"That's also an Allegory:" Literary Criticism's Struggles with Modern Allegorism

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Although as academics and literary scholars we all know what allegory is, it turns out that our definitions may be very different, and sometimes even contradictory. Allegory is one of the fundamental aesthetic categories and, at the same time, it is, as defined by Mieke Bal in her famous work, a traveling concept.[1] Throughout the ages, it has traveled between different artistic domains – as a figure of language, a concept, a genological term, and a visual notion – and has been rooted in theology, philosophy, rhetoric, and poetics. Allegory and allegorism gave rise to at least two revelatory movements in the twentieth-century theory of interpretation: one is connected with the new rhetoric and the other was inspired by deconstruction, especially Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*. Respectively, de Man's tropological intuition was rooted in two other, slightly older, philosophical approaches that laid the groundwork for a modern approach to allegory which today coincide with de Man's project: the relationship between symbol and allegory in Hans Georg Gadamer's[2] and Paul Ricoeur's[3] hermeneutics and Walter Benjamin's reclamation of Baroque allegory from the depths of the messianic tradition (I shall comment on it in more detail later on in the text).

[1] See: Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

[2] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Mars (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 61-69.

[3] Damian Michalski, "Paula Ricoeura hermeneutyka symboli. Próba prezentacji" [Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbols: An overview], *Kwartalnik Filozoficzny* vol. XL, no. 3 (2012): 91–114; Marek Sołtysiak, "Alegoria w tradycji hermeneutycznej. Gadamerowska rehabilitacja alegorii" [Allegory in the hermeneutic tradition. Gadamer's rehabilitation of allegory], *Logos i Ethos* 2 (2016): 75–101.

It can be said that the rhetorical turn loosened the structuralist definition of allegory and its close ties with representation (and thus the inherent question of mimesis) and shook the dictionaries of literary theory, "borrowing" the concept from iconology and the history of visual arts. However, it was the other, post-structural, turn that turned out to be particularly important for Polish poetic critique of the 2000s and academic philosophers/critics, inspired mainly by Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, whose works were at the time mistranslated into Polish. It was then that allegory and allegorism were redefined in Polish poetry as innovative categories which "open" the poem, point to the dynamic nature of language, and challenge referentiality and representation. Whatever lent itself to this new allegorism suggested a reading that would be far from naïve; it was meant to be intellectual, in-depth, self-reflexive, and at the same time impervious to classical allegoresis and closed and final interpretations.

This tendency was first signaled in Polish literary studies in Ryszard Nycz's now classic essay published in *Teksty Drugie* in 1994 entitled "Tropy 'ja'…" [The figures of the "I"…].[4] Nycz did not discuss the correspondences between the image and the concept but focused instead on the structure of the subject, rooted in linguistic analogies to specific figures, including symbol, allegory, irony and syllepsis. The critic loosely referred to de Man's early texts and his understanding of figurative language. For Nycz, the unstable and allegorical modern "I," forced to constantly reconstruct or enhance itself in keeping with some transcendent pattern, corresponded with the allegorical nature of 20th-century literature, which, as the critic argued, was located in a new horizontal system.[5]

It is impossible to underestimate the importance of Nycz's observations not only for literary criticism at the turn of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries but also for Polish literary studies in general. Nycz gave the go-ahead for a fragmentary allegorical reading – such a practice was deemed natural and encoded in the very nature of modern literature. The critic thus turned into a Benjaminian collector of the fragments of the past. It can be said that it was then that the way for searching for philosophical "truth" in Franz Kafka's, Marcel Proust's or Robert Walser's works was paved; it opposed the rigid religious allegoresis (still found in the works of more conservative hermeneutical critics). Michał Paweł Markowski and his student Grzegorz Jankowicz both followed this path.[6]

In a way, the third stage of this strange conceptual path could be discussed in the context of recent years, especially as regards two critics who challenged conventional academic literary research methods. They were mainly inspired by Tomaž Šalamun's modern neo-avant-garde poetry and aesthetic concepts developed by the writers associated with the "Cyc Gada" poetic zine. These critics are Rafał Wawrzyńczyk and Adam Wiedemann, but we should also men-

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[4] Ryszard Nycz, "Tropy 'ja:' koncepcje podmiotowości w literaturze polskiej ostatniego stulecia" [The figures of the 'I:' Notions of subjectivity in twentieth-century Polish literature], *Teksty Drugie* 26, 2 (1994): 7–27.

[5] Nycz refers the reader to two books: Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory. Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1979); Lynette Hunter, *Modern Allegory and Fantasy: Rhetorical Stances of Contemporary Writing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989). Quote after the book version: Ryszard Nycz, *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* [The language of modernism. Historical and literary prolegomena] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Leopoldinum Fundacji dla Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1997), 102.

[6] His "prosaic" counterpart in literary criticism would be Adam Lipszyc, a leading Polish expert on Benjamin, especially in his critical study on world literature. Cf. Adam Lipszyc, *Rewizja procesu Józefiny K. i inne lektury od zera* [Revision of Josephine K.'s trial and other revised readings] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2011).

tion Dawid Kujawa and his book *Pocałunki ludu* [Kisses of the People], which was based on an allegorical structure.[7] In the works of all these critics, the concept of allegory is redefined and extended; it becomes a geometric means of managing meaning (it is "broadband," "open," "deep," "rigid," or "transversal").

Wawrzyńczyk stated in the poem quoted in the title of my essay, "Słuchajcie, tak naprawdę / to nie wiem nawet, co znaczy alegoria" [Listen, I don't/ actually even know what allegory means],[8] and I propose not to read this declaration ironically. My goal, however, is not to present the reader with the history of the concept, as it has already been done many times and much more thoroughly,[9] but to investigate its critical uses. Without further theoretical ado that would exceed the scope of this essay, I would like to refer to a few dictionary definitions.

Let's start with the simplest one, that is, the one that has been simplified for the purposes of didactics. In *Słownik terminów literackich* [Dictionary of Literary Terms], Stanisław Sierotwiński defines allegory as an image that has a figurative meaning but, unlike a symbol, its meaning is unambiguous (e.g., as used in fairy tales), or as a stylistic procedure involving the use of such images, popular in, for example, medieval religious and didactic literature.[10] It is clear that in both understandings the image is subject to a specific interpretation or at least it triggers structured associations. Such an understanding of allegory is closely related to the visual arts, with its focus on iconographic mimesis, insofar as the visible is secondarily translated into the verbal. A slightly more complicated version of this definition may be found in *Zarys teorii literatury* [The Outline of Literary Theory], a textbook on structuralist thought suited to meet the needs of university students. Allegory is defined there as a situation where "a linguistic sign [...] constantly replaces a given concept,"[11] unlike in the case of symbol, "a correspondence is established between them."[12] This correspondence is the most interesting aspect of this definition, as it points to the existence of an "allegorical system," the knowledge of which is obligatory in a given culture, and depends, of course, on the social context, the continuity of tradition and the recognizability of iconographic patterns. It can be said that this defining element, which points to the unambiguous nature of allegory, in fact reflects socially preserved interpretative processes.

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[7] Dawid Kujawa, *Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2010* [Kisses of the people. Poetry and criticism after 2010] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2021).

[8] Rafał Wawrzyńczyk, "Wiersz «Ucieczka»" [The poem «Escape»], https://poez-ja.tumblr.com/post/152906736988/wiersz-ucieczka-rafa%C5%82-wawrzy%C5%84czyk.

[9] See: Rob Copeland, *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010); Theresa M. Kelley, *Reinventing Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jeremy Tambling, *Allegory* (London: Routledge, 2010); Kathleen Kerr-Koch, *Romancing Fascism. Modernity and Allegory in Benjamin, de Man, Shelley* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014); Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London, New York: Verso, 2020); *Alegoria* [Allegory], ed. Janina Abramowska (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2003); *Teoria literatury żywa: alegoria* [Living theory of literature: allegory], ed. Kamila Najdek, Krzysztof Tkaczyk (Warsaw: Uniwersytet Warszawski, 2009).

[10] Stanisław Sierotwiński, *Słownik terminów literackich. Teoria i nauki pomocnicze literatury* [Dictionary of Literary Terms. Theory and auxiliary sciences of literature], 4th edition (Wrocław–Warsaw–Kraków–Gdańsk–Łódź: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1986), 21.

[11] Michał Głowiński, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, Janusz Sławiński, *Zarys teorii literatury* [The Outline of Literary Theory] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1991), 124.

[12] Głowiński, Okopień-Sławińska, Sławiński, 124.

The need to rehabilitate the concept of allegory, and its subsequent growing popularity, has been discussed openly since the 1950s. In 1980, the American art critic Craig Owens published one of his most famous essays, in which he attempted to reevaluate modernism and describe the differences between modernist and postmodern art and philosophy, using the category of "the allegorical impulse;" he tried to rehabilitate a figure that had been (in his opinion) forgotten, disdained, and outdated.[13] Two opposing but ultimately complementing forces – the rehabilitation of rhetoric as a figurative element of language (including adapting the category of performativity for literary purposes) and shifting the allegorical focus from mimesis to linguistic productivity – gave rise to at least three modern definitions of allegory: 1) the classic definition, connected with an image inscribed in culture or a code associated with it, 2) the rhetorical definition, related to figurative and rhetorical language, and 3) the philosophical and literary definition, rooted in the figurativeness of language, its apparent or supposed referentiality.

The most important change in the contemporary understanding of allegory was framed by Paul de Man's two important works, namely the collection of essays *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* published in 1971 and *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* published in 1979. Though in the 1970s both works were not particularly important for Polish literary scholars, they were a testament to a heated discussion held among American critics. I decided not to discuss de Man's approach to allegory, which was indirectly based on Walter Benjamin's aesthetic theory, in detail. It is only worth noting that thanks to de Man allegory became allegorical and lost its mimetic character, associated with correspondence, whether natural or conventional, and social recognition. For de Man, allegorism was a philosophical feature of language, it was always figurative and not referential, and therefore it defied straightforward interpretations. The allegorical sign refers to a non-existing referent, to the sphere of "non-being." The scholar argued that allegorization involved moving away from representation, away from the referent, and thus transformed into a strictly textual figure of language, an autotelic circle of ever weaker reflections.

This "new" approach found in the translated texts of Western critics, together with the overtly academic nature of Polish literary criticism in the 2000s, directly inspired many writers and poets (Andrzej Sosnowski, Adam Wiedemann, and Tadeusz Pióra, among others, found allegory important). The last, at least so far, interesting discussion around this concept took place when *Ilustrowany słownik terminów literackich* [Illustrated dictionary of literary terms] was published. While the dictionary was "illustrated" (it was in fact originally designed as *The Historical Dictionary of Literary Terms* and ultimately received the telling subtitle "history, anecdote, etymology"),[14] it was, in fact, conceived as a truly post-structural antithesis of the dictionary. We can describe it as a conceptual monograph in which different authors interpret and redefine literary concepts in their extensive entries. "Allegory" was (re)defined by Piotr Bogalecki, who decided to focus on its social and mediating nature. As Bogalecki writes, the

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[13]Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism", *October* 12 (1980): 67–86.

[14]*Ilustrowany słownik terminów literackich: historia, anegdota, etymologia* [Illustrated dictionary of literary terms: history, anecdote, etymology], ed. Zbigniew Kadłubek, Beata Mytych, Aleksander Nawarecki (Gdańsk: Słowo/ Obraz Terytoria, 2019).

etymology of the word "allegory" should not be associated with representation and mimesis. Instead, we should refer to *allēgoréo*, or *allos* (different, other), and *agoreuo* (to speak, to deliver a speech). Thus, allegory turns out to be closely related to performance: it is a speech delivered in the agora, in a public square where the audience must first gather. This, in turn, refers us (through the act of gathering and collecting) to Benjamin. "And although it is impossible," Bogalecki writes, "to downplay the social functions of images, ἀλληγορία (*allegoría*) does not refer to powerful totems or holy images but to the political community established in and through the act of linguistic performance."[15] "The other in the agora – this is the original site of allegory,"[16] the Polish scholar writes in his new extrapolation, creating a skillful allegory in itself and substituting it for a dictionary entry.

Allegory as a theme and a conceptual network

The most classic philological approach to allegory may be found in Alina Świeściak's essay on melancholy in contemporary poetry,[17] which is in fact an extended version of her reviews of different collections of poems (similar questions, and sometimes even entire paragraphs, may be found in her academic book of literary criticism *Lekcje nieobecności* [Lessons of absence] from 2010). Allegorical poetry, be it in terms of formal features employed or poetic intentions (e.g., atemporality typical of the allegorical mode), must be discussed in such a book. However, Świeściak seems to criticize allegory, as both "allegorical" poets discussed by her, Tomasz Różycki and Dariusz Suska, appear to be boring, repetitive, monotonous, and conservative (these are just some of the epithets used by Świeściak). They are trapped in their imaginations, which over time transform into mannerism. They write from within the land of the Same, longing for the lost modernist whole.

For Świeściak, both poets express existential melancholy, which to some extent corresponds to Nycz's notion of the modern allegorical subject. Świeściak primarily refers to Benjamin; she is well versed in Benjamin's entire philosophical system and the fundamental role allegory plays in the process of reconstructing history. And yet, the critic also writes as if "next to" Benjamin, without messianic hope. As announced in the title, she is interested in the disturbed relationship between the melancholic and the object (commercialism and desire in the Frankfurt-School spirit) and the role of allegory in the process of detemporalization and derealization. Benjamin's words, "[i]f the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind,"[18] aptly describe how she uses allegory in her essays – not as a tool for seeking truth or revealing (reconstructing) remnants of meaning but as an analytical category which defines and tames different poetic actions and meanings.

Fragments or echoes of Benjamin's metaphors appear very often in close readings: for ex-

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[15]Piotr Bogalecki, "Alegoria" [Allegory], in: *Ilustrowany słownik*, 45.

[16]Bogalecki, 47.

[17]Alina Świeściak, *Melancholia w poezji polskiej po 1989 roku* (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2010).

[18]Świeściak, 242.

ample, the vision of history as ruins, and the vision of the poet as a collector of "suspicious, igneous places which defy all precise classifications."[19] From the very beginning, allegory is unequivocally linked with artificiality, non-being or "second life," and the fossilization of the relationship between the "I" and the "world." However, it does not seem to be followed by the fossilization of meaning in the poem, since in (in this case Różycki's) poetry, we find "a constant movement of meanings – *signifiés* and *signifiants* pretend to be united but they do not share a stable fulcrum point."[20] Respectively:

> symbolist identification with the world [...] is combined here with a sense of alienation, the cause of which seems to be the problematization of the function of the object. Thus, allegory appears artificial; it suspends the "natural" relationship between the subject and the object.[21]

"Allegorical instability" suggested by Świeściak in the title of one of the subsections therefore oscillates between the effects of identification and alienation, temporality and atemporality, or, in other words, between the romantic theory of the symbol and Benjamin's allegory with its "absolute artificiality."

Such an understanding of allegory seems to guide Świeściak's discussion of Dariusz Suska's poetry from the very beginning. The author of *Nasi drodzy zakopani* [Our Dear Buried] envisions the world as "allegorical, as fossils dissected from time;"[22] words and things appear as traces (but they are used ironically, unlike in Benjamin's theory); he uses "homelessness" and allegory as a means of "distancing oneself from historicity;"[23] and introduces an interesting (though undeveloped notion of) "alienation through allegory"[24] and suspension in the melancholic "in-between:" beyond the useful and not yet in the mythical. The poet is also described as possessing the "allegorical awareness of eternal anamorphosis;"[25] he uses the figure of a child as "a future allegorist." The main problem is that its potential is drained as subsequent collections of poetry are published; ultimately, in Suska's poetry, allegory, as a structure which supports his poetic world, breaks down.

I am not concerned with how these conclusions translate into the reception of Różycki's or Suska's works, because most of them seem to be justified and consistent with many other critical analyzes, and sometimes even appear innovative. The move from allegorical fascination to allegorical exhaustion is also natural. I am, however, interested in the concept of allegory which is used by Świeściak; it is supposedly Benjaminian (although de Man is also marginally present with his "Rhetoric of Temporality"), and thus has little to do with representation, but it still values immanent symbol more than allegory's "pure conventionality." In Różycki's poetry, allegorism brings insomnia, emptiness, disinheritance and surface rhetoric, and in Suska's works, the constant processing of death tropes.

[19] Świeściak, 237
[20] Świeściak, 247.
[21] Świeściak, 241.
[22] Świeściak, 255.
[23] Świeściak, 260.
[24] Świeściak, 257.
[25] Świeściak, 260.

For Świeściak, allegory plays a strictly de-illusory role and stands in opposition to the symbolic, to the definable – it reveals the incompatibility between language and things, the sourcelessness of language, and the status of objects as remnants, refuse or ruins.[26] This notwithstanding, Świeściak also uses it to create a semantic field; it is a "source" of metaphors employed in the analysis of the poems and it also ensures their critical cutting edge, rooted in Benjamin's critique of modernity. The most interesting extrapolation of the theory of allegory that Świeściak compares with Benjamin's project, who consistently uses the term "allegorical attitude"[27] in his discussion of Charles Baudelaire's poetry, is the "allegorical drift." It looks a bit as if John Ashbery's *flow* and Benjamin's *flâneur*, filtered through Sosnowski's melancholic poems, suddenly merged into a figure that no longer describes a volitional act of imagination or a primal poetic scene but a passive submission to a convention that ensures the work's auratic character and protects it against accusations of stylistic ease and intellectual emptiness.

Allegorism as an interpretative strategy

A different form of allegory as a tool was used by the critic Grzegorz Jankowicz. It did not so much serve as a semantic map or a conceptual trigger as defined the methodological framework, that is a way of organizing meaning and moving from literature to philosophy and back to ambiguous signs, as if the critic "fought" with texts for truth, and not only aesthetic experience. Jankowicz, especially as a young and prolific critic, could not like poetry – poetry must refer, generally, to some philosophical or social concept, and poetry is but its imperfect interpretation. Thus, the literary work fulfills an allegorical function in his methodological framework: it is a parable or an example illustrating the reflections of modernist or poststructural philosophers translated and promoted by the critic (first Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot and then Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière).

At this point, let me turn to an essay which refers to the analyzed category in its title, namely *Alegoria (Dycki)* [Allegory (Dycki)] originally published in *Studium* in 2005.[28] We should pay attention to Jankowicz's reading strategies, if only because he reviewed and promoted Sosnowski and Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, i.e., in whose works allegorism is employed in two completely different ways, the modern Benjaminian way and the iconic Baroque way. In addition to numerous reviews, Jankowicz edited the first collection of essays devoted to Dycki, where he also published his essay, as well as one of the numerous collections of poems by Dycki, for which he wrote an insightful afterword.

What is, however, the most interesting and poignant in all Jankowicz's essays devoted to Dycki and his works is the poetic nature of his reviews and the fact that he problematizes

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[26]Świeściak, 255.

[27]See: Mateusz Palka, "Obraz zastygłego niepokoju: intencja alegoryczna Charlesa Baudelaire'a według Waltera Benjamina" [Image of Arrested Unrest: Charles Baudelaire's Allegoric Intent According to Walter Benjamin], *Nowa Krytyka* 40 (2018): 167–200.

[28]Grzegorz Jankowicz, "Alegoria (Dycki)" [Allegory [Dycki]), *Studium* 5 (2005): 129–134. See also: Grzegorz Jankowicz, "Poezja to nekrologi" [Poetry is obituaries], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 41 (2009).

the very notion of the sign. Jankowicz's early essays are first and foremost meta-texts, commentaries on the work of a poetry critic. *Alegoria (Dycki)* is an essay written in the spirit of Baroque painterly allegories – it is iconic, based on a visual game with the unsaid and the implied. Jankowicz extracts the figure of "parenthesizing," a suspension of movement, directly from Dycki's poems but at the same time he presents his reflections in a compositional parenthesis. "There is no entrance, no exit," he writes, commenting on one of the poems, "there is basically no movement, and if there is, then only around the circular field of the same signs, figures of closure and finitude."[29] A few years later, when Dycki was awarded the Nike Literary Award, Jankowicz wrote in *Tygodnik Powszechny*:

> Each return of the same word, each repetition of a proper noun, each repetition of a rhythm or a note – all this paradoxically destroys the ligaments connecting language with the world. This is because repetition, which usually strengthens the foundations (whatever they are), in Dycki's works points to the experience of death.[30]

Jankowicz then places Dycki in a textual maze, emphasizing key moments of breaking with reality (similarly to Sosnowski's works) and the omnipotence of language, coercing the subject into endless iterations. However, when reading *Alegoria (Dycki)*, one can form the impression that, even more than the poems, the critic diagnoses his own text, his own ability to write about poetry, and comes to the conclusion that it is doomed to failure. This failure – planned, metaphorically inscribed in the essay – involves transferring the deconstructive method (in)to the fabric of the text; it is thus an attempt to show how solid metaphysical categories break down and give way to a wandering movement of interpretation. Jankowicz refers to early Derrida but most of all to de Man, unable (or unwilling) to overcome the pitfalls of textualism. Jankowicz's Dycki is thus an allegorical poet; he is unreal, imprisoned in a visual-rhetorical figure that cannot be reduced to anything else (e.g., parentheses or the split subject from the equally allegorical essay *Śmierć w pierwszej, drugiej i trzeciej osobie* [Death in the first, second and third person][31]). He struggles, trying to express the impossible, but is always stopped by parentheses – the omnipotent language defined in the spirit of Derrida's *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*:

> It is an extraordinary image: the poet tries to present the beginning and the end at all costs, he turns his eyes away from reality, he almost completely ignores the present, the moment, closes himself in the parentheses of the poem, but nevertheless does not stop time. He does not stop time, because the circle of the story and the square of life are not identical, they do not overlap.[32]

One can, and even should, argue with Jankowicz: argue against closure, against the failure of poetry (its futility) and the failure of a critical gesture that repeats itself, insofar as it is always

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[29] Jankowicz, "Alegoria (Dycki)", 129.

[30] Jankowicz, "Poezja".

[31] Jankowicz, "Śmierć w pierwszej, drugiej i trzeciej osobie" [Death in the first, second and third person], in: *"Jesień już Panie a ja nie mam domu", Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki i krytycy* ['It's already autumn and I have no home', Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki and critics], ed. Grzegorz Jankowicz (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2001), 51–68.

[32] Jankowicz, "Alegoria (Dycki)", 130.

just a rhetorical twist. Jankowicz's textual perspective leads him to a conclusion consistent with de Man's reflections: "a poem about death cannot be written […], although reality can be killed by/in a poem. […] Tkaczyszyn-Dycki's poetry is not, as some critics argue, a survival strategy but an allegorical prefiguration of death."[33]

The critic's subsequent reflection on how language "is detached from the world and multiplies itself or arrests the poet in textual phobias (repetitions, rhetoric)"[34] is of little use. It seems that Jankowicz noticed this as well, because, drawing on the works of Agamben, he shifted the center of gravity of his allegorical reflection from iteration to a life-sustaining residue, from poetry defined as Blanchot's domain of death and entropy to poetry defined as a transfer of energy and material exchange (which is already seen in the afterword to *Podaj dalej* [Pass it on]), or a "black box," which, as he writes in the final essay in the collection *Blizny. Eseje* [Scars. Essays] devoted to Sosnowski's poetry, "takes the side of life."[35] However, Sosnowski and Jankowicz would not be themselves if they did not add, in line with Benjamin's theory, that in fact they refer to "traces of lost life," insofar as "poetry appears […] where and when life no longer exists"[36] and it is in fact a record of a catastrophe that happened to us and contemporary literature.

This late essay on Sosnowski's work engages in a critical dialogue with another, written a decade earlier, in which Benjamin, de Man, Derrida, Blanchot and Agamben try to answer the question "can a poem be redeemed?"[37] This essay opens with an allegory which may be described as a "negative of essence;" it is a story about a poet as a photographer borrowed from Benjamin's reflections on Baudelaire. In the poet's camera there is a "roll of film made of the matter of time – the film of time on which the essence of things is captured (if this verb may be used at all) in the form of a negative."[38] This story leads the critic to the titular, though somewhat reformulated, question: can a contemporary poem, a poem from the age of the decline of language, be redeemed,[39] or "introduced into the economic circulation of communication" (probably Jankowicz implies an act akin to Agamben's profanation, because the author of *Profanations*, especially the essay "Creation and Salvation," features prominently in his work). Somewhere between successive scenes of creation and redemption, Paul de Man's irony and reflections on the materiality of language, Sosnowski finally appears: "We know what happens when the work of creation is mixed up with the work of destruction: words turn into splinters and the poem breaks down. Only *Wild Water Kingdom* foreshadows this spectacular destruction. As already has been mentioned, the text is an allegory of a downfall, but the final downfall is suspended in it and postponed."[40]

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[33]Jankowicz "Alegoria (Dycki)", 134.

[34]Dawid Kujawa raises a similar objection, although in the context of the essays on Sosnowski from *Lekcja żywego języka* [Lessons of a living language]. Cf. Kujawa, 93–106.

[35]Grzegorz Jankowicz, *Blizny. Eseje* [Scars. Essays] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Ossolineum, 2019), 245.

[36]Jankowicz, *Blizny*, 247.

[37]Jankowicz, "Czy wiersz może być zbawiony?" [Can a poem be redeemed?], in: *Wiersze na głos. Szkice o twórczości Andrzeja Sosnowskiego* [Poems aloud. Essays on Andrzej Sosnowski's works], ed. Piotr Śliwiński (Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2010), 70–85.

[38]Jankowicz, "Czy wiersz", 71.

[39]In Polish, the verb "odkupić" means, depending on the context, both "redeem" and "buy back" or "repurchase." Translator's note.

[40]Jankowicz, "Czy wiersz", 78.

While the discussion about Dycki is centered on the Baroque allegory, reflections on Sosnowski are mainly guided by de Man's notion of his irony. Concluding remarks, not necessarily closely related to the earlier analytical gestures, seem to be the most important for us. I will quote them in their entirety because, although Jankowicz states earlier that he does not intend to absolutize any philosophical contexts used by Sosnowski (and he stays true to his word), he ultimately turns Sosnowski's poetry into a parable about the postmodern artist's philosophical situation, trapped between de Man's totality of death and Benjamin's messianic hope, and his attitude to the poem turns into a meta-literary trope, a libidinal story about writing as a creative and redemptive act:

> I would say this: for Sosnowski, the poem is a paradoxical entity that can be endlessly destroyed. And if it is possible to destroy it again and again, dividing and differentiating it time after time, it means that there is no essence of the poem, no essence of poetry. The poem is empty inside – it is filled with an indestructible void. And if it is possible to divide it (to divide the poem, language, word, sound), it means that after each division, after each destruction, there is something left, a splinter, a spark that ignites the next page. What is left is the surplus creative energy (which in Sosnowski's poetry is immediately transformed into destructive energy) – this surplus creative energy survived destruction and now returns to the poem to open new creative, that is writerly, possibilities.[41]

Whatever the planned outcome was, Sosnowski's poems were neither the goal nor the object. From the very beginning, they were but a pretext shoved into an allegorical frame, placed between twentieth-century philosophical languages like a lens which focuses the rays of rhetorical potential. Whether as a "black box" which records a great catastrophe or as a casket containing an indestructible void, poetry is "pinned" by various "discourses of truth" which determine its attractiveness as an example.

Broadband allegory and sensual chains of meanings

What Polish critics took from Benjamin's and de Man's theories of allegory were appearances, lifelessness and immobilization as philosophical concepts, and the intensified movement of dereferentialization. At this point, let us turn to a scholar and commentator who is the most eminent expert on Benjamin in Poland. Adam Lipszyc both confirms the Thanatic aspect of Benjamin's allegory and extends it:

> only in desperate gestures can [allegory] refer from one object to another, guided by arbitrary conventions; it can produce **endless, horizontal sequences in which everything can mean something else**. [...] It is also a sign on "time," in a double sense: because it is characteristic of the gloomy modern times, and because allegorical sequences arise to the rhythm of constantly failing moments, which will never stop, producing symbolic illumination.[42]

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[41] Jankowicz, *"Czy wiersz"*, 85.

[42] Adam Lipszyc, "Alegorie habilitacji, czyli obraz świata w skrócie" [Allegories of habilitation, or a brief image of the world], in: Walter Benjamin, *Źródło dramatu żałobnego w Niemczech* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama], trans. Andrzej Kopacki (Warsaw: Sic!, 2013), 340–341 (emphasis – J.S.).

For Lipszyc, allegory is, in other words, not a figure of language but a figure of metonymic imagination. Devoid of historical claims of a heuristic tool, it favors the movement of accumulation and addition. Poetry is effectively a catalog in which no attempt is made to establish hierarchical evaluations – only vertical and horizontal lines of tensions and clusters of intensity are signaled. We might further argue that Benjamin's allegory, deprived of the messianic core and freed from anti-modernist resentments, is a figure of ontological compression, de-hierarchization, which gives rise to a horizontal chain of signifiers. Such an approach leads us to Šalamun's poetry and Wawrzyńczyk's literary criticism, or at least to what he would like to establish, even if he is not able to name it, as the most promising contemporary lyrical model.

Wawrzyńczyk is not a prolific critic, but he is still an influential one. His publications in "Studium" and the cult online zine "Cyc Gada" are deemed legendary. For some time, he wrote reviews for "Dwutygodnik;" then, he mainly reviewed literary works on his official Facebook site, and edited collections of poems (e.g., by Krzysztof Jaworski and Jarosław Markiewicz). He also "organized the field" in other ways. Always original, he distanced himself from academic games played by other critics of contemporary poetry.

Allegory is important in Wawrzyńczyk's informal yet refined project because it is, in a way, a form of patricide. A group of poets born in the late 1970s and the early 1980s came into conflict with "Literatura na Świecie" [World Literature] and the vision of the American tradition presented in the magazine, although they acknowledged the influence of John Ashbery, whom Bohdan Zadura, Sosnowski and Jankowicz also praised. The group wanted to show a "different" Ashbery than the one associated with the poetic idiom of the 1990s and French poststructuralism (and French Theory was very popular in Poland). Respectively, "Cyc Gada" found another, complementary, role model, rooted in the European neo-avant-garde and praised by Miłosz Biedrzycki, namely Tomaž Šalamun. Šalamun became increasingly popular in Poland in the early 2000s; this experience turned out to be formative for at least some leading contemporary poets (for example for Szczepan Kopyt). In an attempt to venerate this group of poets, and at the same time to point out the problems with reading them (and to annoy other critics), Wawrzyńczyk wrote in his review of Grzegorz Hetman's *Pół ciastka* [Half a cookie]:

> And all of them – Janicki who is misunderstood to this day, the overlooked Szwarc, the non-existent Tomanek, the truly non-existent Grobelski, and, finally, the lonely Hetman – do more or less the same: slowly and methodically, they dissect the larger-than-life bodies of their "fathers" (Sosnowski, Świetlicki, Ashbery, and Šalamun). […] Modern allegory – as a dynamic figure which inspires imagination and mediates between the low style and the specter of mature modernism – was (and still is) at the very center of these problems.[43]

Not only does Wawrzyńczyk repeatedly employ the concept of allegory as one of the most important typological and evaluative categories but also seems to look for its sources elsewhere – not in de Man's post-structural patronage or Benjamin's messianic matrix. This is how he compares Šalamun and Ashbery (bearing in mind that he finds the dissection of Šalamun's works more entertaining and demanding than Polish criticism's reflections on Ashbery's poetry):

[43]Rafał Wawrzyńczyk, "Uwaga, alegoryzowane" [Attention, allegorized], *Dwutygodnik* 304 (2021), https://www. dwutygodnik.com/artykul/9469-uwaga-alegoryzowane.html.

> Both Ashbery and Šalamun knew that poetical power lies under vertical, allegorical structures, and that it is no longer possible to extract it directly, as it was done in the 19th century, for example by installing a meaningful figure at the end of a sonnet. Ashbery diluted allegories to the point that they became pure, almost meaningful images; Šalamun twisted and turned his allegories and broke their limbs until they formed a fierce glow of meaning in the open field.[44]

What is particularly interesting in this project is the susceptibility of the concept of "allegory" to different semantic marriages and extrapolations, including micro-allegories; allegorism as a vertical structure; twisting allegories so that they turn into clean, meaningless images; breaking their teeth; and even "allegorical-metonymic complex structures" which are a kind of multidimensional construct-poem in which meaning is distributed both vertically and horizontally. What draws our attention in this extremely vivid, even poetic, description, is a kind of indifference to actual references to philosophy; instead, our attention is drawn to "ways of reading," "interpretative mechanisms," and "strategies of meaning." Wawrzyńczyk appears to be a critic who neither looks for conceptual matrices into which he can thrust the poem (like Świeściak) nor subordinates it to a philosophical story about reaching the truth in one way or another (like Jankowicz). Rather, he is interested in how the poem works at the level of poetics and how the chains of meanings are organized in it, which leads him to, at times questionable, generalizations and critical literary evaluations. Indeed, Wawrzyńczyk does not seem to refer to the tradition of descriptive poetics. In fact, he uses certain notions intuitively, pragmatically – they are tested in the text, forcing readers to adapt to his dictionary.

In this context, we can refer to the already mentioned *Wiersz "Ucieczka"* [The Poem "Escape"], published on Tumblr poetry blogs at the advent of the Internet:

Słuchajcie, tak naprawdę	Listen, I don't
to nie wiem nawet, co znaczy alegoria.	actually even know what allegory means.
Używam tego słowa	I use that word
do oznaczenia pewnego związku	to denote a certain relationship
między obiektem opisywanym a sposobem	between the described object and the manner
opisu:	of description:
alegorią nazywam związek sztywny.	allegory is what I call a rigid relationship.
Tzn. "miłość" nazywamy "więzieniem" co	I.e., we call "love" a "prison" and that
pociąga za sobą "zdrada" = "podkop do	entails "betrayal" = "digging a tunnel to the
sąsiedniej celi".	neighboring cell."
Tak,	Yes,
w moim przypadku słowo alegoria	in my case, the word allegory
jest alegorią czegoś.	is an allegory of something.
I nie ma ucieczki. (Tu też jest alegoria.)<?>	And there is no escape. (That's also an allegory.)

[44]Wawrzyńczyk, "Gwoździe" [Nails], *Mały Format* 5 (2018), http://malyformat.com/2018/05/gwozdzie-uwagi-o-poezji-tomaza-salamuna/.

Already at first glance, we can see the intended, artificially sustained, rhetoric of this text: from addressing the readers / listeners and attracting their attention (it can be said that this is the allegorical level that Bogalecki reminds us of in connection with the agora), through admitting ignorance (as if the lyrical "I" was trying to explain the theory of the subject-critic existing outside the poem), and, finally, to attempting to formulate a precise definition. It quickly turns out that this "rigid relationship," another semantic equivalent of allegory, leads us astray; it "entails" misleading tropes and associations that are more and more meaningless. For while "love is a prison" is a classic trope, any movement of the imagination that renders this trope concrete gives rise to almost surreal images. This approach is closer to the works of Šalamun than that of Benjamin's or Sosnowski's – allegory is not a decoy which evokes and reorganizes the theoretical potential of twentieth-century philosophical discourses but a pretext for confusing horizontal and vertical orders, metaphor and metonymy, the level of definition (hence "in my case the word allegory") and its practical application ("and that/ entails"). Metalanguage comes into contact with individual *parole* but not in the manner found in Sosnowski's or Dycki's works; thus, this poem would be of little use for Jankowicz as an acknowledged expert in philosophy. Even the final observation in parenthesis reads like an ironic comment aimed to ridicule the above-discussed essay *Alegoria (Dycki)*.

Among many of Wawrzyńczyk's critical texts in which a "different" approach to allegory comes to the fore we should focus on a guest lecture delivered at the Krakow School of Poetry entitled *Zawsze lubiłem kury. O alegoryczności w późnej poezji Tomaža Šalamuna* [I have always liked hens. Allegorism in Tomaž Šalamun's late poetry], in which the critic tried to clarify his approach to allegorism.[45] Using numerous examples from the Slovenian poet's works, Wawrzyńczyk introduces a, nevertheless quite schematic, division into "vertical" and "horizontal" poetic situations, which could also be better described as vertical and horizontal ways of organizing meaning. The vertical is associated with the figurative nature of language, including the tropes of allegory and metaphor; the horizontal is associated with "direct speech" (as Wawrzyńczyk puts it), for example, with narration. Paradoxically, the critic discusses the theory of allegory at a fairly basic level, drawing on structuralist interpretations. Wawrzyńczyk refers to the Polish translation of Gayatri Spivak's essay to show that although allegory establishes a "hard bond" between sign and meaning (as opposed to the "soft" bond found in the metaphor), it also reveals a natural gap between them. It should be noted that in comparison with the sophisticated constructions of Benjamin, Derrida, or de Man, Spivak's essay is quite conservative, even crude. However, this does not stop Wawrzyńczyk from enriching it with his own sensual reflections on these "bonds" or "bridges" supporting them (i.e., intuitive seeing and sensing the process of signification, of musical rather than textual provenance). In each of the subsequent literary examples discussed by the critic, starting with Mickiewicz, through Ashbery, and ending with Šalamun, the allegorical mechanism becomes more and more complex and thus more open, and at the same time deliberately deprived of one of its elements (the referent).

[45]Wawrzyńczyk, "Zawsze lubiłem kury. O alegoryczności w późnej poezji Tomaža Šalamuna" [I've always liked chickens. Allegorism in Tomaž Šalamun's late poetry] [lecture], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tc_G_ mOxaPU&t=2654s&ab_channel=DawidMateusz.

It seems that Wawrzyńczyk is primarily interested in the relationship between the plane of representation and the hypothesis of depth in the poem, and therefore the potential ability of individual figures to evoke extra-textual meanings (which translates into the aforementioned "power of poetry"). It is important, however, only insofar as allegorism becomes neither the matrix of the story (as in Świeściak's interpretations of Suska's or Różycki's works) nor its goal (as in Jankowicz's essay on Sosnowski's works). This can be illustrated by the history of twentieth-century painting, which Wawrzyńczyk also sometimes refers to: allegory in the poem indicates a moment when the plane is questioned; consequently, depth is explored, and two-dimensionality is abandoned. This, in turn, translates into the problem of representation. While the critic poses it indirectly, he has been actually interested in it, as an evaluative element, from the very beginning. Allegory blurs the image reflected on the surface of the water – it disturbs the lyrical situation, and the plane of representation appears wrinkled.

It is difficult to say to what extent this proposal – quite conventional, spontaneous, and as if devoid of philosophical contexts – resembles the Baroque Leibnizian fold from Gilles Deleuze's essay and to what extent it actually simulates conceptual similarity. It does not change the fact that the problem of allegory formulated in such a way – not as a philosophical tool or an auratic warranty of metaphysical meaning but as a mechanism of vertical distribution of meaning in relation to the horizontal expansion of the lyrical world – safeguards against the messianic promises of Benjamin's philosophy of history and the traps of textual Thanatal irony of the "eternal return." This form of allegorism resembles sculptural rather than strictly literary concepts, but perhaps that is why it best corresponds to poetry which academic philosophical critics hardly ever discuss. Nothing spectacular happens in such poems; no conceptual treatises are encoded in them (as in Ashbery's poems). While they do not play an intellectual game with the reader, many of their words may be read as loaded with additional meanings. This notwithstanding, it is not very clear where to look for their foundation and how to reconstruct their "allegorical structures." Referring to the catastrophic nature of Benjamin's theory of allegory, one could say that we are dealing with the tip of the iceberg (Deleuze refers to a similar concept, a cone, in his essay on Gottfried Leibniz), the foundations of which we cannot see. In such a poem, the reader is no longer a collector but the Titanic, waiting for a spectacular collision. That's also an allegory.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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Abstract:

The author analyses the concept of allegory, a classical poetic figure, as a kind of a "travelling concept," a notion that informs contemporary literary criticism. He argues that the growing interest in allegorical styles of reading in the modern humanities stems from two important sources: the works of Walter Benjamin, who reclaimed the Baroque allegory for contemporary poetics, and Paul de Man, who redefined it as an inherent quality of literature and the universal mode of textual interpretation. The author then examines different ways of employing this modern understanding of allegory (as a topic, style or stylization, and as a way of reading) by three contemporary writers and critics Grzegorz Jankowicz, Alina Świeściak and Rafał Wawrzyńczyk.

p o e t i c s

METACRITICISM

allegorism in poetry

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