecocriticism*), and Pat Brereton – *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology and Contemporary American Cinema* in 2005<sup>25</sup>. The monograph *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* is another important book on the topic. In Poland, there have not been many works on ecocriticism in cinema: only individual papers<sup>26</sup>, thematic magazine issues<sup>27</sup> and monographs.

The variety of references and contexts shows that ecocriticism is not a fashion, a manifestation of political sympathies, or an attempt at colonizing some domain in science in order to establish one’s academic status – it is a cognitive and ethical necessity. Apart from everything that has been written on ecocriticism as a research approach, bearing in mind complementary research in ecological humanities or posthumanism, ecocriticism stems from an apocalyptically “motivated” awareness of the inevitability of changes influencing life in the biological sense, caused mostly by man<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, in literature or film, ecocriticism refers to an analysis and interpretation of those representations which illustrate the man-nature relationship (e.g., *Plakat z drewna* [Wooden poster] 1961; *Wieża. Jasny dzień* [Tower. A bright day], 2017; *Pokot* [Game count], 2017), as well as those texts of culture in which such accounts are a background for events, their frame, or context (e.g., *Struktura kryształu* [Structure of crystal], 1969), although in this perspective it is significant to extract the meaning of nature as a reality constituting the represented world or its elements. The ecocritical research practice that I am proposing refers to relations between people and their natural environment, and ways of presenting such relationships in texts of culture, including Dołęga-Mostowicz’s novel and its two adaptations. Below I shall analyze only one fragment of the 1937 adaptation.

<sup>23</sup>J. Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie. Wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki*, Gdańsk 2015.

<sup>24</sup>No 2. of “Teksty Drugie” (2018): *Ekokrytyka* [Ecocriticism].

<sup>25</sup>P. Kääpä, *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas. From Nation-building to Ecocosmopolitanism*, London 2014, pp. 3-5.

<sup>26</sup>M. Podsiadło, *Ekokrytyczny trójgłos w kinie polskich reżyserów filmowych* [Ecocritical three-voice in the cinema of Polish female directors], “Pleograf. Kwartalnik Akademii Polskiego Filmu”, No 3/201: <https://akademiapolskiegofilmu.pl/pl/historia-polskiego-filmu/pleograf/polskie-kino-kobiet/18/ekokrytyczny-trojglos-w-kinie-polskich-rezyserow-filmowych/691> (20.11.2020).

<sup>27</sup>Thematic issue of “Ekrany” Magazine, *Ekokino* [Ecocinema]: “Ekrany”, 2(54) 2020.

<sup>28</sup>I use “apocalyptically” in order to highlight not only visions of the end of life on Earth in the form we know as humans, but also to stress that modernity in the form of technology, instrumental treatment of science, and vulgar reduction of biodiversity has led to situations whose consequences are impossible to predict. I have an impression that ecocriticism is thus also an attempt at understanding reasons which set in motion events in complex, multi-vector cause-and-effect orders, an attempt based on reading texts of culture which store images and knowledge on this topic.



I would like to stress that the fragment I selected illustrates nature in a conventional way, which nonetheless can be interpreted in a new theoretical context, thus going beyond the traditional opposition of subject (implicitly: man) and object (implicitly: thing, animal, plant). In the 1937 adaptation nature is shown as actual trees or reeds. Its references to man serve the role of metaphor illustrating Wasyl's suffering. It should be noted here that in the analyzed sequence the juxtaposition of nature and man was supposed to evoke certain emotions in viewers. Simple dramaturgic devices were calculated to result in a box office success; Waszyński relied on well-established schemes, typical for melodrama<sup>29</sup>.

Thus nature, as a biomorphic subject, is not something "good" because it imitates man, is subjected to man, serves man, or resembles man (hence nature's picture is released from sentimentalism which instrumentalizes it in the represented world). What inspires ecocritical reflection in the discussed fragment is the presentation of the world of nature, living, dynamic, diverse, "taking over" man's suffering, which is why montage consisting of frames of nature and subsequent stages of Wasyl's painful surgery, is so significant. Dynamic images show natural phenomena and plants at the same time and place as viewers could experience them themselves<sup>30</sup>. As a biomorphic subject, nature thus includes man and his life, "absorbing" them in its ontology and existence.

The subject perspective goes beyond traditionally aesthetic images of nature treated as "decorations" of man's life. Nature does not approach man – man approaches nature, as if he wanted to imitate it again. The subject vector goes in two ways: from man to nature, and from nature to man, where direction implies the supremacy of one order over the other; in the first scenario, nature is superior to man, and in the second vice versa. However, subordination is not crucial; it is continuity allowing to make man aware (at least to some extent) that he is a part of a living whole, he depends on it – he is dependent in a continuous way, not nature shown in the form of specific images. I do not claim that the analyzed fragment made man realize that he is in fact part of nature; this was not the goal of the film's creators, although the montage, music, and frames showing actual images of nature can be treated as elements which – to some extent – release the dramaturgy from the anthropocentric perspective and highlight the co-dependency of man and nature.

## Two vectors

In my analysis and interpretation, I will show that the introduction of a realistic representation of nature to the film initiates contexts which are complementary for the anthropocentric perspective, dominating the contemporary culture. At the same time, I assume – although this hypothesis requires complex, intermedia (literary and film) studies – that we can look for the sources of ecocritical sensitivity in cinema based on Polish literature (and in our case – popular literature) in Young Poland presentations of the man-nature relationship.

<sup>29</sup>A. Madej, *Mitologie i konwencje. O polskim kinie fabularnym dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [Mythologies and conventions. On Polish feature cinema of the interwar period], Kraków 1994.

<sup>30</sup>Por. A. J. Ivakhiv, *The Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema*, pp. 118-119.



I propose to consider the analyzed fragment from my original perspective of **a two-vector ecocritical concept of referring film fiction to non-film reality**. In terms of the proposed concept, the introduction of frames that present actual images of nature to the fictional world of the film initiates a double perception of the same signs which are functionalized in two ways. The first vector, **aesthetic-expressive**, allows one to look at what is real from the fictional perspective. In this approach the presentation of nature is treated as an element which completes man's fate in a metaphorically charged way. This perspective is anthropologically dominated, it treats nature in an instrumental way, as a decoration, "ornament", axiological resource. The second vector, **cognitive**, allows one to reverse the dependencies. From the perspective of the genuine representation of nature, semiotically and symbolically introduced to the context of film in an obvious way, in stylistic brackets – in the case of the 1937 film modeled by dynamic montage, visual elements of storm created by the filmmakers, and audio – we look critically at the man-nature relationship, in which we gradually set ourselves free from the anthropocentric perspective, noticing the geomorphic and biomorphic perspective as at least parallel to it. We learn about the order of fiction from the perspective of real references to life, which is as significant, even if it is not human. The second vector points to man's metonymic belonging to nature, of which he is part. Such an approach permits an analysis in the context of interpretations which so far have not functioned, and which are useful for realizing that film – similar to literature – has a huge potential of ecologically significant intuitions, ideas, and contents. I do not assume in advance in terms of my two-vector ecocritical concept that what I call intuitions, images and contents can be unambiguously diachronically reconstructed, constructing a "linear" history of ecocritically "engaged"<sup>31</sup> Polish cinema: "engaged" in brackets so as to show that with this type of research approach there is a real risk of overinterpreting a film that was made long before the development and spread of modern ecocritical theories. I am writing about intuitions in this context in order to show that in different fragments of the film a way of imaging appears, which can be interpreted traditionally, bearing in mind existing film studies theories – but they can also be analyzed by using new critical references.

**Analysis:** After Kosiba and Prokop's prayer (the anthropomorphic machine is turned on) first, short frames of nature appear: reed, grass, dead tree, dark clouds (here the biomorphic machine is turned on). The camera is set on the window of Kosiba's chamber, the lens moves towards the doctor, stops at him. A short, dynamic cut with a one-second frame showing lightning. Cut, followed by Kosiba preparing tools and a rope which he will later use to bind Wasyl. Cut, another one-second frame of lightning. Light on the patient's body indicates that there is a thunderstorm going on outside. Cut. Another one-second frame of lightning. The whole chamber is filled with sudden flashes of light, probably from lightning. Cut, another frame showing the cloudy sky and lightning. Cut, followed by a frame showing the folk doctor about to start the surgery. Close-up showing Wasyl's face twisted with pain. Cut. Frame showing a windblown tree against the background of the cloudy sky. Beads of sweat on Wasyl's face. Cut. Prokop is praying for his son's recovery. Cut. Kosiba, focused on his task, and Wasyl, who

<sup>31</sup>I put this word in inverted commas in order to show that at the present stage of the research we are witnessing possible, ecocritical analyses and interpretations of films made when ecocriticism did not function in the mainstream of critical discourse – and if it did, it was in a form modeled by different normative systems compared to the present day.

loses consciousness because of pain. Blurred image suggesting loss of consciousness. Cut. Prokop is still praying; the camera moves from him to a picture of Jesus. Another cut – landscape with heavy clouds, which are slowly blown away revealing the sun. Cut. A reflection of trees in water gives an illusion that they are upside down. During such a major trial as the surgery performed by Kosiba, almost the whole natural order is reversed. Another cut, combined with an image of a tree, this time shown normally. Cut. Sun is peeking through clouds. Cut. The camera shows the window in Kosiba's chamber, light is pouring through it. The camera leads viewers to two characters: Kosiba and Prokop standing over Wasyl. We can deduce that the surgery was a success, order emerges from chaos again, it is light. The montage is based on the dynamics “produced” by the geomorphic machine, as if the distinction into what is happening here (Kosiba's chamber) and there (outside the window) determines the topography of suffering in which it is possible to distinguish two significant “elements”: Wasyl and nature.

“Borrowing”<sup>32</sup> the real world for the film is interesting – especially that most scenes where nature as the background were registered in an arranged film studio. The dynamic montage in the analyzed sequence highlights the relationship between Wasyl the peasant and nature, based on coexistence, mutual influence, growing into each other, and hence transgressing the pragmatic usage of nature by Wasyl, and doubtlessly – a far deeper insight into this coexistence than the naïve perspective that a peasant, i.e., a simple man, is closer to nature than the modern man. The analyzed sequence, which focuses on and thus highlights the relationship between nature and man, “pre-depicts”<sup>33</sup> the key rule of ecocriticism: *Everything is connected to everything else*.<sup>34</sup> This is how parity and co-significance of life in all its diversity is highlighted. The two-vector ecocritical concept allows one to see this life-giving unity in diversity. I propose to interpret the 1937 film ecocritically in order to extract the man-nature relationship, as well as to look at this relationship from a cognitive perspective representing a way of presenting nature that transgresses contemporary film conventions.

By analogy to Anna Barcz's considerations<sup>35</sup> that regard Polish literature and its ecological contexts one may ask what the relationship between film and nature is about, and what it can mean in ecocritical film studies. I think that film – a picture consisting of movement and sound – is especially “predisposed” for presenting the man-nature relationship precisely because it allows one to present life in all of its complexity, dynamics and change, and in time whose experience makes perceiving this relationship and its consequences real.

Writing that films move us and we move in them, Ivakhiv indicates that they influence the understanding of the man-nature relationship<sup>36</sup>. Change and movement determine shared ontology in those relationships, due to which the represented can become the experienced.

<sup>32</sup>Inspired by A. Barcz, *Realizm ekologiczny. Od ekokrytyki do zookrytyki w literaturze polskiej*, Katowice 2016, p. 122ff.

<sup>33</sup>I propose to use the prefix “pre” in order to highlight that film can be interpreted ecocritically, taking into account the chronology of the discipline, which developed almost 60 years after the film was made.

<sup>34</sup>W. Howarth, *Some Principles of Ecocriticism*, p. 69.

<sup>35</sup>A. Barcz, *Realizm ekologiczny*, p. 122.

<sup>36</sup>A. J. Ivakhiv, *The Anthropiogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema*, pp. 121-123.

Using frames recorded outside a film studio, in nature, obviously serves aesthetic-expressive functions: it is an example of an elaborate, audiovisual metaphor which serves to illustrate the internal state of a character who is suffering due to a painful surgery (breaking legs and setting them again). Anxiety and vehemence illustrated in subsequent frames showing nature, heavy clouds, windblown trees, and trees reflected in water connote the uncertainty, fear, and pain Wasyl experiences. Emotions presented in this way are probably supposed to be experienced also by viewers. When the surgery is about to end, the clouds are blown away, the upside-down image of trees is reversed back to normal, the sun is shining again – nature calms down, everything returns to its original order, which is probably supposed to symbolize the success of Wasyl's surgery.

Introducing a real, even partially distorted image of nature shifts viewers' attention from a suffering man to the living presence of nature and the "co-experiencing" of his suffering. On this level, film, as the biomorphic machine, presents life, movement, change inscribed in the image of nature which is looked at and which allows us to see life and its rhythm based on the transition from darkness to light, from storm to silence. It echoes Young Poland's approach to the man-nature relationship but reshapes this aesthetic "origin"; viewers suddenly look at "real" images of nature, at its sympathetic, i.e., unhidden (Greek *a-lethos*) face – and in this sense real or becoming real via fiction, and hence cognitively functionalized (rather than just presenting nature in an aesthetic way). In the latter case we are dealing with a syntagmatic, horizontal contiguity of man and nature. A metonymic way of illustrating the dependence which makes fiction real and universalizes non-film reality according to the common truth that man is part of nature is seen in this contiguity.

If I introduced the category of "compassion" in terms of ecocritical film studies, I could say that anxiety and suffering are experienced by living organisms, by nature in all its complexity, including by man as part of it. In order not to be accused of overinterpretation, I would like to highlight that this veristically charged image of nature, achieved through montage, requires more research in reference to other films, made both before and after World War 2.

The syntagmatic contiguity that presents the connection between man and nature is reinforced by an image which allows communication other than logocentric: suffering and anxiety "speak" in images, nature and man are seen as images by viewers, their ontology is determined by an audio-visual code. This juxtaposition of two shots: aesthetic and cognitive, metaphorical with metonymic, inspires critical reflection. A suffering man is someone who is closer to nature thanks to that suffering; when sick, man experiences things out of his control. The folk doctor is the middleman between these two orders, but even his actions have their limitations. Kosiba says that sleep and time are needed in order for the patient to get better. Man is defenseless in the face of nature – he does not dominate in relation to nature, he is part of it. It is no coincidence that images of nature include reed, which – at least for Pascal – symbolizes the fragility of human existence. Introducing images of trees, reeds, sky, water to the human world using montage connects Wasyl's body as an individual with compassionate nature, returning Wasyl to nature.

The metonymic contiguity of man and nature is obviously present also elsewhere in the film. Prof. Wilczur compares his life to an uprooted tree; Beata's beloved, Janek, a forester (in the

novel he works as a forester, but the 1981 adaptation does not mention it) who clears a forest and oversees tree-cutting, dies crushed by a tree (in the novel, he dies from tuberculosis). Those differences highlight the peculiar, ecocritical (to use modern language) way of thinking about the relationship between man and nature. The 1937 film is a cognitively intriguing “exception”. Using shots of real nature highlights the real relationship between man and nature, via the peculiar medium of sickness.

## Conclusion

The proposed reflection allows one to look at a film which is important from an historical perspective as a potential source of ecocentric (and thus new) interpretations. The presented study is the first in a series; my aim is to reconstruct and extend various audiovisual variants illustrating the man-nature relationship. I assume that this will enable the creation of diachronic models for describing transformations in man-nature relationships in Polish cinema.

In the ecocritical perspective nature is important not as a motif, figure, topos, or aesthetic “tool”, but as reality which man is part of. The ecocritical reflection highlights man-nature relationships, as well as reorganizes the represented world and determines the need for a new theoretical approach; extracting nature – diachronically and synchronically – in cinema will influence the critical analysis of traditional poetics and change of research perspectives<sup>37</sup>. This is necessary if we want to understand when – more or less – film started to “consciously” demand nature, and when it reflected only a purely instrumental and reductionist approach towards it. In the context of the proposed research perspective including literary texts and other media constituting images about life in all its complexity, life whose existence is not indisputable, will be obvious.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>37</sup>See A. J. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of The Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*, pp. 13-14.

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# KEYWORDS

*nature*

m o d e r n i t y

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper discusses a 1937 film directed by Michał Waszyński, also considering the novel written by Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicza which became the source of the screenplay, and the second adaptation of this novel directed by Jerzy Hoffman in 1981. The paper focuses on the interpretation of the film directed by Waszyński in the context of the relations between man and nature which was original and – in some way – went beyond the melodramatic convention. The film is interpreted in the context of the strong tension between traditional Poland and modern Poland, between fiction and reality.

*film adaptation*

LITERATURE

**fiction**

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# Who Believes in Vodyanoy's Today? Ecological Inspiration in Post-modern Czech Literature (the Case of Miloš Urban)

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Thou who has not created, process. Admire.<sup>1</sup>

In a survey conducted by Anna Dosoudilová (for the purposes of her M.A. thesis on so-called “green literature” canon<sup>2</sup>) the respondents, answering a question concerning the most important works representing ecological literature in Czech and world literature, listed *Hastrman* (2001) by Miloš Urban in first place. The novel reveals its principles immediately in the subtitle, *Zelený román* [A green novel]. These principles, fully confirmed in *intentio operis*, also find their justification in self-directed and metaliterary comments by the author:

*Hastrman* is a modern variation of a fairy tale and myth. The state of the Czech landscape devastated me, especially the North, the Česká Lipa area, where I feel at home. [...] In my opinion, over-exploitation should have been stopped already in 1990. However, it was not – stone was still mined from the mountains surrounding Bezděz [a hill and a castle in the Ralskie foothills in Northern

<sup>1</sup> Miloš Urban, *Hastrman. Zelený román* (Praha: Argo, 2001), p. 383. [“Kdo jsi nestvořil, nepřetvářej. Obdivuj.”] Translations into Polish by A. G. Translations into English by P.Z.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Dosoudilová, *Kánon zelené literatury. Co a jak čtou “pestří a zelení”?* Diplomová práce, FFUK, Praha 2013. <https://is.cuni.cz/webapps/zzp/detail/134158?lang=en> (date of access: 23. 02. 2021).

Czechia – A.G.], and Tlustec gained notoriety in the media back then. We were passing through that ragged region with my brother. I pointed to some excavator and said, “I would blow it up”. And he said “So why the fuck won’t you? Because you won’t, I believe? All you can do is talk.” He was really irritated by my empty words and complete lack of action, but actually that was the moment when I decided to do something about owners of quarries in the Northern Czechia; I sent a water emissary (or rather, the Earth), a wet fop with an aristocratic title. I made him a remote-controlled green arrow, which got slightly out of hand and was moving along more complicated trajectories than I had originally planned, but I was really content about his (and hence also my) method of fighting<sup>3</sup>.

Bezděz and quarry on Tlustec, photo by. Jan Hodáč



Urban’s prose is often related to the esoteric thriller convention conceptualized in the spirit of postmodernist play with cultural heritage (as in, for example several novels known in Poland such as *Sedmikostelí. Gotický román z Prahy*; 1999, *Stín katedrály. Božská krimikomedie*; 2003, *Lord mord*; 2008<sup>4</sup>, with which, by the way, *Hastrman* shares a number of genological connections, not only in terms of plot), a number of mysterious, supernatural, macabre motifs, as well as placing the sources of contemporary mystery plots in the (often) distant past. Urban’s “early” texts are also characterized by a clear anti-modern (anti-civilizational) message, which encourages surrounding the presented reality with historical allusions and motivations and addressing (typically) first-person narration comments – emotional, nostalgic, accentuating the transience of the world, which offer a negative diagnosis of modern times using

memorial discourse tools and quasi-essay in-words. An appreciation for “long persistence”, juxtaposed with the ephemerality of technological novelties and solutions that are *a priori* meant to be temporary, and are carelessly introduced without accounting for potential – social and environmental – “side effects”, also encourages subjecting the plot and the construction of the fictional reality to the laws of literary parabolization, as well as portraying protagonists and selecting themes who/which can play the role of depositaries of tradition and are inclined to defend this heritage.

<sup>3</sup> Miloš Urban, “Jak jsem dal spálit parlament“, *Host*, č. 7 (2008): 2. [“Hastrman je moderní variace na pohádku a mýtus. Byl jsem zoufalý ze stavu české krajiny, hlavně té na severu, v okolí České Lípy, kde se cítím být doma. [...] U nás se ale toto drancování podle mého názoru mělo zastavit už v roce 1990. Nestalo se — kopce v dohledu Bezdězu se těžily dál, smutnou mediální hvězdou byl tehdy Tlustec. Projížděl jsem s bráchou tou pocuchanou krajinou, ukázal na jakési rypadlo a řekl jsem: «Já bych pod něj strčil bombu.» A on na to: «Tak proč to kurva neuděláš? A ty to neuděláš, víd? Dokážeš jenom žvanit.» Skutečně se na mě za plané řeči a nulovou akci zlobil, a já se právě tehdy a tam rozhodl, že si to s těžaři kopců v severních Čechách vyřídím — a vyslal jsem proti nim emisara vody (neboli Země), navhlého frajírka se šlechtickým titulem. Byla to taková mnou dálkově ovládaná zelená střela, která se trochu vymkla kontrole a litala mnohem složitějšími cestami, než jsem původně chtěl, ale já byl s jejím (a tím pádem i svým) bojem velmi spokojen”].

<sup>4</sup> Polish editions: *Kłątwa siedmiu kościołów* [The curse of seven churches] (2006); *Cień katedry: boska krymikomedia* [The shadow of a cathedral: a divine crime comedy] (2005); *Lord mord* (2015).

However, the statement quoted above shows that in the case of *Hastrman* the author's intentions take a more concrete and radical form. In the novel about the vodyanoy the creature uses (literally) terrorist techniques of influencing political decisions in order to save the natural (and, by the way, cultural) landscape of Northern Czechia, consistently devastated since the communist era. As a result, the area has been transformed into an industrial (or rather postindustrial) landscape, resembling the apocalyptic visions of ecologists and movies. Urban clearly states that writers have the right (duty?) to speak up in discussions concerning the most burning issues of today's world.



Moreover, that statement was published (thus gaining the status of an editorial) in an issue of "Host" magazine, which – after a decade of "choking on freedom" – resumed a debate concerning dilemmas related to possibilities, conditions and potential threats of literature engaging with the current political or social life. "Postmodernist euphoria", inspired by the 1989 transformation, which initially defined mainstream Czech literature (which experienced more communist ideological censorship than Poland), after some time lost its initial, almost "cosmogonic" and rather neophytic impetus. Early in the new millennium it started to raise doubts – initially minor, but later stated more definitively. Set free from serving its previous roles – imposed not only by official administrative guidelines, but also commonly expected from dissident literature – it started to be read as a capitulation, as recklessly giving away tools for directly impacting reality to competing discourses, such as the media. As early as 2002, Miroslav Balašík (founder and editor in chief of "Host") warned against such escapism, reminding readers that:

Literature, which deprived itself from the opportunity of conveying moral, cognitive, communicative or ideological values [...] simultaneously renounced what naturally belongs to it: influence on cultivating the spiritual soil of society<sup>5</sup>.

Disenchantment with the loss of prestige – a logical consequence of this voluntary "self-imprisonment in the trap of estheticism" (as defined by Balašík in the quoted article) – resulted in an increased interest in economic and political themes, which restored seemingly

<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Balašík, "Literatura a politika. Poznámky k tematě", *Dokořán*, č. 22 (2002): 25. ["Tím, že se literatura marnotratně zbavila možností být nositelkou hodnot morálních, poznávacích, společenských či ideových [...] zřekla se i toho, co jí bytostně přináleží, tedy vlivu na kultivaci duchovního zázemí společnosti"].

unappreciated genres (such as *roman à clef*, but mostly the popular *political fiction*) to the book market governed by commercialist rules<sup>6</sup>.

By publishing *Hastrman*, Miloš Urban restored the so-called engaged literature (perhaps against his wishes), continuing this trend in 2002 with *Paměti poslance parlamentu. Sexyromán* [Diaries of a member of Parliament. Sexynovel], which, however, did not repeat the success of his eco-horror. Crushing reviews and (probably more importantly) little interest among readers inspired (a doubtlessly disenchanted) Urban to consider the agential (or performative) potential of the written word, and to draw pessimistic conclusions in which his disappointment with his own failure is mixed with awareness (shared by analysts of modernity) that literature has (forever?) lost the status of a “conscience arouser” that had formerly been assigned to it (also as a projection of idealized dreams, close to illusory self-deception):

Although in the case of *Hastrman* I naively expected society to change at least a bit thanks to it, when writing I already knew that nothing would happen. The book would be published, someone would read it, and gradually it would be forgotten. However, the ruthless sentence passed by critics surprised me and threw me off balance. [...] I felt hurt and I had an impression that “people did not deserve my novel”. [...] However, as can be clearly seen, the main role was played by: naivety, frustration, and generally speaking negative emotions, rather than by an attempt at becoming engaged and replace journalistic writing. Today I am content that I took this path, but I have no intention of returning to political writing. However, as they say: never say never<sup>7</sup>.

Other authors were interested in political motifs in order to point out issues with the “new reality” and at the same time juxtapose and codify the repertoire of shortcomings, soon exposing the “eternal” character of the mechanisms of power, regardless of the current political system (from manipulating the dominating narratives and discourses, through “inevitable” opportunism and “obligatory” loyalty to the party or acceptance for nepotism and corruption, to secret contacts with the criminal world). Contrary to them, in *Hastrman* Urban employs creative strategies of so-called green literature. By looking for (or rather – trying to develop) a formula that would be effective in stating ecological postulates, he shocked critics – as shown by Pavel Janoušek in one of his ironic reviews written in a semi-dialectal language:

<sup>6</sup> However, it should be noted that such an unambiguous distinction of contradictory phenomena, understood in conditions of a dying debate (postmodernist “selfless playing with conventions” vs. care for the world) does not always need to translate into actual writing practice. As Ryszard Nycz argues: “The specific development of modern literature based on transforming external opposites into internal variation (from «or – or» to «both... and») has led to the assimilation of characteristics of competing literary forms, especially those of engaged and popular literature (...). Moreover, over time this freedom from mass culture, as well as the politicizing or ‘politicality’ of literature turned out to be one of the characters of internal oppositions – all modern literature has evolved through constructing and overcoming them” (Ryszard Nycz, *Poetyka doświadczenia. Teoria – nowoczesność – literatura* [Politics of experience. Theory – modernity – literature], (Warszawa: Instytut badań Literackich PAN, 2012), 303).

<sup>7</sup> Urban, “Jak jsem dal spálit parlament, 2. [Zatímco od Hastrmana jsem tehdy naivně čekal že by mohl alespoň něco málo ve společnosti změnit, u PPP jsem věděl, že se nestane nic. Knížka se vydá, někdo si ji přečte, postupně se na ni zapomene. Kategorický odsudek kritiky mne přesto zaskočil a rozladil (...). Byl jsem uražený a měl jsem dojem, že si ji «lidi nezaslouží». (...). Jak je tedy vidět, v mém případě hrály hlavní roli naivita, frustrace a negativní emoce, nikoli snaha suplovat žurnalistiku a nějak se angažovat. Jsem rád, že jsem si takovou fázi psaní prošel, ale vracet se k politickému psaní nebudu. Ale jak se říká: Nikdy neříkej nikdy...].

So, for you to understand well, if this first part of the book is art-for-art's-sake, which is exciting only for us, experts in literature, the second part shows – as they once used to teach us – that the author has fully understood his social duty of an artist, that is, to be engaged in the struggle for a better future, so that everything is again as it used to be. So, this Urban created a novel out of the latest, burning modernity, and brought an inspiring picture of fighters for our bright, ecological future in it. Most importantly, he showed that although individual terror leads nowhere, if only we could join forces [...] and if only, under wise guidance, each and every one of us liquidated this one barrier, one factory, or at least threw one enemy of ecology out of a window, then we would momentarily have a paradise on earth<sup>8</sup>.

Urban's attempts resulted in a peculiar genre hybrid: a historical novel rooted in the romantic-Bohemian literature from the era of the Czech National Revival (the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) with its predilection for exhibiting ethnographic (and additionally: incorporated into the idyllic-bucolic discourse) – spiritual and material – attributes of the represented, rustic world, with a horror-sensational plot which in fact glorifies this individual terrorism, or at least is inclined towards partially accepting the effectiveness of its arguments (including the argument of force) in the discussion of the proper ways to fight processes that lead towards degradation of the natural environment.

Although genological eclecticism designed in this way, additionally enriched by a number of intertextual echoes and references, highlights the artificial and conventional character of the literary representation of reality, it does not weaken the “interventional” character of the novel. In other words, by entertaining readers and himself (with conventions), the author teaches and instructs readers (in a slightly traditional way): on the one hand, by providing readers with refined intellectual entertainment and forcing them to decipher various cultural references and allusions, and on the other – by concentrating their attention on one of the crucial, burning (as put by Janoušek) issues of post-transformational everyday life. Urban makes ecological crisis the subject of this entertaining education. This crisis has affected the sub-Sudetic area to an unprecedented extent – even for exceptionally industrialized Europe – leading to the destruction of the rustic landscape. This landscape had been shaped for centuries with respect to the symbiotic coexistence of man and nature – nature being respected religiously, with ancient belief in the supernatural representing its different aspects mixed with life-giving pragmatism and practical knowledge that allows one to wisely take advantage of the resources that nature shares with us:

Change what was once given, intervene in what has always been here – it is acceptable only on one condition: providing we create a better masterpiece for celebrating the one or those who constructed mountains or filled lakes in the landscape, a masterpiece for sacrifices for new builders<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Pavel Janoušek, *Hravé a dravé. Kritikova abeceda* (Praha: Academia, 2009), 276). [“Tož abyste tomu pochopili, jestli ta prvá část tej Zelené knihy je jen takovým uměním pro umění, co z něho můžeme mít rajc jen my, literární fajšmekři, ta druhá už ukazuje, jak kdysi říkali na školení, že si autor plně uvědomil společenskú povinnost umělca se angažovat v boji o pokrok, tedy za to, aby tady zase všecko bylo, jak bylo kdysi dávno. Ten Urban tak stvořil společenský román z naší žhovej současnosti a přinesl v něm inspirativní obraz bojovníků za našu šťastnú ekologickou budúcnost. Důležité přitom je, že ukázal, že individuální teror sice nikam nevede, ale kdybysme se vši spojili [...] pod múdrým vedením každý odstranili jen jednu přehradu, jednu továrnu nebo jen jediného nepřátela ekologie vyhodili oknem, za chvíli tu máme úplný ráj”].

<sup>9</sup> Urban, *Hastrman*, 243. [“Měnit jednou dané, zasahovat do toho, co tu vždycky bylo, je dovoleno pod jednou podmínkou: že stvoříme dílo lepší, určené k uctění toho či těch, kdo stavěli v krajině hory a napouštěli jezera; dílo prostřené k oběti těmto stavitelům”].

Those words are uttered by the narrator (and protagonist) of the novel, who is simultaneously deeply rooted in the Czech cultural discourse (not just folklore), present in it at least since the National Revival, and surrounded by established meaning and concrete notions. What is interesting for us, and crucial for Urban's concept of the protagonist, is that those notions are not related to an unambiguous axiological definition, obligatory in the case of other deities and demons from the Slavonic pantheon. In other words, using Pavel Šidák's remarks, vodyanoy "can be presented as bad and good. Sometimes even his portrait refers to the idyllic imaginarium, oftentimes also ethical evaluation does not apply to him"<sup>10</sup>. The Nietzschean location "beyond good and evil", motivated – according to Šidák – by peculiar, ambivalent relations between this figure and Christianity, consequently, locates it on the borderline of anthroposphere, making it an ontologically dual being (demon- or animal-human), with attributes belonging to (characteristic for) different, seemingly contradictory registers of reality<sup>11</sup>. On the one hand, such an "internal contradiction" corresponds to postulates of ecocriticism (clearly *Hastrman's* interpretative framework), which – according to Anna Barcz – "is mostly interested in how nature has been deprived of its voice"<sup>12</sup>. The antropomorphization of vodyanoy gives this definitely influential voice back to the protagonist. On the other hand, the animalistic (literally – fish) aspect of his identity allows the author to give agency to the natural world (in the spirit of Kenneth White)<sup>13</sup>. Urban takes advantage of this hybrid character, as well as of the belief in the existence of vodyanoy, exceptionally deeply rooted in folk awareness (as stressed by Šidák)<sup>14</sup>, not only in terms of his narrator's "personality outline", but also of supernatural powers and abilities, which allow him to commit numerous crimes almost with impunity. These crimes are partially excused by the nature of the protagonist, and partially – understandable in the face of the challenges he is faced with – by the author:

<sup>10</sup>Pavel Šidák, *Mokře chodí v suše. Vodník v české literatuře* (Praha: Academia, 2018), 63. ["Je představován jako zlý i jako hodný, dokonce idylický, někdy stojí mimo etické hodnocení"].

<sup>11</sup>Elsewhere the scholar concludes his considerations regarding vodyanoy's ontological status in (post)modernist texts: the basic thesis can be formulated in the following way: as the animalistic character of vodyanoy (associated with water) shows, we should call man everything that does not belong to nature (animal) [...] He lives among animals and considers himself one. Vodyanoy presented in such a way becomes a narrative dominant in stories which exhibit the antithetical dimension of the relation between man and nature. [...] According to the traditional valuation, man is superior to it – but this valuation can be reversed. Such an axiological inversion is characteristic for an ecological conceptualization of vodyanoy's motives, in which the thesis according to which man is beyond nature is radically redefined: man does not exist beyond nature. We are talking about narratives in which the opposition man-antinature, nature destroyed, a technologized world is sometimes accentuated, and which conceptualize the figure of vodyanoy differently than in folklore [and hence – differently than Urban; A. G.], consequently juxtaposing man with non-nature (i.e. separating chaos from cosmos known from religious studies, for example). However, there is also an opposite, "integrative" approach. Resignation from attempts at defining the line for what is human comes to the fore, visible already in the symbolic way of presenting vodyanoy [...] with its dream about flowing down with the elements, water, entirety" (Pavel Šidák, "Člověk mezi zvířetem a démonem, lidským a ne-lidským. Jedna interpretace tématu vodníka v české literatuře", w *Polidštěné zvíře. Kapitoly ke středoevropskému myšlení o literatuře*. Edited by przez Jiří Hrabal (Olomouc: Vydavatelství Filozofické fakulty Univerzity Palackého v Olomouci, 2017), 53-54, 55. ["Základní tezi lze pravděpodobně formulovat takto: člověk je to, co není příroda (zvíře), jak ukazuje animistický vodník totožný se živlem, [...]. Je zakotven mezi zvířaty [...] a sám se do zvířat mění. Tento vodník je jádrem příběhů, jež akcentují opozici člověk-příroda. Podle běžného pojetí je člověk hodnocen výše než příroda ale může být i opačně. [...] Samozřejmě je tato axiologie výrazná u ekologického pojetí vodnické látky, která tezi, že člověk je to, co není příroda, radikálně redefiniuje: člověk je to, co není mimo přírodu. Jde tu o příběhy, v nichž se akcentuje opozice člověk versus ne-příroda, zničená příroda, technicistní svět a jejichž pojetí je přirozené opozitní pojetí folklornímu, které důsledně zůstává na pozici oddělování člověka a ne-lidské přírody (jde o oddělování Chaosu a Kosmu známé např. z religionistiky). [...] Nalezneme ovšem i zcela protichůdné pojetí – nazvěme je třeba integrační [...]. Jde o rezignaci na snahu vymezit a ohlídat hranice lidského, předznačenou již vodnickými látkami symbolismu [...] s jejich touhou po splynutí s živlem, vodou, celkem"].

<sup>12</sup>Anna Barcz, *Realizm ekologiczny. Od ekokrytyki do zookrytyki w literaturze polskiej* (Katowice: Śląsk, 2016), 38.

<sup>13</sup>According to Anna Barcz, this world is not "a passive recipient of human actions and projections, but an active agent, co-creating and processing the human culture and society" (Barcz, 38-39).

<sup>14</sup>See Šidák, *Mokře chodí v suše*, 59-63.



Johan Salmon de Caus [...] found himself in the role of a philanthropist and he is more and more forgetting who he was born to be and whom he has to remain until the end of his days. People can be people, but he should be a warning and terror for them. For if he loses this role, they will become terrors, and their fingers will not warn – instead, they will snatch and rob everything without repentance<sup>15</sup>.

Let us put aside the issue of trendy identity-related dilemmas which invariably accompany the narrator from the beginning of the novel (“Only he was water who told stories about it”<sup>16</sup>), forced to obey the laws of a rural community. We should focus on the question of the type and dimension of the tasks the protagonist, baron Salmon de Caus, is challenged by his mission is to save Mount Vlhošť, transformed into a quarry in the fictional world of the novel, and to restore the natural landscape surrounding it, *de facto* annihilated in the communist era – a system of ponds, functional for hundreds of years, flooded after constructing the Nové mlýny dam on the river Dyje. The landscape which the protagonist wants to protect at any cost – restore, in this case – has little to do with pristine nature. Space transformed and adjusted to human economic needs (in this case: for fishing) as early as the Middle Ages is idealized by Urban, who attributes its organization to his own – vodyanoy’s – ancestors:

I too had ancestors whose name was known by everyone here and which can still be found today, together with a family seal on parchment passed down for generations. It is them who improved once wonderful, but already in their time declining water masterpiece, and set up a system of supporting irrigating reservoirs, stream, spring and atmospheric ponds, and connected eight of them into a body of water unparalleled by any other all around the world. Although this masterpiece was artificial, it respected what nature itself gave: they constructed it in a place where little lakes, ponds and wetlands had existed since time immemorial. The masterpiece shared the place with man and entrusted its riches with him, without taking away the original beauty and destination from the marshy landscape<sup>17</sup>.

The rule “first, do not destroy” of the animalistic (i.e., natural in its provenance) side of “Hastrmanovian” identity finds here its peculiar “correcting completion” corresponding to its human part, not far from the postulates of followers of environmental aesthetics and ethics, which, as Mateusz Salwa reminds us:

<sup>15</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 154–155. [“Johan Salmon de Caus (...) se zhlédl v roli lidumila a čím dál tím víc zapomíná na to, kým se narodil, kým je a kým musí být do posledního dne svého života. Lidé ať jsou lidmi, on ať je jejich postrach, jejich varovný prst. Protože pokud jím nebude, stanou se postrachem oni a jejich prsty už nebudou varovat – budou jen trhat a brát, urvi co urvi.”] See. Šidák, “Člověk mezi zvířetem a demonem”, 55.

<sup>16</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 399. [“Byl jenom voda, kdo příběh vyprávěl”]. Thus it can be safely assumed that the titular protagonist has so-called nomadic agency, about which Rosi Braidotti writes: “It is a myth, i.e. political fiction, which allows me to consider the established categories and levels of experience, and to move across them: to blur lines without burning bridges [...]. Political fictions can be more effective here and now than theoretical systems. The choice of an iconoclastic, mythical figure of the nomadic subject is thus against the established and conventional nature of theoretical, and especially philosophical thinking. This figuration explains my wish to study and sanction political action, if we assume that the historical downfall of metaphysically established, fixed identities has been proved. One of the tasks we are dealing with here is to find a way to reconcile bias and lack of continuity with constructing new forms of mutual connections and shared political projects” (Rosi Braidotti, “Poprzez nomadyzm” [Via nomadism], translated into Polish by Aleksandra Derra, *Teksty Drugie*, nr 6 (2007), 111–112).

<sup>17</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 12. [“I já měl předky, jejich jméno tu každý znal a dodnes je lze najít ma listinách, jež po sobě zanechali. To oni zde zvelebili kdysi velkolepé, v jejich době už dávno zpustlé vodní dílo a založili systém podpůrných napájecích nádrží, rybníků potočních, pramenných i nebeských, a osm z nich znovu důmyslně propojili v areál, jenž neměl obdoby na celém světě. Bylo to zajisté dílo umělé, ale ctilo původní východiska daná přírodou: vystavěli je v místě, kde jezírka, tůně a močály bývaly odjakživa. To dílo je zpřístupnilo člověku a propůjčilo mu svůj užitek, aniž by bažinaté krajíně vzalo přirozenou krásu a účel”].

do not need to limit themselves to natural landscape – they may also concern a cultural landscape, in which nature has been subject to significant human activity. *Genius loci* is a commonly used category in this context. The idea of a spirit of a place refers to the unique character of a given area, resulting from its history, ways in which it has been used and inhabited, which gives it specific aesthetic values. In this conceptualization, ethical action is defined as one that respects this character<sup>18</sup>.

As a result, the axiological subsoil of the novel is ruled by a peculiar “melioration ethos” inspired by the theory of ecosystems, which differentiates between desired and harmful ways of taming aquatic matter<sup>19</sup>. The narrator juxtaposes the living water of ponds, which has been growing into natural order for centuries until full naturalization, obedient only to its own laws and “the strong word” of a folk spell, with dead water (leading to desertification of local areas<sup>20</sup>) of the Novy Mlyn lagoon. At the same time, he confronts the lost might of the eternal tongue, which was able to express the rules of cosmic order (the novel contains references to numerous folk texts) with political-legal cliché *newspeak*, deprived of any deeper meanings (“Our activity does not conflict with any act of this state”, the manager of the mining corporation Tytania defends herself<sup>21</sup>). Thanks to the antinomization of worlds, epochs and axiological paradigms designed in such a way, Urban opens a space for textual meanings, which, in the first place, are deeply rooted in a network of references to Slavonic myth and to criticism of Czech politics (which he diagnoses – via the protagonist – to be corrupted and completely indifferent to evidence of the climate crisis):

No state is to be trusted that it will not rip open the land it appropriated. And least of all do I trust this republic, no-com, dense mascaron. To think that it would protect green areas which it claimed like a ruthless usurper is suicidal naivety<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>18</sup>Mateusz Salwa, “Znaczenie estetyki przyrody dla etyki środowiskowej” [Significance of nature aesthetics for environmental ethics] *Etyka*, No 56 (2018), 35. One of the most influential “revivers” of the notion of nature aesthetics, Gernot Böhme, states that modern art points out to nature – showing, reminding, mourning, accusing, warning (Gernot Böhme, *Filozofia i estetyka przyrody w dobie kryzysu środowiska naturalnego* [Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik], translated into Polish by Jarosław Merecki (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2002), 17). Referring to those words (which may be an accurate interpretation of the ecological message of Urban’s novel), Beata Frydryczak stresses that: “The question about the new nature aesthetics does not include the issue of the art-nature relation, but a more essential one: about renewed contact of the modern man with the world of nature. It is accompanied by a belief that aesthetics can contribute to abandoning the strategy of ruling over nature, whose goal is to take advantage of and change the man-nature relations, i.e. create conditions in which this relation will be based on the idea of harmonious co-existence (Beata Frydryczak, “Estetyka przyrody: nowe pojmowanie natury” [Nature aesthetics – new understanding of nature], *Estetyka i Krytyka*, nr 15/16 (2008-2009), 42).

<sup>19</sup>See.: “Let us consider the co-called ecosystems, locally connected organic and inorganic processes, which renew themselves cyclically [...]. It has been known for ages that ecosystems should be understood only as perfect, that on a local and global scale the original state does not regenerate itself without man’s intervention. Hence – more realistically – we talk about man-made ecosystems, or even more modestly: about ecological structures. Maintaining the desired form of nature requires more and more work from man” (Böhme, 149-150).

<sup>20</sup>See: “The decision to construct the dam was motivated by the need to drain the wetland, its legendary marshes and alluvial meadows. It was a success. The dam sucked in all the water; interestingly, it could not pass it on where it was needed. There are shallow sandy trenches in the area today. The wind can be really strong here – they say it is because of the war – and carries the sand all over the area. On the verge of the forest there are drifts, but not snowdrifts. To those with an ominous imagination they resemble Sahara dunes” (Urban, *Hastrman*, 237). [“Důvodem pro stavbu přehrady bylo vysušení věčně vlhkého kraje, jeho pověstných močálů a zaplavových luk. Povedlo se. Přehrada do sebe vsála všechnu vlahu; kupodivu už ji nebyla schopná předat tam, kde ji bylo zapotřebí. V jejím okolí jsou dnes mělké písčité doly. Vítr je tu obzvlášť ostrý, prý od války, a rozfoukává písek po kraji. Na okraji lesu vznikají bílé návěje, ale sníh to není. Tomu, kdo je nadán zlověstnou obrazotvorností, připomínají saharské duny“].

<sup>21</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 259. [“Naše činnost neodporuje žádnému zákonu téhle republiky“].

<sup>22</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 385. [“nedá se věřit žádnému státu, že nerozežere zevnitř zemi, kterou si pro sebe zabral. A nejméně ze všech věřím této republice, zupacké, tupohlavé obludě. Myslet si, že bude ochraňovat zelené území, na které se vrhla a které si zabrala jako sebevražedný uzurpátor, je sebevražedně naivní“].





A literary device, deeply rooted in literary tradition and commonly employed by postmodernists – “authenticating” fantastic events (or at least those which defy commonly understood nature) by situating the fictional plot in a place that is specific, known, and additionally inscribed in a number of cultural associations and connotations – favors a similar indication of engagement. In Urban’s clearly emotional view this device becomes a tool confirming the author’s right to intervene – via his work – in such a way as to achieve real-world results:

What attracted you to a character in a blue-yellow tuxedo, with a pike-like smile and gills? To a fairytale vodyanoy?

Máchův kraj – not the most accurate name – is the region I consider my own. When I was a child, I used to boat on a lake covered in thick, green duckweed. I would imagine there were trees growing under the surface. That there were people resembling fish living there. I was horrified when I later found out that dams were constructed there, which would result in whole villages being flooded; my fairytale vision was actually close to the truth, although far more romantic<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>23</sup>Alice Horáčková, “Urban: Jen počkejte, ztrestám vás svým románem!” [https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/vytvarne-umeni/urban-jen-pockejte-ztrestam-vas-svym-romanem.A010515\\_175240\\_vytvarneum\\_cfa](https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/vytvarne-umeni/urban-jen-pockejte-ztrestam-vas-svym-romanem.A010515_175240_vytvarneum_cfa) (dostup: 22. 03. 2021). [“Co vás přivedlo k postavě v modrozlutém fráčku, se štičím úsměvem a žábami? K hastrmanovi z pohádky? Kraj, který považuju za svůj a kterému se trapně říká Máchův. Jako dítě jsem jezdil na lodičce po jezeře pokrytém hustým zeleným žabincem. Představoval jsem si, že pod hladinou rostou stromy. Že tam žijí lidé, kteří se podobají rybám. S děsivým pocitem jsem se dozvěděl až mnohem později, že se napouštějí přehrady a na jejich dně zůstávají celé vesnice. Že ta moje pohádková představa byla vlastně docela reálná – i když romantičtější”].

Novomlynská dam, photo by Jan Hodáč



Hence the plot is founded on a fairytale product of imagination that resembles childhood memories. This allows him to revive the now slightly forgotten, but once canonical and opinion-forming, nineteenth-century tradition of the “ethnographic novel”, in a natural and obvious way (within Czech culture). This type of novel subjects chains of presented events to descriptions of folk rituals and habits and references to linguistic folk. Urban takes over from the ethnographic novel not only in terms of themes and compositions (“picture of everyday and holiday life of rural communities and the changing seasons”), but also a conglomerate of beliefs typical for the identity model of the National Revival, discovering (as

utopian projections, romantic dreams) signs of indigenusness, authenticity and naturalness free from any civilizational intrusions in rural culture<sup>24</sup>. Those beliefs, translated into the environment portrayed in literature, lead to its peculiar mythologization based on respecting the reliability of beliefs functioning within it that define the functional essence of the universe (ethically and ontologically). In other words, writers who are trying to show the rural mentality from the inside take the real presence of various personified natural forces at face value (of course within literary fiction), transferring the reader to a space where the existence of vodyanoy is normal<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup>The creative strategy used by the author seems to stem from considerations which were formulated by Roch Sulima. Considering the contemporary fate of folklore, he came to the conclusion that “Although the whole world of folk culture is almost completely gone, as well as the model – based on solidarity with life – of social culture, once specific among peasants, folk culture remains vivid as social culture. Objects of folk culture are gone, but it is reinforced by a myth feeding on, for example, the values of the folk word [...]. I will repeat most concisely: folk culture is dead. Its myth is alive, reinforced – among others – by ecologism, which today functions almost like historiosophy. This culture is present in symbols, reminders, allusions, it is part of our unconsciousness, an obligation to the world of values. [...] At the same time it cherishes the role of non-aggressive «sacrificial culture». It is a symbolic expression of the indestructible will to live. At the same time, it is also familiar with fatalism, a sense of the world coming to an end. The vitality of that culture is next to the peculiar philosophy of dying with dignity. There is a culture of life as much as there is a culture of death, i.e. «perishing» understood as the beginning of future life” (Roch Sulima, *Głosy tradycji* [Voice of tradition], (Warszawa: DiG, 2001), 102-103).

<sup>25</sup>Codifiers of determinants of the ecological humanities (Ewa Domańska is one Polish example) often employ the so-called *tribal science* in their considerations. Trying to rehabilitate it (oftentimes surprisingly decisively), they propose a reconstruction of the whole paradigm of academic science. According to Domańska, for example: “It is hardly surprising that non-European autochthons – for how should we write within the framework of a rational discipline about the past of cultures which treat gods, spirits, ancestors, animals, plants, and objects as historical figures? If scholars claim to be open to various approaches to the past, and universities have equal treatment of representatives of different races, ethnicities, and cultures in their statutes, than ‘is there any reason to maintain the epistemic privileged treatment of modern historiography, and to see it as more important than the myth, legend, or dream itself?’” (Ewa Domańska, “Wiedza o przeszłości – perspektywy na przyszłość” [Knowledge of the past – perspectives for the future], *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, No 2 (2013), 227. Quotation: Sanjay Seth, “Historiography and Non-Western Pasts”, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 11, nr 2 (2008), 144). See also: Ewa Domańska, “Humanistyka ekologiczna”, *Teksty Drugie*, No 1-2 (2013), 22-26.

The first part of *Hastrman* employs the same *licentia poetica*. Its plot tells the story of the protagonist's stay in a sub-Sudetic residence in the 1830s, evoking the atmosphere of the "lost world" of the Czech countryside. It is presented in the spirit of Rousseau's sentimental vision of authentic and proper existence: authentic and proper because obeys the laws of nature – although this thesis should be treated with caution (especially regarding the drastic and "sexualized" imaging<sup>26</sup>). Such a vision is close to Enlightenment ideas, as thanks to it a chance for seeking legitimization for one's own emancipatory, national aspirations appears in the most prestigious philosophical trends of that time. It encouraged both the employment of Arcadian conventions and the reinforcement of the impact of imagological mechanisms based on a broadly understood mythologization of what corresponds with the "ruling" rustic discourse. Urban employs basic components of such a discourse, modifying the meanings and values associated with it only to some extent. He incorporates signs of polemics with the original axiological stratification of the genre in the model of the ethnographic novel, corrected in the nineteenth-century realizations by the mitigating filter of the Biiedermeier ethos. This leads to a radical confrontation of three worldviews, fully harmonized in this model: Christianity, rationalism, and pagan beliefs, with which the peasant community, cultivating primeval magic rituals, persist. It is in this community's (only seemingly) anachronistic consciousness where the protagonist finds ontological support; only this community is able to accept his right to be inside what is possible, probable, and real. Representatives of other ideological orientations either deny it (Voves the teacher), or place it in the infernal-demonic space, because all they see in folk rituals are remnants of archaic cults, which should be unconditionally and consistently eradicated (Fidelius the priest, whose name is significant due to its clear Christian reference):

I assure you, that I was surprised with the ways of my subjects more than you were, father. I, however, contrary to you, understood how perfectly those people understand the land their lives depend on. Although admittedly you can give them a bit more than that, as – say – a missionary, you cannot take away from them what they had before you. How can you know who will succeed you? [...] And what if it is someone who will bring completely different teaching from yours? [...] I am telling you, if you completely detach them from their roots, which hold them, roots they

<sup>26</sup>Scholars often stress the specific, "prudish" way (characteristic for nineteenth-century students of folk) of reading (and, as a result, correcting) folk texts, which acts as a form of (self-)censorship, and leads to "cleaning" the collected and later published songs or tales off vulgar words, as well as any clearly erotic contents, which are a petty bourgeoisie taboo (see Jiří Rak, *Bývali Čechové. České historické mýty a stereotypy*, (Jinočany: Nakladatelství H&H, 1994), 85-95). Urban clearly rejects this way of making folk "domesticated" or euphemized: "Why did you choose vodyanoy to be your Orlando, Golem, or Frankenstein, who, almost immortal, travels across time so that he can go through with his great plans? [...] Because vodyanoy is a thoroughly sexual creature [...], with water nymphs and vilas they, descendants of the Greek naiads. This sexuality brings him closer to man, and I wanted my narrator to be as human as possible. Except that I had to reconstruct his hierarchy of values, and to present the struggle for animality and civilization differently than the 20<sup>th</sup> century art did (Irena Reifová "Jsem na straně krásné lži. Rozhovor s Milošem Urbanem" *Přítomnost*, (Winter, 2002), 51). ["Proč jste si za svého Orlanda, Golema nebo Frankensteina, který do jisté chvíle nesmrtelný prochází věky, aby provedl záměr s velkým Z, vybral právě figuru vodníka? [...] Protože vodník je skrz naskrz bytostí sexuální [...], konec konců je s vilami, bludičkami a rusalkami potomkem starořeckých nájad. Touhle sexuální podstatou se strašně blíží člověku, a já samozřejmě chtěl mít co nejčlověčejšího výpravěče – jenom jsem mu potřeboval zpřevracet morální hodnoty, a taky ten zápas civilizovanosti a živočišnosti musel být jiný, než jak se to ukazovalo v umění dvacátého století"].

share with the sun, moon, rain, trees, flowers and animals, and lift them too high, this new one who will come after you, will strike them down. And the fall will break their spines<sup>27</sup>.

The diagnosis formed by *Hastrman* is one of replicas in a dispute which is key for the novel's philosophy, in which the protagonist presents his arguments to the priest, validating the causative power of rituals rooted in eternal agrarian myths – for he himself is one of their heroes, and it is he to whom sacrifices are made by those who participate in them, inadvertently or rather intuitively sensing his “actual essence”:

You are both proud, you and your God, but neither of you can reach me. [...] I am the prince of water and whether forests wither and fields are flooded depends solely on me<sup>28</sup>.

This conversation brings the first part of the novel to a close, opening perspectives for the future (from today's point of view it is obviously a classic *vaticinium post eventum*) and delineating “room for maneuver” for the protagonist's actions presented in subsequent chapters. Already the first lines of part two:

An explosion. This is how it has to be. Noon, crescent that now appears also in the middle of the day, turned its face towards the empty sky, indifferent to his mother's body being torn apart. [...] My humbleness, unlike his, has disappeared. I am here and I cannot any other way. Days of wrath are coming<sup>29</sup>,

transfer the reader to a world that is different from the idyll designed in the “nineteenth-century parts” of the text (quite bloody, we should remember). This idyll is based on a vision of symbiosis between man and nature (today, in this context we would surely consider the issue of sustainable growth or, to use the title of Ernest Callenbach's novel, *ecotopia*<sup>30</sup>), to which sacral qualities are attributed, always respecting the rules of metaphysical order which guarantees this symbiosis<sup>31</sup>. The protagonist returns to this lost paradise of youth at the beginning of the third millennium, but neither as an aristocrat revered by his subjects, nor as an omnipotent embodiment of the aquatic element. Finding this “promised land” to be:

<sup>27</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 218-219, [“Ujišťuji vás, že jsem byl zvyklostmi svých poddaných udiven víc než vy. Na rozdíl od vás jsem ale pochopil, jak dokonale ti lidé cítí krajinu, na níž jsou závislí. Vy jim sice můžete dát něco navíc, řekneme jako misionář, ale nesmíte jim brát to, co měli ještě před vámi. [...] Jak můžete vědět, kdo přijde po vás? Co když to bude někdo s úplně opačným učením než je vaše? [...] Říkám vám, že jestli je úplná vyrvete z kořenů, jež je drží pevně v zemi, kořenů společných jim, slunci, měsíci, dešti, stromům, květinám a zvířatům, a povznesete je příliš vysoko, ten nový přichodí je zase srazí dolů. Ten pád jim přerazí páteř”].

<sup>28</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 223.

<sup>29</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 229. [“Výbuch. Snad to tak musí být. Poledne, srp měsíce, který teď vychází i ve dne, odvrátil tvář k prázdnému nebi synovsky lhostejný k trhání těla své matky. [...] Moje pokora, na rozdíl od jeho, je pryč. Jsem tady a nemůžu jinak. Nadcházejí dny hněvu”].

<sup>30</sup>See Petr Kopecký, *Robinson Jeffers a John Steinbeck. Vzdálení i blízcí* (Brno: Host, 2012), 65.

<sup>31</sup>The tendency to attribute nature with divine (or at least sacra) qualities, the basis of the ethical message of the novel, brings to mind biocentric concepts which, contrary to ecocentrism (based on scientific findings and the ecosystem theory) correspond with “the idea of the sanctity of life and, generally speaking, nature, and consequently have a spiritualistic dimension” (Petr Kopecký, *Robinson Jeffers a John Steinbeck. Vzdálení i blízcí*, 94). [“představou posvátnosti života a přírody obecně, a má proto často spirituální rozměr”].



on the verge of complete destruction, caused by actions of the mining corporation and its managers' and owners' greed for profit, he becomes an alien in his motherland. And with an alien's eyes he is watching and describing his former landscape. With eyes of someone, who is looking at the unreal effect of devastation of his home place<sup>32</sup>.

Strangeness, or rather, Otherness defines both the way in which *hastrman* perceives reality, and how he is perceived. And it is this position of an "ontological misfit" that allows him (and, by the way, the author) to omit (put in brackets?) any ethical concerns and dilemmas accompanying the evaluation of terrorist acts which, even if they happen for a good (?) cause, are commonly condemned if they result in so-called innocent victims<sup>33</sup>. However, as Tadeusz Sławek explains, when we:

talk about an animal, a coup, destroying the existing order is not such a far-away topic. Those whose sensitivity makes them live "like animals" are treated as revolutionaries. They do not just appear, like a natural phenomenon, they do not take their place. Their goal is to take the place of others, expropriate them and [...] make them homeless. [...] Those who are "like animals" see with shocking, overwhelming clarity [...] that agreeing with one of the sides of the conflicting forces does not lead to the reconstruction of the world. Hence being "like animals" means going beyond<sup>34</sup>.

This "going beyond" (above, alongside), which could also mean being outside of mainstream social identity constructs and habitual models, makes it easier for the protagonist to establish cooperation with the NGO "Children of Water". The organization tries to peacefully achieve the same goal of stopping the exploitation of Mount Vlhošť<sup>35</sup>. This cooperation ends with the pro-

<sup>32</sup>Richard Změlík, "Reálná a fukční krajina v díle Miloše Urbana", *Česká literatura v intermedialní perspektivě*, red. Stanislava Fedrová, (Praha: Akropolis, 2010), 329. ["na pokraji totální zkázy způsobené činností těžební společnosti a ziskuchtivosti jejich představitelů a majitelů, stává se ve své původní domovině cizincem. A očima cizince je právě popsána i vlastní krajina. Očima toho, kdo se dívá na neskutečnou devastaci rodného místa"]. The protagonist is perfectly aware of his passage from the familiar to alienation: "I liked it better in the past. I felt wonderful then, the world was as it was supposed to be, and I was at its center. Every step forward brought some benefit – there was nothing to be scared of. Today I find myself at the periphery of society; although I have to admit that I am to blame for that. Serves me well. I am a living anachronism, a fairytale hero, a children's bogeyman. But despite all that I cannot shake off the feeling that I have been tasked with something. Something connected with [...] the coming postindustrial age" (Urban, *Hastrman*, 391). ["Mně se víc líbilo v tehdejší době. Tenkrát jsem se cítil úžasně, svět byl takový, jaký být měl a já čněl v jeho středu. Každý krok kupředu byl dobrý – nebylo třeba se bát. Dnes jsem na okraji společnosti; dlužno dodat, že vlastním přičiněním. Dobře mi tak. Jsem přežívající anachronismus, postava z pohádek na strašení děti. A přesto se nemohu zbavit pocitu, že mám nějaký úkol. Úkol, jenž souvisí (...) s příchodem postindustriálního věku."].

<sup>33</sup>It should be noted that among the numerous murders committed by the protagonist, there is actually only one case of an innocent victim (of course within the novel's ethos) – blowing up the quarry's machinery kills a caretaker. This guilt justifies and excuses killing vodyanoy (in terms of a sacrifice) by neo-pagan sect of ecologists recreating the nineteenth-century "aquatic idyll".

<sup>34</sup>Tadeusz Sławek, *Śladem zwierząt. O dochodzeniu do siebie* [Following animals. About coming to self], (Gdańsk: Fundacja Terytoria Książki, 2020), 118. The quote refers to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

<sup>35</sup>This is how Urban manages to omit one of paradoxes defining the activity of various alternative "resistance groups", i.e. weaken the common belief that the modern world no longer offers opportunities for going beyond the mainstream system. The process of "totalization of capitalism", which – as Jan Sowa stresses – has dominated all aspects of life, causes that "The only outside which exists in a similar situation is, for example, one chosen by Ted Kaczyński (better known as the Unabomber): forest wilderness, where it is possible to reach the state of autonomy and 'drop out' from society – however, ways of influencing it become, to put it mildly, limited. [...] *Dropout*, i.e. the only, guarantee outside of capitalism of ethical purity, but it is also means depriving oneself of having a significant influence. [...] Such a state of affairs clearly shows one thing: because there is no effective position outside of capitalism, we should completely abandon understanding in terms of outside-inside categories, especially the phantasm of the unblemished knight, who attacks the capitalism fortress from outside" (Jan Sowa, "Co jest wywrotowe?" [What is revolutionary], *Kultura Współczesna*, nr 2 (2010), 16, 17).

tagonist's death, treated as propitiation, leading to completely abandoning the dream *status quo ante*, partially regulated by nature's own forces (breaking the Nové Mlýny dam, bringing to mind the mythical release of waters), and partially developed with cottage-artisanal techniques dating back to before the Industrial Revolution, whose usefulness is strongly confirmed by mission statements of the organization's leader (yet another significant name, Tomáš Mor):

And what about the energy given to us? [...] We are living, strong, thinking, feeling people, a unique form of *continuum* in space. If we continue to strive forward, we will lose sight of where we came from; we will detach ourselves from our ancestors, and thus from ourselves, for we are only their descendants. Sometimes we need to return to them, because otherwise we are doomed. Machines can do our work for us. We can make money to buy them and energy to set them in motion. If we take this energy from water, which flows by itself, or from the sun, which shines by itself, or from wind, which blows by itself, it will be good energy. However, if we take it from what we tore from the inside of earth, and then burn it with fire and sulfur, it will be bad energy. Riddled earth will become brittle like an eggshell, we may sink into it with each step. We have our own energy. Let's use it<sup>36</sup>.

The retrospective (one could say – post-pastoral<sup>37</sup>) utopia actualized in the novel's ending, described via a rhetoric characteristic of ecological discourse (here referred to in the form of a slightly banal praise for renewable energy), is supposed to prove that the activists' initiatives may bring a positive result, as long as their program clearly and explicitly declares its aversion to technological achievements, instead calling for a return to so-called tool culture<sup>38</sup>. This is the only culture that offers a chance to be free from the oppression of global conformism, which forces people to not only accept the gradual degradation of the natural environment, but also to actively (although

<sup>36</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 390-391. ["Co s energií, která nám byla dána? (...) Jsme živí, silní, myslící a cítící lidé, jedinečná forma kontinuity v prostoru. Pokud se poženeme pořád jen kupředu, ztratíme ze zřetele bod, odkud jsme vyšli; ztratíme se svým předkům, ztratíme se sami sobě, neboť jsme jejich potomci. Nebudeme-li se k nim čas od času vracet, upadneme do záhuby. Dílo za nás můžou udělat stroje. Můžeme si na ně vydělat, můžeme si koupit energii, která je uvede do pohybu a bude je udržovat v chodu. Dá-li tu energii voda, jež sama teče, anebo slunce, co samo svítí, anebo vítr, jenž sám od sebe vane, bude to energie dobrá. Pokud však tu energii získáme z toho, co jsme vyrvali z útrob země a pak jsme to spálili ohněm a sírou, bude to energie špatná. Děravá země bude křehká jako skořápka vajíčka – při příštím kroku se můžeme propadnout. Máme svou vlastní energii. Využijme ji!"]

<sup>37</sup>Julia Fiedorczuk uses the adjective post-pastoral, coined by Terry Gifford and also used by Lawrence Buell, in order to "describe aesthetics which combines the pastoral inclination towards celebrating non-human nature with a sense of responsibility for the state of the natural environment. She is mostly interested in such literary forms in which the anthropocentric celebration of imagination makes room for more eco- or bio-centric focus on non-human nature, its inherent value, independent of pragmatic of aesthetic benefits that people can have from it" (Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie* [Cyborg in a garden], 92). Perhaps this need to untangle literary representation from those economic-aesthetic conditions and connotations was the decisive factor in terms of the choice of space in which *Hastrman's* plot takes place. As Karel Stibral observes: "Growing fascination with wilderness and pristine nature manifests itself not only in admiration for mountain ranges and jungles. Regardless whether it is in some tropical area or in moderate climate, awe is born for marshes, wetlands and bogs, which were omitted until now. Before, this type of terrain was largely ignored, perhaps with the exception of Thoreau" (Karel Stibral, *Estetika přírody. K historii estetického ocenění krajiny*, (Červený Kostelec: Pavel Mervart, 2019), 419). ["Vzrůstající hlad po divokosti a divočině je spojen nejen s obdivem k velehorám a pralesům. Ať již v tropickém či mírném pásmu, ale objevuje se i nově obdiv k dosud pomíjeným močálům, bažinám a mokřadům. To byl typ terénu, který byl – snad s výjimkou Thoreaua – doposud značně přehlížen"].

<sup>38</sup>See "A quality shared by all those forms of resistance is that they are not just attempts at doing without a system or life as if they did not exist, but also the fact that most people who undertake them are trying to construct a world that would be different from the systemically regulated one. [...] Building a house, sewing a piece of clothing, or even cooking a meal from unprocessed ingredients with one's own hands require [...] getting used to tools and, first and foremost, perseverance and time. It also requires going back to the tool culture [...], in which individuals deal with reality that requires taming in such a way as to serve man" (Marek Krajewski, "Dyskretna niezgoda. Opór i kultura materialna" [Discreet disagreement. Resistance and material culture], *Kultura Współczesna*, nr 2 (2010), 44,45).

not always consciously) participate in this process. Researchers stress that the “philosophy of secondary instrumentation of objects” facilitates their de-semanticization, that is, it deprives them of their expressive potential. According to Marek Krajewski, by losing the function of a prop in rhetorical games, they become a semantically neutral “instrument of direct change of reality”<sup>39</sup>. Such observations, raising doubts at first glance (they suggest the possibility to leave Goffman’s “theater of everyday life”, or going beyond Debord’s “performance society”), turn out to be decisively inaccurate in the case of *Hastrman*. The repudiation of devices fuelled by “steam and electricity” (not to mention optical fibers) in the novel’s world becomes an ideological manifesto, as it guarantees the success of the program to re-install the nineteenth-century lifestyle (and the mode of living with nature), proposed in the novel. On the one hand it signals a lack of agreement for the modern, false cult of development, and on the other it is a sign of belonging to a community proposing *modus vivendi* and *operandi* alternatives to what is treated as obvious today<sup>40</sup>.

Machines cannot go to either Old Village, or the mountain. Caravans of mule- and horse-carts leave Holan from morning until evening, going around ponds to leave stone, wood, lime, sand, and peat, either on the slopes of Vlhosti, or the outskirts of Old Village. Workers carry load on their backs or use wheelbarrows and wagons. [...] Where there once was a quarry, now there is a mountain, in every way similar to the original one. In the place of ruined houses there are new buildings, which are no less beautiful or useful than the demolished ones. [...] I look at all those people and I see the impossible – they willingly, at least for some time, sacrificed their selfishness, and became a part of a perfectly functional whole, for a wise ruler explained to them its purpose and benefits. [...] Vodyanoy, this fairytale warning against human pride, was suddenly no longer needed. Children of Water can do everything he could do. And better<sup>41</sup>.

The inter(archi)textual element in which the author places the story of *vodyanoy* facilitates emphasizing the peculiar conventionality of the organization of the plot, which – especially in the second, “modern” part – as has been said, clearly models itself on sensational thrillers (from this perspective *Hastrman* can be treated as a typical example of postmodernist “playing with kitsch”<sup>42</sup>), at the same time reversing the direction of evaluating the protagonist’s actions. Open conventionality

<sup>39</sup>Krajewski, 44.

<sup>40</sup>Julia Fiedorczuk, referring to Leo Marx, concludes that this disdain for mechanical appliances, associated with a return to the Arcadian imaginarium, “‘is in no way anachronistic in the times of high technology’, for since early 1960s [...] there have been strong anti-technocratic impulses, wherein the meaning of machine’ is now not only literal, but also metaphorical; it is identified with a «system» against which one should rebel. Anti-hegemonic, pastoral mentality characterizes [...] the ever-growing group of people who want to live «closer to nature» and profess values incompatible with the myth of eternal progress” (Fiedorczuk Julia, *Cyborg w ogrodzie*, 89-90). Internal quotation: Leo Marx, “Pastoralism in America”, translated into Polish by Marek Paryż, in *Kultura, tekst, ideologia. Dyskursy współczesnej amerykanistyki*, edited by Agata Preis-Smith (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 101.

<sup>41</sup>Urban, *Hastrman*, 393. [“jak k hoře, tak do Staré Vsi žádné stroje nesmí. Od rána do večera vyjíždějí z Holan karavany volských a konských spřežení a každá z jedné strany objíždí rybníky, aby složila kámen, dřevo, vápno, písek a zeminu buďto na úpatí Vlhosti, nebo za humny Staré Vsi. Dělníci nosí břemena na zádech, nebo je vozí v kolečkách, na trakářích, na žebřinách. [...] Kde býval lom, tam je dnes plná hora, co nejpodobnější té původní. Kde byly rozvaliny domu, tam jsou dnes nová stavení zachovávající krásu a účelnost původních. [...] Dívám se na všechny ty lidi a vidím nemožné – dobrovolně se aspoň na čas vzdali svého sobectví a stali se součástí dokonale fungujícího celku, neboť dobrý vládce jim objasnil, jak a proč a v čem je to dobré. [...] Hastrman, ten bájný korektiv lidské pychy, je najednou zbytečný. Děti Vody umí vše, co uměl on. Svedou to líp”].

<sup>42</sup>In one interview (conducted by Irena Reifová) the author does not deny that “my books have at least a bit of an artistic character inasmuch as they stem from commercial writing, which in turn originally freeloadered on genuine art. So, I tolerate this commercial current, because I know from experience that those two circulations permeate and inspire each other” (Reifová, “Jsem na straně krásné lži”, 51). [“Jsou-li tedy moje knížky alespoň trochu umělecké, tak vlastně vycházejí z pokleslého umění, které zase při svém vzniku zneužívalo opravdové umění. Onen pokleslý proud tedy toleruju, protože mám zkušenost s tím, jak se to obrací a vzájemně inspiruje.”]

(avoiding the use of the word *artificiality*), also orchestrates idealized images of life in a recovered, old-fashioned enclave, revealing only a wishful dimension of the realization of the anti-civilizational undertaking proposed in the novel, radical in its principles and brutal in practice. Because readers, familiar with the tradition of utopian fantasies easily transforming into their Orwellian-Huxleyan opposite, have no difficulty in predicting possible consequences of the eco-revolutionaries' zeal<sup>43</sup>. Also, they are not hard to predict, especially that the Children of Water resemble a neo-pagan sect, additionally burdened with the original sin of totalitarian inclinations, rather than organizations such as Greenpeace or WWF, which employ rational means of persuasion and influence<sup>44</sup>.

Urban seems to say that nature (in the novel, of utmost religious importance), similarly to revolution, requires sacrifices, and its wellbeing depends on sustaining its processes, which also includes (along with strictly economic actions) updating ritualistic-symbolic practices. Faith in the causative power of sacrifices (in *Harstram* – plants, animals, and people) justifies the peculiar omnipresence of death in the post-pastoral world. This omnipresence, partially delineating subsequent fields of play with readers' cultural experience (this time focusing on the topos *et in Arcadia ego*), at the same reminds one of the absolute and inviolable character of the natural order based on the constant change of cycles of birth, ripening, and death. The final, fatalistic lines of the novel ("I am giving, so you shall give. Because this is how it must be. MUST."<sup>45</sup>) reinforce and *de facto* consecrate this inalienable imperative of self-sacrifice for the sake of maintaining the continuity of the eternal order of things. In order to highlight this universal order, extricated from authoritative simplifications of the official (anthropocentric) historiography, Urban refers to elements of alternative historical philosophy, which also includes natural processes, via a speech the protagonist gives to his subjects:

Earth is water, and people – are water creatures, their bodies are bones, and tissues, and muscles immersed in fluid, a handful of dust in a sea, a continent in an ocean [...]. Water, which you think you are holding in your palm, is very old, it has been stirred a thousand times, and purified as many times, those drops come from the Nile, they were poured into a red jug by a young slave [...]. Those were the same drops that were later taken to the paradise of seventh heaven, but they did not stop there, they returned to earth, because the eternity of water does not lie motionless, it constantly returns. Rain was prominent and sweet, the salty sea sucked it in and changed it into an iceberg, which circulated the Earth twice, and released those drops, so that they could get stuck in a salmon's gills. The fish was caught by a fisherman [...], who started rowing towards the port, a storm was coming from the West, Calais was shortly in the hands of the French, but was seized by the English the following day [...]. You will find the whole world in those drops, and all times, and

<sup>43</sup>Anna Kronenberg treats the so-called green humanities as a revolutionary theory. She believes that "This subversive, or even revolutionary character [...], is based on questioning the current models of exercising authority and rejecting culturally reinforced scientific, historical, political, economic paradigms based on eurocentrism and patriarchy. Such a perspective is connected with subsequent turns taking place in new humanities (a performative turn towards agency), and with the new concept of agency: engaged, agential, nomadic, performative" (Anna Kronenberg, *Geopoetyka. Związki literatury i środowiska* [Geopolitics. Relationships between literature and environment] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2015), 16).

<sup>44</sup>According to Barbara Pasamonik, one common if slightly unexpected "side effect" of modern forms of social protest "is not only emancipation of individuals from imposed identities and almost limitless freedom of self-creation. 'Unbearable lightness of being' provokes 'escape from freedom' Too much freedom results in the renaissance/return to the times of unshakable faith, social order, and stable moral rules. Reactive cultural fundamentalism is also an unexpected side effect of counter-culture" (Pasamonik, "Fundamentalizm kulturowy jako współczesna kontrkultura" [Cultural fundamentalism as modern counter-culture], 62. The statement refers to Islamic fundamentalism).

<sup>45</sup>Urban *Hastrman*, 399. ["Dávám, abys dal. Protože tak to být musí. MUSÍ!"]





it is also a matter of time when the same water will be poured into a red jug by a young slave<sup>46</sup>.

The concept of history combining the idea of nature's cyclicity with the Nietzschean "eternal return", outlined in the statement above (far broader and richer in the whole text), referring to the principles of the so-called environmental history, allows the reader to synthetically

combine the formulaic tradition of anthropocentric reading and writing the past with the accompanying history of man's natural surroundings, so far rarely considered in historiography<sup>47</sup>. Vodyanoy – a figure in which human and animal characteristics permeate each other – highlights and verifies this synthesis. He reminds us about the relationship connecting bio- and anthropo-sphere, making the recognition of these colligations *conditio sine qua non* of salvation and survival of any form of human life, threatened by short-sightedness and man's pseudo-demiurgic pride, convinced of his right to take advantage of quickly shrinking natural resources without any consideration.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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<sup>46</sup>Urban *Hastrman*, 140-141, 142. ["Země je voda a lidé povodňané, jejich těla jsou kosti a tkáň a svaly ponořené do kapaliny, hrst prachu v moři, světadíl v oceánu. [...] Tahle voda, o níž se domníváš, že ji máš v hrsti, je velmi stará, tisíckrát kalená a stejně často čištěná, tyto kapky jsou z pramene Nilu, nabrané do červeného džbánu mladou otrokyní [...]. Byly to právě tyhle kapky, které pak vstoupily do ráje sedmého nebe, ale nezůstaly tam, vrátily se dolů, protože věčnost vody nespočívá v nehybnosti, nýbrž ve věčných návratech. Déšť to byl vydatný a sladký, slané moře ho pozřelo a proměnilo v ledovou kru, jež dvakrát obeplula Zemi, než roztála a pustila uvězněné kapky na svobodu, aby uvízly v zábrách lososa. Rybu vylovil rybář [...] a vesloval do přístavu, od západu se blížila bouře, Calais bylo nakrátko francouzské a na druhý den mělo znovu padnout do rukou Angličanům. [...] V těch kapkách najdeš celý svět a celý čas, a jen jeho otázkou, kdy tuto vodu nabere červeným džbánkem z Nilu ruka mladé otrokyně"].

<sup>47</sup>Recapitulating those principles, Ewa Dąbrowska states that "Environmental history is interdisciplinary, and most closely related to historical geography and ecology, although it is also close to the history of cities, climate, economy, and agriculture. It also accommodates the histories of rivers, animals and fish, plants (often forests), as well as water and ice. The most common topics concern epidemics, natural disasters, degradation of natural environment resulting from urbanization or pollution. It also contributes to the revival of history of agriculture in the spirit of ecology (history of agriculture of sustainable growth) and history of landscape and gardens (Ewa Domańska, "Wiedza o przeszłości – perspektywy na przyszłość" [Knowledge of the past – perspectives for the future], *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, nr 2 (2013), 249).

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# KEYWORDS

## ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

### kryzys ekologiczny

#### ABSTRACT:

Miloš Urban, a Czech writer, is mostly associated with postmodernist playing with the convention of the metaphysical thriller. In 2001 he published *Hastrman*, a novel representing so-called green literature, for which he received the prestigious *Magnesia Litera* award. His concerns about progressive degradation of the natural environment of northern Czechia inspired him to develop a creative method which allows him to highlight threats related to the ecological crisis without excessively lecturing the reader. By reaching for genealogical models of the nineteenth-century ethnographic novel, combining them with elements of horror and contemporary political fiction and – first and foremost – adding the vodyanoy (i.e., a figure that is not only deeply rooted in Czech cultural memory, but also characterized by an animalistic-or demonic-human ontological duality), Urban achieved a particular ethical undecidability of the protagonist's actions. The titular hastrman acts for “a good – ecological – cause”, but in order to fulfill his mission, he uses criminal, *strictly* terrorist methods. As a result, the novel asks questions instead of offering definitive answers, forcing the reader to rethink their own attitude and propose tools for salvation of the gradually, but inevitably disappearing traditional order based on the harmonious cooperation between man and surrounding nature.

## postpastoral utopia

“GREEN LITERATURE”

## Slavonic demonology

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# To the Springs, to the Mountains: Proto-Ecocritical Readings of H.D. Thoreau's *Walden* and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Na przełęcz*

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## From American Transcendentalism to Ecocriticism

Although (in the UK and the US) ecocriticism became a mature academic trend only in the 1990s, its origins date back to the second half of the 19th century (as it also did in Polish literary studies). The humanities began to separate from the natural sciences, looking for their own autonomy, conceptual apparatus, and answers to fundamentally pragmatic questions about the dependence of literature on empirical reality. Consequently, the focus on the relationship between man and the environment has brought the divided disciplines together: it was of interest to both human and natural scientists.

In his 1996 canonical ecocritical work, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, Lawrence Buell made it clear: the ecological crisis is, above all, a crisis of the imagination. Such an approach to the problem, further developed by Julia Fiedorczuk in Polish contemporary ecocritical research, gives rise to a humanistic discourse which focuses on the relations between human and more-than-human nature.

Apart from examining the notion of the subject, contemporary ecocriticism also reflects on a number of important problems related to the practice of inhabiting the world. Therefore, it examines the principles of functioning in a community, as well as the exploitation of the natural environment, focusing on the economy, often in relation to ethics and the choice of means of production.<sup>1</sup>

If we want to talk about contemporary ecocriticism (and refute the accusations of employing this rather “fashionable” theory in an anachronistic or liberal manner), we should look at different ways of thinking and writing about the natural environment. The starting point, therefore, is Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*: a fundamental proto-ecocritical and nature writing text.<sup>2</sup>

Ecocriticism also attempts to reinterpret the 19th century theme of nature from a completely different perspective: not as a distant and close-ended literary motif, and thus an aesthetic way of organizing a text, but rather in a way that shows a continuity of thought, and looks for answers to fundamental questions about our place in the world. Such a methodology, or rather a critical reading practice, requires additional justification: while I wish to present new and inspiring conclusions about the researched works and the natural imagination, I am aware of the fact that a novel approach to literature also needs to be grounded in theory. Drawing on Ryszard Koziółek, I argue that one has to believe in the adopted methodology and ensure that the adoption of a specific approach does not result from its fashionable status. Koziółek thus comments on this question: “If this is the third semester - I am an ecocritic.”<sup>3</sup> He further observes that he is sarcastic because he does not “agree that theories are a set that can be used freely by any researcher and applied to any object.”<sup>4</sup>

How should new methodologies be used correctly? How can one avoid the over-zealousness of a neophyte? An important factor in using a relatively new (or fashionable) methodology is finding reliable resources and respecting their adopted approach. If we use theory in such a way, we can evaluate it, notice transformations within the discipline, and thus avoid a situation in which we simply “follow certain trends.” When deciding to use a certain methodology, it is important, first of all, to get acquainted with the counterarguments against it so that this choice is justified, careful, and free from ideological and cognitive naivety.

## American Nature Writing as an Ethical Gesture

Ecocritical reading is a revisionist reading. As noted by Lawrence Buell, the crisis of Western metaphysics and ethics has brought to light a serious, complex, and fundamental problem:

<sup>1</sup> See: Julia Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie: wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* [Cyborg in the Garden: An Introduction to Ecocriticism] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2015) 21; Julia Fiedorczuk, Gerardo Beltran, *Ekopoetyka: ekologiczna obrona poezji* [Ecopoetics: An Ecological Defense of Poetry] (Varsovia: Museo de Historia del Movimiento Popular Polaco: Instituto de Estudios Ibéricos e Iberoamericanos de la Universidad de Varsovia, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See: Lawrence Buell, *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture* (Cambridge, Mass. Belknap Press of Harvard University. Press, 1996), 6-9; Julia Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie: wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2015) 21; Joanna Durczak, *Rozmowy z ziemią: tradycja przyrodopisarska w literaturze amerykańskiej* [Conversations with the Land: The Tradition of Nature Writing in American Literature] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2010) 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ryszard Koziółek, *Znakowanie trawy albo praktyki filologii* [Marking grass or philological practices] (Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2011), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Koziółek 23-24.

the crisis of the imagination and the crisis of understanding nature and humanity's relation to it. Interestingly, the American scholar emphasized the importance of metaphors which determine our view of reality. Buell argues that metaphors imply a certain view and evaluation of the world, which is not noticeable at first glance. How does it work? Scholars focused on deconstructing the concept of progress, which appears to be associated with positive connotations. However, the opposite of progress, e.g., the destruction of ecosystems related to forest clearing or the exploitation of natural resources, is marginalized:

(...) we live our lives by metaphors that have come to seem deceptively transparent through long usage. Take for instance "progress", literally a process or transit, which the democratic and industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century taught us to equate with "improvement", first with political liberalization and then with technological development. Whenever we use this word, unless we put it in quotation marks, we reinforce the assumption of a link between "technology" and "good" and the assumption that continuous technological proliferation is inevitable and proper. To state this point is not to argue the reverse, merely to call attention to the power of language<sup>5</sup>.

The "power of language" refers to its susceptibility to indirect manipulations, such as blurring the boundaries of the metaphor, when two figurative elements compared with each other are not seen as similar but identical. Ecocriticism tracks such linguistic constructions (and consequently also symbolic, imaginary, and ethical constructs and choices) to show how they pretend to be neutral, although they have been appropriated in the name of specific goals or particular interests. Indeed, the question of language is crucial in analyzing the transformations of the natural imagination and for the methodology itself: language must be investigated, challenged, and analyzed in the context of the anthropocentric point of view it imposes on nature. The investigation of the language of progress is the first step in the search for new ways of expression.

Buell also emphasized the pastoral tradition, which was fundamental for the American literary revival of the mid-nineteenth century (as well as for the understanding of American culture by Americans). He contrasted it with three tendencies: the image of old (European) world desire, the image of American cultural nationalism, and the discourse of American exceptionalism. In the context of the pastoral tradition, the most important figure was not so much (or not only) the leading transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, but his student, considered to be the precursor of nature writing: Henry David Thoreau.

In America, Thoreau's *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* is considered an iconic book. Charles Darwin was not as successful even in British literary studies.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the collection of Thoreau's essays became, in a way, a starting point for Buell. The American scholar developed a typology of "environmental" texts – this typology is general (though still accurate) enough to shed new light on environmental issues in a number of works, showing the critical potential of ecocriticism. Environmentally oriented texts present the non-human environment not only as a framing device (an object) but as a certain continuum which suggests that human history is part of natural history; recognize the fact that human interest is not the only legitimate

<sup>5</sup> Buell, *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*, 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Buell, *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*, 6-7,9.



interest; recognize that human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; and see the environment as a variable in time, a process rather than a constant.<sup>7</sup>

In this terminological confusion, two interconnected concepts deserve further attention: nature writing and ecocriticism. The former is part of the latter. As Joanna Durczak points out in her historical definition of nature writing, this category has somewhat blurred the boundaries of poetics, but its features are distinct:

The biggest problem for the majority of scholars who study nature writing is the vagueness of the term. In the United States, it is customary to define nature writing as non-fiction prose (it is most often an essay), devoted to broadly understood nature, but, in accordance with the nature of the essay, treated in a subjective, often emotional way. (...) Despite all the vagueness, critics dealing with nature writing emphasize that there is a certain set of components characteristic of texts traditionally included in this category. Two elementary features are a natural fact and a human being contemplating their relationship with it. It is very important that both components appear in the text together.<sup>8</sup>

The main generic determinant (of the nature essay) is the focus on the relationship between the environment and the human subject immersed in it. However, the subject finds themselves in a difficult situation; they must stop, or at best limit, classifying the world with the help of their human dictionary. They should only describe it. How is this achieved? By limiting the hegemonic, human, and hierarchic perspective and relying on a description that is able to express the unique aspects of the environment. The perceiving subject has to acknowledge the "ontological and axiological primacy of nature over man,"<sup>9</sup> which does not necessarily deny the existence of a higher power. That is also why nature writing was favored by 19th-century thinkers, as it "expressed different forms of spirituality, from Christianity, through Buddhism, deism, pantheism and atheism to materialistic mysticism and sacralism."<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary ecocriticism is not only a theoretical but also a social trend. The interest in social engagement dates to early nature writing. Thoreau's *Walden* is, in fact, a philippic delivered to condemn the destruction of nature in the name of progress. It is a unique text indeed; the essay documents the experiment of moving from the city to Walden Pond to live there for two years. Indeed, Thoreau does not simply juxtapose the countryside and the city but uses this opposition to criticize social and economic relations. Thoreau's text would therefore be a model example of a literary approach to anti-urbanism, although understood in a rather specific and non-intuitive way. According to Buell:

"Anti-urbanism", as [Leo, A.B.] Marx puts it, "is better understood as an expression of something else: a far more inclusive, if indirect and often equivocal, attitude toward the transformation of society and of culture of which the emerging industrial city is but one manifestation".<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Buell, 7-8.

<sup>8</sup> Joanna Durczak, *Rozmowy z ziemią. Tradycja przyrodopisarska w literaturze amerykańskiej* [Conversations with the land: Nature writing in American literature] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2010), 22-23.

<sup>9</sup> Durczak, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Durczak.

<sup>11</sup> Buell, *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*, 13-14.

Such an understanding of anti-urbanism explains why Buell sees Thoreau as not interested in nature as such but in nature as a conceptualization of something else – Thoreau appears to perceive nature through social and cultural changes resulting from the rapid economic growth in the early 19th century.<sup>12</sup> Thoreau also opposes Puritan morality and capitalism. It is also worth noting that in his monumental work on the history of American thought, Vernon L. Parrington, a historian living at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, titled the chapter devoted to the author of *Walden* “Transcendental Economist.”<sup>13</sup> Parrington thus recognized that *Walden* should also be studied by historians of economic thought:

The single business of Henry Thoreau, during forty-odd years of eager activity, was to discover an economy calculated to provide a satisfying life. (...) *Walden* is the handbook of an economy that endeavors to refute Adam Smith and transform the round of daily life into something nobler than a mean gospel of plus and minus.<sup>14</sup>

Thoreau's project is not only an experiment and an expression of rebellion, but a gesture that calls into question the monolithic nature of reality. Building a house and a farm from scratch and living in accordance with nature's laws revealed the shortcomings of civilization, and thus the whole idea of progress, which, according to the author of *Walden*, corrupts human morality because people tend to focus on economic profit. When Thoreau leaves the city he symbolically and literally leaves such corrupted order. Thoreau demonstrates to his critics that a different way of life (living close to nature) is possible; he presents an alternative vision of a sustainable economy, which also triggers spiritual renewal and happiness. The experiment paradoxically demonstrates that people should adjust to the environment and not *vice versa*, which was by no means obvious considering the accelerating capitalist relations of the second half of the 19th century. The laws of symbiosis, that is, coexistence with surrounding nature, govern life in the woods. The writer first reduces human needs, which in fact do not differ from those of animals. He builds a simple house and grows his own food:

To many creatures there is in this sense but one necessary of life, Food. To the bison of the prairie it is a few inches of palatable grass, with water to drink; unless he seeks the Shelter of the forest or the mountain's shadow. None of the brute creation requires more than Food and Shelter. The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success.<sup>15</sup>

The similarity between different beings, and even more broadly between human and more-than-human nature, does not lead to banal conclusions – the belief that man is, in fact, also an animal. Thanks to careful observation and acute senses, Thoreau began to build poetic metaphors that led him to notice that the world in general was created according to the same principles:

<sup>12</sup>Durczak, *Rozmowy z ziemią. Tradycja przyrodopisarska w literaturze amerykańskiej*, 17.

<sup>13</sup>Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: The Romantic Revolution in America* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 400.

<sup>14</sup>Parrington, 400.

<sup>15</sup>Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or life in the Woods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 10.

I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body. You find thus in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf. (...) The atoms have already learned this law and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. (...) Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. (...) It is wonderful how rapidly yet perfectly the sand organizes itself as it flows, using the best material its mass affords to form the sharp edges of its channel. Such are the sources of rivers. In the silicious matter which the water deposits is perhaps the bony system, and in the still finer soil and organic matter the fleshy fibre or cellular tissue. What is man but a mass of thawing clay? The ball of the human finger is but a drop congealed. The fingers and toes flow to their extent from the thawing mass of the body. Who knows what the human body would expand and flow out to under a more genial heaven? Is not the hand a spreading palm leaf with its lobes and veins? (...) Each rounded lobe of the vegetable leaf, too, is a thick and now loitering drop, larger or smaller; the lobes are the fingers of the leaf; and as many lobes as it has, in so many directions it tends to flow, and more heat or other genial influences would have caused it to flow yet farther. Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature.<sup>16</sup>

Although such a vision of the world may seem naive, it demonstrates a fundamental problem – a linguistic aporia – the fact that human language fails to accurately describe the, not only human, reality and the fact that the language of nature differs from human language. The description of the world thus relies on an imperfect metaphor, which often leads to anthropomorphism. As Joanna Durczak points out, the metaphors used by English-speaking nature writers to appeal to the imagination of their readers were fundamentally positive: they emphasized mutual connection, cooperation, and symbiosis. Later, relations between man and nature were burdened with a different emotional baggage. As Darwinism gained popularity, the notions of interspecies competition and “the survival of the fittest” dominated the way in which the environment and its internal hierarchies were portrayed.<sup>17</sup>

Respectively, in accordance with Thoreau’s pro-ecological approach, nature and man develop according to the same law (like communicating vessels). As such, Thoreau’s anger, clearly visible in the opening essays of *Walden*, is all the more understandable. Thoreau strongly criticizes the developing capitalist economy ruled by greed rather than mutual benefit. Subsequent essays in the collection have a clear ethical orientation.

One day, quite unexpectedly, at the beginning of the essay “The Pond in Winter,” Thoreau arrives at a very important, if not the most important, conclusion of the entire collection, discovering that language is not able to express more-than-human reality. Nature communicates with a different system of signs, one that is inaccessible to humans. It uses light (or, as Joanna Durczak notes, non-grammatical nature-oriented nouns, such as pine, hill or snow<sup>18</sup>). Nature also has its call to action: “Forward!”

<sup>16</sup>Thoreau, 286.

<sup>17</sup>Joanna Durczak, *Rozmowy z ziemią. Tradycja przyrodopisarska w literaturze amerykańskiej*, 31.

<sup>18</sup>Durczak, 78.

After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what—how—when—where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on *her* lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her resolution.<sup>19</sup>

The anthropocentric view was no longer sufficient for Thoreau, nor was it comprehensive. Nature is not an aesthetic construct that may be used to conceptualize the mental states of people living outside urban areas: in *Walden*, it becomes an autonomous entity, and this autonomy is respected by the writer. Thus, Thoreau moves away from narratives based on exploitation and submission to human will that objectify nature, becoming one of the first spokesmen for nature and its autonomy. The alleged silence of nature, and, consequently, human misunderstanding of it, in turn, result from the fact that we ask nature the wrong questions. Nature cannot answer them, if only because of the major differences in codes used by the sender and the receiver of the message. Any attempt to present the phenomena of the natural world in terms of standard human language is a dangerous overinterpretation - we produce meanings that are not really there.

In the history of ecocriticism, Henry David Thoreau's experiment is referred to as one of the first attempts to proto-ecocritically look at the text and the reality beyond it.<sup>20</sup> The reflection of the American writer, one of the apostles of transcendentalism, from which the tradition of nature writing stems (*Walden* has become an iconic example of the genre), contributed to the creation of a critical revisionist contemporary methodology, which has been developed since the publication of *Walden* in 1854. *Walden* attempted to dismantle mental and linguistic constructs in order to overcome the crisis of the imagination. Thoreau critically examined economy, social relations, and the exploitation of natural resources, and reflected on the limited category of the human subject.

From literature to legal solutions:  
Stanisław Witkiewicz and Jan Gwałbert Pawlikowski

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, ecological reflection begins to define itself in normative and systemic terms, proposing certain changes in legislation, not only in the Anglo-American cultures but also in Poland. The debate about the environment and the need to protect it, for fear of irreversible damage caused by technological development, increased urbanization, and high natural population growth, is important in Poland as well. Contemporary environmental research is largely based on the conclusions drawn from the transformations of the imagination at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Natural sciences, which developed greatly in the 19th century but never in isolation from the humanities, played an important role in this process. Ecocriticism seems to bring these two distinct traditions together and is also part of posthumanism.

<sup>19</sup>Thoreau, *Walden*, 265.

<sup>20</sup>Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie: wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki*, 21, 207-208.

In an introduction to one of the editions of *Na przełęczy* [On the Mountain Pass] (1891) by Stanisław Witkiewicz, Czesław Koziół describes the writer as one of the first artists to reflect on the dark side of the myth of progress:

Witkiewicz belongs to a dying generation that still participates in the last stage of bourgeois positivism, but is no longer enthusiastic about technical and economic development, engineers, inventors, merchants and organizers. [...] This feeling of disappointment was the result of the social bankruptcy of the slogans of positivists who believed that technical and economic development could be a remedy for all social problems. It turned out that positivists [...] made a terrible mistake. Contrary to what they believed, economic and technological growth did not make everyone happy: only merchants and capitalists and their direct associates became more affluent [...] Witkiewicz's generation, in its prime, is *Młoda Polska* [Young Poland] and ridicules the philistine culture of the bourgeoisie, condemning the egoistic philosophy of the victorious bourgeoisie. Instead, it looks for different, higher goals [...].<sup>21</sup>

Koziół was right. He points to the ideological affinities between Thoreau and Witkiewicz. *Na Przełęczy* is an autobiographical essay in which the artist describes his trip from Krakow to Zakopane. In addition to extensive and impressionistic descriptions of nature, the fauna and flora of the Tatra Mountains, *Na Przełęczy* is also a sociological study: a participant observation, an examination of the area and its popularity in contemporary society, and a critical look at tourists and their love of folk culture. Witkiewicz criticizes capitalism, capitalist trends, and the resulting destruction of the natural environment, including adaptation strategies of the people of Podhale who wished to make the most of tourism. Some Gorals decided to play this capitalist game: they "Orientalized" themselves; they presented themselves to tourists as they would be stereotypically perceived in the collective consciousness, thus making money. Zakopane appeared to be a kind of performance, a philistine mecca for wealthy townspeople who were eager to fall in love with nature, focusing on over-aestheticizing their feelings and experiences. The Tatra mountains were therefore perceived through the prism of their function: located near Krakow, the region satisfied the needs of communing with beautiful nature and became a symbol of material status. With irony, Witkiewicz describes the dilemmas of a tourist who had just found himself in a mountain town:

The quiet philistine, who visited the Tatra Mountains because everyone else did, initially tries to adapt but it is a painful and difficult process. He is used to falling asleep while listening to a samovar in the evening, to seeing pale, clean buns in a wire basket next to a plate with the slices of pink ham. He is used to waiting for the paperboy, to visitors, and to sitting on his couch, while the maid puts in his empty and idle hand the most recent denial of yesterday's news. This man did everything he could to turn his life into a series of infinitely small but repeatable pleasures. The newspapers think for him. Everything makes life easier for him. He buys wit, humor, comfort, and pleasure for his three cents. And here, he finds himself in a vacuum – in the desert.<sup>22</sup>

Witkiewicz bitterly exposes the fact that society is focused on money, thus isolating itself from the real experience of more-than-human nature. As such, we are reminded of a similar

<sup>21</sup>Czesław Koziół, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy* [On the Mountain Pass], ed. Czesław Koziół, (Warsaw: Książka, 1948), V.

<sup>22</sup>Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy* [On the Mountain Pass], in: *Pisma tatrzańskie* [The Tatra writings] Vol.1, ed. Roman Hennel, (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1963), 40-41. All excerpts from the texts were translated by M.O.

situation described by H.D. Thoreau in *Walden*. Both authors share the same beliefs, although Witkiewicz criticizes both the philistines and the ascetics:

Only the people who did not have time to get used to the comforts and who, above all, look for something in the world, who look and see, know how to listen, want to explore and get to know things, only they can be happy. They are maniacs for whom simple food and simple furniture is enough. It is enough for them – they can then focus on the beauty of nature, some ethnographic differences or natural peculiarities. If they were tortured, they would still look for color, admire the hilt of the executioner's sword, or study the chemical composition of a deadly viper venom.<sup>23</sup>

For Witkiewicz, nature was neither idyllic nor aesthetic. It was a dangerous and unpredictable force that only the natives, Gorals living in symbiosis with nature, seemed to understand. They were able to read its signs and adapt to its changes:

At night, in complete darkness, we were awakened by a sudden whistle, the rattling of windows, the crackling of the roof and the howling of stoves. It seemed that the wings of a huge bird, with feathers like great mast pines, were hitting the walls of the cottage, sweeping the tops of the spruce trees and dying somewhere in the darkness of the black night. Then everything went quiet for a moment – only to explode suddenly with a new force of madness and rage.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, Witkiewicz openly mocked rich tourists, their mannerisms, and their fixation on literary or, more broadly, social conventions. Apart from making ironic remarks about the tourism industry, Witkiewicz also demonstrated how nature is deprived of its autonomy – it is relegated to the role of a reserve. Mindless tourists see it from horse-drawn carriages on their way to the Kościeliska Valley:

The poetic philistine was worried about his own situation. He constantly expressed his admiration and enthusiasm, played among the rocks and jumped clumsily, and cherished and glorified the uncomfortable lodgings, his guide, and even his walking stick. In the Tatra literature, this elegiac tone prevails: everyone thanks the Creator, who built such miracles for them, for tourists.

Today, everything is changing. Trips to the Tatra Mountains have become something ordinary and common. Enthusiasts, having lost a lot of money, are tight with their money; For Gorals, civilized, stamped and normalized in their payments, guests are a source of income, on which taxes have to be paid.

The moment the gentlemen begin to count their money, Gorals scrupulously calculate the value of their services and merits. Egoisms collide: disappointment and the source of all these tales about the greed of Gorals and the exploitation of guests. Of course, Gorals are not always to blame, and you can often see a distressed Jasiiek or Maciek who suffer, since their guests threatened that they would describe them in the newspapers because they had been overcharged for something. The guest who does not want to pay does not see that he is the same as the Goral who wants to overcharge for everything.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Witkiewicz, 41.

<sup>24</sup>Witkiewicz, 49-50.

<sup>25</sup>Witkiewicz, 41.

Witkiewicz comments on how the mountain ecosystem is constantly violated and also makes a few remarks on the status of animals and humans in natural surroundings. He focuses on climbing, which becomes a meditation that opens one up to nature and transcends the aesthetic dimension. He also points out similarities in human and animal behavior:

*Climbing*, this selfless struggle with nature, allows one to use excess strength and health, leaving no disgust, no real disappointments, because there are no real interests or benefits to gain. [...] The climber obtains a lot of overwhelming impressions from a wonderful and powerful nature: nature is easy to comprehend, because it presents itself in expressed, defined, firm, clear and convincing shapes.<sup>26</sup>

Alas, despite what really makes him different from animals, despite his hats, tailcoats, pointed-nosed shoes, Amsterdam liqueur and Virginia, man has so much in common with them! Are these two voices talking over the desert not the same as the singing of birds or the roar of predators meeting in the darkness of the forest?<sup>27</sup>

[Hunting] it is a pure struggle for existence between two different creatures who are equals. (...) [A bear has] his own sayings and ways, just like humans.<sup>28</sup>

Witkiewicz criticizes the instrumentalization of nature by wealthy tourists. He argues that they only visited the Tatra Mountains because it was fashionable and because they wished to satisfy their aesthetic needs. However, the most important issue that occupied the writer's mind is the way of perceiving reality. This issue, in turn, translates almost directly into acknowledging the limitations of language: the written fails to fully express the seen. Witkiewicz, as an art critic, points out that even photography is not able to convey the essence of the seen, falsifying almost everything from color to texture. Only an impressionistic description, which accounts for the position of the sun, the changing colors and the relations between individual elements, may be credible. As Witkiewicz writes in one of his critical essays:

Not only does photography produce a false image of an impressionist image, photography is also false by nature. The coating is to a varying degree sensitive to the effects of various colors. As a result, even a very dark blue spot in the photograph looks brighter than the brightest yellow or red spot, than the brightest orange tone. Photography therefore often gives an almost completely different impression of different colors and the relations of local color fields than the one seen in nature. For example, when the sun illuminates snow, it looks so dazzling and so contrasting in nature, but it is completely lost in photography because the shadows, tinged with the reflection of the blue sky, are not captured in all their complexity.<sup>29</sup>

For Witkiewicz, impressionism was not so much an aesthetic way of organizing a text, but an epistemological issue. It was an extension of naturalism, since both engaged with the subject

<sup>26</sup>Witkiewicz, 63.

<sup>27</sup>Witkiewicz, 136.

<sup>28</sup>Witkiewicz, 148.

<sup>29</sup>Stanisław Witkiewicz, "Impresjonizm" [Impressionism], in: *Sztuka i krytyka u nas* [Polish art and criticism], ed. Jan Jakubowski, Marta Olszaniecka, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971), 149.



who perceives the world only in fragments. Since it was impossible to be objective, the artist was trying to convey the complexity of the world through detail, which, in a way, contained the whole. Such an understanding of impressionism, as well as the category of cognition in general, is particularly helpful in noticing the level of complexity of more-than-human nature, including the flora and fauna in the Tatra mountains. It is also worth noting that Witkiewicz's extremely graphic natural imagination is rooted in Romantic literature. As Maria Olszaniecka observes:

The enthusiasm for Mickiewicz's descriptions of nature could be explained if we take into consideration Witkiewicz's personal love for creating pictures-descriptions. Witkiewicz loved *Pan Tadeusz* (quotations from the poem may be found not only in books but also in Witkiewicz's letters) and it shaped him as an impressionist writer. We could even argue that Mickiewicz had a direct original influence on Witkiewicz's descriptive language.<sup>30</sup>

Focusing on a detail was an epiphany-like experience. Especially when a group of climbers looked at a monumental landscape for the first time:

What looked like golden gravel from above, with the eye of a peacock's feather on top, is a great valley, full of rocks from the surrounding mountain tops, boulders that we climb onto, roll off, jump over, minding the narrow spaces between them. Climbers climb onto them using their hands, working with their legs, arms, backs. They are focused – they do not want to break their legs, twist their arms. If anything, they can be bruised and tear their shins. It is chaos, a labyrinth, a puzzle made of small rooms, narrow corridors, narrow passages, steep walls; however, in the face of the majestic mountains, the hardships and the dangers of rock formations, it is nothing. Alas, it does not resemble the comfortable roads we are used to. The hardship makes it impossible to observe nature and the surroundings. Man is busy with, engrossed in, walking.<sup>31</sup>

Witkiewicz's poetics in *Na Przełęczy* is focused on what is important at a given moment – when one is actually looking at something. Fragmentation, i.e., paying attention to a certain fragment of a larger image, modulates sensitivity in the sense that it allows one to perceive the autonomous, the strange and the specific in nature. Witkiewicz pays attention to landscape because he wishes to see the world anew; he wishes to include more-than-human nature (previously relegated to the role of decorations or background) in the act of looking.

Through the streaks of light, trembling in a slight mist, the even walls of Rysy rise up high – foggy, airy; the sun falls into the valley of a black lake and shines there as if, beyond the rocky, dark threshold, an electric lamp burned, throwing reflections on the rocks, whose each bend and projection is clear and sharp. [...] Rock rubble is scattered everywhere, large, white chippings of granite are piled up. In the sunlight you can see this world in ruins – you can see that the mighty mountain tops crumble, fall apart and turn into lumps and dust that the wind blows away; you can see how spruces die, you can see their whole generations, pale, wretched, dwarfed, dying or already dead.

<sup>30</sup>Marta Olszaniecka, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Sztuka i krytyka u nas*. ed. J. Jakubowski, M. Olszaniecka, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971), s. XLII.

<sup>31</sup>Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy*, 135.

[...] Ferns turn yellow, the grass withers. Everything shows traces of decay, death, transformation and rebirth – of constant change and impermanence. Only water, dark, shiny, uniform, so different from what surrounds it, seems to be as permanent as eternity.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Witkiewicz's impressionistic consciousness also influenced the form of this autobiographical essay: he reversed its narrative order. It was not so much the desire to describe reality that resulted in the description of the detail as the experiences triggered by noticing what had previously remained invisible. The latter motivates the text, rendering it fragmentary and digressive.

Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski had similar concerns to Witkiewicz. He criticized the rapidly changing Tatra Mountains and rampant tourism, which translated into the degradation of the natural environment and the unique mountain ecosystem. In the essay *Kultura a natura* (1913) [Culture and nature], which was extremely important for environmental protection in Poland, Gwalbert Pawlikowski expresses his concerns about the lack of official regulations that could protect the Tatra Mountains from the brutal exploitation by tourists and its irreversible consequences (the construction of cableways, converting mountain shelters into hotels, and turning paths into roads).

In relation to more-than-human nature, Gwalbert Pawlikowski also opposed anthropomorphism, which deprived nature of its autonomy and distanced it from man:

For the moods triggered by nature seem to have no reason, and their nature is undefined; indeed, we tend to ascribe to nature those feelings that come to us, and explain them, undefined as they are, as feeling the same thing as nature. It is the age-old, apparently insoluble, problem of anthropomorphism. It only takes on a different, supposedly higher, or in fact very vague and indistinct, form, as if it were destined to die someday by dissolving into the fog. Instead of the naive animism animating each creation of nature individually, we should recognize the unity of the universal spirit with which the human spirit is connected.<sup>33</sup>

Such an approach is connected to Gwalbert Pawlikowski's developed environmental awareness and his concern for environmental protection: starting in 1912, he was the president of the Tatra Mountains Protection Committee of the Tatra Mountains Society. He wished to establish the Tatra Mountains national park, similar to the first American national park Yellowstone.<sup>34</sup> He was an ardent advocate of this idea and helped introduce official environmental protection regulations (Radecki 2014, 59-80). National parks could protect the environment: an environmental refugium would be established. The national park was supposed to be an autonomous space; it would be managed and regulated only by its own laws. Humans were to study them and learn about the laws of nature. The creation of a national park would also mean that nature would be recognized as a valuable cultural object and become part of Polish

<sup>32</sup>Witkiewicz, 207.

<sup>33</sup>Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski, *Kultura a natura i inne manifesty ekologiczne* [Culture and nature and other ecological manifestos], ed. Remigiusz Okraska, (Łódź: Obywatel-Stowarzyszenie "Obywatele-Obywatelom", 2010), 45.

<sup>34</sup>Jacek Kolbuszewski, *Ochrona przyrody a kultura* [Environmental protection and culture], (Wrocław: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Polonistyki Wrocławskiej), 143.

national heritage. Therefore, any decisions or regulations that could significantly affect the way the park operated should be based on morality, ethics, and sound judgment.

The representations of nature in nineteenth-century literature make us reflect on their origins. We also need to reflect on and reformulate such basic categories as subject and nature, since, as concepts, they promote exclusion and (gender, ethnic and species) inequalities. As such, humanistic thought could no longer ignore animals and the development of economy based on the exploitation of natural resources. Ecocriticism, as an approach that is fundamentally revisionist, began to examine the relationships between human and more-than-human nature, trying to create an inclusive world, based on mutual coexistence and cooperation.

The roots of this reading practice are, in turn, found in American nature writing of the second half of the 19th century, as exemplified by H.D. Thoreau's *Walden, or life in the woods*. The text was a manifesto: it questioned and opposed the exploitation of the environment for profit. Capitalism, which additionally significantly violated social relations, was also a source of, among other things, economic exclusions. There is no such distinct tradition of environmentally-oriented texts in Poland. This has to do with, among other things, historical context: the subordination of Polish literature to politics. Nature was (indirectly) used to fight for Polish independence, and was not treated as an autonomous, self-regulating, and self-governed sphere.

However, interesting transformations of environmental imagination may be noticed in Polish literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In a comparative analysis, the works of Witkiewicz and Gwałbert Pawlikowski engage in an original dialogue with the tradition of nature writing, and even express some contemporary ecocritical concerns.

Journalism and literature played a significant role in shaping social awareness as regards environmental protection (and at the turn of the century, as exemplified by Gwałbert Pawlikowski, personal involvement and activism also played an important role). They may be described as a collective exercise in empathy and responsibility.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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# KEYWORDS

NATURAL WRITING

ecocriticism

**ABSTRACT:**

In the article, I focus on the comparative approach to the images of nature in literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. I analyse H.D. Thoreau's *Walden, or life in the woods* and Stanisław Witkiewicz's *Na przełęczy* [On the mountain pass]. The starting point for examining the origins of nature writing is a close reading of Henry David Thoreau's essay, which marks the beginning of ecocriticism: it combines an activist and revisionist approach towards the relationship between human and more-than-human nature. Although nature writing has not developed as a distinct tradition in Polish literary studies, in my analysis I demonstrate that Stanisław Witkiewicz's *Na Przełęczy* (1891) is essentially an example of this genre, as discussed by Lawrence Buell in reference to H.D. Thoreau's essay.

## environmental awerness

### *American transcendentalism*

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# The Music of the Abyss: Nature in Howard Phillips Lovecraft's *The Music of Erich Zann*

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*Silence and peace come over you if you begin to comprehend the darkness. Only he who does not comprehend the darkness fears the night. Through comprehending the dark, the nocturnal, the abyssal in you, you become utterly simple.*

C.G. Jung<sup>1</sup>

## 1 – Prologue

This article should probably have been written in German because I wish to write about a secret, *the* secret, to be exact, which Erich Zann tried to tell the narrator of *The Music of Erich Zann*, emphasizing that it can only be expressed in German. However, contrary to expectations, it is not the language itself that is at stake here, but the emanation of the German soul it expresses. The Austrian composer Arnold Schönberg wrote in a letter to Alma Mahler:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The red book* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 251.

<sup>2</sup> Schönberg is referring to the works of Igor Stravinsky and Maurice Ravel in this quote.



But now comes the reckoning! Now we throw mediocre kitsch mongers into slavery again, and they will need to revere the German Spirit and learn to worship the German God.<sup>3</sup>

The “German Spirit” seems to correspond to Hegel’s “spirit of the times” (*Zeitgeist*). And Schönberg wrote this letter at a time that could be described as the time of fulfilled prophecy. The prophet whose prophecy comes true is of course Hegel/is of course Kant. It is impossible to put it differently, and although comparing these two philosophers is a considerable simplification, I focus on the similarities in their philosophies of aesthetics. The aesthetic revolution which begins with Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* is also an integral part of modernism.<sup>4</sup> The “German God” from Schönberg’s letter thus appears to be a god of modernity.

## 2

*The music of Erich Zann* is one of those short stories by Howard Phillips Lovecraft which somehow elude the standard approach to his works.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, it may be included in the so-called “Cthulhu mythology.”<sup>6</sup> The term was coined by August Derleth and today it is most often used to describe Lovecraft’s works. However, literary scholars point out that Derleth allegedly misrepresented the literary legacy of Lovecraft. In addition to literary forgeries, Derleth also (ingeniously) referred to (his view of) Christianity in his discussion of Lovecraft’s literary mythology.<sup>7</sup> The term “Cthulhu mythology,” though still in use, seems to be obsolete, and Lovecraft’s prose is now seen as much more diverse. On the other hand, *The music of Erich Zann* lacks many characteristic features that make up a “classic” Lovecraftian text. There is no confrontation with the unknown in this short story, which usually leads to madness or the death of the protagonist. Respectively, even before one is confronted with the unknown, the reader is provided with a description of malevolent beings that is filled with adjectives. For a reason.<sup>8</sup> Houellebecq observes that:

<sup>3</sup> *Schoenberg’s Correspondence with Alma Mahler*, ed. Elizabeth Keathley, Marilyn McCoy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 128.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bartosz Kowalczyk, “Podwaliny modernizmu” [Foundations of Modernism], in: *Szkice o modernizmie* [Essays on Modernism] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Silva Rerum, 2019), 9-18.

<sup>5</sup> Krzysztof Grudnik points out that the author claimed that this story was one of the best he had ever written. Krzysztof Grudnik, *Okultyzm i nowoczesność. Studium literaturoznawcze* [Occultism and modernity: A literary study] (Gdynia-Kraków: Black Antlers, 2016), 314.

<sup>6</sup> The core of Lovecraft’s mythology is made of works which Michel Houellebecq calls “Great Texts.” Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the world, against life*, trans. Dorna Khazeni (New York: Abrams, 2019), 45-46.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sunand Tryambak Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: A life* (West Warwick: Necronomicon Press, 1996), 638-640. Cf. Mikołaj Kołyszko, *Groza jest święta* [Terror is sacred] (Chojnice: Phantom Books, 2014), 83-85.

<sup>8</sup> That is why Lovecraft was often considered to be a bad writer. However, Michel Houellebecq claims that this was a literary strategy: “no one has ever attempted to imitate these passages where he sets aside all stylistic restraint, adjectives and adverbs pile upon one another to the point of exasperation, and he utters exclamations of pure delirium such as: ‘Hippopotami should not have human hands and carry torches ...’ This can be proven *a contrario* by his pronouncement regarding the work of a peer: ‘[Henry] James is perhaps too diffuse, too unctuously urbane, and too much addicted to the subtleties of speech to realize fully all the wild and devastating horror in his situations.’” Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the world, against life*, 94-95.

HPL's aim was objective terror. A terror unbound from any human or psychological connotations. He wished, as he said himself, to create a mythology that "would mean something to those intelligent beings that consist only of nebulous spiraling gases." Just as Kant hoped to set the foundation of a valid ethical code "not just for man but for all rational beings," Lovecraft wanted to create a horror capable of terrifying all creatures endowed with reason.<sup>9</sup>

*The music of Erich Zann* is but a promise of such a description. An old man writes down his story, but a sudden gust of wind makes the pages fly out of an open window and ultimately the narrator, and consequently the reader, is not able to learn the truth. Thus, the identity of the mysterious creature with which the musician was fighting remains a mystery.

### 3

The story is a retrospective account of past events. The narrator reminisces about a time when, as a student of metaphysics, he rented a room in a house on Rue d'Auseil. Already during the first night in his new apartment, he heard music, which – as it turned out – was coming from the room of another tenant – Erich Zann, a rather inconspicuous mute old man from Germany, whom the narrator considered to be a genius violin player. Fascinated by the unearthly, passionate, and wild melody, the narrator asks Zann if he could listen to him play. Zann agrees to play for him, but the music is not as haunting and intriguing as the "night music," which was, in the words of the narrator: "a kind of a fugue, with recurrent passages of the most captivating quality (...)." <sup>10</sup> The narrator is disappointed that what Zann played for him differs from the music he heard at night. He hums the notes he remembers but the musician becomes angry and scared. He waves his hand, making the narrator stop, and looks nervously towards the curtained window "from which one could look over the terminating wall at the declivity and panorama beyond." <sup>11</sup> The old man asks the student to move to another room, where he will no longer be able to hear the music at night.

The narrator could hear the old man's music only once more, and the circumstances were unusual to say the least. A terrible scream could be heard from Erich Zann's room. <sup>12</sup> When the musician opened the door, the narrator could see that he was visibly distressed. The violin and the bow were on the floor. The old man asked the student to sit down and wrote a few words on a piece of paper.

The mute implored me in the name of mercy, and for the sake of my own curiosity, to wait where I was while he prepared a full account in German of all the marvels and terrors which beset him. <sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Houellebecq, 87.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *The music of Erich Zann* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Lovecraft, 4.

<sup>12</sup> "(...) an inarticulate cry which only a mute can utter, and which rises only in moments of the most terrible fear or anguish." Lovecraft 5.

<sup>13</sup> Lovecraft 5-6.

Zann wrote for an hour, but before he could finish his account, he turned, trembling, towards the window. The narrator could hear the music coming from the outside. The musician picked up the violin and began to play passionately, as if trying with all his might not so much to drown the music coming from the outside out but to ward it off.

Then, the plot picks up momentum. Zann's music becomes more and more demoniac and mysterious forces rush into the room. A gust of wind blows Zann's handwritten papers out the window, and then extinguishes the candles. The narrator tries to find the musician in the dark and he touches his face: "his blue eyes were bulging, glassy and sightless."<sup>14</sup>

#### 4

The nature of this mysterious force has been analyzed by many different scholars. Krzysztof Grudnik refers to Lacanian typology:

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, "the endless abyss," where the self disintegrates (the self as a symbolic construct) corresponds to the Real. [...] The function of the music in the story is difficult to determine. [...] Nevertheless [...] there is an affinity between music and the Real; music is touched by the Real.<sup>15</sup>

The window, and in fact the street (Rue d'Auseil, whose name refers to *au seuil* – "on the threshold"<sup>16</sup>), is for Grudnik a barrier that separates the symbolic order from the Real, that is, an order which cannot be symbolized.

This is an initial, and of course valid, interpretation. Furthermore, Benjamin Noys, to whom Grudnik refers,<sup>17</sup> argues that:

It is this "chaos in the symbolic" that Lovecraft's fiction constantly delineates, doing so through the concept Žižek identifies as the "imaginary Real", in which we find "a kind of image that endeavors to stretch imagination to the very border of the unrepresentable."<sup>18</sup>

Grudnik concludes after Noys that:

[Noys] argues that the Real is unrepresentable and thus "we could note the recourse to the piling of adjectives, an excess of signifiers, veil and unveil, at the same time, the monstrous unspeakable <<thing>."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Lovecraft 8.

<sup>15</sup> Grudnik, *Okultyzm i nowoczesność. Studium literaturoznawcze*, 313-314.

<sup>16</sup> Grudnik, 312.

<sup>17</sup> Grudnik, 314.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Noys, *The Lovecraft "Event"*, [online:] [www.academia.edu/548596/The\\_Lovecraft\\_Event](http://www.academia.edu/548596/The_Lovecraft_Event) [date of access: 29 March 2021]

<sup>19</sup> Grudnik, *Okultyzm i nowoczesność. Studium literaturoznawcze*, 314.

The relation between Lovecraft's style and the concepts of Lacan is indeed well-founded, perhaps too well-founded in twentieth-century philosophy. In fact, however, it is a valid perspective – after all, entities that elude symbolization – beings that cannot be described by means of language – may be found in abundance in Lovecraft's works.

This notwithstanding, Grudnik, drawing on Burleson's findings, appears to go too far in his interpretation. Let me quote Burleson directly:

It is significant that Erich Zann's music is described as a "kind of a fugue," (...). It is sufficient to point out that just as a musical fugue consists of multiple themes interwoven in certain ways, the story at hand has at least three "textual" themes similarly employed: the setting of the rue d'Auseil, the music of Erich Zann, and the weird externality or alienage of whatever influences may lie beyond Zann's curtained window.<sup>20</sup>

Apparently, however, both authors struggle with defining the function of music in the story, and this function (contrary to what Grudnik claims) can be clearly defined. I will return to this question later on in this article. It is enough to point out at this point that Burleson, guided by his intuition, almost arrives at a correct conclusion in his etymological analysis of the concept of music. Just before he moves away from this question towards other issues at hand, Burleson writes: "The old man is inseparable from <<his>> music, which of course is of the Muses."<sup>21</sup> This seemingly laconic statement is nevertheless very important. First of all, it evokes an important context which, although it may be found in all of Lovecraft's works, seems to be treated marginally. But we will come back to that as well.

## 5

In the monograph *Szkice o modernizmie* [Essays on modernism] (2019), I write the following about Lovecraft's works:

The abyss [...] with which Zann struggles seems to be a pure and perfect emanation of the essence of German idealism, and thus the essence of modernity. The musician tries to ward it off with his music.<sup>22</sup>

I have interpreted the abyss as modernity because I have misinterpreted some fragments of the text and made some incorrect assumptions.

First, the old man claims that what he fears can only be described in German.<sup>23</sup> This seems to suggest that whatever is lurking outside the musician's window can only be described using concepts that exist only in German. After all, (in the words of Deleuze)<sup>24</sup> concepts are

<sup>20</sup> Donald R. Burleson, *Lovecraft: disturbing the universe* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 69.

<sup>21</sup> Burleson, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Kowalczyk, *Szkice o modernizmie*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Lovecraft, *The music of Erich Zann*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Michał Herer, "Tysiąc plateau – książka osobliwa" [A Thousand Plateaus – a unique book], in: Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Tysiąc plateau* [A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia] (Warsaw: Bęc Zmiana, 2015), IX.

the essence of philosophy, and it is hard to find a more German philosophy than German idealism.

Secondly: Erich Zann belongs to a world which is, as it were, created outside of language, both because of his profession and because of the nature of his disability.<sup>25</sup>

Thirdly: it is a mistake to assume that the old man is hiding from modernity in one of the largest cities in Europe (we assume that Rue d'Auseil is in Paris). After all, urbanization and modernity go hand in hand and, in some respects, reflect the same phenomenon.

Fourthly: The fact that the narrator is a student of metaphysics matters, but it is wrong to assume that all forms of metaphysics are associated with German idealism.

And fifthly, the reader should not assume that they know who Erich Zann really is. It is a mistake to assume that the old man is what he appears to be, but I will refer to this question later in this essay.

## 6

The decisive experience, so difficult to talk about, it is claimed, for those who have had one, is not even an experience. It is nothing more than the point at which we touch the limits of language. (...) Where language stops is not where the unsayable occurs, but rather where the matter of words begins. Those who have not reached, as in a dream, this woody substance of language, which the ancients called *silva* (wildwood), are prisoners of representation, even when they keep silent.<sup>26</sup>

The above passage from Giorgio Agamben's *The Idea of Prose* may provide an alternative perspective, or, indeed, a more focused perspective in the process of reading Lovecraft through the prism of Lacan's philosophy. In such a context, the concept of the Real would be redefined. We would have to recognize that what we call the Real is not in fact outside the symbolic order, but rather its foundation.<sup>27</sup> In other words, it gave rise to, essentially symbolic, reality. Bruno Schulz seems to share this view. In *The Mythologization of Reality*, Schulz thus writes about poetry:

when the word, released from such coercion, is left to its own devices and restored to its own laws, then a regression takes place within it, a backflow, and the word then returns to its former connections and becomes again complete in meaning - and this tendency of the word to return to its nursery, its yearning to revert to its origins, to its verbal homeland, we term poetry.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> This observation in itself is not incorrect, it is actually, as it will turn out later, extremely important. However, its interpretation is incorrect.

<sup>26</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "The Idea of Matter," in: *Idea of Prose*, trans. by Michael Sullivan, Sam Whitsitt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 37.

<sup>27</sup> Other Lacan scholars argue the same.

<sup>28</sup> Bruno Schulz, *The Mythologization of Reality*, trans. by John M. Bates, [online:] <http://www.brunoschulz.org/mythologization.htm> [date of access: 19 July 2021].

He further writes:

Our most sober concepts and definitions are distant offshoots of myths and ancient stories. There is not even one of our ideas that is not derived from mythology, a mythology that has been transformed, mutilated, remoulded.<sup>29</sup>

The above observations can be summarized thus: the paradigm in which language is not secondary to reality, but creates it, is characteristic of the 20th century – it may be found in psychoanalysis (including Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis), phenomenology, neo-positivism, structuralism, post-structuralism, and pragmatics. Schulz and Agamben are probably the closest to the phenomenological perspective: they point to the extreme limitation of symbolic attributes, which allows one to experience the original nature of different phenomena. However, Agamben indicates that we have not so much reached the end of language, but the end of the matter of language and the ambiguity of the term "matter" is paradoxical. It turns out that something as immaterial as language can materialize, although, understandably, this should not be surprising. In *The Mythologization of Reality*, Schulz writes about it openly ("The old cosmogonies expressed this in the maxim 'in the beginning was the Word'"<sup>30</sup>), suggesting that the word, the meaning, and the myth are material:

When we employ commonplace words, we forget that they are fragments of ancient and eternal stories, that, like barbarians, we are building our homes out of fragments of sculptures and the statues of the gods.<sup>31</sup>

Similar connotations may be found in Agamben's essay. Indeed, language has no end; it only has a foundation against which a reckless traveler can hit their head.

## 7

A small suggestion hidden in one of the descriptions provides key information about the story's greatest mystery. However, before we answer the most important questions – What haunts Zann? Who is Zann? – we should focus for a moment on the (many different) functions of music in the story. For one, there is "night music," which the narrator describes as utterly different from everything that he has heard before: "the playing grew fantastic, delirious, and hysterical, and yet kept to the last the qualities of supreme genius which I knew this strange man possessed."<sup>32</sup> Respectively, when Erich Zann played a concert for the narrator during the day the music was different, so unlike the "strange melodies"<sup>33</sup> that he heard in his room at night. It is in the description of this "daytime" concert that the term "fugue" appears, which was later employed as a dominant structural and narrative feature in the interpretation

<sup>29</sup> Schulz.

<sup>30</sup> Schulz.

<sup>31</sup> Schulz.

<sup>32</sup> Lovecraft, *The Music of Erich Zann*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Lovecraft, 5.

of the entire story, for example, in Burleson's and Grudnik's texts. It should be emphasized that this term appears in the story only once, in reference to the "daytime" music. The fugue is a classic form with a clearly defined structure. Lovecraft thus seems to emphasize the difference between the "daytime" and "night" music – the latter is definitely more chaotic but also more important in the context of the entire story. This difference corresponds to the differences between classical and modernist music (or art in general). The fugue is associated with Bach and baroque music, while Zann's "night" music is associated with Schönberg and does not rely on classical compositional patterns. Schönberg's dodecaphonic music, is – also in the light of his letter – essentially modernist. Erich Zann should be thus read in a similar manner – as an aspiring modernist.

There is also the third type of music – it is described in the climax of the story. It is the music coming from the outside through the window; it appears to the narrator to be extremely subtle, quiet, and coming from afar.<sup>34</sup> The two types of music could not be more different. Zann's crazy and strange music is so unlike the sweet calm melody. In fact, two completely different worlds are confronted here: the modern world and the unknown, or rather forgotten, world of nature.

## 8

Lovecraft does not hide anything in *The music of Erich Zann*; yet, he carefully conceals his clues. Lovecraft is not, as he was once described, a mediocre writer, and he demonstrates his insight and profound knowledge of the modern paradigm in this and other stories. These passages, in which, as Houellebecq states, he writes like a madman and breaks all stylistic rules, in fact reveal ruptures in the structure of language, which gives way to the wild and the primary. As such, the ruptures in the structure of the symbolic order through which the Real enters are exposed as well. Such an approach to language may also be found in the works of Wittgenstein and Lacan. The modern world thus appears to be a linguistic construct, made of, as Schulz suggests, fragments of old tales. Their original meaning is lost – it has not survived to modern times. If anything, it is mutilated meaning, devoid of its fundamental connotations, and therefore completely illegible. Lovecraft in his texts seems to refer to, and miss, this lost world of harmony, whose fragments and particles we interpret today as "cosmic horror." This longing can be seen in Lovecraft's early text *Poemata Minora*, in the section entitled *To Pan*, in which the lyrical I describes their meeting with Pan in a dream. The final stanza is particularly important:

All too soon I woke in pain  
And return'd to haunts of men  
But in rural vales I'd fain  
Live and hear Pan's pipes again.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Lovecraft, 310.

<sup>35</sup> Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *Poemata minora: Volume II* (Providence: The Providence Press, 1902), [online:] [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Poemata\\_Minora,\\_Volume\\_II](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Poemata_Minora,_Volume_II) [date of access: 19 July 2021].

This tangible expression of the feeling of alienation and passion for mythical stories suggest that the mysterious being should be sought in the sphere of original meaning – unfortunately, now we only have remnants of this once epic story.

For Lovecraft, the mysterious being was associated with Erich Zann. And Erich Zann was described thus: “He was a small, lean, bent person with shabby clothes, blue eyes, grotesque satyr-like face, and nearly bald head.”<sup>36</sup> The musician looked not so much like a man who resembles a satyr, but rather like a satyr dressed in human clothes. Since Lovecraft used his extraordinary imagination in his fantasy and horror stories, we can rely on our imagination and argue that Erich Zann was, in fact, a satyr who had left his home and learned to live among people.<sup>37</sup> This, in turn, allows us to conclude that the mysterious being Zann is afraid of is Pan.

## 9

Lovecraft’s 1927 essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* provides his readers with a unique insight into the writer’s literary inspirations. Explaining the idea behind weird fiction, Lovecraft reviews the works of his famous predecessors, including Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe. Lovecraft argues that a good horror story should, above all, convey a certain atmosphere, emphasizing that this atmosphere should be perceived on a macro-scale – on a cosmic scale. To describe this absolute and utter horror, which transcends human understanding, Lovecraft uses the term cosmic panic. The meaning of panic is clear: the experience of dread, which paralyzes or leads to temporary (or permanent) madness, is so common that it can certainly be viewed as one of Jung’s archetypal experiences. Horror literature eagerly explores this type of fear. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft refers to authors who explored this issue literarily, pointing to the mythical source of fear. One of Edward Frederic Benson’s short stories seems to resonate quite well with the theme of *The music of Erich Zann*. The protagonist of the story describes to his friend an extraordinary experience that changed his life. When he was alone in the woods, he suddenly heard “the sound quite distinctly of some flute-like instrument playing the strange unending melody.”<sup>38</sup> The melody was not based on repetitive phrases. High notes, used as a point of climax, were repeated over and over again:

It came from the reeds and from sky and from the trees. It was everywhere, it was the sound of life. It was, my dear Darcy, as the Greeks would have said, it was Pan playing on his pipes, the voice of Nature.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Lovecraft, *The music of Erich Zann*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Such a reading seems to be in keeping with the principles of the so-called Occam’s razor. Having selected the solution with the fewest assumptions, we should simply accept the fact that if Erich Zann resembles a satyr, then he probably is one.

<sup>38</sup> Edward Frederic Benson, “The man who went too far”, in: *The Room in the Tower and Other Stories*, (London: Mills & Boon, 1912), 222.

<sup>39</sup> Benson, 223.



*The man who went too far* was published almost ten years before *The music of Erich Zann* but it is not the only text that might be a point of reference for Lovecraft's story which he mentions in his essay. Lovecraft also refers to a text by one of his masters, the Welsh writer Arthur Machen, who is the author of the acclaimed horror story entitled *The Great God Pan*. Lovecraft thus describes the disturbing experiment that triggers the plot:

A young woman, through surgery of the brain-cells, is made to see the vast and monstrous deity of Nature, and becomes an idiot in consequence, dying less than a year later.<sup>40</sup>

Commenting on the esoteric connotations of Machen's prose Marco Pasi writes:

As we will see, in this story the ancient Greek god serves as a symbol of a spiritual reality that lies beyond our senses, to which esoterics and mystics of all times have yearned to gain access.<sup>41</sup>

William James famously argued that we only have access to reality conditioned by empiricism, because we experience the world through our senses. This leads to a disturbing hypothesis. Even if the senses have direct access to the world of things (after all, phenomenology refers to visible phenomena), their interpretation is biased because our consciousness operates in the symbolic. If it is to be real, contact with the world of things should take place outside the symbolic. Language becomes a veil of reality behind which there lies material truth, but also unsayable (inexpressible through symbols) horror.

The goal of the controversial experiment which lies at the heart of *The Great God Pan* is to actually switch off those areas of the brain that seem to be responsible for the symbolization processes, so that the patient can see through the veil of reality.<sup>42</sup> In *The music of Erich Zann*, the veil of reality drops probably because, due to his disability, Zann exists on the border between the symbolic and the real, and his subjectivity is very limited in relation to symbolic structures.

## 10 – Epilogue

In the short stories by Benson and Machen, as Pasi observes, Pan symbolizes opposing the ongoing modernization processes or perhaps even civilization. Even though he fills people with horror (though other contributing factors should also be considered), he stands for a post-lapsarian longing of the "Paradise lost." In psychoanalytical terms, it is a longing for unity with the unconscious, the realm of instincts, which humanity can no longer suppress<sup>43</sup> – they return to regain control over the world just like the Great Old Ones in Lovecraft's stories.

<sup>40</sup> Howard Phillips Lovecraft, *Supernatural horror in literature*, (Abergele: Wermod and Wermod Publishing Group, 2013), 122.

<sup>41</sup> Marco Pasi, "Arthur Machen's Panic Fears: Western Esotericism and the Irruption of Negative Epistemology", *Aries*, no. 7 (2007), 69.

<sup>42</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan*, [online:] <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/389/389-h/389-h.htm> [date of access: 19 July 2021].

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Grudnik, *Okultyzm i nowoczesność. Studium literaturoznawcze*, 298.

Interestingly, both Marco Pasi and Krzysztof Grudnik point out that the “rebirth of Pan” takes place in early modernism.<sup>44</sup> It probably fills the empty space left after Nietzsche declared God dead. Pan is predominantly reborn in literature, not only in horror literature, which – paradoxically – is the sphere of the symbolic. Indeed, in his preface to Alberto Caeiro’s collection of poems, which, as the poet observes, may be read as a continuation of Walt Whitman’s poetic philosophy, Ricardo Reis writes: “Rejoice, all you who bemoan the worst disease in History! The Great Pan is reborn!”<sup>45</sup>

We should also reflect on the categories used to describe the works of Lovecraft, Machen, Benson and Blackwood, and instead of the popular category of “supernatural horror” we should use a term that would identify the source of this horror. The category of “natural horror” seems right, given that contemporary horror literature is also moving in a similar direction.<sup>46</sup> However, the answer to this question should be explored in a different essay.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>44</sup> Pasi, “Arthur Machen’s Panic Fears: Western Esotericism and the Irruption of Negative Epistemology”, 69. Grudnik, *Okultyzm i nowoczesność. Studium literaturoznawcze*, 296.

<sup>45</sup> Ricardo Reis, “Przedmowa” [Introduction], trans. by Wojciech Charchalis, in: Fernando Pessoa, *Poezje zebrane Alberto Caeiro* [Collected poems of Alberto Caeiro], trans. by Gabriel Borowski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Lokator, 2020), 19.

<sup>46</sup> For example, in the works of Jeff VanderMeer, or even some short stories by Stephen King.

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# KEYWORDS

music

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**ABSTRACT:**

The article analyzes Howard Phillips Lovecraft's short story *The Music of Erich Zann*, with a view to presenting the conflict between modernity and nature in Lovecraft's works. The text in question, along with supplementary texts, provides information that allows us to reformulate the perception of Lovecraft's works, or more precisely, the category of "supernatural horror."

**MODERNISM**

nature

modernity

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# Nature and People. Tadeusz Śliwiak's Ecological imagination

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“(…) wir in einer dem Baum abholden Zeit leben. Die Wälder schwinden, die alten Stämme fallen, und es erklärt sich nicht durch Ökonomie allein. Die Ökonomie ist hier nur mitwirkend, ist volziehend, denn zugleich leben wir in einer Zeit, in der auf unerhörte Weise verschwendet wird. Das entspricht ihren beiden großen Tendenzen: der Nivellierung und der Beschleunigung. Das Hohe muss fallen, und das Alter verliert seine Macht.”<sup>1</sup>.

## The dream of nature

Tadeusz Śliwiak, renowned as a poet belonging to the generation of 1956, adopts a non-anthropocentric point of view in his works. He takes the side of nature and recognizes the damage caused to it by man. Artur Sandauer writes that the poet: “adopted Horatio’s motto *naturam sequi*, to follow the natural order, as his own. In his poetry, he attempts to describe the essential experience of man coming into active contact with nature, of man transforming it.”<sup>2</sup> Piotr Kuncewicz observes that “in general, the two spheres of this poetry are the beautiful world of nature and the trauma of suffering, disability, death.”<sup>3</sup> Respectively, Konstanty Pieńkosz argues that “Śliwiak describes [...] the world in such a way as to show the servitude of nature in relation to man. He notices traces of the bond between man and nature everywhere.”<sup>4</sup> Andrzej Juchniewicz observes that “one cannot ignore the poet’s pioneering work in the field of ecological imagination.”<sup>5</sup> As pointed out by the critics, Śliwiak had a unique relationship with nature, which

<sup>1</sup> E. Jünger, *Bäume*, Munich 1977, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> A. Sandauer, *Poezja tragicznego ładu. (Rzecz o Tadeuszu Śliwiaku)* [Poetry of the tragic order (Tadeusz Śliwiak)], in: idem, *Zbrane pisma krytyczne. Studia o literaturze współczesnej* [Collected critical essays: Studies on contemporary literature], Warsaw 1981, p. 483.

<sup>3</sup> P. Kuncewicz, *Tadeusz Śliwiak*, in: idem, *Agonia i nadzieja* [Agony and hope], vol. 3: *Poezja polska od 1956* [Polish poetry since 1956], Warsaw 93, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> K. Pieńkosz, *Świat nadziei paradoksalnej* [The world of paradoxical hope], in: T. Śliwiak, *Koń maści muzycznej* [Musical horse], prefaced and edited by K. Pieńkosz, Kraków 1986, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> A. Juchniewicz, *Z czyścica na Parnas* [From Purgatory to Parnassus], “Śląsk” 2020, no. 5, p. 63.

had to do with his childhood experiences of living with his family in the municipal abattoir in Lvov. At the time, he saw nature as a desired and pristine sphere of harmony and order, a place beyond human interference and beyond evil, which he witnessed daily in the slaughterhouse, in particular in the inhumane treatment of animals and Jewish workers.<sup>6</sup> “[...] to return to nature, you must first exist as a subject that is separate from it,” Julia Fiedorczuk writes.<sup>7</sup> Growing up in an abattoir during the Second World War, Śliwiak was separate from nature.<sup>8</sup> Wishing for green spaces, he immersed himself in them above all in his imagination. In the poem *Rondo*, published in his ingenious collection *Poemat o miejskiej rzeźni* [The poem about the municipal abattoir] (1965), Śliwiak goes back to and reflects on his childhood, looking at himself “from the outside.”<sup>9</sup>

I ran from the abattoir to the forest to wash my eyes and my hands  
from the sight and matter of warm animal blood

And the scream that was inside me now became a voice  
it rubbed against the bark of tall pine trees

A thorny bush surrounded me Soft moss embraced me  
The trees stood dignified Their knots were bleeding

The green forested sky has quieted down  
I looked at my hands They were clean again

As if a bird flew from them and made me and  
itself free And it sang And it did not blame me<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Critics have commented on Śliwiak's childhood in Lviv and the fact that he witnessed the killing of animals and Jews, seeing the annihilation of both as equally cruel, thus acknowledging the fact that animals were the victims of war. See: K. Niesporek, *Zwierzęta i ludzie. O Poemacie o miejskiej rzeźni Tadeusza Śliwiaka* [Animals and people: The Poem about the municipal abattoir by Tadeusz Śliwiak], “Porównania” 2021, no. 2 [in press] and P. Sobolczyk, “Ty jesteś krowa a ja Żyd”. *Tadeusza Śliwiaka Holocaust zwierząt* [‘You are a cow and I am a Jew’: Tadeusz Śliwiak writes about the Holocaust of animals], “Pogranicza” 2009, no. 5, p. 28–40.

<sup>7</sup> J. Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie. Wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* [Cyborg in the garden: Introduction to ecocriticism], Gdańsk 2015, p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> In the preface to *Poezje wybrane* [Collected poems] from 1975, Tadeusz Śliwiak thus writes about his contact with nature: “From the window of our apartment I could see the huge building of the cold store and the halls where animals were killed. There was a tannery on the other side of the street. Old chestnuts grew not far from my house. There were many. We, the local boys, liked them. They were green for a long time. Like long holidays which we truly experienced only after the war”; “Today, one of my favorite places which I visit most often are the wild Bieszczady Mountains. They are so different from that city (Lviv - K.N.) built with stone.” T. Śliwiak, *Wstęp* [Preface], in: idem, *Poezje wybrane* [Collected poems], prefaced and edited by the poet, Kraków 1975, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Bennett, *Emphatic vision: Affect, trauma, and contemporary art*, Stanford 2005.

<sup>10</sup> T. Śliwiak, *Rondo*, in: *Poemat o miejskiej rzeźni* [The poem about the municipal abattoir], Kraków 1965, p. 23:  
Biegłem z rzeźni do lasu obmyć oczy ręce  
z widoku i materii ciepłej krwi zwierzęcej  
A ten krzyk co był we mnie teraz stał się głosem  
ocierał się o korę wyprężonych sosen  
Ostry krzew mnie otoczył Mech przygarnął miękkie  
Drzewa stały dostojnie Krwawiły ich sęki  
Uciszyło się niebo zielone lesiste  
Patrzyłem w moje dłonie Były znowu czyste  
Jakby ptak z nich uleciał i wolnym uczynił  
mnie i siebie I śpiewał I za nic nie winił

All poems by Śliwiak were translated by M. Olsza.

The lyrical I finds refuge in nature. His very escape to the forest demonstrates that the poet cannot accept the transgression of moral boundaries taking place in the abattoir. In the forest, he seeks understanding and purification “from the sight and matter of warm animal blood.” Śliwiak inverts the biblical ritual of sacrifice in the poem. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, we read: “[...] the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a young cow, sprinkling those who are defiled, sanctify for the purification of the flesh” (Hebrews 9:13). The goal is to restore balance, “allowing a person or an unclean thing to return to normal life.”<sup>11</sup> However, in Śliwiak’s poem, the purpose of shedding blood and its meaning changes. It does not cleanse but corrupts, it is a symbol of the cruelty of war and the abattoir – it dries on the body, occupying the mind of the lyrical I. Witnessing slaughter, as Freud argues, exposes the artist to numerous stimuli in a very short time;<sup>12</sup> the unspeakable emotions build up in the lyrical I and they are expressed only in the open space – in the forest. Screaming, uttering what has been suppressed, brings relief. The lyrical I who wishes to find refuge and purification in the forest does not harm the animals, but he feels responsible for the evil done to them by people. He sees “the red sea of the slaughter” and is unable to save the lives of the innocent, be it animals or Jews. He feels their pain. Nature, on the other hand, plays the role of an absolute that opens up to human pain and absolves it. The forest surrounds the lyrical I with care and tenderness and thus suffers with the I. By taking the poet’s pain onto itself, the forest frees and cleanses the I of bad emotions. The scream is temporarily replaced by silence. Red blood is replaced with green trees. Bloody hands turn clean. The lyrical I no longer feels guilty. At least for a moment, he is not confined to the experience of the abattoir but thinks about freedom and the end of war. However, peace and absolution found in nature do not last long:

And here I can hear a shot and noises in the hazel trees nearby  
And here is a man with a shotgun and an animal covered in blood<sup>13</sup>

The forest opens up to man and accepts him, but man feels that he is superior to nature: he goes far too far and constantly comes into conflict with it. Ultimately, the reality of the slaughterhouse, from which the artist tries to escape, catches up with him at every step. It comes back, again and again, when he least expects it, as if the poet was forever doomed to repeat it. The poet’s idea of “ecological dreams” of wild and “pristine” nature, to which he did not have access before, are thus quickly verified and forgotten. In the forest, apart from desired nature, the poet almost always meets a hunter or a lumberjack whose actions have a negative impact on the environment. While nature is supposed to be pristine and open to all, it is nevertheless appropriated by man. And, as Śliwiak writes, man cannot / does not want to accept “that he is just one of many living creatures inhabiting this Earth, an unprivileged element of the

<sup>11</sup>M. Wróbel, *Oczyszczenie* [Purification], in: *Encyklopedia katolicka* [Catholic encyclopedia], vol. XIV: *Nouet – Pastoralis Officii*, Lublin 2010, p. 296.

<sup>12</sup>S. Freud, *A general introduction to psychoanalysis*, London 2012, p. 95.

<sup>13</sup>I oto strzał i łoskot w leszczynie pobliskiej  
i człowiek z dubeltówką i zwierz we krwi śliskiej  
T. Śliwiak, *Rondo...*, p. 23.



biosphere.”<sup>14</sup> On the contrary: he tries to dominate and govern it.<sup>15</sup> Śliwiak wants to blur the differences between nature and man – he wants both to coexist; he wants mutual understanding. Or, Artur Sandauer writes, pointing to the “biological or geological concerns” found in the poet’s works, Śliwiak wants “active contact,” “friction.”<sup>16</sup>

## The greatness and benevolence of nature

In his works, Śliwiak provides the reader with insight into nature. Trying to describe how it may be experienced and how it functions in the Anthropocene, he allows “non-human elements of nature” to speak, thus fulfilling the ecocritical “postulate of speaking on behalf of the environment.”<sup>17</sup> In the volume *Widnokres* [Horizon] (1971), in the section *Ziemia* [The Earth], in the poem *Oratorium* [Oratorio], Śliwiak succinctly describes his approach to nature. The title of the poem is connected with “a monumental musical composition for soloists, choir and orchestra”<sup>18</sup> (in the poem, the collective subject speaks: it is a choir of trees which describe how they function at particular stages of life) and a place of worship, “communal or individual prayer, the acquisition of wisdom and virtue [...]”<sup>19</sup> In the poem, the forest, called the oratorio, stands for a sacred space, an absolute that should be cherished, while nature defined as “the domain of harmony, innocence and pristine beauty” stands “in opposition to those aspects of culture that are corrupt, degenerate or – to refer to the language of theology – sinful.”<sup>20</sup>

The poem comes in three parts. In the first part:

Our trunks are pregnant  
 our trunks are like bells  
 bells that are made of resin ores inside us  
 we hang them all over the forest  
 the wind rings them  
 announcing golden autumn  
 then we become a light-leaved orthodox church  
 of the forest rite  
 where the sun is askew  
 and the incense, like fog, walks on the moss  
 hawthorn bushes perform the blood sacrifice  
 and bird choirs in green clouds  
 sing ejaculatory prayers

<sup>14</sup>J. Fiedorczyk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. J. Tabaszewska, *Wstęp. Ekokrytyczna (samo)świadomość* [Introduction: Ecocritical (self) awareness], “Teksty Drugie” 2008, no. 2, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup>A. Sandauer, *Poezja tragicznego ładu...*, p. 482–483.

<sup>17</sup>J. Tabaszewska, *Wstęp...*

<sup>18</sup>M. Głowiński, *Oratorium* [Oratorio], in: M. Głowiński, T. Kostkiewiczowa, A. Okopień-Sławińska, J. Sławiński, *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of literary terms], Wrocław – Warsaw – Kraków 2007, p. 360.

<sup>19</sup>W. Partyka, *Oratorium* [Oratorio], in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. XIV: *Nouet – Pastoralis Officii*, Lublin 2010, p. 711.

<sup>20</sup>J. Fiedorczyk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 41.

because autumn is the season of fulfillment  
because autumn is our summa<sup>21</sup>

In his persona poems, Śliwiak gives voice to those who have been deprived of subjectivity. The trees speak in the first-person plural and thus are able to present their perspective – personification is employed throughout the entire poem. The forest without man is free; it is governed by its own rules. Recalling the past, trees look back at the time of their glory. The “pregnant trunks” symbolize resistance, strength, durability, and hardness. They are, as Gaston Bachelard puts it, great images of power, they embody virtue and they testify to self-sacrifice and humility (“brimant ses propres élans, toutes les paresseuses impulsions du végétalisme vert et tendre”). Though they may appear to be invincible,<sup>22</sup> deep down they are sentient, which is reflected in the “trunks that (are/ sound) like bells.” Manfred Lurker writes that the wind enters the trees and acquires a voice: the tree groans and moans; something whispers and murmurs in the treetops.<sup>23</sup> The resin secreted by the bark is associated with the bells hanging on the branches. The trees say that the resin is like “ore,” implying that it is a precious raw material. Indeed, its healing properties prove its value – it is used to heal the “wounds of the tree.” Nature is self-sufficient, it relies on itself. The choir of trees repeats the phrase “our trunks” twice. The use of the possessive pronoun shows that they are not owned by humans. Nature is reborn, it feels free, it follows its own rhythm, determined by the change of seasons. Autumn is celebrated in the pristine forest. Interestingly, it is not seen as a time of bloom, impermanence, fragility, fading away, or imminent death. It is a time when the power of trees is revealed and celebrated. Mircea Eliade writes that:

[...] a tree is full of sacred powers because it is vertical, it grows, it loses its leaves and grows new ones, and so it regenerates (“dies” and “rises”) an infinite number of times, it has resin, etc. The source of all these justifications is a simple mystical contemplation of the tree as a “form” and as an alteration of biological life. [...] The tree becomes sacred because of its power, that is, because it shows an extra-human reality which is revealed to man in a specific shape, bearing fruit and cyclically renewing itself.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup>T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium* [Oratorio], in: idem, *Widnokres* [Horizon], Warsaw 1971, p. 111:

Nasze pnie ciężarne  
dzwonne nasze pnie  
z żywicznego kruszcu wiązą się w nas dzwony  
rozwieszamy je po całym lesie  
wiatr je kołysze  
dzwoni jesień złotą  
wtedy stajemy się światłolistną cerkwią  
leśnego obrządku  
gdzie słońce stoi ukośnie  
i chodzą po mchu mgieł kadzidła  
krzewy głogów spełniają ofiarę krwi  
a ptasie chóry w zielonych obłokach  
śpiewają akty strzeliste  
bo jesień jest porą spełnienia  
bo jesień to nasza summa.

<sup>22</sup>G. Bachelard, *La Terre Et Les Rêveries De La Volonté*, Paris 1948, p. 67; 120-123.

<sup>23</sup>M. Lurker, *Der Baum in Glauben und Kunst: unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Werke des Hieronymus Bosch*, Strasburg 1960, p. 250.

<sup>24</sup>M. Eliade, *Roślinność: symbole i rytzy odnowienia* [Vegetation: symbols and rites of renewal], in: idem, *Traktat o historii religii* [Treatise on the history of religion], trans. J.W. Kowalski, Warsaw 2009, p. 280–281.

The choir of trees reveals the secrets of nature to the reader. The forest lies beyond the sphere of the human; it turns into a sacred place where the cyclical sacred rites of nature take place. The trees transform in the process. They are filled with metaphysical light; they turn red, brown, and yellow and become "light-leaved." This is the side of the forest that is difficult to describe, alien and inaccessible to man, hence the neologism. It turns out that the forest ritual is governed by its own rules and draws on Catholic liturgy. Fog is associated with incense, pointing to the presence of a deity in the forest. The red fruits of hawthorn trees are a reminder of Christ's "blood sacrifice" and symbolize his suffering; respectively, they represent the Old Testament rite of sprinkling animal blood, in itself a propitiatory ritual. Birds sing "ejaculatory prayers," addressing deities "in order to establish [...] a spiritual connection."<sup>25</sup> The prayers are sung "in green clouds," i.e., in the treetops. The choir of trees explains that they mediate between heaven and earth, the higher and more powerful they are, the closer they are to the absolute or, as Mircea Eliade writes, they become the "seat of the deity."<sup>26</sup>

The forest knows its value; it defends itself against any attempts to disturb its peace and order:

We were once the Kingdom of Dark forests  
 forests inaccessible to strangers  
 guarded by bears and wildcats  
 a daredevil who dared to enter  
 was scared by a hissing snake  
 and poisonous berry  
 decaying glowing trunks  
 and the owl-eyed night  
 Like great monarchs  
 in arborescent crowns  
 we have ruled over this land for centuries  
 only our equals  
                   hunters and falconers were allowed to enter<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup>J. Zbiciak, *Akt strzelisty* [Ejaculatory prayer], in: *Encyklopedia katolicka* [Catholic encyclopedia], vol. 1: *A i Ω - Baptyśc* [A and Ω – Baptists], ed. F. Gryglewicz, R. Łukaszyk, Z. Sułowski, Lublin 1973, p. 275.

<sup>26</sup>M. Eliade, *Roślinność: symbole i rytmy odnowienia...*, p. 283.

<sup>27</sup>T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium...*, p. 111–112.:

My niegdyś księstwa lasów borych  
 dla obcych niedostępne knieje  
 przez niedźwiedzie kudłate strzeżone i żbiki  
 śmiałka co się tu zapuszczał  
 płoszyliśmy sykiem żmii  
 i trującą jagodą  
 próchnem święcących pni  
 i sowiooką nocą  
 Jak monarchowie wielcy  
 w rosochatych koronach  
 od stuleci tą ziemią włodarząc  
 tylko równym sobie dawaliśmy drogę  
 łowcom i sokołnikom.

The trees, speaking from a contemporary perspective, constantly return to the past. Calling themselves “great monarchs / in arborescent crowns” and ruling over independent “kingdoms of dark forests,” they go back to the times when they were admired, respected, and revered – perceived as superior to all other living creatures.<sup>28</sup> As Bachelard puts it, trees once inspired greatness and pride in men, and could also calm men down, bringing relief and reassurance. “Le chêne n’arrête-t-il pas jusqu’au nuage qui passe?” further asks Bachelard, emphasizing the unlimited divine power of trees.<sup>29</sup> In the past, the forest was the sphere of the mysterious, the powerful, and the untamed. Intruders were not allowed. The forest was guarded by wild animals and plants. On the other hand, forests could also be generous, providing shelter and respite. Nature, as it is stated in the Book of Genesis, was governed by man, but in a completely different dimension:

The nature of the tree reveals the power of life. Sitting under knotted tree trunks that had survived more than one generation, people realize how short their own lives are. They took the life force from the tree in the form of fruit. They wished to find a cure for various diseases in leaves and flowers. They modelled their houses and tents on the branches which formed the roof over their heads. Flowering, fruiting, the annual dying and rebirth, pointed to a higher power, which made man hope he could overcome death.<sup>30</sup>

## The crisis of nature

The fact that nature gives us so much ultimately did not lead to the establishment of a bond between nature and man, but to man’s “emancipation”<sup>31</sup> and dreams of conquest. The forest, which is governed by its own rules, is now subjected to human hegemony. The biocentric perspective gives way to that of the anthropocentric. In the second part of *Oratorium*, Śliwiak writes:

[...]  
 We are trees that used to be great and mighty  
 today we are abandoned by our defenders  
 we are no longer guarded by their fangs and claws  
 bears on a chain dance with the gypsies  
 wildcats cry in cages  
 wild boars run away at the sight of man  
 we are waiting in forest ghettos  
 for the torturers who arrive at dawn  
 with sharp shiny tools  
 used to kill us and drag our chopped bodies

<sup>28</sup>M. Lurker, *Der Baum in Glauben und Kunst ...*, p. 239.

<sup>29</sup>G. Bachelard, *La Terre Et Les Rêveries De La Volonté...*, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup>M. Lurker, *Der Baum in Glauben und Kunst ...*, p. 245. Translated by M. Olsza.

<sup>31</sup>J. Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 41.

We were once great  
today we are vulnerable trees<sup>32</sup>

Describing the changes that have taken place in nature, the choir of trees looks at the past and the present. Trees are no longer able to defend themselves. However, it is not the plants that die first but the animals. As a child, the poet lived in the municipal abattoir which made him particularly sensitive to the suffering and unethical treatment of animals. Instead of enjoying their freedom in the forest, their natural habitat, animals are tamed and “broken” by man. The process of domestication removes the barrier that exists between people and animals, mentioned in the previous stanza, which so far has protected the forest from intruders. The act of conquering “the dangerous animal nature,” fear and danger, allows a person to truly enter the forest. The bears, wildcats and boars that used to be on their guard are now trained and domesticated. As a result, as Tadeusz Sławek writes, “the animal becomes human and loses its true wild nature [...]”; on the other hand, it cannot be “subjected to the laws of culture.”<sup>33</sup> While bears adapt to the situation and “dance on a chain,” other creatures rebel, suffer, and try to defend themselves: “wildcats cry in cages” and “wild boars run away at the sight of man.” When wild animals are tamed and gone, forests turn from “light-leaved orthodox churches” into “ghettos,” where trees no longer have any power. Lumberjacks rule over them. The choir of trees knows when and why they come. They know that they will die and prepare for it every morning, calling lumberjacks torturers. Indeed, they are barbarians, executioners, tormentors, murderers. In a different poem by Śliwiak, the tree says: “[...] z siekierą na ramieniu / idzie człowiek przez las / boję się jego oczu / boję się jego pomysłów” [...] with an ax on his shoulder / a man is walking through the forest / I’m afraid of his eyes / I’m afraid of his ideas].<sup>34</sup> It is people, not nature, that are unpredictable. For whoever puts an axe to a tree uproots it, radically destroys it, kills it.<sup>35</sup> Just holding an axe gives man unlimited power over the forest. When the executioner comes, Śliwiak writes in the volume *Widnokres*, “nim pierwszy topór w pierwszy pień uderzy” [before the first axe strikes the first trunk], nature fades away, withers, changes its colors (“ciemnieje zieleń mech swą miękkość traci” [the green moss loses its softness]), sends warning signals (“ptak ponad gniazdem kołuje spłoszony” [the bird flies over the nest, alarmed], “wiatr się zrywa” [the wind blows], “w źródłach rdzawy pojawia się naciek” [rust appears in the springs], “świecą pnie spróchniałe” [rotten trunks shine]), gets scared and hides (“głębiej się chowa rudy lis w swej Jamie” [the red fox hides deeper in its den], “ślepe

<sup>32</sup>T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium...*, p. 112:

[...]  
My drzewa nigdy wielkie i mocarne  
dziś opuszczone przez naszych obrońców  
już nas nie strzegą ich kły i pazury  
niedźwiedzie na łańcuchu tańczą z Cyganami  
żbiki płaczą w klatkach  
odyńce uciekają na widok człowieka  
my w leśnych gettach zamknięte czekamy  
na oprawców idących o świcie  
z narzędziem ostrym namaszczone światłem  
aby nas zabić i wywlec obrabane ciała  
My nigdy wielkie  
dziś bezbronne drzewa.

<sup>33</sup>T. Sławek, *Zwierzę, człowiek i wspólnota losu. O węzach, drożdżach i tym, co jest nami* [Animal, man and shared lives: Snakes, thrushes and our problems], in: *Zwierzęta i ludzie* [Animals and men], collected volume, ed. J. Kurek and K. Maliszewski, Chorzów 2011, p. 19, 23–24.

<sup>34</sup>T. Śliwiak, *Drzewo* [Tree], in: idem, *Solizman*, Warsaw 1981, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup>W. Kopaliński, *Topór* [Axe], in: idem, *Słownik symboli* [Dictionary of symbols], Warsaw 1990, p. 428.

sowy dziób chowają w pierze / kryją swą bladość pod liściem podbiały” [blind owls hide their beaks in their feathers / they hide their pallor under the leaves of a coltsfoot]), and try to defend their territory with whatever strength they have left in them (“ścieżki zarasta blekot i pokrzywa” [the paths are overgrown with poison parsley and nettle]). On the other hand, trees, sensing a threat, “w pniach twardnieją” [harden in their trunks]. Trying to avoid extermination, their successive layers bond, unite; they do everything they can to make it difficult for man to tear them apart and hurt them. The tree, as Gaston Bachelard observes, “il se noue pour s’appuyer, non plus sur un humus riche et faible, mais pour s’appuyer sur soi, sur cette réserve de dureté qu’est un tronc nouveau. Il devient dur pour durer.”<sup>36</sup> It is the accepted but not always effective line of defense. Ultimately, when man comes, nature is defenseless against him. In another poem by Śliwiak we read:

the tree that fell  
under the blow of an axe  
did not kneel  
it did not cover itself with its branches

there is a resin scent in the air  
there is a stump with its branches cut off on the ground  
stupefied<sup>37</sup>

Trees die standing up. This is what they have to face. They do not ask mercy from their torturers or ask for their lives to be spared. Proud, they humbly accept their fate. In the last stanza of *Oratorium*, the choir of tress says: “[...] nie wiemy czym jest ucieczka / znamy dla siebie tylko jedną drogę / wzwyż do światła” [...] we do not know how to run / we only know one way / up towards the light].<sup>38</sup> They live. They do not want to die. They want to build their power, to go towards “niebiańskich sfer kosmicznych” [heavenly cosmic spheres], the metaphysical and the sacred. The remnant of the tree’s power is the “stump with its branches cut off.” Shocked to see its most important part die, they are “stupefied.” As such, to quote Witold Doroszewski, they are “standing still, shocked, not able to move, terrified, numb.” Peter Wohlleben asks: “And what if you cut a tree down? Is it then dead? And what about centuries-old stump [...]? And if it isn’t, then what is it?”<sup>39</sup> When an axe cuts into it, the trunk is wounded, it becomes lonely, it has to redefine itself and its role in the forest. “Are these trunks now young tress or, alternatively, are they really thousands of years old?” Wohlleben asks. Henry D. Thoreau writes in one of his essays: “The owner of the axe, as he released its hold on it, said that it was the apple of his eye; but I returned it sharper than I received it.”<sup>40</sup> In the “forest

<sup>36</sup>G. Bachelard, *La Terre Et Les Rêveries De La Volonté* ..., p. 65.

<sup>37</sup>T. Śliwiak, *Ostupienie* [Stupefaction], in: idem, *Żywica* [Resin], Warsaw 1964, p. 62:  
drzewo które padło  
pod uderzeniem topora  
nie klęczało  
nie zasłaniało się gałęziami  
jest żywicy zapach w powietrzu  
jest obłupany na ziemi pień  
osłupiał.

<sup>38</sup>Idem, *Oratorium*..., p. 113.

<sup>39</sup>P. Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from A Secret World*, Vancouver 2015, p. 80.

<sup>40</sup>H.D. Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Oxford 1999, p. 38.

ghetto” the axe is *the* weapon. Man learns how to use it better with every tree he cuts down. Another sign of the forest dying is the smell of resin, which is released whenever an axe cuts into a tree.<sup>41</sup> The smell is stronger in places where nature dies. In *Ośłupienie* [Stupefaction], Śliwiak writes: “woń żywicy wiedzie / z lasu do tartaku / z tartaku do lasu” [the smell of resin leads / from the forest to the sawmill / from the sawmill to the forest]. This is the way of the cross which the trees have to walk.

## Dead nature

Deforestation, about which Tadeusz Śliwiak writes so often in his works, furthers as civilization develops. What man considers to be good and normal is perceived differently by nature:

They bind us together to make rafts  
they float us on a great river  
this is our road to a sawmill hell  
where saws tear our fibers  
and cut our beautiful bodies into pieces  
the wind does not recognize us in the even boards  
our shavings are blown away like withered leaves  
They will strip us of our beauty  
impose their idea of beauty on us  
smooth out our knots  
anoint us with shine<sup>42</sup>

In the above fragment, there is a strong division into two grammatical categories: they and we. On the one side, there is culture and man. On the other side, there is nature. Nature is appropriated by people who believe that, as Fiedorczuk observes, its only task “[...] is to serve man, because technological progress and the development of capitalism are good in themselves, and nature will find a way to adapt.”<sup>43</sup> The trees try to show their own point of view on this subject,

<sup>41</sup>In his works, Śliwiak also mentions another tool that is used to cut trees – the saw: “Przyszli / z ramion topory zdjęli / ujęli w ręce swe zębate piły / tą stałą wyostrzoną czynią wiele światła” [They came / took the axes off their shoulders / took their saws into their hands / they make a lot of light with this sharpened steel] (*W środku lasu* [In the middle of the forest] in: T. Śliwiak, *Czytanie mrowiska...* [Reading the anthill], p. 27); “Leżymy powaleni / na suchym mchu lasu / pień olbrzym / i ja / Patrzę na opartą o pień drzewa piłę / pokazuje zęby // Jutro wrócą tu drwale” [Fallen/ we lie on the dry moss/ a giant stump / and me / I look at the saw leaning against the tree trunk / it bares its teeth // Tomorrow the lumberjacks will come back (*Człowiek w lesie* [Man in the woods] in: T. Śliwiak, *Wyspa galerników* [The Island of galley slaves], Kraków 1962, p. 13).

<sup>42</sup>T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium...*, p. 112–113:  
Wiążą nas w tratwy  
pławia wielką rzeką  
oto jest nasza droga do piekła tartaku  
gdzie piły rozpedzone szarpią nasze włókna  
i tną na sztuki nasze piękne ciała  
w ułożonych deskach wiatr nas nie poznaje  
wióry nasze rozwiewa jak uschnięte liście  
Obedrą nas z urody naszej  
obdarzą swoją wyobraźnią piękną  
wygładzą sęki  
namaszcza świecidlęm.

<sup>43</sup>J. Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 41.

explaining to the torturers that they are also living and breathing creatures. Śliwiak recognizes and describes the physiological features of trees:

[...] In a tree  
there is white blood under the sepia of the bark  
accessing it means cutting  
wood-wrenching taut strings

suddenly putting out tomorrow's green<sup>44</sup>

The bark is like skin. Resin is like "white blood." "Taut strings" of knots are like veins. Each blow with an axe causes severe wounds to the trees, gradually killing them. In *Oratorium*, trees remind us that their respective parts mean something more. Manfred Lurker observes that the branches represent forms and ideas, the outer bark is a symbol of corporeality, geographical spaces are leaves, and stars are flowers; the sap flowing through the tree, on the other hand, contains the essence of divinity.<sup>45</sup> Cutting trees into pieces not only destroys the forest, changes its original purpose, but also deprives it of its essential symbolic meaning as a whole. Objectified, trees become victims of violence. The actions performed on them are expressive and brutal: trees complain that they are "bound," "floated," "torn," and "cut." Their choir does not, as Bachelard would want, "porter haut sa couronne aérienne, son feuillage ailé."<sup>46</sup> Instead trees are stripped of their original beauty and turned into boards. Human interference transforms trees beyond recognition – they become new beings, unrecognizable to nature itself. The wind used to be their friend but now it is their foe. The "shavings" are blown away like waste, remnants left by man. For trees the reaction of the wind is a clear sign of their passing, vulnerability, anxiety<sup>47</sup> – they fully realize the scale of the harm and destruction done to them. The choir of trees also points out that nature and culture differ, especially when it comes to the category of beauty. Man finds aesthetic value mainly in "still/dead nature," which he helped create. Human skills and creativity overcome the once incomprehensible power of nature. Man interferes in nature and departs "from the animistic and organicist understanding of nature,"<sup>48</sup> moving towards capitalism. By killing nature, man gains tangible profits. Śliwiak further writes about the devastating nature of human activity thus:

So they will turn flora into four-legged fauna  
of tables and chairs  
we will be used to support the roofs of their houses  
they will build their bridges with us  
they will use us to make whatever they like

<sup>44</sup>T. Śliwiak, \*\*\*[Idąc przez śniegi...] [\*\*\* Making my way through the snow], in: idem, *Ruchoma przystań* [Moving haven], Kraków 1971, p. 61:

[...] w drzewie  
pod sepią kory jest krew biała  
dostać ją znaczy drzewołomnie  
przecinać struny naprężone  
zielen jutrzejszą gasząc nagle.

<sup>45</sup>M. Lurker, *Der Baum in Glauben und Kunst* ..., p. 147.

<sup>46</sup>G. Bachelard, *La Terre Et Les Rêveries De La Volonté* ..., p. 69.

<sup>47</sup>Por. W. Kopaliński, *Wiatr* [Wind], in: Idem, *Słownik symboli*..., p. 453.

<sup>48</sup>E. Domańska, *Humanistyka ekologiczna* [Environmental humanities], "Teksty Drugie" 2013, no. 1–2, p. 18–19.



from weapons to tools  
 from a butcher's log to a violin  
 from the pig's trough to the frigate  
 And even after death, they will take refuge in us  
 and they will make us spread the arms  
 of the crosses over their graves<sup>49</sup>

The human being is presented in the poem as the creator of reality. He takes over the divine role of creating the world on his own terms. Human interference radically changes nature: "flora" transforms into "four-legged fauna." The nature of trees changes irreversibly; this transgression is unacceptable to them. Ernst Jünger explains that "im Holz tritt das Bergende und Schützende des Baumes am unverhülltesten hervor."<sup>50</sup> Therefore, he claims that exploiting the forest to meet human needs is justified. The transformed trees, turned into tables, chairs, roofs, bridges, violins, but also coffins or crosses, etc., as Jünger would say, become an indispensable part of culture and live on even when man dies. It is even a more complex process: the transgression brings out their essence. When something is made of wood, Jünger explains, we see its real life, its "forest and wood spirit," its "forest charm," which even an axe cannot destroy.<sup>51</sup> Śliwiak also appreciates this hidden value of the objects which surround us. He knows that there is more to things, and he wants to understand them. He makes use of all of his senses. The poet interacts with things – he touches them, smells them, looks at them, analyzes them, wishing to discover their original nature:

A tree is more than a memory of it  
 a table a boat carved with a spoon  
 you can touch it  
 you can be read in it  
 grains and knots sealed with resin  
 you can add a few strings to it and it will sing  
 you can use a chisel to find a human face in it<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup>T. Śliwiak, *Oratorium...*, p. 113:  
 I tak z flory wywiodą czworonożną faunę  
 stołów i krzeseł  
 wesprą nami dachy swoich domów  
 zepną w mosty  
 będziemy służyć wszystkim ich zachciankom  
 od broni do narzędzia  
 od rzeźnickiego kłosa do skrzypiec  
 od świńskiego koryta do morskiej fregaty  
 A i po śmierci będą szukać w nas schronienia  
 i jeszcze nam rozkażą nad swymi grobami  
 rozkładać ramiona krzyży.

<sup>50</sup>E. Jünger, *Bäume ...*, p. 63.

<sup>51</sup>Ibidem.

<sup>52</sup>T. Śliwiak, *Pamięć* [Memory], in: idem, *Święty wtorek* [Holy Tuesday], Kraków 1968, p. 12:  
 Drzewo czymś więcej jest niż pamięć o nim  
 stołem jest łodzią wystruganą łyżką  
 można go dotknąć  
 można w nim odczytać  
 słoje i sęki zwężlone żywicą  
 można mu dodać kilka strun a śpiewa  
 można w nim dźwiękiem dociec ludzkiej twarzy.

If you look deep into things made of wood, you can discover the history of trees. It will make you ask questions that the poet asks four times in the poem *Rozdarcia* [Tears] when he watches a furniture exhibition in Kalwaria Zebrzydowska: “Co to za las?” [What is this forest?]. He notices a gap, an empty space, and regretfully replies: “to las co odszedł / w stronę ludzi i chłodnych zwierciadeł” [this forest has gone / towards people and cool mirrors].<sup>53</sup> However, when man uses nature to achieve his goals, he tends to err. Not only useful things, but also “weapons” and “a butcher’s log,” used to kill and harm others, are made of trees. As these objects, trees are not only witnesses of dramatic scenes of extermination, but also, against their will, instruments of crime – they are accomplices to the suffering of innocent creatures.

## Responsibility for nature

When he writes about the destruction of nature, Tadeusz Śliwiak cannot help but refer to his childhood experiences. He witnessed the death of Jews and animals in a municipal abattoir in Lvov, and thus he describes nature dominated by man as a “forest ghetto.” Nature will be annihilated there. The poet has been significantly traumatized by both genocides: “stoję tu / po wielu przykładach / nie oswoiłem w sobie / mieszkającej śmierci” [I am standing here / after many examples / I have not tamed the death/ that lives in me]<sup>54</sup>, “patrzę w las – widzę drzewo całe w łuskach siekier” [I look into the forest – I can see a tree full of axe scales].<sup>55</sup> Giving voice to trees, Śliwiak describes the subsequent stages of their life. Man puts an end to their happiness. Instead of using nature wisely, cooperating with it, or supporting it, man devises a plan to transform it from the nature of the first kind into nature of the second, or even third, kind.<sup>56</sup> Thus, happy mighty trees become the property of man, and their further existence depends on man. Then, they are first skillfully transformed into “even boards” and various objects. On the one hand, they are objects that we use every day and cannot imagine our lives without. On the other hand, they can be used to cause harm, transgressing all moral boundaries. Indeed, trees become their own torturers, as the axe and saw handles are usually made of wood. The poet notices the dramatic effects of human activity: “Dłuższa jest teraz / droga wiewiórki / z drzewa na drzewo / więcej jest teraz nieba / zstępującego w las” [The squirrel’s path / from tree to tree / is now longer / there is more sky / descending into the forest], he writes in *Ośłupienie*; “Tu pozostanie / pusty słup powietrza / nie obsiądą go ptaki / i zwierz się nie otrze” [Here will remain / an empty pillar of air / birds will not sit on it / and no animal will rub against it]; “ustaną korzenie / pień okaleczony / zamknie się w sobie / licząc stygnące słoje” [The roots will cease / trunk crippled / will shut itself off / counting the cooling grains], he predicts in the poem *W środku lasu* [In the middle of

<sup>53</sup>Idem, *Rozdarcia* [Tears], in: idem, *Widnokres...*, p. 110.

<sup>54</sup>Idem, *Ośłupienie...*, p. 62.

<sup>55</sup>Idem, *Igła* [Needle], in: idem, *Dotyk* [Touch], Warsaw 1989, p. 68.

<sup>56</sup>Julia Fiedorczuk explains: “Nature of the second kind is nature that has been processed by humans through farming, irrigation systems, or dams. The concept of nature of the third kind is connected with the development of imaging technology and computer science – it is the nature that has been technologically reproduced. [...] all these concepts, nature of the first, second, and third kind, make sense only in a culture that contrasts the domains of nature and culture, classifying human beings as culture and thus treating all their actions as unnatural.” J. Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie...*, p. 43–44.

the forest]. Śliwiak believes that people are the main culprits – they are responsible for the crisis of nature. He asks an important question: “czy człowiek zdusi winę w sobie / ofiarą ognia i potrzebą / stołu i łodzi z parą wiosł?” [will man silence the blame in himself / through the sacrifice of fire and the need / for a table and a boat with a pair of oars].<sup>57</sup> The poet knows that he benefits from culture at the expense of nature and indirectly tortures trees – he knows that he cannot blame the lumberjacks. Indeed, he somehow defends them: “poznałem najwyżej pięciu sześciu drwali / to dobrzy ludzie / nie mam im nic do zarzucenia” [I have met no more than five lumberjacks / they are good people / I have nothing against them].<sup>58</sup> However, Śliwiak still feels responsible for the natural environment – he believes that he is responsible, and guilty, because he is human. Despite the fact that he “pisze na papierze zaczerpniętym (z nich – K.N.)” [writes on paper taken from them], the choir of trees in *Oratorium* calls the poet “kronikarzem [...] słoju i spękanej kory” [the chronicler [...] of grains and cracked bark], a defender of “poezji lasu” [the poetry of the forest].<sup>59</sup> By showing the suffering and the terrible effects of the destruction of nature in his poems, Śliwiak wants to give voice to it or speak on its behalf. He tries to alleviate its pain, trying to resolve the conflict between nature and man. On the other hand, when in the volume *Kolczuga* [Hauberk], he writes about “Dantym tartaków” [Dante of sawmills], who sits “na wysokiej górze / usypanej z trocin” [on a high mountain / made of sawdust]<sup>60</sup> and mourns the forest, it seems that he is writing about himself.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>57</sup>T. Śliwiak, \*\*\*[Idąc przez śniegi...]..., p. 61.

<sup>58</sup>Idem, *Ostupienie...*, p. 62.

<sup>59</sup>Idem, *Oratorium...*, p. 113.

<sup>60</sup>Idem, *Dante*, in: idem, *Kolczuga* [Hauberk], Warsaw 1989, p. 68.

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# KEYWORDS

## ORATORIUM

### nature

### i m a g i n a t i o n

#### ABSTRACT:

This article examines the ecological imagination of the forgotten poet from the 1956 generation, Tadeusz Śliwiak, and his poem *Oratorium* [Oratorio] published in the volume *Widnokres* [Horizon] (1971), in the section entitled *Ziemia* [Earth]. The poet's observations on nature are summarized in this poem. Śliwiak in his poems notes that while nature opens up to man and accepts him, man, feeling his superiority over nature, goes too far and constantly enters into conflicts with it. In the forest, apart from communing with nature, which man wants very much, hunters and lumberjacks interfere with the environment. Though it should be protected and open to all, nature is appropriated by man. The poet believes that people are responsible for the destruction of nature and asks an important question: "czy człowiek zdusi winę w sobie / ofiarą ognia i potrzebą / stołu i łodzi z parą wiosł?" [will man silence the blame in himself / through the sacrifice of fire and the need / for a table and a boat with a pair of oars]. Feeling responsible for the natural environment and believing that he is to blame for its destruction because he is human, Śliwiak tries to save "poezja lasu" [the poetry of the forest]. By showing the suffering and the painful effects of the destruction of nature in his poems, Śliwiak wants to give voice to it or speak on its behalf.

# man ecology

*Tadeusz Śliwiak*

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# The Issue of Waste in the Works by Olga Tokarczuk

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In the short story *Góra wszystkich świętych* [All Saints' Mountain] from *Opowiadania bizardne* [Tales of the Bizarre] Olga Tokarczuk describes a cemetery of holy cows, where we can see:

(...) twisted, half-digested plastic bags, with logos of chain-store brands still visible, strings, rubber bands, bottle caps, cups. No organic digestive juice could deal with this advanced human chemistry. Cows ate waste and carried it, undigested, in their stomachs. This is what is left from cows, I was told. The carcass disappears, eaten by insects and predators. What is left, is eternal. Waste<sup>1</sup>.

We do not expect to find elements such as plastic bags in a holy place, i.e., a cemetery of sacred animals. However, they still appear there, scaring us away with their presence. We will try to consider the issue of waste in the works by Olga Tokarczuk, as well as the role it plays in her prose. How does waste interact with a literary text?

According to the dictionary definition, waste is something unwanted, unusable, used, useless, especially leftovers, remains, rubbish<sup>2</sup>. One could say an object becomes waste due to the intention of disposing of it. Every object has the potential of becoming waste. According to Martin Heidegger, objects become visible once they cease to serve their function; we notice them when they do not work properly. Some can be eliminated or reduced, but others can no longer be used – and thus become waste. In this context, the status of waste is not obvious. Waste used to be handy when it served man, but it lost this property once it broke down and was thrown away. Useless objects are marginalized. The problem with waste is its existence – its intrusive presence makes us feel uncomfortable in a way.

<sup>1</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, "Góra wszystkich świętych", in *Opowiadania bizardne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018), 195-196.

<sup>2</sup> <https://sjp.pwn.pl/doroszewski/smiec-I;5505639.html>, date of access 20.03.2021.



Greg Kennedy presents an interesting theory concerning waste in *An Ontology of Trash. The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature*, where he asks questions about waste as something non-existent, for non-existence is one property of waste. According to Kennedy, “a study of trash cannot be anything but ontological because, with trash being is most at issue. Trash is supposed to be nothing, a non-existent; it is supposed to lack whatever legitimates the presence of an object in our world”<sup>3</sup>. He believes that “trash necessarily follows from the logic of care-free commodities, whose consumption necessarily excludes taking care of them”<sup>4</sup>, that “the commodified consumption that inexorably concludes with trash does not let beings be and this ontological refusal like-wise prevents us from entering into our own being”<sup>5</sup>.

Some objects are single-use; they exist solely for a certain purpose, such as being containers for warm takeaway coffee, only to be discarded once they fulfill their purpose. Our attitude to things has changed over time. Thanks to technological advancements producing single-use objects is possible and commercially viable (also due to mass production, cheap labor, coordinated transport systems, access to resources). Before the Industrial Revolution such an undertaking would have been impossible due to technological and economic limitations, as a result of which few people could afford throwing things away. Nowadays food products are protected from the outside world with plastic (made of oil). Once we have drunk milk, we are left with waste – a container which no longer serves its role. Kennedy points out that “[t]o seal a piece of food in plastic is to sever all remaining relations it has with living nature”<sup>6</sup>. Food containers, apart from storing food, securing it from the outside world, and providing a deceptive sense of the sterility of the food they contain, also detach us from the production process. We lose the cause-and-effect relationship and cease to see the connection with nature.

Kennedy observes that “[p]lastic is a substance completely inert and lifeless”<sup>7</sup>, and that “[t]echnology favors it for its outstanding malleability; plastic, unlike natural materials (...) offers no substantial resistance to its manipulation”<sup>8</sup>. Even its very name indicates that it stands in opposition to nature, for it was made and produced by man in a laboratory. Objects made of plastic surround man in the form of clothes made of artificial fabrics, as well as processed plastic. We also rely on single-use packages or plastic bags. The scale of the problem can be easily seen in any shop, where it is difficult to find basic products that are not packed in plastic.

In the essay *Ogródki działkowe i pola golfowe* [Allotments and golf courses], Tokarczuk describes an allotment as a place for growing vegetables, with neat patches. Next to carrots and peas she describes sticks with “cut, empty mineral water bottles placed at the top, which are now stirred by the wind, making a noise which scares birds away”<sup>9</sup>. An allotment is (typically, but not always) a place in a city, where some space is divided into individual allotments purchased for recreational

<sup>3</sup> Greg Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash. The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature* (State University of New York, 2007), x.

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy, 123.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy.

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, 66.

<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, *An Ontology of Trash. The Disposable and Its Problematic Nature*, 66.

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy.

<sup>9</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, “Ogródki działkowe i pola golfowe”, in *Moment niedźwiedzia*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 108.

purposes or for growing vegetables. This space is artificial, torn away from the city tissue, a manifestation of a longing for nature. However, in the essay this space is invaded by a “foreign” element – a plastic bottle. It is being reused; combined with a stick (an element of a tree – i.e., it belongs to nature) it is supposed to protect crops from birds with its presence through its unusual shape and the noise it makes when stirred by the wind. This artificial element enters the natural world and distorts its order and space. Tokarczuk continues to stress this invasion into the world of nature: “one by one – people take picnic food out of plastic bags, put up cheap tin barbecues, fill plastic cups with supermarket juice. Once they finish eating, they will pull weeds and secure poles for peas”<sup>10</sup>. Tokarczuk points out “plastic bags”, “cheap tin barbecues” which are not durable, for high quality typically does not correlate with low prices. It is safe to assume that if such a portable barbecue breaks down, it will be thrown away. However, it is the “plastic cups” that are the biggest sin – they will be discarded after being used only once. All these objects constitute the profane, which violates nature’s integrity. We prohibit ourselves from nature by scaring it away with plastic bottles on sticks, which symbolizes man’s dominance over nature with our artificial products.

In *Prawdziwa historia* [True story] (*Opowiadania bizarne*), an art professor arrives in a city to give a talk at a conference. He goes to the center of town to watch the life of the metropolis. He watches people who “carry their shopping in gargantuan plastic bags, with huge leaves of parsley and stiff brooms of mature leek sticking out”<sup>11</sup> – plastic bags are an inseparable part of shopping both in the literary and physical world. People can do shopping at a street market located on a square outside the city center, which offers “cheap Chinese commodities” next to fruit and vegetables. The professor sees passers-by attracted by “displays full of branded goods, displayed wittily and flirtatiously, like works of art”<sup>12</sup>. In a review published in “Mały Format” Paweł Kaczmarski points out that the short story has a parabolic message: “status and prosperity are neither certain nor stable. The way we present ourselves influences how we are perceived”<sup>13</sup>. It could be said that how we are perceived depends on our clothes and the things we own. The protagonist of the short story sums up that “today shopping resembles browsing through garbage”<sup>14</sup> – it is hard to find something valuable among the mass-produced products which inundate us from huge factories.

The chapter *On the Origin of Species* from the novel *Flights* offers an interesting perspective. It is a reference to Darwin’s 1859 *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, in which the scholar presents the principles of his theory of evolution. Before, it was believed that natural species were not subject to change, whereas Darwin introduced a permanent state of change by showing that all species (including humans) gradually change. Rather than created by God, they emerge and die out as a result of slow, constantly ongoing causes. Changes are endless, for they are fuelled by species’ survival. The most important reason behind this changeability “is the mutual affinity between one organism and another – perfection of

<sup>10</sup>Tokarczuk.

<sup>11</sup>Olga Tokarczuk, “Prawdziwa historia”, in: *Opowiadania bizarne*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018), 86.

<sup>12</sup>Tokarczuk, 89.

<sup>13</sup>Paweł Kaczmarski, “Opowiadania mizerne” [Mediocre stories], a review of *Opowiadania bizarne* by Olga Tokarczuk, *Mały format*, 07-08/2018, <http://malyformat.com/2018/08/opowiadania-mizerne/>.

<sup>14</sup>Tokarczuk, “Prawdziwa historia”, in: *Opowiadania bizarne*, 91.

one organism leads to the perfection or emergence of others”<sup>15</sup>. In *Flights* Tokarczuk adds another chapter to Darwin’s history of evolution. A careful observer notices the emergence of a new species, unknown in Darwin’s times: plastic bags, which are “mobile and light; prehensile ears permit them to latch onto objects, or the appendages of other creatures, thus expanding their habitat”<sup>16</sup>. They can move thanks to their small size, light weight, as well as due to the fact that “they’re made up of their surfaces exclusively, empty on the inside, and this historic foregoing of all contents unexpectedly affords them great evolutionary benefits”<sup>17</sup>. Plastic bags are man-made.

By referring to the theory of evolution, Tokarczuk shows that the human species may be too slow to adapt to an environment dominated by a new species of “aggressive” plastic bags, for they are created too fast for people to adapt to the changes dictated by survival next to an invasive species. The ontological status of plastic bags should be considered, for Tokarczuk clearly presents them as an intermediate entity between living organisms – they are neither plants nor animals, but they can move, which distinguishes them from inanimate objects. In light of these arguments, Magdalena Ochwat’s interpretation of this fragment of the novel is correct:

Darwin’s theory, known as survival of the fittest, is based on constant competition between organisms which belong to the same species, or between organisms which belong to different species. This allows to see the catastrophic vision of the future – plastic bags may be the stronger, more durable, and better adaptable form of life than homo sapiens<sup>18</sup>.

In the context of the whole novel, which is devoted to travelling and the need to be in constant motion in order to uncover one’s inner “I”, plastic bags – although a man-made product – are better adapted to the world and travelling. Such a bag is a pure form which seeks content. Carried by wind, it can get stuck to random objects, it touches them, is filled with them, and then gets bored and moves on to find new contents. Darwin observes the distribution of species, which depends on – among other things – climate changes. Well adapted organisms are able to survive and pass down some particular feature from generation to generation, which ultimately becomes characteristic of the whole group. Plastic bags are eternal; they will decompose in 300 years, and enter the endless cycle of nature, which is their constant feature, as along with lightness, movability, and being in constant motion. They are able to dominate the whole world; we can find them in oceans, on land, in mountains, they slowly take over our habitats. It is ironic, for they are man-made. According to Darwin, new forms of life are better than older ones (as they are better adapted), and the evolutionary process is not just a process that leads to increased complexity (from simpler to more complex forms), but also signifies progress, improvement, and – ultimately – a drive for perfection. In the case of forms such as plastic bags – made by man from polymers, they are already complex at the moment of production, but later, due to changes induced by external conditions, they break down into smaller pieces, which nonetheless continue to exist

<sup>15</sup>Karol Darwin, *O powstawaniu gatunków drogą doboru naturalnego* [*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*], <https://wolnelektury.pl/media/book/pdf/darwin-o-powstawaniu-gatunkow.pdf>. English version: [http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1861\\_OriginNY\\_F382.pdf](http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1861_OriginNY_F382.pdf)

<sup>16</sup>Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*, (London: Fitzgarraldo Editions, translated into English by Jennifer Croft, 2017), 465.

<sup>17</sup>Tokarczuk.

<sup>18</sup>Magdalena. Ochwat, „Edukacja polonistyczna wobec kryzysu klimatycznego – rozpoznania i rekomendacje dydaktyczne”, w: *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Sectio N: Educatio Nova*, vol.5, (Listopad 2020): 198.

in space. According to the theory of evolution, “[m]an does not actually produce variability; he only unintentionally exposes organic beings to new conditions of life, and then nature acts on the organisation, and causes variability”<sup>19</sup>. Darwin identifies climate changes among the reasons behind the evolution of species. Nowadays we are experiencing another climate change, this time caused by man, to which animals cannot adapt, which is leading to the sixth extinction of species. Living organisms are being replaced by a new species, the man-made plastic bag, which does not require sunlight, access to water, adequate temperatures or air to survive – it only needs to exist and move. We have created a new species for the devastated world.

In *Przyszła archeologia* [Future archeology], Tokarczuk considers the way our generation will be perceived in the future. She describes contaminated beaches, where we can already find “plastic bottles after all drinks of the world, as well as plastic sheets, tires, shoes, Styrofoam, canisters, barrels and plenty other small stuff – toys, buttons, parts of some mysterious equipment, containers”<sup>20</sup>. This will concern future archeologists studying beaches and uncovering all this waste there. Aleksander Nawarecki, as if confirming Tokarczuk’s premonitions, observes in his *Lajerman* that “in fact archeologists dream about discovering an ancient landfill”<sup>21</sup>. Based on his considerations regarding industrial landfills (typically from mines) he observes that “the difference between a treasure and trash can be relative”<sup>22</sup>. In order to find something precious, one needs to scavenge – but we can never be sure whether a discarded thing is precious or trash. In every object, “every oddment there are oddments, which can not only be useful, but actually precious”<sup>23</sup>. In her essay *Feralne psy* [Stray dogs] Tokarczuk sums up that “although the poor are getting poorer, the rich’s dumpsters are well-stocked”<sup>24</sup>, and in the essay *Śmieci, śmieci* [Trash, trash]: “the waste system is based on social inequalities. The rich throw away what they no longer need, and the poor collect and reuse those second-hand things”<sup>25</sup>. Charity shops, which Tokarczuk saw in Switzerland, may be a solution to the problem of inequality. They are known as *Brockenhaus* – the name refers to the story from the Gospel according to St. John, in which Jesus, after the miracle of the five loaves and two fish, tells his disciples to collect the crumbs, so that nothing was left. This idea appealed to Tokarczuk, for it satisfies one of the many human needs – the exchange of things: “objects are exchanged between people, they are used up, they are not anonymous, they have their history and they are not cheap – they have soul and are often of good quality”<sup>26</sup>. However, she points out that currently there is a conviction that second-hand objects are humiliating, that people who buy them do so only because they cannot afford new things. She observes a division into those who are better off, who “consume cheap junk produced in sweatshops, which does not observe the majority of quality standards, meaning that those things will soon break down and will

<sup>19</sup>Darwin, [http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1861\\_OriginNY\\_F382.pdf](http://darwin-online.org.uk/converted/pdf/1861_OriginNY_F382.pdf)

<sup>20</sup>Olga Tokarczuk, “Przyszła archeologia”, in *Moment niedźwiedzia*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 109.

<sup>21</sup>Aleksander Nawarecki, “Hałda. Teologia resztek” [Landfill. Theology of waste], in *Lajerman*, (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2010), 50.

<sup>22</sup>Nawarecki.

<sup>23</sup>Nawarecki.

<sup>24</sup>Olga Tokarczuk, “Feralne psy”, in *Moment niedźwiedzia*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 58.

<sup>25</sup>Olga Tokarczuk, “Śmieci, śmieci”, in *Moment niedźwiedzia*, (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2012), 119.

<sup>26</sup>Tokarczuk, 120.

end up in the ever-growing pile of trash flooding us”<sup>27</sup>, and those who are worse off – scavengers, prospectors, willing to exchange or give away their goods. In Tokarczuk, exchanging goods could be the real answer to the problem of overconsumption we are dealing with today.

Water washes ashore new treasures, which have been cleansed from their past: “meanwhile instead of amber and pebbles, other treasures can be found – such as a small plastic toy soldier whose ranks and affiliation have been washed away, and so nobody knows which army he served and what happened to him”<sup>28</sup>. Tokarczuk often employs this motif; in the short story *Skoczek* [Jumper] (*Gra na wielu bębenkach*) [Playing multiple drums], the protagonists walk on a beach on a day following a night storm. Compared to their previous excursion, new elements have appeared: “there was plenty of waste on the beach: a string of seaweed, branches, sticks, sometimes entwined with plastic more colorful than expected”<sup>29</sup>. The phrase “more colorful than expected” [nadspodziewanie] is interesting here – it suggests that the plastic was not pale despite its contact with water; the color remained vibrant. Water “precedes any form, it is the foundation of any creation”<sup>30</sup>, and “submerging in water symbolizes a return to what was there before the form, that is complete regeneration and rebirth”<sup>31</sup>. Water is in itself a symbol of life, but it can also give new life via the initiation ritual. However, plastic immersed in water cannot take advantage of its beneficial properties, for it is synthetic and as such does not contain the element of life – hence water is unable to change its properties. Tokarczuk calls this waste “special”, for it is “sterilized with sea water, scrutinized with the tongue of waves”<sup>32</sup>.

Waste management, waste disposal, the work of garbage trucks are a cultural taboo. All man wants is to quickly get rid of waste, without considering where it will end up. Unfortunately, it turns out that typically waste is not recycled – it ends up in an isolated space, i.e., a landfill. As marginalized spaces, landfills are located far from cities. Julia Fiedorczuk observes that “a landfill locates itself on the borderline between civilization and wilderness – as a substance, waste is permanently in a transitional state”<sup>33</sup>. Some waste can undergo biodegradation, and hence be useful and beneficial for the environment. However, other waste constitutes a harmful, or even dangerous element for the natural environment. For Fiedorczuk, the transitional zone between the natural and the synthetic is important in the context of waste (which contains organic and inorganic substances)<sup>34</sup>. However, there is no doubt that plastic is alien and synthetic due to its nature. It does not constitute a material of the same kind as glass; as waste, it has its own, separate container so that it can be isolated in the segregation process, and then subjected to recycling. Landfills show us that we ourselves exclude waste from our visual space, we push it away from ourselves, we do not want to see it. Every appearance of waste in an urban or domestic space where it should not be becomes a sign that there is a mistake in our limited world, which distorts our sense of security.

<sup>27</sup>Tokarczuk, 121.

<sup>28</sup>Tokarczuk, “Przyszła archeologia”, 109.

<sup>29</sup>Olga Tokarczuk, “Skoczek”, in *Gra na wielu bębenkach*, (Wałbrzych: Wydawnictwo Ruta, 2001), 213.

<sup>30</sup>Mircea Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii* [Treatise on the History of Religions], translated into Polish by Jan-Wierusz Kowalski, (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1966), 189.

<sup>31</sup>Eliade.

<sup>32</sup>Tokarczuk, “Przyszła archeologia”, 109.

<sup>33</sup>Julia Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie. Wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* [Cyborg in a garden. Introduction to ecocriticism], (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2015), 139.

<sup>34</sup>Fiedorczuk, 138.

The already mentioned essay *Feralne psy* describes a book by Jean Rolin, who “looks where we do not want to look, and once we do, we do not want to see”<sup>35</sup>, i.e., stray dogs – excluded from civilization, that will lead travellers to landfills, slums, empty squares once occupied by street markets, construction sites, industrial areas, and railway sidings – to areas occupied by excluded populations. According to Tokarczuk, the book “outlines another reality, inferior and marginalized, but existing next to the human one in a complex dependency, in which many of us are entangled”<sup>36</sup>. Those places constitute a space for the excluded, which is clear in the novel *Drive your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, in which a female dog locked up in a dark shed with rusted bikes, plastic barrels, and other trash appears: “[t]he Dog was standing on a pile of planks, tied to the wall by a string around her neck. What else immediately caught my eye was a pile of excrement”<sup>37</sup>.

Although we separate ourselves from waste (which is a product of our actions), we create special, secluded spaces for it, it still appears where we do not want to see it. We cannot separate marginal places from our lives, for they will still constitute its environment. Man is a part of the environment: there is a close correlation between human physiology and the space man occupies. By interfering with the environment, we interfere with ourselves. Waste overlooks this line drawn by humanity, it can easily cross it and appear where it is not supposed to, and even cross man’s physical line and become a part of us. External waste permeates our organisms. Elements of microplastic can enter our bodies by consuming fish from polluted oceans. Man becomes a part of what he has produced. Perhaps the man of tomorrow will consist of waste produced by our generation, which will be a direct result of excessive exploitation of the natural environment.

In *Śmieci, śmieci* (*Moment niedźwiedzia*) there is a specific account of Tokarczuk’s stay in Switzerland. Soon after arriving in the country, Tokarczuk received a detailed instruction for recycling waste; she herself observes that “segregating this waste was slowly putting me in a state close to meditation”<sup>38</sup> – she noticed the complexity of the world consisting of various elements. Most containers were made of several different types of materials; for example, bread bags are made of plastic and paper, which need to be separated from each other. For Tokarczuk, recycling was “a lesson in analytical thinking”, decomposing into the prime factors. Jan Wolski observes that it constitutes “a description of a significant aspect of life in the Western civilization – or perhaps we should more accurately call it spiritual life”<sup>39</sup>.

Throwing things away is a new human ritual – it is an orderly, symbolic act (getting rid of something we no longer need). In the essay Tokarczuk stresses that segregation brings her joy, but – as a careful observer – she also notices that for others it is a source of relief, it is even celebratory in a way. People take part in the “happy celebration of throwing trash away”<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>35</sup>Tokarczuk, “Feralne psy”, 55.

<sup>36</sup>Tokarczuk, 59.

<sup>37</sup>Olga Tokarczuk, *Drive your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions), 39-40.

<sup>38</sup>Tokarczuk, “Śmieci, śmieci”, 115.

<sup>39</sup>Jan Wolski, “*Obrazek jak z dziwacznej bajki....* Olga Tokarczuk w Szwajcarii” [A picture like from a bizarre fairytale... OT in Switzerland], in *Światy Olgi Tokarczuk* [World of Olga Tokarczuk], edited by M. Rabizo-Birek, M. Pocałun – Dydycz, A. Bienias, (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2013), 210.

<sup>40</sup>Tokarczuk, “Śmieci, śmieci”, 117.

One day I was invited for a coffee. I was watching how the guests – while discussing modern theater – poured cream from tiny cups, automatically tearing aluminum lids from plastic small plastic bowls, discretely licking them and putting them away to the designated box. Pure habit in the service of ecology<sup>41</sup>.

Tokarczuk recycled some of her Swiss experiences in the short story *Góra wszystkich świętych*, which takes place in Switzerland:

The coffee jar was passed from one person to another, coffee being poured into cups like a dark, steaming stream. Next, the nuns eagerly reached for cream cups. Old fingers delicately pulled golden aluminum lids and poured cream into cups. Next, the nuns tore the lids away completely, and immediately put them on their tongues, like an aluminum Host. The tongues skillfully, with one lick, left the lids clean and perfectly shiny. Later, the meticulous tongues went inside the container to remove every tiny drop of cream. The nuns licked the cream eagerly and efficiently with a gesture they had repeated hundreds of times. Now the paper band had to be torn from the plastic container. The nuns' nails skillfully tore where the paper was glued and took the paper off with a triumph. As a result of all those operations, there were three recyclables in front of each nun: plastic, paper, and aluminum<sup>42</sup>.

As a side note, Wolski points out inconsistencies in Tokarczuk's observations: "collecting such lids is a very common hobby in Switzerland. It is a kind of philately – collecting coffee cream lids"<sup>43</sup>. Regardless of this inconsistency, it is interesting how it was presented in the short story; this aspect deserves attention. The nuns meticulously disassembled coffee cream containers. Tokarczuk uses Christian symbolism here, connecting the round shape of the lids with the Host. The Host (Latin *hostia* – sacrifice, offering) is a round wafer made of wheat flour which constitutes the Body of Christ. In the Christian tradition the Eucharist is an initiation sacrament, which "both completes and is the last stage of initiation, for this is where Christ's sacrifice culminates"<sup>44</sup>. According to Eliade, the Eucharist incorporates followers in the mystical Body of Christ, the Church<sup>45</sup>. Commonality is another connection between Eucharist and recycling – the Church, as a community, is connected and strives for salvation through the Eucharist; recycling, although it relies on individual work and segregating waste according to materials it is made of, is an action undertaken in order to provide a clean planet for future generations. The Eucharist is permeation: by accepting the Body of Christ Christians become Christ. A symbolic acceptance of the aluminum Host into the community, and mutual permeation with human carnality take place, supposedly leading us to salvation. The Eucharist makes a promise: just like Christ becomes eternal, so do we. Accepting a synthetic, eternal piece of material in the form of the Host, allows us to join the Community. Recycling is a form of salvation; something that will allow us to survive.

Moreover, the introduction of the protagonist of *Góra wszystkich świętych*, as well as its author, resembles an initiation, which is the same as an ontological transition of the existential

<sup>41</sup>Tokarczuk, 116.

<sup>42</sup>Tokarczuk, "Góra wszystkich świętych", 156. .

<sup>43</sup>Wolski, "Obrazek jak z dziwacznej bajki.... Olga Tokarczuk w Szwajcarii", 206.

<sup>44</sup>Andrzej Megger, "Eucharystia w procesie wtajemniczenia chrześcijańskiego", *Roczniki Teologiczne*, (August 2016): 21.

<sup>45</sup>Mircea Eliade, *Historia wierzeń i idei religijnych, t. II Od Guatamy Buddy do początków chrześcijaństwa* [History of Religious Ideas, Volume 2], translation into Polish by Stanisław Tokarski, (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1994), 228. English version – translated by Willard R. Trask, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

order<sup>46</sup>. During an initiation, a novice is presented with the concept of the world of a given society. In this case, it is segregating waste – for as we are well aware, today it is not so clear what a given object is actually made of, and what substance was originally used to make it. These are some questions that modern man needs to ask himself. During an initiation, novices get access to this knowledge – disassembling a coffee cream container into three parts. One container consists of three different substances, almost like the Holy Trinity. Eliade observes that most initiatory attempts more or less clearly imply a ritualistic death followed by resurrection or rebirth; a new man returns to life, undertaking a new lifestyle. The initiatory death signifies the end of childhood, ignorance, and secularism<sup>47</sup>.

Death is a deconstruction of a container, and putting those deconstructed elements in colorful segregation bins symbolizes a new birth, in a different form. Is this not the essence of recycling? An object becomes useless, but it returns in a different form. Segregation allows us to come into contact with the primary absolute and continuously recreate creation. Man creates something from natural (wood, stone) or synthetic (i.e., man-made) substances, and then reshapes them once they are used. According to Eliade, any ritualistic repetition of cosmogony is preceded by a symbolic return to <<Chaos>>; in order for the old world to be recreated, it needs to be annihilated first<sup>48</sup>. In *Góra wszystkich świętych* recycling becomes a ritual – it is performed by the nuns with reverence. There are older, used things in the monastery, such as “a table worn off by being used for centuries”<sup>49</sup>, and “colorful recycling bins were the only modern objects in that room”<sup>50</sup>. The nuns perform a daily deconstruction ritual during their morning coffee, which takes place automatically – they participate in the spiritual life together, because they have found a new way of existing contained in the three recyclables: plastic, paper, and aluminum. For what is segregation of waste if not a new ritual of 21<sup>st</sup> century man? This sight makes the protagonist think, because:

I too will be one day deconstructed and everything I am made of will return to its place. The ultimate recycling. What is left from a portion of coffee cream after this absolving ritual are parts which have nothing in common, they become separate, belong to different categories. Where are the flavor and texture? Where is the thing which they were harmoniously co-creating only a while ago?<sup>51</sup>.

Waste segregation is like the decomposition of the body after death. The whole seems elusive to us, and in fact we are only a collection of elements comprising our body, and we too will soon be subject to ultimate decomposition, incorporated into the cycle of nature.

Is life without plastic possible? A vision of a post-plastic world is shown in the short story *Kalendarz ludzkich świąt* [Calendar of human holidays], in which plastic has been consumed by bacteria bred for that purpose. The bacteria were supposed to consume only plastic ocean waste,

<sup>46</sup>Mircea Eliade, *Inicjacja, obrzędy, stowarzyszenia tajemne* [Rites and Symbols of Initiation], translation into Polish by Krzysztof. Kocjan, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1997), 8.

<sup>47</sup>Eliade, 10.

<sup>48</sup>Eliade, 11.

<sup>49</sup>O. Tokarczuk, “Góra wszystkich świętych”, 154.

<sup>50</sup>Tokarczuk, 155.

<sup>51</sup>Tokarczuk, 184.



but “with time they moved to land and consumed all plastic around the world”<sup>52</sup>. This situation turns out to be fatal: “only smoldered skeletons were left from objects made of synthetic materials, a phantom of human civilization”<sup>53</sup>. Since then, metal has been used – but there was a shortage of it resulting in high prices – as well as cheaper raw materials, such as wood and rubber.

Moreover, the short story presents a world gone awry, which is not surprising due to it being a bizarre short story – humanity finally solved the problem of overwhelming plastic, but it turns out that in fact our civilization was founded on plastic (perhaps *Plasticocene* is a more accurate term than *Anthropocene*?): “the plastic disaster destroyed not only houses, factories, and hospitals, but it also questioned some notions”<sup>54</sup>. It turns out that it is the foundation on which man’s might is constructed. Plastic, which in itself is very durable, is an eternal form of life. What turns out to be the decisive factor in terms of man’s greatness and the durability of his civilization is the durability of the synthetic materials he invented. However, those durable elements become autonomous, they detach themselves from man and start to function in a way similar to AI algorithms. On the one hand it helps us solve problems we cannot deal with and it is helpful in many areas of life, such as medicine, but on the other, it also poses a threat, because we find ourselves unable to control it – we are both its creators (we produce it in factories), and victims (we cannot control what happens to synthetic materials once they lose their utilitarian function for man).

Sister Ann – the protagonist of *Góra wszystkich świętych* – goes to India to find new nuns for her monastery, because “she read somewhere that there is still holiness to be found in India”<sup>55</sup>. In spite of the long journey, she does not find holiness, but she sees a cemetery of holy cows, a place where “pariahs bring carcasses of holy cows so that they do not contaminate the city. They just leave them there in the scorching sun, and nature does the rest”<sup>56</sup>. In Hinduism cows represent the divine, natural goodness, which is why they are protected and worshipped. Andrzej Szyszko-Bohusz stresses that cows, “which none is allowed to kill”<sup>57</sup>, have a special place among sacred animals. Cows also have a rich symbolic meaning. Cirlot points out the association of cows with the earth and moon, and stresses the fact that many lunar goddesses have cow horns, such as the Egyptian Isis (in fact, the cow was her incarnation)<sup>58</sup>. This animal blesses humanity and the universe with live-giving power. The cow’s special place in Hinduism allows us to associate it with the *sacrum*. In his *Treatise on the History of Religions* Mircea Eliade points out that every definition of religious life so far has one thing in common – each juxtaposes the *sacrum* (holiness, being sacred) and religious life with the *profane* (secularity, commonness) and secular life<sup>59</sup>. The *sacrum* is closely tied with history, because it always fully

<sup>52</sup>Olga Tokarczuk, “Kalendarz ludzkich świąt”, in *Opowiadania bizardne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018), 205.

<sup>53</sup>Tokarczuk.

<sup>54</sup>Tokarczuk, 212.

<sup>55</sup>Tokarczuk, 177.

<sup>56</sup>Tokarczuk, 195.

<sup>57</sup>Andrzej Szyszko-Bohusz, *Hinduizm, buddyzm, islam* [Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam] (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1990), 21.

<sup>58</sup>According to Cirlot: “Vac, the feminine aspect of Brahma, is known as the ‘melodious Cow’ and as the ‘Cow of abundance’, the first description stemming from the idea of the world’s creation out of sound, while the second—as hardly needs be said—comes from its function of nourishing the world with its milk, the fine dust of the Milky Way”. Juan-Eduardo Cirlot Laport, “Cow”, in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, translated into English by John Sage, New York: Dover Publications.

<sup>59</sup>Eliade, *Treatise on the History of Religions*, 7.

manifests itself in a certain historical situation; the most personal and transcendental mystical experiences always carry the mark of a given moment in history<sup>60</sup>. In the analyzed passage of *Góra wszystkich świętych* the cow, a sacred animal in Hinduism, belongs to the sacrum. A cows' cemetery is a mystical, holy place, which is invaded by the profane in the form of death. Carcasses of dead animals should decompose according to the laws of nature, so that they can return to the natural cycle. However, something else happens – what is left is trash which the cows must have mistaken for food. Trash is man-made, and as such belongs to the profane. This picture shows the consequence of excessive waste production and mismanagement, but first and foremost, it is a hierophany. The profane enters the sacrum with the consumption of a string, bottle cap, piece of rubber, or plastic cup by sacred animals. According to Eliade, hierophany is a manifestation of holiness, every intrusion of the sacrum into the profane – every example of hierophany reveals the coexistence of these two entities: the sacrum and the profane, spirit and matter, eternity and mortality, etc.<sup>61</sup> The sacrum can manifest itself anywhere, it is not limited by any form. Anna is seeking genuine holiness in India, but she does not find the promised revelation there – instead, she finds a cemetery of holy cows, which were supposed to embody that holiness. And this holiness is invaded by an alien element – the profane, which distorts its reception. The sacrum typically manifests itself in an object which belongs to the profane<sup>62</sup>, but in this case the profane manifests itself in the sacrum – a reversed hierophany – trash appears in the place of holy cows. The profane distorts holiness, it forbids access to it.

In the works quoted here waste appears in different contexts. In Tokarczuk, the mention of waste behaves like waste – it sneaks by, sometimes blending into the literary space. It may not constitute an emphasized element of a given text, like in the case of the essay *Ogródki działkowe i pola golfowe*, where it appears in an unobvious place – but nonetheless its unquestionable presence distorts relations with nature. Sometimes it becomes more visible, like in the novel *Flights*, where a separate chapter is devoted to it. A plastic bag becomes a threat in many texts by Tokarczuk, where it manifests both its presence and absence. Waste appears as an odd element of reality, which cannot be ignored – but it is also unclear what to do about it. However, this poetics does not connote only negative meanings, for it contains a certain connection. Tokarczuk proposes that we treat waste segregation (which we see as something positive) as a new type of spiritual activity, which is supposed to be an answer to today's problems, including the climate catastrophe. The problem of waste will not disappear – quite the opposite will happen, as waste will become a part of our society, reality, landscape, and – ultimately – us.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

<sup>60</sup>Eliade, 7-8.

<sup>61</sup>Eliade, 35.

<sup>62</sup>Eliade, 34.

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# KEYWORDS

OLGA TOKARCZUK

ecocriticism

**ABSTRACT:**

The paper discusses the issue of waste and plastic, especially plastic bags, in the works by Olga Tokarczuk. The author considers what waste is in today's civilization. Waste is a marginalized, omitted element in the human existence. This character of waste is used by Tokarczuk in her prose, where waste appears in full sight only to disappear a moment later. She presents plastic products as an example of a new, better species, which may prove to have surpassed man in terms of survival of the fittest. In her essays and short stories examples of a new spirituality related to waste segregation can also be observed.

spirituality

W A S T E

*plastic*

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# Forest Landscape: Joanna Rajkowska's *Rhizopolis*\*

\* *Rhizopolis* – Joanna Rajkowska's installation at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art, 1 February – 29 June 2021.

Marek Hendrykowski

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## 1. *Rendez-vous* with a palm tree

I have been following Joanna Rajkowska's artistic career for many years. She first caught my attention when an exotic palm tree appeared out of nowhere on a small hill in the middle of the Charles de Gaulle roundabout in Warsaw. Who put it there? Who placed it in the centre of Warsaw and why? And why exactly there and not someplace else? The answers to these questions triggered some interesting observations: I am forever thankful for the creative imagination I discovered in Rajkowska's work.

I first saw the palm tree, if I remember correctly, a long time ago – in December 2002. The artist has created many memorable installations since. They were thought-provoking and creatively challenged and questioned the communal social space.

Apart from *Greetings from Aleje Jerozolimskie*, her other projects include: the provocative *Satisfaction Guaranteed, Airlines*, the now dismantled *Oxygenator* in Grzybowski Square, *Artist for Rent* (two projects in Berlin and Łódź respectively), *Twenty-two tasks, Ravine, Rotor* and *Minaret* in Poznań, which was supposed to be placed on an old factory chimney (the project was never implemented). No wonder then that this time I was intrigued by the title of Rajkowska's newest project at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw – *Rhizopolis*.

Why *Rhizopolis*? What mysterious meaning is hidden in this neologism, created by the author? Let me explain this rather puzzling title. The title – which “sounds” scientific (by the way, the

abbreviation 'rhiz' from the word 'rhizoma', is a medicine made from rhizomes; it has been used by pharmacologists and pharmacists for centuries) – “wants” to be noticed. It draws and “demands” attention, acting as a slogan that circulates in the public space like a magic spell.

Let us decode it. The neologism 'rhizopolis' created by the author consists of two interconnected words. Both come from Greek. 'Rhiza' means a root, a rhizome. 'Polis' is a collective habitat, an urban settlement, a city. The title as a whole, as I have discovered, corresponds perfectly with the main idea of Joanna Rajkowska's work.

## 2. The exhibition at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art

An almost monochromatic poster, filled with cold blues to greys, shows an intriguing picture. There are numerous entangled roots and thick rhizomes hanging from its upper edge and they cover half the poster. Among them, along the vertical axis, there appears a female figure that is visible in front from head to toe. When we turn the poster by 180 degrees and look at the woman's face, we recognize Rajkowska.

There would be nothing particularly unusual in this image, were it not for the eccentric placement of the model. The human figure is “hanging” upside down. Her booted feet touch the upper edge of the poster and are hidden among the roots and rhizomes, and her whole body is upside down – her head touches the bottom edge of the frame.

## 3. Building her own strategy

A constellation of great individuals or, indeed, a galaxy of outstanding artists, was active in Polish avant-garde art at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. These artists do not belong to the same generation, but their philosophies of art are similar. I am referring here to their prominent presence in the contemporary iconosphere because both together and separately they seem to form an important frame of reference for Rajkowska.

I list them in the alphabetical order: Magdalena Abakanowicz, Mirosław Bałka, Jerzy Bereś, Izabela Gustowska, Jarosław Kozłowski, Katarzyna Kozyra, Dorota Nieznalska, Józef Robakowski, Wilhelm Sasnal, Monika Sosnowska, Leon Tarasewicz, Julita Wójcik... This list could go on and on. Other thought-provoking and internationally recognized artists could be added to it.

Over the years, project after project, installation after installation, step by step, Joanna Rajkowska found her own creative strategy, which made her – and still makes her – a thoroughly contemporary artist with a distinct and recognizable personality. Let me add that neither materials (after all, she used different ones, according to her needs) nor the style (traditionally defined as a recognizable, characteristic artistic “voice”) define her.

What distinguishes Rajkowska as an artist is something else, namely her strategy – chosen by her at the beginning of her career and consistently developed over the years.

It is not so easy to define, because it concerns both the work of art itself and its context or contexts. Rajkowska's artistic strategy, which she has consistently followed for years, combines the specific and brilliantly defined here and now with symbolic spacetime, where the past (I deliberately do not call it history) in its various forms and echoes merges with the wide horizon of tomorrow.

Rajkowska's installations (I am referring, quite conventionally, at this point to a common term for the genre of contemporary art called "installation art"), due to her own choices, never appear in random or semantically indifferent places. They are genre-specific, i.e., they are artistic projects made of various elements, placed in an existing or artificially created space. No wonder that the artist herself referred to some of her works as "social sculptures" or "public sculptures."

It is interesting, by the way, how little importance Rajkowska pays to the "non omnis moriar" hopes and steadfast faith placed by others in their art, and in the longevity of art in general. The ancient maxim "ars longa, vita brevis" may be read in a different light in Rajkowska's case. It is no accident that the genre of art that is particularly close to her own philosophy of art is called "installation:" it can be assembled but also disassembled.

Many of her works do not exist anymore (including *The Oxygenator*) – they have been destroyed. Others were bound to, as it were, disintegrate gradually in the futile confrontation between unstable matter and merciless nature. Still others, for various reasons, were not implemented. Nevertheless, even as designs and concepts, they managed to enter into the collective consciousness and have stayed there, if only because of the resistance or even the indignation they caused. At this point, let me indeed comment on the creative use of context, which is essential for Joanna Rajkowska's work.

Context plays a huge role in her installations. It concerns not only the place, but also the other complementary aspect, namely time. As such, her artworks become, in fact, shocking interventions in existing and previously thoroughly recognized spacetime, which is the carrier of meaning constructed together with a given work. Spacetime is attacked and annexed by a surprising object.

In the case of Joanna Rajkowska, one could even speak of a peculiar act of both civil and artistic courage, in which the artist's unconventional creative gesture and the power of expression correspond to being responsible for the "committed offence." It is not reckless bravado, but personal courage. The courage to undertake artistic intervention which emanates from her works makes them significant events in social life.

#### 4. Entering the artwork

When I went to Zachęta to see Rajkowska's exhibition, I expected something surprising. Something that would communicate her unique artistic philosophy and establish a direct relationship with the audience. Visitors are greeted by a unique feature, even before they enter the building. It is a rainbow gate situated opposite the main entrance to the gallery.

Inside the building, on the ground floor, in the room on the left, the *Rhizopolis* exhibition is complemented by an exhibition entitled *Live Storages: Didactics* (works by Zbigniew Dłubak,



Dorota Podlaska, Leszek Rózga, Andrzej Tobis and the group Twożywo are on display). As the title suggests, all the works on display have a didactic value. The decision to combine the two exhibitions turned out to be fortunate in its own way, especially considering the deeper educational value of Rajkowska's installation.

The juxtaposition of these two exhibitions further inspires an interesting reflection on the poetics and style of reception of a certain category of contemporary art, as opposed to passive, dispassionate contemplation. The *Living Storage* exhibition is viewed as a set of museum artifacts chosen and arranged by museum curators. The viewer remains "outside." It is impossible to say something like that about *Rhizopolis*, which is radically different in its assumptions, carefully arranged and assembled at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art by Joanna Rajkowska.

The installation *Rhizopolis* was on display in one of the rooms on the first floor. It was surprising in itself. A thick and heavy curtain, which resembles a lead apron used during X-rays, separates the corridor and the room – one must breach it (literally!) to enter the exhibition. Finally, once we pass through the heavy curtain, we go to the other side, abandoning the known and entering the unknown.

Once we make this very important step, we find ourselves *in medias res*, beyond the frame which separates what we have left behind from what is just opening up in front of us. Our bodies, feelings and senses begin to feel the psychosomatic pressure exerted on each participant forced to play the role of an actor. The pressure on the viewer is the result of the tremendous pressure of the circumstances, which creates the microcosm of the arranged performance.

A moment later, the visitor is in for another surprise. The room is almost completely dark. Taken by surprise, our eyes slowly adjust to the darkness, trying to see and recognize anything. The lungs (I visited the exhibition during the global Covid-19 epidemic) may hardly absorb the minute particles of residual oxygen floating around in the stuffy claustrophobic room.

Step by step, we enter into the eternal darkness of the space, looking around and treading cautiously on the soft, organic, and bone-dry surface of the forest undergrowth. Other associations come to mind: logging, extraction, debarking, chipping, rootstock, rhizome. Consequently, we begin to think about the process which turns a living tree into dead wood.

We learn that we have become actors in this underground show because the image from hidden video cameras is projected onto a screen in the back of the room. The video is played with an asynchronous delay so that everyone present at the exhibition can see for themselves how they did as actors.

Going back to the roots in Joanna Rajkowska's installation forces everyone who wants to become a thinking and feeling part of it to participate – we cannot not participate as we make our way through the exhibition. The project overwhelms and surrounds every visitor. There is no outside world, at least as long as we are in the exhibition room. Roots and rhizomes hanging from the ceiling touch our heads. Under our feet, as far as the eye can see and the foot can reach, there is only the shredded pulp of boughs and twigs. And on top of all this, there is this stuffy claustrophobic microclimate.

*Reditus in radices.* This return to the roots makes us aware of what roots and rhizomes are – not only for various plants and trees, but also for us, people. We know that the Greek word “rhiza” means “root.” Another Greek word, “rhizome,” means “rhizome.” The rhizome, defined in biological terms, is a thickened underground shoot that functions as storage and spore and as a delivery channel. In short, it is a reservoir of vital juices and life itself.

## 5. Taboos

Joanna Rajkowska violates various social taboos in her artworks, albeit always by means of considerate methods and means of expression. Unlike many other contemporary artists and performers, who are more radical than her, since *Satisfaction Guaranteed* she has avoided scandalous strategies, considering the social consequences of her actions, even if they are carried out in the name of art and artistic freedom.

Rajkowska’s main artistic goal is not just to violate certain taboos, but to perform, with surgical precision, symbolic operations around those spheres and places of common collective consciousness, which are filled with various types of mental and emotional deposits. From the very beginning, identifying the sources of various chronic diseases that society suffers from and treating art as therapy have been very important for Rajkowska.

## 6. Chaos and Cosmos

Yes, it’s us. Yes, it’s about us. About us, with us and/or without us. Developed on a grand scale for several centuries, mankind’s noble project entitled the “progress of civilization” did not fail. The idea of the absolute, boldly and confidently inscribed in the forever optimistic development of the Anthropocene, did fail, however. Humanity has learned about it again, and this most recent lesson was painful. Modern man, as a usurper and sole ruler of all, striving to achieve absolute power in the world, has recently realized his own inherent weakness. In a word, we can only do as much as we can and that is it.

This moment of both individual and collective reflection on the future, which is by no means guaranteed and may never come, is extremely important in the context of the lesson that *Rhizopolis* wants to teach us. Humanity will destroy itself by mindlessly destroying the foundations and source of its own life. What is worse, it firmly believes that it may ruthlessly rule over everything.

Rajkowska points out that *Rhizopolis* can be treated as a film set built by the gallery curators, which, driven by curiosity, we decided to visit and learn more about. What is this set and what kind of film is being made in our presence? The artist knows and we know too. Essentially cosmic, the landscape conceived by Joanna Rajkowska is taken straight out of an apocalyptic movie.

Visiting the gloomy space of *Rhizopolis* is by no means a pleasant experience. On the contrary, the place we are in, separated and dissected from the external environment, allows us to finally see ourselves for who we are, but it certainly cannot be tamed. When I speak of “entering the work,” I mean a carefully

arranged situation in which visitors are “taken” out of the civilized world they know, the world outside, and confronted with the underground, on the existence of which their own existence depends.

## 7. A chick in Pięć Rogów square

Another sculptural installation by Joanna Rajkowska is slowly emerging from the darkness of Warsaw's future – it is a captivatingly beautiful artistic and architectural image, a design for a sculpture. It is a two-meter-tall sculpture of a song thrush egg (in Latin, the name of the bird is *Turdus philomelos*, which is as beautiful as Rajkowska's artwork), which is to be erected in the Pięć Rogów Square (at the intersection of Jasna, Chmielna, Hoża, Szpitalna and Bracka Streets).

The idea was tested out in London two years ago. There, artists displayed a similar outdoor sculpture of an enlarged bird egg, except it was not a song thrush egg but a blackbird egg. Inside the magnificent structure, to the delight of intrigued passers-by, a sound system (emitting the sound made by a chick that was about to hatch) and an inductor (emitting vibrations as if of a hatching egg) were installed. It was indeed an interactive artwork. The multisensory process of its reception, designed by the author with the audience in mind, stimulated and triggered intimate sensual contact with the object encountered in the center of the city.

As I write these words, the fate of the artist's most recent project is still undecided. It has many supporters, but also influential opponents (the main opponent is the provincial conservator of monuments). A bird egg in a historical Warsaw square? No way! It must be a joke. People have already protested against the squandering of public money to pay for the erection of the artificial palm tree. It is out of the question! That one project, at the center of the Charles de Gaulle roundabout located in the center of Warsaw, is enough. It is so bizarre, ladies and gentlemen. After all, we announced that we are bound by the contract for the time being and the palm tree cannot be removed, but after the contract expires, such ideas will not be accepted.

Again, as usual, two philosophies of the city collide with each other and two radically different – quite conventional or, on the contrary, quite unconventional – approaches to public space. To some, a huge, and in addition a vibrating and squeaking, sculpture of a bird egg seems to be ideologically suspicious; after all, it is not known what will hatch out of it. What if it is some blue, stained, pro-ecological contraband, aimed at challenging the self-proclaimed guardians of the principles of good taste. People are already talking about the fact that in the eighteenth century animals were killed in this square for entertainment.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

# KEYWORDS

contemporary art

loci communes

POETICS

installation

**ABSTRACT:**

The article is an analytical and interpretative study of the poetics of the two newest art installations by Joanna Rajkowska.

expression

CONTEXT

space

**NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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# Hermeneutics of Admiration

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John D. Caputo, describing his hermeneutics as cold, abandons faith in the senses. It is hermeneutics that has lost its innocence; it is no longer the activity of the subject, but what haunts him and forces him to interpret at the least expected moment. However, this imperative does not guarantee any clear answer. There is no secret (which is actually the only secret)<sup>1</sup>. The hermeneutic approach proposed by Adrian Gleń in the book *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*<sup>2</sup> [Andrzej Stasiuk. Existence] distances itself from such radical solutions, maintaining a strong conviction that the process of dealing with a work of literature allows the reader to get closer to the secret, or to even reach it.

Gleń consistently explores the hermeneutic tradition in literary studies. As early as his post-doctoral book, *“W tej latarni...”*. *Późna twórczość Mirona Białoszewskiego w perspektywie hermeneutycznej* [“In this lighthouse...”. Late works by Miron Białoszewski from the hermeneutic perspective] (2004) he focuses on Martin Heidegger’s philosophy. The monograph *Bycie – słowo – człowiek. Inspiracje heideggerowskie w literaturze* [Being – word – man. Heidegger inspirations in literature] (2007), where he includes not only theoretical-literary considerations, but also critical practice, is another manifestation of this approach (focusing mainly on poetry by Tymoteusz Karpowicz, Miron Białoszewski and Czesław Miłosz). In *Istnienie i literatura (notatnik hermeneuty)* [Existence and literature. A hermeneutist’s notebook] (2010) he proposes the term “personalistic hermeneutics” to describe his type of literary criticism. He continues in *Do-prawdy? Studia i szkice o polskiej literaturze najnowszej* [Oh really? Studies and sketches in contemporary Polish literature] (2012), in which he combines critical-literary discourse with a fascination for the analyzed works. *“Marzenie, które czyni poetą...”*. *Autentyczność i empatia w dziele literackim Juliana Kornhausera* [“Dream, that makes one a poet...”. Authenticity and empathy in the works by Julian Kornhauser] is an attempt at defining the ethical and metaphysical dimension of Kornhauser’s poetry, largely referring to such categories as engagement and authenticity. In *Czułość. Studia i eseje o literaturze najnowszej* [Tenderness. Studies and essays on contemporary literature]

<sup>1</sup> Michał Januszkiewicz, *W-koło hermeneutyki literackiej* [A-round literary hermeneutics] (Warszawa: PWN, 2007), 133-134.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2019).

(2014) Gleń employs his preferred model of literary criticism, characterized by openness to “foreign” language. “*Wiernie, choć własnym językiem...*” *Rzecz o krytyce literackiej Juliana Kornhausera* [“Faithfully, although in own language...” On Julian Kornhauser’s literary criticism] (2015) is a study in the so-called “empathetic criticism” of Kornhauser’s works. When characterizing Gleń’s work one should bear in mind that he has published several volumes of poetry.

The book about Andrzej Stasiuk is unique among Gleń’s academic achievements. Written in a personal (or even intimate) tone, it is a bold realization of what he claims the duties of literary scholars are. Such a formula was surely facilitated by the concept of the series by Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego “Projekt: egzystencja i literatura” [Project: existence and literature], as a part of which the book was published. Biography, identity, experience – these are the major categories for discussing literature used in the concept. The academic board overseeing the series (Marzena Woźniak-Łabieniec, Przemysław Dakowicz and Arkadiusz Morawiec) not only sees works of literature as “existential projects”, but also – significantly – as the very process of studying literature. Hence, attempts at writing self, registering own experiences (cultural, political, historical, as well as corporal, sensual, spiritual), and the very process of studying literature – all constituting present-day literary scholars – are highlighted in the series in the context of reception of a literary text<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the series offers academic books for laymen, hence a lot of care has been given to making sure that they are approachable, avoiding specialist terms, traditional academic style, and highly theoretical discussions<sup>4</sup>. Taking advantage of this methodological “loosening”, Gleń resigns from the form of a traditional study, which analyzes the whole body of work of a given author, instead focusing only on those texts which he probably finds personal<sup>5</sup>.

The book consists of four chapters, each with an intriguing title: 1) *Auto-bio-grafia* [Auto-biography], 2) *Bycie* [Being], 3) *Niebycie* [Nonbeing], 4) *Bycie Re-Aktywacja* [Being Re-Activated]. In the first chapter, he decisively cuts himself off from analyzing Stasiuk’s works in terms of

<sup>3</sup> Additional information on the series can be found on the website of Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego. See “Projekt: Egzystencja i Literatura”, <https://wydawnictwo.uni.lodz.pl/serie/seria/projekt-egzystencja-i-literatura/> (date of access: 10.01.2021).

<sup>4</sup> See a discussion with authors from the series “Projekt: Egzystencja i Literatura”: Anna Legeżyńska, Tomasz Garbol and Adrian Gleń during 17. Opolska Jesień Literacka. “*Życie i literatura: Hartwig, Miłosz, Stasiuk*” [Life and literature: Hartwig, Miłosz, Stasiuk], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwKQmPMU2BQ&t=1501s> (date of access: 10.01.2021). Titles of the books from the series (seven so far) are also noteworthy; each book describes the works it analyzes with one word: Agnieszka Kałowska, *Witkacy. Etyka* [Ethics] (2016), Marzena Woźniak-Łabieniec, *Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz. Metafizyka* [Metaphysics] (2017), Maciej Urbanowski, *Stanisław Brzozowski. Nowoczesność* [Modernity] (2017), Anna Legeżyńska, *Julia Hartwig. Wdzięczność* [Gratefulness] (2017), Tomasz Garbol, *Czesław Miłosz. Los* [Fate] (2018), Agnieszka Kramkowska-Dąbrowska, *Janusz Krasiński. Świadektwo* [Testimony] (2020). To describe the whole interpretative concept with one word is not easy; it imposes a concise, perhaps even aphoristic way of formulating thoughts. Gleń reveals that he was originally going to entitle the book *Żeby bardziej być* [In order to be more], and the main reason why he did not was, in fact, this editing concept. See Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 14-15. The vibrant cover designs by Katarzyna Turkowska, which correspond with the contents of the books, also deserve a comment. The photographs of authors are diverse color-wise, with a characteristic graphic element – a dot signaling an interpretative perspective: in the case of Andrzej Stasiuk (like in Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz and Stanisław Brzozowski) an eye is distinguished in this way (Witkacy – lips, Julia Hartwig – an earring). Thus the design creatively complements research theses.

<sup>5</sup> As a result, the book does not cover such important works as *Biały kruk* [Rarity] (1995), *Opowieści galicyjskie* [Stories from Galicia] (1995), *Dziewięć* [Nine] (1999) or *Dojczland* (2007). However, first and foremost Gleń omits Stasiuk’s official debut, *Mury Hebronu* [Walls of Hebron] (1992), which for many critics is in fact crucial for understanding Andrzej Stasiuk’s writing strategy. Moreover, Gleń mentions neither Stasiuk’s early poetic works, nor plays. It should also be mentioned that Gleń does not include a clearly autobiographical book *Jak zostałem pisarzem (próba autobiografii intelektualnej)* [How I became a writer (an attempt at an intellectual autobiography)] (1998), nor an extensive interview conducted by Dorota Wodecka *Życie to jednak strata jest* [Life is actually a loss] (2015). This is not an accusation – I would only like to clearly stress that Gleń’s choices are highly subjective.

such methodological orientations as postcolonialism, ethical criticism, geopoetics or cultural literary theory (depreciating them as “fashionable”). He also questions the validity of applying the strategy of an autobiographical reception (rather narrowly understood) to Stasiuk’s prose. He claims that “the narrative truth” of Stasiuk’s works should be seen as “testaments of individual sensitivity and worldview, testaments which clearly belong to the narrative art, in which myth and phantasm belong to the basic instrumentarium”<sup>6</sup>.

Chapter 2, *Bycie*, is organized according to the “East” category. Gleń largely refers to the 2014 book on Stasiuk with the same title, trying to define the empathetic and ethical vision of the writer. On the one hand, according to Gleń, the East as presented by Stasiuk from the geo-historical perspective is “a huge metonymy of our fear, an archetypical picture of submission and terror”<sup>7</sup>. On the other, Gleń claims that the East is an “arche-rule of Stasiuk’s thinking, the source of personal and separate experience of reality”<sup>8</sup>. At the same time Gleń self-identifies in those perceptions, experiencing longing for a lost rule of being; he thus highlights a very personal dimension of the metaphor: “Hence I see the *East* as a complement, a journey to the fundamentals of seeing oneself and reality. This is why I go even lower, taking «yellow» roads, I choose paths which I would like to lead me across Central Europe, known from *Jadąc do Babadag* [Going to Babadag], and only then to the *East*, imperceptibly to all customs officers”<sup>9</sup>.

In the same (and the most extensive) chapter, Gleń discusses the issue of life, important in Stasiuk, presenting it as the major metaphor of existence. He also juxtaposes numerous references to religion and metaphysical issues. However, first and foremost he incorporates key elements of Heidegger’s philosophy into his interpretative process: criticism of the Western model of thinking, threats posed by technology detaching us from the natural order, attachment to land, using tools, fear of death and loss.

*Niebycie* offers an analysis of the 2012 collection of short stories *Grochów*, whose major theme is the death of the narrator’s loved ones (grandmother, friend, author), as well as a dog<sup>10</sup>. Referring to Heidegger’s works, Gleń discusses the mechanism of denial, “talking over” the inevitable death. In Stasiuk, thinking about the past, movement, storytelling are common ways of denying the sense of an ending. However, contrary to Heidegger, Gleń decides to strongly accentuate the fact that Stasiuk’s protagonists take the side of life, existing at any cost; he stresses the strong protest against death and decline.

<sup>6</sup> Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Gleń, 54.

<sup>8</sup> Gleń.

<sup>9</sup> Gleń, 56-57.

<sup>10</sup> Gleń writes: “A dog’s presence is still required, even this ‘cooling body’ participates in the heat flow, which constitutes a symptom of existence”, Gleń, 149. He analyzed the issue of ‘animal existence’ in Stasiuk’s prose. The following passage is also noteworthy: “In the East a combination of the human and the animalistic reveals itself, faces grown into the world like a perennial plant, rooted deeply and independently into places from which they cannot be detached, places which are impossible to imagine without them. In the face of this nothingness, of history monsters, of matter falling apart, people become as if being more. Existing together, inside, poor and humble, strong with the wisdom of land”, Gleń, 74. Gleń’s conclusions promisingly correspond with attempts at a non-anthropocentric reading of Martin Heidegger. Among others, *Radykalny nonantropocentryzm. Martin Heidegger i ekologia głęboka* [Radical nonanthropocentrism. Martin Heidegger and deep ecology] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Rzeszów: Wyższa Szkoła Informatyki i Zarządzania, 2018) is noteworthy.



The final chapter, *Bycie Re-Aktywacja*, continues the discussion of the issues raised in previous chapters. Gleń clearly displays his philosophical inclinations, discussing such categories as authenticity, lingering, nothingness, emptiness. The ontological state of lingering in Stasiuk's works defined as "motionlessness", as well as observations regarding the relations between existing and memory, deserve attention. Remarks related to Stasiuk's photographic sensitivity, which constitutes a kind of bridge between what is and what used to be, are interesting: "Just like literature stores images, photographs never stop mediating in this movement from «back in the day» to «now». Every visual sign able to turn on an image at the basis of past experience guarantees un-forgetting"<sup>11</sup>. Gleń is trying to prove that in Stasiuk a sensual image precedes any cognition, and the filter of photographic (but also pictorial) images guarantees depth and genuineness of existence, constituting a peculiar private myth related to the effort to preserve the material.

First, I would like to refer to issues related to autobiographism. Gleń strongly favors reading Stasiuk's prose "without any biographical compulsion". What does that actually mean? According to Gleń, Stasiuk's narrative, with its vividly shaped "I", is deprived of unambiguous identification. Hence, such categories as "experience" and "encounter" are important – although they originate in individual (authentic) experience, they are not exhausted by it. In this case the source experience rather indicates a metaphysical generalization, being in general; it is unrelated to autobiographical forms which refer to concrete testaments. For Gleń, an autobiographical reception is suspicious, uncertain. He proposes seeing the authenticity<sup>12</sup> of Stasiuk's writing on the basis of a writing convention alone, and of the authentication strategies used by the author<sup>13</sup>. He claims that "there is not a greedy or flirtatious author's ego that demands followers, but a tender and sylleptic 'I', which – by moving away and suspending the issue of identifying itself with the author, does not kill him off, thus legitimizing its stories and reflections from a life falling apart, which we believe to be authentic for this very reason"<sup>14</sup> in the center of Stasiuk's narrative. Unfortunately, Gleń does not develop this significant observation regarding the syllepticity of a literary text, cutting his views on autobiographism at the most interesting moment.

<sup>11</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 181. The term "un-forgetting" – significant for understanding Gleń's argumentation, unobvious, and culturally specific – should be commented upon. It was first used probably by Cyprian Kamil Norwid in the poem *A Dorio ad Phrygium* (1872), and later popularized by Hubert Orłowski. It is a process similar to *anamnesis*, i.e. referring to memories hidden from a protagonist. However, "un-forgetting" is not about inborn contents (like in Plato's theory of cognition): it about acquired ones. As opposed to collecting medical history, i.e. medical anamnesis, it is not a result of a subject-"external" diagnosis – it is a result of individual work. Associated also with the Christian Eucharist, anamnesis is "making a memento", i.e. commemorating known objects, while "un-forgetting" is extracting what is unknown to the protagonist themselves. The phenomenon cannot be related to the process of "remembering", i.e. restoring what a protagonist knows to have once existed in their memory; "un-forgetting" refers to forgotten areas of memory. Hence, it can be said that the moment of remembering that something is forgotten is the beginning of the "un-forgetting" process. See Przemysław Czapliński, Kornelia Kończal, "Odpominanie" [Un-forgetting], in *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci* [A lexicon of memory culture], edited by Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Robert Traba, in cooperation with Joanna Kalicka (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2014), 301.

<sup>12</sup>Extending the "authenticity" category – so important for Gleń (and used in his other works) – to accommodate for Olga Szmidt's conclusions, would be interesting; in her studies in authenticity in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century culture, Szmidt decided to focus on the works by such philosophers as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry David Thoreau or Marshall Berman, rather than on Charles Taylor, Theodor Adorn, Martin Heidegger or Søren Kierkegaard. See Olga Szmidt, *Autentyczność: stan krytyczny. Problem autentyczności w kulturze XXI wieku* [Authenticity: a critical state. The problem of authenticity in the culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Kraków: Universitas, 2019)].

<sup>13</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 42-47.

<sup>14</sup>Gleń, 50.

In this context, objections raised by Piotr Sobolczyk in his review of Gleń's book on Miron Białoszewski<sup>15</sup> remain valid. He points out that by rejecting the autobiographical method, Gleń actually perceives it very narrowly, mostly in relation to *Autobiographical Pact* by Philippe Lejeune. Sobolczyk signals the need to consider other, more recent autobiographical methodologies by referring to the "sylleptic" concept of agency proposed by Ryszard Nycz, and more precisely to the sylleptic "I" trope in a text<sup>16</sup>. According to Nycz, the sylleptic "I" functions in two different ways at the same time – both as genuine, empirical, authentic, and fabricated, textual, fictional-narrative<sup>17</sup>. Elżbieta Winiecka concludes: "Maintaining a homogenous, and thus one-dimensional perspective is practically impossible in literature, which by definition introduces a discrepancy between the expressing, the expressed, and the textual «I». Creating a suggestion of this textual-experiential homogeneity is the goal of an author who puts himself in the center of described events"<sup>18</sup>. Adrian Gleń, by combining Stasiuk's narrative with the sylleptic "I", actually places this work in the center of the methodological discussion on autobiographism.

Moreover, Piotr Sobolczyk implies that the clear autobiographism-hermeneutics opposition is unfounded – both from the perspective of Schleiermacher, and much later, twentieth-century concepts. Gleń highlights the eclectic, "absorbing" character of hermeneutics; for example, the influence of the autobiographical method on the development of Paul Ricoeur's thought<sup>19</sup>. Thus Gleń, by discrediting "biographical compulsions" so decisively, at the same time disassembles the significant role played by studies in biographism in the process of forming hermeneutic methodology<sup>20</sup>.

Issues regarding autobiographism are also related to another important topic in the book – Gleń's approach to critical literary discourse. In the prologue he writes:

<sup>15</sup>Adrian Gleń, „W tej latarni...”. *Późna twórczość Mirona Białoszewskiego w perspektywie hermeneutycznej* (Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2004).

<sup>16</sup>Piotr Sobolczyk, "Hermeneutyka tak, ale jaka?" [Hermeneutics, but what kind?], *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2006): 152-153.

<sup>17</sup>Ryszard Nycz, *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* [Language of modernism. Historical-literary studies considerations] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013), 114.

<sup>18</sup>Elżbieta Winiecka, "O sylleptyczności tekstu literackiego" [On the syllepticity of a literary text], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (2004): 146.

<sup>19</sup>Sobolczyk, "Hermeneutyka tak, ale jaka?": 154. Paul Ricoeur's struggles with studies in autobiography have been analyzed in detail by Zofia Mitosek. See Zofia Mitosek, "Hermeneuta i autobiografia" [Hermeneutics and autobiography], *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2002): 137-151.

<sup>20</sup>Anna Legeżyńska has recently refreshed this issue in the context of the development of Polish literary studies. See Anna Legeżyńska, "Wystarczy mocno i wytrwale zastanawiać się nad jednym życiem..." [Biography as a hermeneutic challenge], *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2019): 13-27. Wilhelm Dilthey, a key figure in the hermeneutic tradition, should be mentioned here. The concept of analyzing biographies of individuals played an important role in the shaping of his "philosophy of life". For Dilthey, letters, documents, and literary works by distinguished individuals constituted an opportunity for making the products of their spiritual life objective, and hence for learning man's capabilities. However, Dilthey gradually extended the scope of objectivization of human life, focusing on studying history and reflection on historical processes. The hermeneutic character of seeking knowledge about man made Dilthey perceive historical manifestations of human existence as written texts, because he assumed that human products express human life, and as such provide an insight into his business. A hermeneutic understanding of Dilthey's concept allows one to go beyond individual limitations; however, in principle the ultimate results – i.e. learning about man as a whole – are not achieved, for these are the principles of metaphysics (rejected by Dilthey). Dilthey sees man from the perspective of action, not contemplation. In such a conceptualization, understanding is always limited. See Włodzimierz Lorenc, *Hermeneutyczne koncepcje człowieka 2. Dilthey, Misch, Bollnow* [Hermeneutic concepts of man 2] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe "Scholar", 2008), 78-85. At the same time it should be noted that Dilthey's philosophy is not refined, because – as his students stressed – he frequently changed his opinions, which means that the same statements can have different meanings depending on the context. See Włodzimierz Lorenc, *Filozofia hermeneutyczna. Inspiracje, klasycy, radykalizacje* [Hermeneutic philosophy. Inspirations, classics, radicalizations] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2019), 61.

A critic praising literature may seem ambiguous or even fake. He mostly risks: losing trust (if he has deserved any), resignation from his own “expertise” (to which the Latin *criticere* both refers and obliges this dying profession). His awe inspires negative associations, a skeptical half-smile, and at best – disbelief. Before, he was hiding behind a screen of “objectivity” or “specialist outlook”. Now, he is standing naked, and this nakedness momentarily inspires embarrassment with suspiciousness: isn’t it the same person who passed judgments and arguments, carefully selecting his words, who constantly interpreted, stubbornly arguing that it is here, not elsewhere, where the heart of a given work beats, greedily holding on to his legitimization of the only discoverer of literature’s secrets, passing punishments with awe-inspiring aloofness and distinction? And now he claims to have uncovered himself, took off his coat of conventions, suddenly authentic and genuine?<sup>21</sup>

Gleń is unafraid to admit his fascination with Stasiuk’s works – in fact, he intentionally stresses his gratitude to the author. As a result, he does not observe any major influence of Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Stanisław Grzesiuk, Marek Hłasko or Edward Stachura on Stasiuk’s prose<sup>22</sup>. According to Gleń, Stasiuk writes with “literary emphasis unmatched by contemporary authors, operating with a completely original phrase”<sup>23</sup>. Thus, instead of identifying Stasiuk’s obvious inspirations, he clearly prefers to mention “literary allies”. He writes with great conviction: “Stasiuk should be necessarily placed among authors like Schulz, Miłosz, Szczepański or Białoszewski, for example – who are on the side of the crippled, broken, repressed, excluded, beyond expression. And in those terms his vision is deeply humanistic, empathetic and ethical – simply, and on an elementary level”<sup>24</sup>. Elsewhere Gleń confesses: “Yes, Stasiuk’s philosophical-literary visions are probably somewhere between the metaphysical liturgy of Schulz and Miłosz, Gombrowicz’s mocking comedy show, and Haupt’s mild nostalgia”<sup>25</sup>. Well, to me this is an exaggeration.

Moreover, Gleń does not mind too much that Stasiuk repeats the same metaphors, indecently similar travelogues, and even trivializes the philosophical concepts he refers to. Gleń’s reading of Stasiuk’s works is full of solemnity and – as Gleń himself puts it – trust in the author. He only highlights the originality and authenticity of the discussed works: “Who knows, perhaps Andrzej Stasiuk indeed is among the best authors – the most tender, the most observant – in the contemporary Polish prose? Guardian of being, who writes walking hand in hand with death, out of and against which his prose grows”<sup>26</sup>.

Admiration for Stasiuk’s writing also results in intransigence, even a certain ruthlessness for other critics’ opinions: “Piotr Majewski distinguishes himself with a large dose of methodological ignorance. Regardless of the character of literary presentation, he does not hesitate to conclude that Stasiuk’s prose belongs completely to the generalizing ethnic discourse,

<sup>21</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 10-11.

<sup>22</sup>Only in one place does Adrian Gleń refer to the work of Elżbiera Dutka, who comments in a footnote that Stasiuk was occasionally described as, among others, an heir to the legends of Marek Hłasko and Edward Stachura. See Elżbieta Dutka, “‘Słowiańskie on the road’ – o Europie ‘zwanej Środkową’ w prozie Andrzeja Stasiuka” [‘Slavic on the road’ – on Europe ‘known as Central’ in Andrzej Stasiuk’s prose], *Fraza* 4 (2007): 170. –

<sup>23</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 24.

<sup>24</sup>Gleń, 52.

<sup>25</sup>Gleń, 95.

<sup>26</sup>Gleń, 14.

based on stereotyping the other (...)”<sup>27</sup>. Elsewhere he comments: “The conclusion of Starszewski’s text reveals that its author wants to prove that his own methodology is accurate – at any cost. In the concluding remarks to his interesting study he used petrified formulae which constitute the ideological fundament of postcolonial thought, completely ignoring whether it is consistent with literary testaments”<sup>28</sup>. Thus, Gleń clearly distances himself from postcolonial thought, presenting Stasiuk’s travels to the East as “experiencing a deep sense of being inside reality”<sup>29</sup> (as opposed to the vastly neurotic, unauthentic existence of Westerners).

Surely Georges Poulet’s “identifying criticism” is an important source of inspiration for Gleń. A representative of the Geneva School, under the great influence of Proust’s<sup>30</sup> theories, Poulet claims that a critic’s greatest challenge is to give an account of his own admiration. According to Poulet, a critic should compose a text that would be a spiritual copy of the work he analyzes – which is possible only when a complete transfer of one mind into another has taken place<sup>31</sup>. I believe that Poulet’s concept leads Gleń to pastiche<sup>32</sup>. This is how Gleń describes his own trip to “the writer’s land”:

Somewhere near Zborovo tyre valves started to tap, and so I had to stop to pour oil in my tired, worn out lanos. Perhaps I was supposed to come here and experience this perfect freedom? Is this the *genius loci* of this land?

And so I was sitting and smoking. Until they appeared – a Gypsy family with countless kids. They were walking through the middle of a side street (near a shop where you can pay in PLN – supposedly the only place where there is someone willing to carry our currency across the border), loud and self-centered as usual.

And then the old Jewish cemetery. A kind man from Slovakia encouraged me to open the main gate... with a kick. I was hesitant for a moment. But I also wanted to say my foreign Kaddish for the broken and overgrown – as usual, as everywhere – matzevahs, impossible to read.

<sup>27</sup>Gleń, 34. He refers to theses from Piotr Majewski, “Przeglądanie się w Cyganie: obraz Innego w prozie Andrzeja Stasiuka” [Looking at oneself in a Gypsy: the picture of the Other in Andrzej Stasiuk’s prose], *Sprawy Narodowościowe* 32 (2008): 151-63.

<sup>28</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 38. Here Gleń polemizes with Dariusz Skórczewski, “Kompleks(y) środkowego Europejczyka” [Complex(es) of a Central European], *Opcje* 2 (2008): 10-11.

<sup>29</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 39.

<sup>30</sup>See Georges Poulet, “Self-identifying criticism”, translated into Polish by Judyta Zbierska-Mościcka, in *Szkoła Genewska w krytyce. Antologia* [The Geneva School in criticism. Anthology], selection by Henryk Chudaki et al., foreword by Maciej Żurowski (Warszawa: PWN, 1998), 164-169. Adrian Gleń, referring to Heidegger’s rule of “listening to a literary work” in his book devoted to the works of Julian Kornhauser clearly stressed that the postulate of empathetic criticism of the Geneva School is also an inseparable part of hermeneutic criticism. See Adrian Gleń, *„Marzenie, które czyni poetą”... Autentyczność i empatia w dziele literackim Juliana Kornhausera* (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 169.

<sup>31</sup>Georges Poulet, “Krytyka identyfikująca się”, 159.

<sup>32</sup>Pastiche is related to various evaluations – from reluctance, through neutrality, to fascination. The emotions which it stirs largely depend on how it is defined and what functions are ascribed to it; it can be treated as a genre, a type of styling, or an aesthetic category. See Artur Hellich, “Jak rozpoznać pastisz (i odróżnić go od parodii)?” [How to recognize pastiche (and distinguish it from parody)?], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 2 (2014): 28. For Poulet, pastiche is not the end point of a “critical act”; such an “accepted gesture”, i.e. imitation of a writer’s style, is not proper criticism. He writes that identifying with a text puts us in an unusual world, where everything is new and at the same time provides a sense of authenticity. “Making a pastiche of an author is imitating what is trivial and what is crucial”. Georges Poulet, “Krytyka identyfikująca się”, 166-167. Hence, for Poulet finding a way to original places is the key. Referring to “thematic criticism” of Marcel Proust, he stresses the significance of “improvised memory”, which allows to remember “common topics”, and ignore “secondary effects”. See Georges Poulet, “Krytyka identyfikująca się”, 167-169.

The moment of uncontrolled joy of the Gypsy family, and the eternal arrangement of stone traces of silent memory. It is hard to find a better embrace, a wrestling match between what is and what used to be<sup>33</sup>.

Seeing so many characteristics of the author's style may be surprising. We can see Stasiuk multiplied, or maybe rather condensed, which – to my mind – gives an unintentionally comical effect<sup>34</sup>. This affects the reception of this text. Gleń is inconsistent and quite surprising. He suddenly moves from a somewhat literary, and – what should be highlighted – personal autobiographical register, i.e., attempts at penetrating into Stasiuk's prose, to academic discourse: specialist terms, references to other scholars, bitter disputes. Suddenly tenderness transforms into academic evaluation. This practice is well expressed by the title of a page-long summary of the discussion: *Wejście i wyjście. I wejście* [Entrance and exit. And entrance]. And this is how it feels – like being invited to a very intimate world only to be formally asked to leave, and then showered with more confidences. Surprise, consternation... In the end, I was confused; I had the impression that Gleń is open, sensitive, direct, and at the same time harsh in his judgments and despotic. The summary is in fact a several-sentence long comment on an extensive quotation from *Jadąc do Babadag*:

Yes, because genuine death must imitate life. – This sentence by Stasiuk has to conclude this book.

This is how I imagined it already a long time ago.

And it IS like that<sup>35</sup>.

So much dominance in such a short utterance: genuine, must, it is like that... This fascination with Stasiuk's prose makes Gleń possessive, categorical in his judgments and conclusions. Admiration inspires Gleń to "write with Stasiuk" in a fragmentary way, to imitate his style, construct a certain narrative community with him<sup>36</sup>. As I have already mentioned, the perspective from which Gleń

<sup>33</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 5-6.

<sup>34</sup>Such an effect obviously throws off the hermeneutic mode of reading and refers to the conflict regarding the character of postmodernism described by Ryszard Nycz, i.e. the scope of influence of two means of creating an artistic form: parody and pastiche. See Ryszard Nycz, *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze* [Textual world. Poststructuralism and knowledge of literature] (Warszawa: IBL, 1993), 184-188.

<sup>35</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 201.

<sup>36</sup>Richard Rorty's (importantly, a philosopher who critically refers to Heidegger's hermeneutic concept from the perspective of neopragmatism) concept is another interesting way of practicing literary criticism under the influence of fascination with the works analyzed. In his essay "Pragmatist career", arguing with the distinction between usage and interpretation introduced by Umberto Eco, Rorty argues that a text provides stimuli thanks to which the reader (and hence a critic) can convince oneself and others to say what they wanted to say about that text from the very beginning. Richard Rorty, "Kariera pragmatysty", translated into Polish by Tomasz Biedroń, in Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1996), 102. Rorty thus questions this model of literary criticism, referring to the metaphor of "internal integrity of a text" proposed by Eco. According to Rorty, a literary work cannot say what it wants to say. Why am I referring to this polemic of Rorty with Umberto Eco, who is entangled in the hermeneutic circle? Because that essay discusses the category of fascination, which is crucial for Gleń. Rorty claims that fascination (and conviction) are determined by the needs and aims of those who are fascinated. Thus the distinction between usage and interpretation is replaced with many various "usages" that readers (critics) make of a text. However, to me the conclusion of the essay, where Rorty presents another opposition, is the most interesting part: a methodological and inspired reading of texts. A methodical criticism is deprived of authentic engagement. Such a mode of reading does not change the accepted aims. Inspired criticism results from an encounter with an author, protagonist, plot, or verse. It influences a critic's self-image. A text does not change a critic by changing their goals regarding people, objects, texts encountered later in life. However, it does not have much to do with striving for distinguishing between reality and appearances. See Richard Rorty, "Kariera pragmatysty", 96-107.

analyzes Stasiuk's prose is largely determined by issues discussed by Martin Heidegger. And in this context, I believe that Gleń's language is significant<sup>37</sup>. I think that the academic character of the book which I have already contrasted with repeating a sentence from Stasiuk is also inconsistent. In many places academic discourse changes its character and becomes exceptionally metaphorical, which can be read as references – intentional or unintentional – to Stasiuk's style (and his followers)<sup>38</sup>.

Additionally, Gleń's practice of using hyphens for constructing new terms can be associated with Heidegger's language. Some examples include: "in-and-visibility", "doing-nothing", "writing-towards-life", "re-activation", "existing-now". Such practices may be both justified and necessary (especially in the hermeneutic tradition). However, used immoderately, they lose their power, and as a result – seem redundant<sup>39</sup>. These neologisms, complex linguistic constructions do not build up tension while uncovering fresh semantic areas for the reader – they only clearly indicate the source of inspiration. Like a charm, they transfer the reader near the source<sup>40</sup>.

However, I would like to stress that I have no intention of focusing on this certain inconsistency in the stylistic layer of the book. What I find more important is to point out methodological difficulties and challenges related to attempts at self-identifying criticism, as well as implementing Heidegger's philosophy in literary studies. I simply believe that the analysis of the book's language facilitates a discussion of many of the key issues raised by Gleń.

<sup>37</sup>By attaching so much weight to the linguistic layer of Gleń's book, I accommodate for his methodological inclinations. Martin Heidegger is surely a philosopher who made language the basic problem of hermeneutics. (At the same time, we should not forget about the evolution of his thought regarding the issue of language – after the so-called turn, he went significantly beyond the hermeneutic position). Heidegger connected language with his concept of cognition, arguing that human existence, being-in-the-world that would go beyond language, is impossible. It should be stressed that Heidegger's position was significant for the development of hermeneutics, especially for Hans-Georg Gadamer, who argued that we do not control language – we belong to it. Hence, according to Gadamer, a genuine conversation takes place when we "engage" in it, when it leads us, and not when we "conduct" it. For Gadamer the hermeneutic turn in philosophy thus does not equal a linguistic turn. See Michał Januszkiewicz, *W poszukiwaniu sensu. Phronesis i hermeneutyka* [In search of sense. Phronesis and hermeneutics] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2016), 86-91.

<sup>38</sup>Contrary to the principles of the series "Projekt: Egzystencja i Literatura", the book *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie* is in fact not approachable. In its linguistic layer as many as three stylistic solutions can be found: traditional academic discourse divided by rather hermeneutic passages referring to Heidegger's philosophical language and clear attempts at recreating Stasiuk's poetics which distinguishes itself with its autobiographical character. At times one may even wonder whether Poulet's concept of "spiritual copies" in various places in Gleń's work refer to one and the other "world of mind". However, instead of arbitrarily resolving this issue, I would rather refer to Heidegger's significant conclusions connected to the issue of "metaphorization" of academic discourse: it is possible to strive for (authentic) language via two (neighboring) ways: thinking and poetizing. The former is characteristic of philosophers, and poetizing – for poets, of course. However, in Heidegger thinking avoids metaphysical, logical, and academic categories, thus approaching poetry. Such "poetizing thinking" does not mean arbitrariness – "accuracy" is understood non-metaphysically, and becomes "unthinkable" from the perspective of science. See Michał Januszkiewicz, *W koło hermeneutyki literackiej* (Warszawa: PWN, 2007), 45. However, one can wonder whether the language of Gleń's book was influenced by the fact that Gleń himself is a poet, and thus the "poetizing way" may constitute an attractive direction for expressing contents which escape a typical academic discourse. However, I do not wish to resolve that issue. By the way, such a combination of critical-literary and poetic language was meant to be the subject of Gleń's analysis in his book on Julian Kornhauser. However, he resigned from such an approach, instead "trusting" Kornhauser, who (as a critic) warned against treating poetry and criticism by the same author in a complementary way. See Gleń, *„Marzenie, które czyni poetą”... Autentyczność i empatia w dziele literackim Juliana Kornhausera*, 35-37.

<sup>39</sup>Marek Bernacki's book on Czesław Miłosz: Marek Bernacki, *Tropienie Miłosza. Hermeneutyczna „bio-grafia” Poety* (Kraków: Universitas, 2019) is a good example showing that it is possible to conduct a consistent hermeneutic analysis without abusing this linguistic mannerism.

<sup>40</sup>Gleń frequently uses brackets according to the same principle. This is unsurprising – constructing neologisms in such a way is extremely popular in today's humanistic discourse, perhaps even exploited.

Gleń typically approaches Heidegger's poetic style when he highlights the need of transcendence in Stasiuk's works, transgressing the sensual and empirical:

Discretion as the reverse of certainty, which breeds only noise and chaos (after all, *discretio* opposes *discrepatio* – 'asynchronous sound', 'original incompatibility'), opening the space of what cannot be subjected to methodological explication. We should listen to the discrete in a text – evoking a metaphysical perspective – the most. Earnestly, mostly using empathy. It is the unclear, uncertain in a text that makes one think. The un-clear where I can see a piece of reality which does not want to stay within its limits, when I see the cognitive helplessness of the speaking subject, admitting that his language gives up faced with mystery, that the mystery is and remains some conveyor belt for his travels, writing, and understanding, or that networks of images born from their pressure do not exhaust themselves only in what they are trying to represent with more or less success. Something like this especially forces the reader to pause and answer<sup>41</sup>.

Krzysztof Michalski highlights the religious aspect of *Being and Time*, pointing out its "Biblical style" (following Erich Auerbach)<sup>42</sup>. According to some scholars, Heidegger's works resemble myths, poetry, or religious meditation, rather than traditional philosophical discourse. For example, Walter Strolz defines him as a meditative thinker. John D. Caputo and Otto Pöggeler stress the presence of mystical elements in Heidegger's works. Attempts at connecting his concepts with Asian philosophical tradition should also be noted<sup>43</sup>. Hence, I have an impression that references to Heidegger's style allow Gleń to highlight "a huge charge of metaphysics and religiousness" in Stasiuk's prose<sup>44</sup>.

I believe that as early as his official debut – a collection of short stories entitled *Mury Hebronu* [Walls of Hebron] (1992) – religious issues can be observed<sup>45</sup>. On the most basic level they take the form of Biblical references, but there are also references to Eastern religious tradition (although much rarer). In Stasiuk, connecting religion with a counter-cultural fascination with spirituality is justified<sup>46</sup>. It should also be stressed that Stasiuk's protagonist clearly displays disdain for institutional religion.

I can see many motifs referring to mysticism in Stasiuk's prose, such as the phenomenon of stopping, questioning time, and protagonists participating in a peculiar, eternal "now", or

<sup>41</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 72.

<sup>42</sup>Krzysztof Michalski, *Heidegger i filozofia współczesna* [Heidegger and modern philosophy] (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1978), 46-48.

<sup>43</sup>Cezary Woźniak, *Heidegger. Da/Augenblick* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020), 20.

<sup>44</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 61.

<sup>45</sup>Many of my observations regarding religious references in Stasiuk's works can also be found in: Paweł Dziel, "Inspiracje religijne w pisarstwie Andrzeja Stasiuka" [Religious inspirations in Andrzej Stasiuk's writing], in *Literatura i wiara* [Literature and faith], edited by Andrzej Sulikowski (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Print Group, 2009).

<sup>46</sup>See Ursula Baatz, "Mistyka hipisowska" [Hippy mysticism], in *Leksykon mistyki* [Lexicon of mysticism], edited by Peter Dinzelbacher, translated into Polish by Bogusław Widła (Warszawa: Verbinum, 2002), 204-205. What I mean is a phenomenon often defined as "hippy mysticism", although this term does not exhaust the counter-cultural issues I signaled. I write more extensively about it in the paper: Paweł Dziel, "Święte miejsca w twórczości Andrzeja Stasiuka oraz Jacka Podsiadły" [Holy places in the works by Andrzej Stasiuk and Jacek Podsiadły], in *Święte miejsca w literaturze* [Holy places in literature], edited by Zbigniew Chojnowski, Anna Rzymska, Beata Tarnowska (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, 2009).



a strong, even illuminating feeling that the surrounding reality is only an illusion<sup>47</sup>. And Gleń pays attention to that, writing about Stasiuk's being on the road in the following way: "A trip to the East is like a mystical experience of wreaking havoc, devastation"<sup>48</sup>. Similarly to many mystics, Stasiuk's protagonists' language is full of comparisons and metaphors. One could say that if the author tries to show something unimaginable, he reaches for literary tools typical for poets<sup>49</sup>. The belief that it is possible to experience something unimaginable via the senses is at the core of mystical language. This belief makes it seem absurd and internally inconsistent for people who do not experience similar states<sup>50</sup>. The accumulation of metaphors in Stasiuk reminds one of theoretical proposals connecting literature to mysticism, mostly indicating the possibility of nonconceptual cognition – the source of poetic language<sup>51</sup>.

Frequent descriptions indicating impermanence, the transience of existence, force Stasiuk's protagonists to seek the unchangeable. And it seems that for him light is the only phenomenon that would not be subject to destruction. Gleń devotes a lot of attention to this issue, rigorously analyzing various aspects of the phenomenon: "In Stasiuk's writing the sense-creating potency depends not only on the dialectics of light (metaphor of sense) and darkness (symbol of nothingness) – which would be in line with the eternal tradition and hermeneutics – but also (and this, in fact, is what I would most like to focus on) on various «levels of concentration» of light, its intensity or angles, as well as circumstances in which light is registered in this prose"<sup>52</sup>.

For Gleń the constant presence of the resurrection motif<sup>53</sup> is an important argument in favor of perceiving Stasiuk as a religious author. This issue is closely connected to the previous motif of describing the world. Gleń discusses the protagonist's waiting for the "perpetual light", which "will coagulate into a flame able to overexpose everything, turn into ashes, and – transformed in this way – lift it to immortality"<sup>54</sup>. However, Gleń far more often presents light in Stasiuk's prose as a memory stimulant<sup>55</sup>. Memory, which "forces us to constantly revive, it serves the wish of presence, which seems even stronger than religious orders and dogmas regulating the work of an eschatological imagination"<sup>56</sup>. After all, Stasiuk writes that "no idea of resurrection has ever come to my mind, other than memory – this bastard of time that has

<sup>47</sup>See Dziel, "Inspiracje religijne w pisarstwie Andrzeja Stasiuka".

<sup>48</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 67.

<sup>49</sup>Mieczysław Orski, *Autokreacje i mitologie (zwięzły opis spraw literatury lat 90.)* [Self-creations and mythologies (a concise description of literary matters in the 1990s)] (Wrocław: OKIS, 1997), 52.

<sup>50</sup>Leszek Kołakowski, *Jeśli Boga nie ma... O Bogu, Diable, Grzechu i innych zmartwieniach tak zwanej filozofii religii* [If there is no God... On God, Devil, Sin and other concerns of the so-called philosophy of religion] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1988), 126.

<sup>51</sup>Stefan Sawicki, *Wartość – sacrum – Norwid. Studia i szkice aksjologiczno-literackie* [Value – sacrum – Norwid. Axiological-literary studies and sketches] (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1994), 100.

<sup>52</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 85.

<sup>53</sup>Gleń, 173.

<sup>54</sup>Gleń, 104.

<sup>55</sup>I think that Stasiuk's works are dominated by the motif of the physical (lux) world, related to the Aristotelian tradition – a natural, sensible phenomenon, rather than the spiritual, divine world (lumen). See Kris Van Heuckelom, "Patrzeć w promień od ziemi odbity". Wizualność w poezji Czesława Miłosza ["Looking into a ray reflected by earth". Visuality in the works by Czesław Miłosz] (Warszawa: Fundacja „Centrum Międzynarodowych Badań Polonistycznych, IBL PAN, 2004), 12-13.

<sup>56</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 106.



never been controlled by anyone”<sup>57</sup>. Hence Gleń’s observations in which he paradoxically combines the resurrection motif with absence, disappearance of the world, seem significant to me. This is how he analyzes the experience of resurrection of Maria Amalia Mniszech from the Brühl family, whose church vault (actually, the sarcophagus sculpture) is frequently visited by the narrator in *Dukla*. Gleń’s observation – “Reality is freed from light, sight, it is subject only to those senses whose functioning is dictated by imagination”<sup>58</sup> – is crucial. It is memory and imagination that guard against annihilation in Stasiuk’s prose.

So, can Stasiuk be treated as a religious author? I think not. In Stasiuk, references to the *sa-crum* are mostly related to playing with motifs rather than reflecting upon faith. Gleń seems to share this opinion, for he stresses that Stasiuk does not write about any “salvation or deification wish”<sup>59</sup>. Gleń is thus more inclined towards treating Stasiuk as an existentialist “tracing the intersection of being and nothingness, looking for any similarities between religious visions to own experiences and ideas founded upon it”<sup>60</sup>.

However, I agree with Gleń, especially regarding what is fundamental in his work – Stasiuk remains on the side of life, of existing. This is how Gleń clearly distances himself from Heidegger<sup>61</sup>, for whom awareness of death is the key, desirable moment, “opening existence to its «most own» possibility of being”<sup>62</sup>. Gleń writes: “In Stasiuk’s work death does not constitute – in any way or aspect – a phenomenon that would be able to move human predispositions. Experiencing death does not open absolute freedom and does not reinforce the abilities and capabilities of man experiencing being close to death, or the phenomenon of own mortality in any special way”<sup>63</sup>.

It is first and foremost Stasiuk’s experience of a journey – which, according to Gleń, is the closest to the figure of a wanderer – that seems to stimulate both memory and imagination. Gleń admits: “Reminding, unreminding – which arrange themselves into a literary reconstruction of being-now and the pre-eternity hidden in it – is in general the stake of any travelogue”<sup>64</sup>.

<sup>57</sup>Andrzej Stasiuk, *Dukla* (Gładyszów: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 1999), 91.

<sup>58</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 98.

<sup>59</sup>Gleń, 107.

<sup>60</sup>Gleń, 173.

<sup>61</sup>I would also like to signal that Gleń enters into a dialogue with Heidegger’s arguments in another area, going significantly beyond the scope of his concept. Clearly “trusting” Stasiuk, in a way accepting his “manner”, he contrasts Heidegger’s theses regarding objects (tool, craft, workshop metaphors) with Stasiuk’s perspective, which indicates an attachment to objects and machines, a sort of respect for them. According to Gleń, Heidegger’s reflection regarding objects is cold, it implies a functional order, closing the understanding of objects within the notion of “handiness” or “reliability”. Hence Gleń distances himself from Bjørnar Olsen’s views (who saw Heidegger as a precursor of today’s “turn towards objects”). See Gleń, 109-127.

<sup>62</sup>In *Being and Time* Heidegger concludes: “Death *lays claim* to it [Dasein] as an *individual* Dasein. The non-relational character of death, as understood in anticipation, individualizes Dasein down to itself. This individualizing is a way in which the ‘there’ is disclosed for existence. It makes manifest that all Being-alongside the things with which we concern ourselves, and all Being-with-Others, will fail us when our ownmost potentiality-for-Being is the issue. Dasein can be *authentically itself* only if it makes this possible for itself of its own accord”. Martin Heidegger, *Bycie i czas*, translation into Polish Bogdan Baran (Warszawa: PWN, 2007), 331-332. English version: p. 304, translated into English by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper 1962).

<sup>63</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 152-153.

<sup>64</sup>Gleń, 178.

And he continues: “elementary experience of opening the fact of own existence takes place – importantly and significantly in Heidegger – in experiencing surprise, weirdness, or even the secret of *existentiae*, which is most severely, most intensively experienced while traveling”<sup>65</sup>.

What fascinates Gleń so much is Stasiuk’s “life-travel-writing”. Anna Legeżyńska implies that constructing someone else’s biography requires salvaging the individuality of experiencing an encounter with the Other. According to Legeżyńska, such an encounter facilitates admiration for the writer’s personality: “imagination, empathy, and fascination create a hermeneutic modal frame of the biographical text, whose aim – apart a pragmatic gain – is to solidify the individuality of one’s fate”<sup>66</sup>. For Gleń, Stasiuk’s “lifewriting” is decisively something more than just a text. What is fictional in this prose seems to be combined with the veristic and creates – as Anna Pekaniec put it – “a peculiar mode of shaping experience”<sup>67</sup>.

Adrian Gleń tries to recreate Stasiuk’s defense of existence. It is especially clear in the autobiographic-pastiche parts of his work devoted to travelling. Perhaps this need should be connected to the phenomenon which Ryszard Nycz dubbed personal literary studies. Does Gleń’s language not express the need to reject the opposition of affect and intellect, experience and understanding, proposed by Nycz? Nycz writes: “We understand what a text is about if we experience it; we can experience it if it reactivates us and changes our learned cognitive structures”<sup>68</sup>. Gleń gives an account of the process of experiencing Stasiuk’s mystery of roaming. He confesses: “This is what travelogues are for: they extend existence”<sup>69</sup>.

I have to admit that Gleń’s book stirred strong emotions in me. On the one hand, I was irritated with his principled theses and uncritical approach to Stasiuk. I was annoyed with the imposing, inconsistent pastiche. On the other hand, I enjoyed analyses referring to experiencing existence and the painful rejection of passing away. Gleń’s work reminded me of what once fascinated me in Stasiuk, and what was overwhelmed by the disappointment stemming from predictable effusions, metaphors exploited numerous times, shallow and often unfounded references to philosophy.

<sup>65</sup>Gleń, 167.

<sup>66</sup>Legeżyńska, “‘Wystarczy mocno i wytrwale zastanawiać się nad jednym życiem...’ Biografistyka jako hermeneutyczne wyzwanie”: 26.

<sup>67</sup>Anna Pekaniec, “Autobiografia i epistolografia w perspektywie kulturowej teorii literatury” [Autobiography and epistolography from the perspective of cultural literary theory], in *Literatura polska i perspektywy nowej humanistyki* [Polish literature and new humanities perspective], edited by Romuald Cudak, Karolina Pospiszil (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2018), 263.

<sup>68</sup>Ryszard Nycz, “Tekstowe doświadczenia” [Textual experiences], *Teksty Drugie* 1-2 (2010): 12. Nycz, referring to Martin Heidegger’s *On the Way To Language*, claims that “experience which comes to the fore (articulation, writing) in literature, and then activates itself through reading, is of a ‘whole-psychophysical’ character ([...] simultaneously: corporal-sensual, social-cultural, notion-linguistic), co-topical (as a kind of paradoxical, mutually related ‘passive activity’ of the experiencing and the experienced); and transformative (in terms of objects and the subject). [...] In this perspective, the notion of experimental poetics would refer to both a description of a specific variant of prototypical “plot” of an experience happening, and the specific character of the process of experience-related referentiality, running along a trajectory similar to a Möbius strip (from external reference through its “topical” internalization, to the new, evoked externalization of index relationship with reality)”. Ryszard Nycz, *Poetyka doświadczenia. Teoria - nowoczesność - literatura* [Poetics of experience. Theory - modernity - literature] (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2012), 141-143.

<sup>69</sup>Gleń, *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, 107.

To my mind, Stasiuk's protagonist is most convincing when he gives up his metaphysical armor and does not deal with great names, historical events, or eschatology. Journalistic writing is not Stasiuk's element; he is much closer to authenticity – so desired by Gleń – when he expresses the moment of surprise with random events, everyday details, the common presence of people, animals, objects, as well as light, time, and space in passages resembling poetic prose. He is not trying to reconstruct this experience with philosophical or religious associations – he gives an account of experiencing materiality. Then only existence, so highlighted by Gleń, matters. Presence – or its lack: deep longing for existence. In such places Stasiuk's stylistic devices are fresh, truly unique, at times even piercing. I copy such miniatures for my personal use, to read them separately from the whole. Like poems.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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# KEYWORDS

FASCINATION

hermeneutics

*experience*

pastiche

**ABSTRACT:**

This essay discusses Adrian Gleń's book *Andrzej Stasiuk. Istnienie*, which refers to the hermeneutical tradition in literary studies. The perspective from which Gleń analyzes Stasiuk's prose is largely determined by Martin Heidegger's philosophy, as well as postulates of "self-identifying criticism" by Georges Pulet of the Geneva School. The essay presents a broader context for issues related to autobiographism, polemizing with Gleń's interpretation "without biographical intrusions". Additionally, methodological issues related to literary criticism under the influence of fascination with the analyzed works are discussed. The essay focuses on literary studies practices which explore the category of experience.

## SELF-IDENTIFYING

## autobiographism

*Andrzej Stasiuk***Martin Heidegger****NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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# Between Shadow and Light

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All literary scholars, theater scholars and admirers of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz should read Ewa Szkudlarek's interesting new monograph entitled *Portrety cieni Witkacego* [Witkacy's shadow portraits]. It is a unique, original, and insightful book, presenting its readers with a new methodological approach in the humanities through its focus on the visual and metaphorical aspects of shadows. The monograph presents the reader with a new perspective on Witkacy's works. While plenty of other works devoted to Witkiewicz also discuss different aspects of the artist's works, Szkudlarek's monograph analyzes the artist's oeuvre across different media and addresses questions that have not been noticed by other scholars. The life and work of Witkacy have been analyzed in different perspectives, including in terms of personality (madness, obsession, despair, melancholy), but no one has noticed the "shadow line" before, both in the artist's philosophy and work.<sup>1</sup> The shadow connects and differentiates

<sup>1</sup> J. Degler, *Witkacego portret wielokrotny: szkice i materiały do biografii (1918-1939)* [Witkacy, multiple portrait: Sketches and materials for a biography] (1918-1939), Warszawa 2009. A. Żakiewicz, *Jednolity świat wyobraźni. O wątkach literackich w malarstwie twórczości Witkacego* [Unified world of imagination: Literary motifs in Witkacy's paintings] in: *Witkacy. Życie i twórczość* [Witkacy: Life and works] Conference proceedings commemorating the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Witkacy's death (Muzeum Pomorza Środkowego, Słupsk 16-18 September 1994), ed. J. Degler, Wrocław 1996. L. Sokół, *Witkacy i Strindberg: dalecy i bliscy* [Witkacy and Strindberg: distant and close], Wrocław 1995 and other.



the works of Witkacy. The multi-faceted nature of the shadow, in the context of culture, psychology, psychoanalysis, and existentialism, unites Witkacy's entire oeuvre. Szkudlarek thus makes a major interpretative contribution. The monograph demonstrates that Szkudlarek knows how to identify and study cultural references to emotions and experiences. She is also able to analyze poetics and aesthetics. It is also worth emphasizing that Szkudlarek discusses the shadow as a means of expression, a "poetic idiom," in a broad context: it is a fundamental feature of Witkacy's represented world. The shadow, Szkudlarek argues, acts as a metaphor for the human condition, human vulnerability and mortality.<sup>2</sup> What is particularly innovative is that the scholar analyzes "shadow aesthetics," locating it in-between the aesthetics of light and the aesthetics of darkness. In fact, the monograph reconstructs shadows that exist or disappear because of the light emanating from Witkiewicz's literary images, paintings, and photographs.

Szkudlarek analyzes the shadow in literature (novel, drama), painting (portrait, landscape) and other art forms (theatre, photography and film). As she writes in the introduction to the monograph, the study sheds new light on the works of the outstanding 20th-century Polish artist. She also emphasizes that the cultural, artistic, metaphysical and existential dimension of the shadow is also important in Witkacy's work.<sup>3</sup> Considering such a broadly defined research problem, the book is structured in a clear and logical way. It is divided into three parts – I. Shadow Images, II. Shadow Illusions, III. Shadow Projections – and each of these parts is further divided into chapters.<sup>4</sup>

In the first part, Szkudlarek discusses shadow in painting (portrait and landscape) and in photography. The researcher analyzes the "mimetic aesthetics" in Witkacy's works.<sup>5</sup> The second part of the book is devoted to fictional characters and the role of the shadow in complementing the human condition in prose, plays and photographs. Witkacy's characters are "shadowed" and thus contribute to the mysterious, metaphorical dimension of Individual Existence. In the third part, Witkiewicz's works are discussed in the context of Carl Gustaw Jung's shadow archetype. This part demonstrates the self-making dimension of Witkacy's works in a biographical context. Szkudlarek discusses various aspects of Witkacy's works, which correspond to his personality traits and personal experiences of the "shadow line" (including his life in Lithuania).

Witkacy never commented on the shadow in his aesthetic and theoretical texts, yet shadow is present in the works of art he created. Szkudlarek points out that in his psychological theory of colors, Witkacy writes about the possibility of perceiving different colors. She also adds that "Witkacy visualizes shadows in his paintings, photographs and literary texts. Not only the form, but also the colors of the shadow are important for Witkacy. Portraits of women

<sup>2</sup> E. Szkudlarek, *Portrety cieni Witkacego* [Witkacy's shadow portraits], Poznań 2018, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Part I. Shadow Images: I. Portrait, II. Photographic portrait, III. Landscape, IV. Photographic landscape; Part II. Shadow Illusions: V. Shadows of figures and characters, VI. Theater shadows, VII. Film shadows; part III. Shadow Projections: VIII. The shadow of personality, IX. Shadow Colors, Shadow Transformation. The individual parts and chapters refer to the logical structure of the entire argument.

<sup>5</sup> Beata Popczyk-Szczęsna, review of *Portrety cieni Witkacego*, artPapier. <http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=380&artykul=7550>. Date of access: March 30, 2021.

are very interesting in this respect, as they show the special bond between the artist and the model. The shadows in the portraits are painted with different colors. The portraits have a complex color scale: from the traditional halftones of black to glossy white (portrait of Maria Witkiewiczowa from 1918, portrait of Edwarda Szmuglarowska from 1930), yellow, red, purple, blue (portrait of Lena Iżycka from 1925, portrait of Małgorzata Wanda Żukotyńska from 1928, portrait of Helena Białynicka-Birula from 1929).<sup>6</sup>

W. Sztaba writes that: "Portraits are most often drawn in color, and this is emphasized by Witkacy. The portraits are made of dynamic color lines, arranged in colorful layers, one above and over the other. The glow of colors, visible in pastel artworks, is also there: this time these are mostly luminous lines, streaks of color, glowing wires."<sup>7</sup>

The analysis and visualization of the shadow in portraits painted as part of the so-called "S.I. Witkiewicz's Portrait Company" and photographic portraits are particularly interesting. Szkudlarek skillfully uses her knowledge of painting, art history, aesthetics, literature, drama, photography, and psychology. She pays attention to the "colors of the shadow," because for Witkacy not only the form but also the shadow matters. Witkacy expressed the model's soul by means of "dynamic lines." The artist divided his portraits into five types depending on their location on the scale – from naturalism to Pure Form. Szkudlarek refers to Witkiewicz's technique of painting portraits as "the psychology of the brush," because he tried to capture not only the physical resemblance but also, more importantly, psychological features. The artist's greatest talent was portraying both the body and the soul. In her analysis of Witkacy's portraits, both paintings and photographs, Szkudlarek pays attention to the characteristic features of the image and describes the unique relationship between the painter and the model. She emphasizes that "Witkacy's portraits are all carefully thought-out studies of the face, emphasizing the personality of the model. The artist and the model maintain eye contact, which contributes to the reflection of the shadow emanating from the eyes."<sup>8</sup> Witkacy not only recreated models as if in a mirror reflection "noticing how a dense or a fine web of shadows surrounds the cheeks, the eyes and the hair of his models. He also energetically and decisively paints in thick lines, leaving empty spaces in-between, thanks to which the faces in the portraits or self-portraits look as if they were smeared with shadows."<sup>9</sup> This play of light and shadow is characteristic for the artist – it is his unique means of expression. It is also an important formal feature in his novels and dramas.

Szkudlarek analyzes painted and photographic portraits, skillfully using her expert knowledge of photographic techniques (she discusses their history), art history, and psychology to analyze Witkacy's works. She also refers to the artist's theoretical knowledge to emphasize the important role that the shadow plays in Witkacy's philosophy.

<sup>6</sup> E. Szkudlarek, op.cit, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> W. Sztaba, *Gra ze sztuką. O twórczości Stanisława Ignacego Witkiewicza* [Playing with art: The works of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz], Kraków 1982, p.116.

<sup>8</sup> E. Szkudlarek, op.cit, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

Particular attention should be paid to the brilliant interpretation of the photograph of Witkiewicz's fiancée, especially in the perspective of future tragic events. Szkudlarek sees in Jadwiga Janczewska's photographic portraits "some artistic intuition." Witkacy sees his fiancée as "the eternal bride in the land of shadows."<sup>10</sup> The portraits of Witkacy's fiancée are not faithful representations. Szkudlarek argues that in photographic portraits Witkacy plays with various means of perception. Witkacy's artistic sensitivity, as well as the ability to play with light and shadow, reflect the dramatic nature of Janczewska as an individual and the relationship between her and Witkacy.

Witkacy took many photographs of Jadwiga Janczewska, but two of them are analyzed in more detail. Szkudlarek pays particular attention to two photographs from 1913, which show the bride in a hat with a veil. The first photograph is described by the scholar thusly: "She turns her gaze away from the camera, looking down, thoughtfully. Her wide-brimmed hat casts a distinct shadow over the patterned wall. She is captured, lifeless, in the moment as if she were beautiful Eurydice descending, quite unexpectedly, into Hades."<sup>11</sup> The second photograph of Janczewska in a hat with a veil "exposes the enlarged shadows of the eyelashes. (...) The eyelashes and lace embroidery as if intertwine..."<sup>12</sup> Szkudlarek offers comprehensive, inspiring and suggestive interpretations. She draws on a number of associations and provides various contexts, e.g., Staff's poem, *Shadow*, elements of Eros and Thanatos, Orpheus and Eurydice, or the drama *Orpheus* by Anna Świrszczyńska.

Szkudlarek's analysis of the artist's self-portraits is indeed brilliant. Szkudlarek writes: "the self-portraits are painted with restless, nervous strokes, which extend beyond the shape of the face. These lines sometimes protrude like spikes or a wire mesh. Witkacy thus thickens the darkness around himself, catching it in a net, as it were, showing that he is doomed to be wounded. He also reminds us that he is doomed to be harmed and that he is in a hopeless situation. The artist places himself in a hostile, dangerous and, to some extent, claustrophobic space."<sup>13</sup>

The discussion of the shadow in Witkacy's autobiography, his self-making practices and works is particularly interesting. Witkacy's life was shrouded in mystery and scandal, and he perpetuated this image. His life was an extension of the style of Young Poland modernists for whom shock became both entertainment and a distinguishing feature of artistic philosophy. Szkudlarek analyzes the shadow in Witkacy's life, referring to contemporary psychology and psychiatry. The shadow is as an expression of tension, metaphysical fear, which connects the external and the internal world. It is a visualization of the archetype of the unconscious in the human psyche.

In the chapter "Landscape," Szkudlarek emphasizes that Witkacy, like other avant-garde artists, used the shadow as a symbol, as a means of expression. She writes: "Witkacy's landscapes

<sup>10</sup>Ibidem, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup>Ibidem, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup>Ibidem, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 47.

are not a subject in themselves for me; they are the key to interpreting those works by the artist that, broadly speaking, explore the concept of space. (...) For Witkacy, a work of art is a kind of medium which can be read anew, depending on the adopted perspective.”<sup>14</sup>

Szkudlarek draws attention to the previously unnoticed aspects of Witkacy's photographic works, drawing on the artist's reflections on landscape, which led him to formulate “his own philosophy of the landscape.”<sup>15</sup> Witkacy's drawing style and writing style, especially his technique of description, are united by the landscape. It is especially visible in Witkacy's novels: *622 upadki Bunga* [622 Falls of Bungo], *Pożegnanie jesieni* [Farewell to Autumn], *Niensycenie* [Insatiability], *Jedyne wyjście* [The Only Way]. The descriptions of landscape, Szkudlarek emphasizes, show the artist's unique “landscape sensitivity.”<sup>16</sup> Landscape and shadow together create a whole that functions in-between reality and metaphysics – the two interact with each other and work together.

Szkudlarek pays attention to the philosophical and aesthetic reflection visible in Witkacy's landscapes. They engage in a dialogue with both the traditional concept of a work of art and innovative “aesthetics.”<sup>17</sup> The scholar refers to Leonardo da Vinci's theoretical reflections on the shadow and the artistic concepts of Impressionists and Symbolists. In the 20th century, European artists began to paint shadows differently. Szkudlarek also notices this change in Witkacy's works: he represents internal and external shadows.

In the second part of the book, Szkudlarek discusses in detail the shadow as a trace. As always, she combines different theoretical perspectives (psychology, philosophy, aesthetics, literary studies, art history) in her analysis of the ontology of the shadow as a trace. The “trace” is one of the most important categories in anthropology. Szkudlarek interprets the concepts of “shadow” and “trace,” referring to Witkacy's photographs in the snow (including a figure reflected in the water with his mother in the snow). The scholar refers to F. Soulages, who claims that “a photograph is a trace,”<sup>18</sup> but also quotes Barbara Skarga, who observes that “the concept of the trace is related to space and time. The trace is always here, in a given place (...) The trace refers to the past, to what was, but is no longer, at least here and now. It is a sign of something from the past, something that happened, passed, but left its mark more or less clearly (...) serving as proof of the existence of a given culture.”<sup>19</sup> The trace, Szkudlarek argues, has the nature of a shadow, insofar as it can be “permanent or fleeting, expressive or vague, with a clear form or shapeless.”<sup>20</sup> Traces, like shadows, are shaped by nature. Szkudlarek refers to Heidegger, Plato and Levinas, discussing the existential understanding of the shadow as a human being. The photograph as a “trace of a trace” resembles Plato's “shadow of a shadow.” Szkudlarek does not adopt Plato's theory uncritically, building her own interpretive discourse. She believes that Witkiewicz never attained the truth and “full knowledge” in

<sup>14</sup>Ibidem, p.78.

<sup>15</sup>Ibidem, p.80.

<sup>16</sup>Ibidem

<sup>17</sup>Ibidem, p. 81,

<sup>18</sup>Ibidem, p. 138.

<sup>19</sup>Ibidem

<sup>20</sup>Ibidem, p. 139.

either photography or painting. At best, he only touched “the shadow of consciousness, the representation of which is not real; it is only an illusion.”<sup>21</sup>

The photographs reproduced in the monograph show various forms of Individual Existence.

Szkudlarek uses Witkiewicz’s concept of Individual Existence to reinterpret the shadow as a form that complements the representation of a human being.<sup>22</sup> Witkacy’s artistic reincarnations in literature, drama, and photography are made complete by the shadow which adds an aura of mystery to them. The shadow plays the same role as the description of the protagonist, his body language, and face: it represents the spiritual dimension of Individual Existence. Szkudlarek analyzes Individual Existence in existential and metaphysical terms: it is filled with anxiety (as defined by Witkacy). The scholar also further reinterprets the concept of Individual Existence. The shadow is analyzed in the context of Carl Gustaw Jung’s philosophy, even though he does not deal with psychoanalysis but with the metaphor of the shadow as a form of cognition. As a concept and an artistic form, it is filled with metaphysical (as Witkiewicz would say) anxiety. Szkudlarek distinguishes between conceptual shadows and poetic-artistic shadows. She analyzes five key meanings of the shadow metaphor: they complement one another and play an important role in her interpretations. She looks for the sources of the shadow either in Witkacy’s works of art and critical essays or in contemporary psychology and psychotherapy. Both approaches complement and/or unite individual perspectives and analyses.

Szkudlarek also analyzes shadows and traces in Witkacy’s plays: *W małym dworku* [In a small country house], *Kurka Wodna* [The common moorhen], and *Pragmatyści* [The Pragmatists]. Playing with light and shadow lies at the heart of these theatrical performances. In Witkacy’s plays, the shadow plays the role of “the aestheticism of representative art.” Szkudlarek observes that “the gallery of characters in his plays enriched the theater with the metaphor of image and shadow.”<sup>23</sup> Witkacy zooms in on his protagonists, hopeless, lonely, and powerless, and “dresses” them with light to emphasize the meaning of life. Their shadow is the essence of human existence; it represents the individual. The interpretation of Mamalia from *Pragmatyści* and her dance is interesting and insightful. Szkudlarek writes: “Mamalia’s dance and the meanings of her name point to various forms of shadows. Regardless of her pose on stage (she can be a passive doll, a poor puppet or a cabaret dancer), her illuminated body is accompanied by a shadow.”<sup>24</sup>

In *W małym dworku*, we see “a complex process of restoring what has been replaced by realism; matter and thus the spiritual dimension of the shadow are rediscovered.”<sup>25</sup> The characters in Witkacy’s dramas are “shadows of existence.” The shadow complements their personalities.

<sup>21</sup>Ibidem, p. 162.

<sup>22</sup>In the late 1920s, Witkacy created the foundations of his own philosophical system based on ontology, which he called biological monadism. In 1935, he described his philosophy in the treatise *Twierdzenia implikowane w pojęciu Istnienia* [Theorems implied in the concept of Existence].

<sup>23</sup>E. Szkudlarek, op.cit, p.167.

<sup>24</sup>Ibidem, p.178.

<sup>25</sup>Ibidem, p.182.

The third part of the monograph discusses shadow projections. In these chapters, Szkudlarek once again discusses the concept of life between light and darkness, i.e., physical and metaphysical existence. She refers to C.G. Jung's psychological concepts to analyze the archetype of the shadow. The shadow "is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort."<sup>26</sup> There are two worlds in Witkacy's works, a physical one and a metaphysical one, i.e., people live in between light, darkness and shadow. The shadow refers to one's consciousness, to the psyche. Szkudlarek analyzes an interesting example of Witkacy's self-portrait from 1938 "Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."<sup>27</sup> These portraits show the duality of human nature (the shadow surrounds one part of the face, while the background is black).

The last two chapters, "Shadow Colors and Shadow Transformation," are indeed fascinating. Color, blue to be exact, "creates a metaphysical atmosphere of suspension on the border between the earthly (the end of Individual Being) and the otherworldly (the infinity of the Individual Being)."<sup>28</sup> The interpretation of blue in Witkacy's works, especially against the background of changes in painting of the 19th and 20th centuries and the works of the artist's father, allowed the scholar to see more than others. Szkudlarek discusses "shades of blue, light blue, dark blue, bright and faded blue" in Witkacy's works, once again demonstrating her extensive knowledge and interpretive skills. The author combines visual analyses with the science of perception, referring to the works of Rudolf Arnheim, Newton and Goethe.

Color, light, and shadow characterize Witkiewicz's works, as seen in the symbols of "extinguishing the lamp," "night butterfly," "gray moth," "burning candle," and "beautiful fire." Through reminiscences, the author shows the human soul, recalling literary works, photographs, plays and films.

Discovering light and shadow through the perception of the world turns being a *flâneur* into an aesthetic experience. Witkacy's search for light is his search for balance in life, and shadow and darkness are what absorbed his world. "Everything that is contained in Witkacy's *flâneur* is reduced to a wandering eye seeking a source of light."<sup>29</sup>

Szkudlarek's *Portrety cieni Witkacego* also demonstrates the author's sensitivity and skill as a writer. Different theoretical concepts interweave in the book. Thanks to the power of her poetic language, Szkudlarek creates suggestive images. However, the reader can expect more than just "the pleasure of the text." The monograph discusses various works by Witkacy and features illustrations that represent the visual history of the artist's vanishing shadow.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

<sup>26</sup>C.G. Jung, *Man and his symbols*, London 1962, p. 55.

<sup>27</sup>These portraits were painted according to the regulations of the Portrait Company after consuming cocaine, drinking beer or smoking a cigarette – type E.

<sup>28</sup>E. Szkudlarek, op.cit, p.259.

<sup>29</sup>Ibidem, p. 285.

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# KEYWORDS

shadows of characters

WITKACY

shadow images

SHADOW COLORS

*shadow illusion*

SHADOW PROJECTION

**ABSTRACT:**

Ewa Szkudlarek's book *Portrety cieni Witkacego* [Witkacy's shadow portraits] is an innovative look at the work of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. The author discusses the visual and the metaphorical aspects of shadows by analyzing the artist's oeuvre across different media. This has not been done so far. The shadow connects and differentiates the works of Witkacy. The multi-faceted nature of the shadow in the context of culture, psychology, psychoanalysis, and existentialism unites Witkacy's work. The shadow acts as a metaphor for the human condition, human vulnerability and mortality.



## T H E A T E R   S H A D O W S

## portrait

## SHADOW TRANSFORMATION

*photographic portrait*

## film shadows

*landscape*

## PHOTOGRAPHIC LANDSCAPE

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