Lorenzo Montemagno Ciseri

Paweł Graf

Ewa Kraskowska

Christopher Merrill

Domenico Talia

fall 30 2022

Poetics of detail

In the case of literature and literary studies, a nuance or a trifle often proves important.

FORUM POETYKI | FORUM OF POETICS

Editorial Office: 61-701 Poznań, ul. Fredry 10
Editor: Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland

„Forum Poetyki | Forum of Poetics" fall 2022 (30) year VII | ISSN 2451-1404

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Reading and detail

Paweł Graf

ORCID: 0000-0001-9725-8726

What is a detail? The associations this word sparks off are obvious and may be divided into two groups. Thus, either we are dealing with something significant, although at the same time almost imperceptible – something that is important but easy to overlook – like the devil who is in the details; or, on the contrary, we are dealing with something insignificant, trivial, accidental, and it is better not to pay too much attention to it, so as not to lose sight of what is important. At the same time, in the case of literature and literary studies, a nuance or a trifle often proves important. The detail adds flavor, modifies the meaning, and can bring unexpected enlightenment. For as long as I can remember, I have always been a detailed reader – I have always liked slow reading and looking at textual trifles. And when I analyze details, my thoughts move beyond, so to speak, the analysis proper.

One of the most important books for me was Daniel Arasse's study devoted to painting, simply entitled Le Détail. *Arasse would find in the pictures which he discussed, and at the same time interpreted in an interesting and original way, painterly details. Insects located on the periphery, almost hidden in the frame; inscriptions; the color and the number of buttons on an expensive dress; the placement of the hands; or a tiny dog in the corner of the house and the canvas. All this, critically discussed and analyzed, came out of the shadows, moved from the non-seen to the foreground of critical reflection and allowed us to see the artist's work in a new and different way.*

The poetics of the detail which thus emerges immediately comes face to face with its synonym, that is the poetics of the particular. I would like to emphasize that these are two separate entities, two

different poetics. In Western languages, let us consider Italian or French for example, we have one word to describe both: the Italian il detaglio *means both "detail" and "particular." To explain the difference between these two concepts I shall turn to the crime novel. The crime novels works with particulars – the detective with his eagle eye notices particulars that are invisible to both his assistant (if there is one) and the reader. That is why neither the assistant nor the reader can solve the mystery; they do not see the particulars and confuse the clues. They mislead themselves. Thus, on the one hand, a particular turns out to be, seemingly, something small and irrelevant in the world represented in the novel; on the other hand, it is fundamental in the process of meaning-making. Without noticing it, critical reasoning will fail, the meaning of the work will be elusive, and the logic of understanding will break down. Details are different. Details are, as if, accidental textual elements – they can be omitted, overlooked, or ignored in the process of reading. Only when noticed do they generate a parallel reading; they even pose a threat to the reading proper, insofar as they make the reader move beyond it. The reader moves in a completely different direction, and the text is transformed into an independent counter-story. When we read the sentence "the invisible structure of the heat has turned steamy," we are reminded of a hot day we have experienced in our lives, consider whether the word steamy has anything to do with steam, or think about the fact that that although the structure of the heat is invisible, the author saw it and described it; we get so lost in our thoughts that we forget what we are actually reading, we abandon it and follow the details. Let us add that although there are writers of the particular and there are writers of the detail, we find both details and particulars in any text and we decide which will define our reading. If we want to read Georges Perec with pleasure, we have to be sensitive to particulars, and if we want to read Marcel Proust, who famously examined a "little patch of yellow wall," with pleasure, we have to be sensitive to details. Looking at the paintings of the last supper, of which there are many in Italy, we can compare the different versions, noticing the details. We can see that Saint John, in general, is always asleep as if the young disciple has been drunk by the elders, who can only now discuss their plans. The examination of this detail may inspire us to reflect on the relationship between responsibility and age. Discussing the text of Luigi Pareyson, convinced that all parts of the work of art form an inseparable unity and one must not lose sight of any, Umberto Eco suggests that reading that is focused on the particulars is perfect, perhaps even too perfect; paying attention to details allows us to introduce ourselves into the text!*

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The present issue of Forum of Poetics *devoted to the detail shows multifaceted approaches to the question at hand. In "Karenin's ears, Grinevitch's fingernails," Ewa Kraskowska analyzes the detail* per se. *This essay is full of surprises. We learn, for example, that Tolstoy's Karenin not only had ears, but also that in Anna's eyes they were disgusting. Interpretation in the spirit of the analytical method created by Vladimir Nabokov captures the characters' gait, appearance, features,*

and nervous tics. In Kraskowska's interpretation, all these details become of primary importance, although they are found in the descriptive background, the seemingly insignificant underpinning of the plot. And I was reminded that I once wrote about ears in my essay Powieść w świetle widzialnego *[Novel in the light of the seen], where I quoted from Arasse's* Le Détail*: "Regardez donc l'oreille. L'oreille est impayable." Krzysztof Skibski, quoting the words "grey on grey" as his motto, reflects the nature of the detail that is easy to overlook; in his text, he reflects on the moments of condensation, a specific thickening of meanings. At the same time, emphasizing the non-linear and discontinuous nature of reading, he notices potential meanings implied in the reading process. And grammar plays a significant role in the entire process, he adds. Lucyna Marzec analyzes Jolanta Brach-Czaina's micrology, pointing out that the detail is meant to "make a difference," make the past feel present, authenticate fantasies, challenge coherence, break up the reading process and, in philosophical terms, suspend the problems of mimetics and fictionality, as it essentially refers to ontology. Such theoretical diagnoses are inspired by the reading of Brach-Czaina's text, who is a "lover of details" herself. Agnieszka Kwiatkowska discusses war details seen through the eyes of a child. This is yet another critical perspective. Kwiatkowska explains how reflection on the world is determined by the perspective of the narrator, the one who looks at the world from inside their hiding place, from inside their trauma. While the narrator may try to conceal greater and more fundamental questions behind details, it does not always work – it does not always help them survive. Paradoxically, it is the details that make this larger whole possible, allowing one to enjoy life and ask about its meaning. Finally, as post-memory, details become a task for the reader. The difference between the one who notices details as a character in the text, as the sensitive poet or the sensitive narrator, and the one who reconstructs someone's situation through details as the reader is inscribed in the root of the word* dettaglio *– the word* taglio*, a cut, marks a border between the world during and after the war, between them and us. Also of great interest is Tomasz Mizerkiewicz's interview with Christopher Merrill, an American poet, essayist, journalist and translator, which focuses on the media image of the details of war. Chiara Taraborrelli discusses Luca Alvino's book* Il dettaglio e l'infinito. Roth, Yehoshua e Salter *[Detail and Infinity. Roth, Yehoshua and Salter] – it is an existential project in which horizontal life is juxtaposed with vertical life. The latter involves order, conventions, and rules. Certain and unquestionable truths, validated by the power of transcendence. Such a life, however, does not allow us to gain insight into the essence of our imperfect existence. Horizontal life involves savoring details, seemingly insignificant self-reflection, enjoying everyday life, and examining the little things – all that fills our life with humanity, tenderness towards what is small, petty, trivial, and in fact constitutive. This concept, opening oneself up to details, for Alvino involves introducing chaos into our lives. Sławomir Buryła reviews Marek Zaleski's book* Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne *[Intensity and other related matters], drawing attention to affects. And we can reflect on how affective the detail is, what feelings it evokes in the contemplative reader, and whether it evokes only positive feelings or, on the contrary, whether it brings "aggressive details" to the fore? Małgorzata Nowak discusses Andrzej Tretiak as a critic of translation, reviewing his translation skills and translation theory in detail. Zofia Paetz in her*

analysis of Andrzej Stasiuk's prose writes about non-linear transtemporal details and considers them as a way towards presence. Dawid Borucki writes about "Earth's Powder in the Basilica of the Cosmos," that is the environmental apocalypse of/on the Earth, which is actually only a detail, both significant and insignificant, in the Universe – a blue dot surrounded by emptiness. Elżbieta Dutka and Paweł Graf design a theory of the poetics of the detail. Dutka combines the detail with micro-poetics, drawing attention to the existence of detail(ed) problems in the study of, in this case, space. This allows her to perceive the cultural archive as a site which functions in the field of geopoetics. Graf discusses the sensitivity to detail experienced by some readers and formulates the concept of counter-reading, which is overwritten over the con-text and combines the sensual with the physical, allowing us to experience pleasure, which unexpectedly "allows us to later repent – repent interpretation, reading or understanding." The whole is complemented and enriched by the translations of texts written by critics who have not been present on the Polish scene. Domenico Talia discusses the profusion of detail in literature, those micro-inclusions that, as he writes, "distract the reader and show him trifles, nuances, details. The reader is forced to divert his attention from the plot and shift his gaze to 'almost nothing,' illuminated by an event that is so small, indecisive, perhaps useless, but delightful in its insignificance." Lorenzo Montemagno Ciseri writes about Dante's Divine Comedy. *Alas, not in an obvious way. He discusses a method of a detailed reading of Dante's poem through teratological analysis. The reflection on the monstrosities and monsters described in the work of the brilliant Italian poet helps the contemporary reader engage with* The Divine Comedy. *The reader learns to appreciate details in the process of understanding the text, which propaedeutically constitutes an excellent introduction to the poem. The reader is also taught to read in a different way – to notice and analyze literary* imponderabilia. *The essays of the Italian scholars praise a form of reading in which we pay attention to the small elements of the text, the nuances of the represented world. They contrast the reader who is only focused on the plot, and therefore immersed in action, with the reader who stops to look at the details hidden in the folds of the text, because such details generate literary meanings – meanings which correspond to our human life and sensibility. An analogon of life. A soliloquy, a monologue addressed to oneself, and thus a text which combines in itself the theory of the detail, the practice of the detail, a review, an interview, or rather an auto-interview – Marek Hendrykowski's essay on the poetics of "chochlik" (a demon of misprints and slips of the tongue) is all that and more. This humorous and insightful article should be read at the end – because this academic text is simply well written and very entertaining!*

And indeed, in the final words of this introduction, I invite everyone to read this issue of Forum of Poetics *in detail!*

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

The geopoetical detail?

The cultural archive as part of a place's texture

Elżbieta Dutka

ORCID: 0000-0002-5404-2586

detail "a part of a whole, a small and subordinate part; something tiny, a trifle:" to explain something in detail. To speak in general terms without going into details.[1]

detail <fr. *détail*> part of a bigger whole, a small component of something, e.g., a machine, a device; metaphorically: a thing, a matter of no importance, a trifle.[2]

In comparison with what is large

The study of details has become the hallmark of micropoetics; in 2017, an entire issue of *Forum of Poetics* was devoted to it.[3] Elżbieta Winiecka drew attention to the problematic nature of the object of micropoetics, insofar as it depends on the preconceived and subjective assumptions held by scholars:

[1] "Detail" in: *Słownik języka polskiego PWN* [The PWN Dictionary of the Polish Language], ed. Mieczysław Szymczak, vol. 1: A–K (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1999), 362.

[2] "Detail" in: *Słownik wyrazów obcych PWN* [The PWN Dictionary of foreign words and phrases], ed. Jan Tokarski (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1980), 147.

[3] *Forum of Poetics* 2017 (spring/summer).

> Because what matters here is the comparative perspective, which exhibits differences in scale, allowing us to highlight the fundamental fact that small is small in comparison with what is large (or, also, depending on our needs: official, dominant, manifest, self-explanatory, important, inspiring). And that what hitherto was overlooked or only fleetingly shown, particularly in the panoramic perspective on the history of literature, now finds itself at the centre of scholarly interest. As we can see, the scale of micro is micro only when there exists in our consciousness a broader context for it: macro-problems, macroprocesses and macrostructures.[4]

I would like to draw attention to the detail, a particular issue, a part perceived only on a micro scale. The spatial humanities provide a broader (albeit probably not the broadest[5]) critical background for it. Relatively recently, it inspired scholars to write about the spatial turn[6] and today it inspires us to use the term "spatial literary studies."[7] Robert T. Tally coined such a collective name for various research perspectives focused on space, including geocriticism, literary geography, and geopoetics.[8] Considered in the wider context of spatial literary studies, geopoetics, although in itself a significant and complex research trend, constitutes but a fragment, a detail. I shall narrow the perspective even further and focus on one particular approach to geopoetics.[9] Elżbieta Rybicka in the monograph *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich* [Geopoetics. Space and Place in Contemporary Literary Theories and Practices] argues that geopoetics is primarily a research practice,[10] a multifaceted project of "analysing and interpreting interactions (including circulations) among works of literature and related cultural practices and the geographical space."[11] Respectively, in one of her articles, Rybicka writes that geopoetics studies investigate how geography determines literature (and the author) and the structure of a literary text; it may be defined as "the study of the mechanisms which create the topography of a region and a place."[12] The

[4] Elżbieta Winiecka, "Micropoetics and its contexts", *Forum of Poetics* 2017 (spring/summer): 46.

[5] An even broader background may be provided by the cultural theory of literature. See: *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy* [The Cultural Theory of Literature. Main concepts and problems], ed. Michał Paweł Markowski, Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 2012); *Kulturowa teoria literatury 2. Poetyki, problematyki, interpretacje* [The Cultural Theory of Literature (Part 2). Poetics, Problems, Interpretations], ed. Teresa Walas, Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 2012).

[6] *The Spatial Turn. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Barney Warf, Santa Arias (London: Routledge, 2009).

[7] *Spatial literary studies. Interdisciplinary approaches to space, geography, and the imagination*, ed. Robert T. Tally (New York and London: Routledge, 2021).

[8] Robert T. Tally, "Spatial Literary Studies Versus Literary Geography? Boundaries and Borders Amidst Interdisciplinary Approaches to Space and Literature", in: *Spatial literary studies*, 317–331; Robert T. Tally, "Introduction: the map and the guide", in: *Teaching Space, Place, and Literature*, ed. Robert T. Tally (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 1–9; Robert T. Tally, "Introduction: The Reassertion of Space in Literary Studies", in: *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*, ed. Robert T. Tally (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–6.

[9] It is assumed that Kenneth White coined the term "geopoetics;" he saw it as a philosophy and an art of life. See: Kenneth White, *Geopoetyki* [Geopoetics], sel., ed., trans. Kazimierz Brakoniecki (Olsztyn: Centrum Polsko-Francuskie Côtes d'Armor – Warmia i Mazury w Olsztynie, 2014). Elżbieta Konończuk writes about the various meanings of geopoetics in: "W meandrach geopoetyki" [In the meanders of geopoetics], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2005): 213–228. Anna Kronenberg, in turn, formulates an ecological understanding of geopoetics as "green writing and reading," *Geopoetyka. Związki literatury i* środowiska [Geopoetics. Relations between literature and the environment] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2014).

[10] Elżbieta Rybicka, *Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich* [Geopoetics. Space and Place in Contemporary Literary Theories and Practices] (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), 12.

[11] Rybicka, *Geopoetyka*, 92.

[12] Elżbieta Rybicka, "Ponowoczesny regionalizm i badania komparatystyczne" [Postmodern regionalism and comparative studies], *Rocznik Komparatystyczny* 2 (2011): 154.

most important, but also the most problematic, category of geopoetics is place. Its complexity and heterogeneity may be explained using the metaphor of texture, insofar as it refers both to geology and the concepts associated with weaving, be it a piece of fabric or a text, which have been part and parcel of literary studies for years.[13] A place's texture, this complex and condensed constellation, consists of:

> [...] personal existential experiences, sensual experiences and emotions that permeate private landscapes, autobiographical memory with its turmoil, but also the sphere of cultural (literary, visual, musical) experiences, and, finally, imagination, which transforms and freely transfigures these components. And these three ingredients – experience, the **cultural archive,** and imagination – make up this dynamic configuration which we call "place," not only in literature and not only in literary studies [emphasis – E.D.].[14]

The geopoetological detail that I would like to draw attention to is the cultural archive – a term that Rybicka did not even list in the subject index in her monograph.

In addition to geopoetics, a broader background against which such a detail as the cultural archive may be studied is the archival turn. It may be seen, first and foremost, in the name of the part of place's texture of interest to me; the name "cultural archive" is not accidental. One cannot but notice that the applied terminology is a testament to the popularity of archival imagery. Of course, the fact that archives are "trendy" does not fully explain why this particular name for the geopoetological detail is used, but it is nevertheless very telling.

The archival turn, like other "turns" recognized (probably too often) in contemporary literary studies, raises a number of questions.[15] Scholars argue that this phrase did not only spark the interest in the archive, which found itself at the center of various research projects and fields, but also significantly expanded the definition and metaphorized the concept of the archive.[16] A broader view of the archive as the figurative representation of the most important problems of modernity may be found, among other places, in Jacques Derrida's lecture, where he reads the archive in Freudian terms.[17] The archive has been "revived" and "embodied" in

[13] Rybicka, *Geopoetyka*, 168–169.

[14] Rybicka, *Geopetyka*, 173.

[15] Danuta Ulicka, "Zwrot archiwalny (jak ja go widzę)" [The archival trun (as I see it)], *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2010): 159–164.

[16] Elżbieta Wichrowska, "Badacz w archiwum i archiwum badacza. Paradoks archiwum" [The researcher in the archive and the researcher's archive. The paradox of the archive], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2 (2021): 289–290. The 7th World Congress of Polish Studies at the University of Wrocław which took place on October 20-23, 2021, summarized the discussions concerning the archival turn in the Polish humanities. The conference *Archives and the Present* was held at the congress, during which I delivered a paper entitled *"Nic tak nie ożywia opowieści jak skamielina". O archiwum kultury z perspektywy geopoetyki* ['Nothing brings a story to life like a fossil.' The cultural archive from the perspective of geopoetics], in which I have addressed the issues discussed in this article.

[17] Jacques Derrida, *Archive fever. A Freudian impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

contemporary theatre studies and performance studies.[18] Moving away from the traditional status of the archive as a site and a set of institutionalized practices, primarily related to creating, selecting, and sharing collections as well as studying documents, is met with both enthusiasm and reservations.[19] Danuta Ulicka uses two different terms – the archive and the "archive" – to emphasize the difference between the traditional and the symbolic approach.[20] Ulicka notes that the "archive" is riddled with "too many" meanings:

> The word has been widely used in various fields and critical cultural practices, either as a synonym for the universally respected (historical, social, cultural, individual) "memory," or (in the works of historiographers) as an equivalent of an "alibi" or a "pretext," that is a seemingly decisive argument found in a historical document; the "archive" may also be an equivalent of a "granary," a "storage room," a "repertoire," or a "collection," the content of which allows one to freely destroy, construct, and "design" the past. The list of synonyms and the stories produced around them is long. Such stories, supported by philosophical (Bergson, Derrida, Foucault) and literary (Proust) authorities and discussed in the wider context of psychoanalytical, feminist, masculinist, post-colonial, identity, critical-constructivist studies, serve "potential history" well, insofar as they serve to expose the power of the archives in the light of the concealed mechanisms and purposes of their production, but they have also turned the term into a metaphor.[21]

Indeed, in comparison with actual archival research and discoveries which influence the development of the discipline, the very operations on the term "archive" (paraphrasing, interpreting and reinterpreting, or artfully transforming it) are devoid of such "causative power."[22] But just as archival documents require a careful reading, a reading which takes into consideration their various contexts, a reading that "exposes" them,[23] so do metaphorical meanings or "impressions"[24] evoked by the very term "archive."[25] The archive, as a "travelling concept,"[26] moves between disciplines and theories, entering into new constellations. The potential opened up by the archive as a metaphor, as well as the way it functions in various

[18]See, among others: Dorota Sosnowska, "Ciało jako archiwum – współczesne teoria teatru i performansu" [The body as an archive - contemporary theory of theater and performance], in: *Świadectwa pamięci (W kręgu źródeł i dyskursów (od XIX wieku do dzisiaj)* [Testimonies of memory (The sources and discourses (from the 19th century to the present)], ed. Elżbieta Dąbrowicz, Beata Larenta, Magdalena Domurad (Białystok: Alter Studio, 2018), 79–89; Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2003).

[19]Wichrowska, 290.

[20]Danuta Ulicka, "«Archiwum» i archiwum" [«The archive» and the archive], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2017): 273–302.

[21]Ulicka, "«Archiwum» i archiwum", 274.

[22]Ulicka, "«Archiwum» i archiwum", 276.

[23]Ulicka, "Zwrot archiwalny (jak ja go widzę)", 161.

[24]Derrida, 46.

[25]"The 'archive' has become one of the most popular metaphors for all kinds of memory and storage agencies". Wolfgang Ernst, "The Archive as Metaphor. From Archival Space to Archival Time", *Open* 7 (2005): 46–53, https://docplayer.net/12159609-Wolfgang-ernst-the-archive-as-metaphor-from-archival-space-to-archival-time.html, date of access: 7 July 2021.

[26]Magdalena Rewerenda writes about the archive as a "travelling concept," *Performatywne archiwum teatru. Konsekwencje* Nie-boskiej komedii. Szczątków *Olivera Frljicia* [Performative Theater Archive. Consequences of Oliver Frljic's Un-divine Comedy: Remains] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2020), 10.

interactions and the results of such conceptual "travels" and transfers, are all very interesting. From the point of view of archival science, the "archive" moves away from the original meaning; it transcends institutional limitations. Other disciplines see it differently – as a possibility, a chance. One particular problem we should consider is how the metaphor of the archive works in geopoetics.

In the first part of the article, taking into account a broader background – the macrostructure of geopoetics and the archival turn – I will ask questions about the meaning and function of the geopoetical detail. Dictionary definitions of the word "detail" and different sayings and idioms point to a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, something is not worth going into details, because it is trivial, because we focus too much on petty issues. On the other hand, however, the details determine the shape of the whole, "the devil's in the detail." So, what kind of a detail is the cultural archive in geopoetics? Is it just an intriguing terminological grain of sand, or a pebble in your shoe that is impossible to ignore? In the second part of the article, I shall analyze the works of Janusz Szuber and Adam Robiński and reflect on the meaning of the cultural archive in literary conceptualizations of a place and identity. I wish to examine to what extent the geopoetological detail may also function as an operational concept, a concept that is useful in literary interpretation.

The cultural archive – part of a place's texture

Elżbieta Rybicka explains that the cultural archive, as a part of a place's texture, is a collection of "known representations, cultural codes, patterns of space recognition, genre norms."[27] It is an anthropological and cultural reservoir of "testimonies" which show the relationship between man and place – relationships "constituted by perception, emotions, meanings, beliefs and imaginations."[28] This reservoir may be understood in two ways. On the one hand, the cultural archive houses universal cultural codes, norms, patterns (e.g., ways of representing specific landscape features) which are not associated with any specific geographical space. On the other hand, it refers to various texts of culture which relate to a specific place, which is, in a way, "occupied" by previous authors. Such a concept of the cultural archive is present in Małgorzata Czermińska's notion of autobiographical places (although she does not use the term "cultural archive" explicitly in her article).[29]

The cultural archive as part of a place's texture, similarly to geological strata, undergoes various transformations; like a thread in a piece of fabric, it has a distinct connectivity to other threads; as a text, it requires reading. What distinguishes it from other archives and "archives" is its symbolically enhanced spatiality. At the beginning of his lecture, Derrida refers to a topological principle, pointing to the archive as a place "where things commence."

[27]Rybicka, *Geopoetyka*, 174.

[28]Rybicka, *Geopoetyka,* 174.

[29]Małgorzata Czermińska, "Miejsca autobiograficzne. Propozycja w ramach geopoetyki" [Autobiographical places. A proposal within geopoetics], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2011): 183–200.

The French philosopher derives topology, similarly to the nomological principle of order and power of the archive, from the word *arkhé* – the "commencement" – and beginnings are so important for the archive.[30] To paraphrase these remarks, it can be said that the archive that creates texture is a place where place commences; it is the source of a place's law and politics, its *genius loci*.

Therefore, the cultural archive is a very broad metaphor in geopoetics. The cultural archive is (also in a figurative sense) a museum and a library. In archival studies, the functions of the museum and the library are clearly separated;[31] in geopoetics, such divisions seem to be less important than convergences and similarities, pointing to a certain whole embodied in a place, a certain whole which connects a place and the wish to preserve it, to save its unique nature. The cultural archive is primarily a figure of memory[32] – collective memory, intersubjective memory – which, combined with individual experiences and imaginations, gives rise to a place.[33]

The cultural archive and other elements which make up a place's texture, i.e., experience and imagination, enter into complex and dynamic relations. Elżbieta Rybicka points out that experience may not be articulated if the cultural archive is not activated;[34] likewise, creation (imagination) feeds on cultural memory.[35] Therefore, the archive seems indispensable; it even becomes the central element of a place's texture, but it is also an extremely problematic element. The paradox of the archive in geopoetics is that it is often a starting point and a point of reference for new and original representations, although it is also sometimes perceived as a façade behind which a place is hidden.[36] An example of the latter may be "Paris" syndrome, experienced when the image of the city known from cultural texts may not be found in reality. As a component of a place's texture, the archive is associated with both the "fever" of archival research and a moment of resistance, signaled by Derrida,[37] which in fact refers to the process of negotiating the image of a given place. In reflection on place, the urge to archive, preserve,

[30] Derrida, 9–10.

[31] See, e.g.: Lutosław Stachowski, "Muzea jako strażnicy materiałów archiwalnych" [Museums as guardians of archival materials], *Problemy Archiwistyki* 1 (2009): 23–49, https://www.archiwa.gov.pl/images/docs/problemy/LStachowski.pdf, date of access 4 August 2021.

[32] "The significance of archives in modern and postmodern societies makes them the basic point of reference in discussions about memory, and often also a model for thinking about it." Iwona Kurz, "Archiwum" [Archive], in: *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci* [Modi memorandi. Lexicon of the Culture of Remembrance], ed. Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, Robert Traba, with the help of Joanna Kalicka (Watrsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2014), 45. Cf. "The archive thus turns out to be a metaphor for the figure of memory; it points to the question about memory, implying its crisis: the politics of memory; the rules of constructing the past and attempts to explain the mechanisms of the modern world; the threat; what is happening to 'memory' today (that is, the processes of forgetting); how we need memory and what kind of memory is possible; how to reproduce it (and the dangers thereof)." Wichrowska, "Badacz w archiwum i archiwum badacza", 289–290.

[33] Rybicka, *Geopoetyka*, 174.

[34] Rybicka, *Geopoetyka*, 173.

[35] Rybicka, *Geopoetyka*, 172.

[36] Rybicka, *Geopoetyka*, 184.

[37] "For Derrida, the archive is a place or a moment of subtle resistance rooted in 'historicity and the obligation of memory.'" Aleksander Kopka, "Śladem archiwów (Jacques Derrida *Gorączka archiwum*)" [Tracing archives (Jacques Derrida's *Archive fever*), *Art. Papier* 332 (2017), http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=334&artykul=6441, date of access 1 February 2020.

and repeat clashes with the urge to blur, repress, and reject.[38] The archive, as a part of a place's texture, is "not only a factor which determines the perception of space, but also raw material subjected to critical transformations."[39]

The cultural archives of the Bieszczady Mountains – a library and a cabinet of curiosities

We can learn more about the significance of the cultural archive, its complex nature, and various forms, by analyzing the literary topographies of the Bieszczady Mountains. I offer only preliminary remarks about the role which the cultural archive of the Bieszczady Mountains plays in creating the texture of the "wildest" region in Poland. I shall discuss very different works by Janusz Szuber and Adam Robiński.[40]

W czeluściach gór dymiących	In the depths of the smoking mountains
Niedźwiedzie piwo warzą	Bears brew beer
Albo w panwiach żeliwnych	Or leach wood ash
Ługują popiół drzewny.	in cast iron pans
Cyhany hrajut na skrzypkach i basach‹?›	Gypsies play on violins and basolias

This is how Janusz Szuber's poem *Las wielki i niedźwiedziów dosyć* [The forest is huge and there are enough bears] begins; it was published in the collection *Tam, gdzie niedźwiedzie piwo warzą* [Where bears brew beer]. Although Szuber's poetry is so firmly rooted in culture that it is sometimes associated with classicizing trends,[41] this poem is different. It is almost entirely composed of quotations, with a short commentary and footnotes which reveal to the reader the sources used by the poet (F, 9). There are twenty-seven lines in the entire cento, only five of which are not quotations. Thus, almost the entire image of the place was created from materials found in the cultural archive. The poet said that his work is "the testimony of language from different eras" (F, 9). For Małgorzata Okupnik the poem is a "sophisticated intertextual game," an "imaginary creation."[42] Okupnik writes that:

[38]"The archive as a public prosthesis of memory essentially juxtaposes the desire to repeat and preserve the original event with its inevitable obliteration and displacement, resulting from the very essence of the archive." Kurz, *Archiwum*, 46.

[39]Rybicka, *Geopoetyka*, 416.

[40]Szuber's works analyzed below have already been interpreted. In addition to the sources I cite, see also e.g., Ewa Ogłoza, "«Powiedzieć. Cokolwiek». Janusza Szubera – próba lektury i projekt dydaktyczny" ['Say. Anything.' Janusz Szuber – an attempt at interpretation and a didactic project], *Z Teorii i Praktyki Dydaktycznej Języka Polskiego*, vol. 22 (2013): 81–82; Andrzej Sulikowski, "Twórczość poetycka Janusza Szubera" [Janusz Szuber's poetry], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 2 (2004): 93–128 and the monographs: Tomasz Cieślak-Sokołowski, *'Mój wszechświat uczyniony'. O poezji Janusza Szubera* ['My created universe.' Janusz Szuber's poetry] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004); Jacek Mączka, *Powidła dla Tejrezjasza. O poezji Janusza Szubera* [Jam for Tiresias. Janusz Szuber's poetry] (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2008). I would like to write more about Robiński's reportage in a separate article.

[41]Cf. Krystyna Latawiec, "Poeta wobec uniwersum kultury. O poezji Janusza Szubera" [The poet and the universe of culture. Janusz Szuber's poetry], *Annales Academiae Paedagogicae Cracoviensis* folia 20, *Studia Historicolitteraria* 4 (2004): 184.

[42]Małgorzata Okupnik, "«Poszóstnie przez Bieszczad». Janusza Szubera poetyckie utraty i nostalgie" [In a six-horse carriage through the Bieszczady Mountains». Janusz Szuber's poetic losses and nostalgia], *Porównania* 2 (2012): 175.

> Szuber "composed" the poem from verses found in official records and regional *lauda*, Stanisław Staszic's *Dziennik podróży* [Travel journal], Ludwik Zajszner's and Oskar Kolberg's research and travel notes, Wincenty Pol's and Marcin Szmarzewski's diaries, and works by Jan Kanty Podolecki and Wacław Potocki. In order for the "testimony of language" to be truly complete, Szuber quoted a sentence in Yiddish, a phrase in the Boyko language and, finally, a Lemko folk song. Each quote individually reflects this lost multicultural world, and together the quotes create a coherent, multidimensional, polyphonic whole, which can hardly be considered a faithful historical reconstruction. In Szuber's vision, the Bieszczady Mountains are an Arcadian space with no history of violence, fratricide, resettlements.[43]

The quotes that make up Szuber's cento are not only a site of intertextual games; they may also be read as sources which have been carefully selected by the poet from the cultural archive. Undoubtedly, the poet exposes archival materials; in this poem, they take precedence over other elements which make up a place's texture. They give the reader an idea about how multicultural and diverse the region used to be and, what is equally important, they were combined in such a way as to create a "coherent," "polyphonic whole." The Arcadian, that is idealized, image of a community-in-diversity in the cento stands in contrast to the other poems in the collection, which refer to the Holocaust, resettlements, and the wartime and post-wartime apocalypse. Therefore, both what is included and what is omitted is important. Selected archival quotes create the place's texture. The geopoetological detail thus allows us to make an interpretative shift from literature and language to reality. To draw on Ryszard Nycz, it can be said that *Las wielki i niedźwiedziów dosyć* refers to the "textual world,"[44] but at the same time the geopoetological perspective allows us to notice a "literary practice" in the poem. The work influences reality by creating (constructing rather than reconstructing) the place, its texture, the images associated with it, by shaping how it is perceived and interpreted.

The cultural archive dominates the cento; other elements which make up the place's texture are slightly more visible in *Świadectwo języka* [The testimony of language] – Szuber's commentary to the poem *Las wielki i niedźwiedziów dosyć*.[45] In this autobiographical text published in the collection *Powiedzieć. Cokolwiek* [Say. Anything], the poet declares that he is "one of many, so many, who fell in love with the Bieszczady Mountains at first sight" (T, 71). Emotions and experiences primarily make up the place's texture in this text. Szuber writes about "sensual" mountains: mountains that may be seen, traversed, and experienced in various ways (from a glider, on a motorbike, on foot). The text is a testament to a strong, emotional connection with the place. Even the illness that made the poet leave his beloved mountains did not break this bond. It was then that direct and sensual experiences were replaced by the cultural archive and imagination. Describing his long hospital stay, Szuber emphasized:

[43]Okupnik, 175.

[44]Ryszard Nycz, *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze* [Textual world. Poststructuralism and literary studies] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 1993).

[45]Janusz Szuber, "Świadectwo języka" [The testimony of language], in: *Powiedzieć. Cokolwiek* [Say. Anything] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011), 71–74. Henceforth, I use the abbreviation T.

> Almost unable to move, as allowed by my present condition, I reached for the windowsill, which my fellow inmates called the library. I kept there maps, books, notebooks. Autumn in the mountains dressed up in colors, while I, against, against what, fate, accident, genetic conspiracy, slowly, quote after quote, exploring the poetics of the cento, began to write *Las wielki i niedźwiedziów dosyć* [...] (T, 73).

The cultural archive clearly acts as "compensation" in this case. The "library" on the hospital windowsill and the fact that the poet was exploring the poetics of the cento show that he developed "archive fever." The act of looking for something in his collection may be read as a desire to find a place he had to leave because of the disease and a desire to learn about its *arkhé*. For the poet, the commencement and the essence of the Bieszczady Mountains are multiculturalism and diversity. The desire to preserve, to conserve the "polyphonic whole" clashes with the melancholic sense of loss – the realization that the real experience of the mountains is out of the poet's reach and that his vision is utopian. In Szuber's works, a decidedly logocentric cultural archive, a library of sorts, allows the poet to escape an existential and historical crisis.

The role (and the nature) of the cultural archive in Adam Robiński's *Kiczery. Podróż przez Bieszczady* [Kiczery. A journey through the Bieszczady Mountains][46] is equally interesting, though different. In this hybrid work – a mixture of a travel book, an anthropological study, and an essay about a place – one may also see "archive fever." Indeed, the very opening shows how important the cultural archive is in Robiński's text. Robiński reminisces about his childhood, living in a block of flats in Warsaw, and goes through his own archive – a private collection of books and maps – which takes him back to the beginnings of his passion for travelling.[47] An actual journey through the Bieszczady Mountains begins with a visit to the Natural History Museum of the Bieszczady National Park in Ustrzyki Dolne. Robiński pays attention to only one thing – a plaster cast of the woolly rhinoceros; an animal which roamed the earth twenty-three thousand years ago. The reporter repeats after Bruce Chatwin, whose book *In Patagonia* he carries in his backpack, "Nothing brings a story to life quite like a fossil or some other paleontological discovery" (K, 23). Chatwin's travel book turns out to be the most important guide to the Bieszczady Mountains. Robiński draws surprising analogies, as he discovers "Polish Patagonia" – "an extraterritorial region, somewhere at the end of the world" (K, 53). The reference to paleontology, apart from it being a clear indication of the source of literary inspiration, also points to an early archival gesture. Robiński does not only watch the exhibit, but, like the archivist, also begins to analyze it. He describes previous excavations and searches and explains to the reader in a very matter-of-fact tone why the rhinoceros, whose remains were discovered in 1929 in the former Stanisławów voivodship, was preserved in such good condition (K, 19). Anecdotes and logistical and engineering details concerning the unearthing of the archaeological discovery

[46]Adam Robiński, *Kiczery. Podróż przez Bieszczady* [Kiczery. A journey through the Bieszczady Mountains] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2019). Henceforth, I use the abbreviation K.

[47]This passion may be seen in Adam Robiński's debut book, *Hajstry. Krajobraz bocznych dróg* [Hajstry. Images of side roads] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2017).

prove how important the find was – locally, it was an event "comparable only to the landing of Apollo 11 on the moon" (K, 22). Robiński also describes in detail how the find was secured and archived. The museum exhibit triggers an archival search, raising questions not only about the prehistory of the place, but also about what happened later, when the Bieszczady Mountains were part of Galicia, and modern times, when the area was turned into a National Park. The story of the prehistoric rhinoceros may also refer to an "archaeological parable" noticed by Derrida in the writings of Sigmund Freud. Freud dreamed of a discovery on par with archaeological excavations, which would be a source that does not require additional explanations by the archivist (archive "in divorce with regard to the *arkhé*").[48] However, as Derrida further writes, Freud thus "raises the stakes,"[49] the search for a fossil or stone that "speaks by itself" fuels archive fever even more, semantic tensions arise between the *arkhé*, *archive,* and *archaeology*. The archaeological exhibit seen at the beginning of the book does not "speak by itself;" it is not an answer, but instead raises many questions (e.g., how it ended up in the museum in Ustrzyki Dolne). It resembles a document found in an archive, the origin of which needs to be checked; it requires deciphering and leads to other archives, other collections. This is how the search for something that would explain the phenomenon of the Bieszczady Mountains begins in *Kiczery*.

Robiński explores the cultural archive, evoking literary descriptions, memories, documents, and tourist guides. He quotes, among others, Aleksander Fredro, Wincenty Pol, Mieczysław Orłowicz, Martin Pollack, Stanisław Kryciński, Andrzej Potocki, and Władysław Krygowski. However, in his archival research, Robiński does not limit himself to intertextual references. The archive which forms the place's texture in *Kiczery* is more diverse than the one in Szuber's cento. It is not a library or a museum; it is a cabinet of curiosities.

Robiński also refers to Karolina Grzywnowicz's artistic project entitled *Chwasty* [Weeds] (K, 104–106), and thus the texture of the place is also revealed to include plants. Grzywnowicz literally placed a fragment of a Bieszczady meadow in the Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw. She wanted to draw attention to the archival function of nature – the distribution of weeds allowed her to recreate the layout of former Boyko villages. A desire to archive the last traces of the past also inspired the creation of the Museum of Migration described by Robiński. It is a "traveling institution;" it is housed in a caravan converted into a mobile recording studio. Robiński quotes fragments of testimonies and memories about World War II and the post-war years collected in the museum. Indeed, he actually also creates an oral archive of the Bieszczady Mountains, recording stories told to him by the locals. Memories of the "pioneers," of Greek refugees in Krościenko, of westerns which were shot in the pastures create the image of the old "wild" Bieszczady Mountains. The reporter also archives contemporary stories in his travel book: for example, stories about looking for "sheds" (i.e., antlers shed by deer), or tourist legends about bear encounters. One story leads to another, determining

[48]Derrida, 91.
[49]Derrida, 91.

the "trajectory of the archival quest,"[50] demonstrating that the image may not be rendered coherent. The reporter-archivist looks at the collected material and observes: "Everyone in the Bieszczady Mountains dreamed of something. Some said they were cowboys, others said that the local forests were bottomless wells and no one in the lowlands would notice if they dried up" (K, 235–236).

Robiński does not only suggest that the Bieszczady archive is a figure of imagination rather than memory,[51] but he also exposes significant gaps in the collection. These gaps do not only exist because archival materials are fragile. To a large extent, they exist because during the times of the People's Republic of Poland the history of this region, especially the history of World War II and Operation Vistula, was falsified and taboo. The aforementioned manipulations are illustrated by a quote from the extensive *Przewodnik po Polsce* [Guide to Poland] from 1969, in which "[w]hat happened in the valleys, i.e., the displacement of eighty-six thousand non-Polish inhabitants of the Rzeszów Voivodship, was described by the authors as 'a return to local vegetation patterns'" (K, 157).

The journey through the Bieszczady Mountains in *Kiczery* turns out to be a journey through the nooks and crannies of the local archive or, indeed, a cabinet of curiosities. The archive constructed in the narrative is a site of recording, recording messages and ideas about the place, but also a site of critical reflection. However, the archival quest does not answer the question about the phenomenon of the Bieszczady Mountains but allows one to discover the extremely complicated texture of this place. In Robiński's book, the cultural archive has a melancholic nature; it awakens desires but fails to fulfill the hopes it inspires. It can be said that it is:

> [...] too random and too extensive to be an answer. Loss is hidden in unordered archival collections – the archive houses everything and nothing at the same time, becoming in itself a synonym of melancholic loss.[52]

The geopoetological detail as an operational concept

Although it is not as popular as, for example, narrative maps, readerly journeys, or toponymic tropes, the cultural archive turns out to be a useful and important concept in literary studies.[53] By entering into relations with other elements which make up a place's texture, the cultural archive helps one understand and recognize a place, look at it differently, experience it more deeply, truly feel it. It is also a breeding ground for imagination which creates a place,

[50]This phrase comes from Katarzyna Szalewska's article "Topo-grafie archiwum – o genealogii i melancholii" [Topo-graphies of the archive – genealogy and melancholy], in: *Świadectwa pamięci*, 261.

[51]Szalewska writes about the archive as a figure of imagination, which in postmodern autobiography is "a form which conceptualizes identity," 259.

[52]Szalewska, 254.

[53]The term "cultural archive" has been used in literary studies by, for example, Jerzy Borowczyk and Krzysztof Skibski: Jerzy Borowczyk, Krzysztof Skibski, "Puste miejsca w przestrzeni, puste miejsca w języku. Wokół Miejsca Andrzeja Stasiuka i dwóch opowiadań Zygmunta Haupta" [Empty places in space, empty places in language. Around *Miejsce* by Andrzej Stasiuk and two short stories by Zygmunt Haupt], *Polonistyka. Innowacje* 8 (2018): 173–190.

either from scratch or anew. In the works of Szuber and Robiński, the cultural archive plays a leading role, and at the same time both authors critically reflect on its make-up. The geopoetological detail draws attention to small parts, to particulars, which are sometimes difficult to find in the archival nooks and crannies, and to the role they play in a place's texture. Also, we cannot but ask questions about the performative and pragmatic dimension of the cultural archive, about the manner in which archival materials are collected, preserved, constructed, and about the purpose of such collections. In each case, the question of choosing and omitting is important. In Szuber's cento, it points to the idealization of the beloved region; respectively, in Robiński's travel book it reveals political manipulations, individual illusions, mythologies, and the essentially phantasmatic nature of the Bieszczady Mountains.

Writing about the contexts of micropoetics, Elżbieta Winiecka indirectly points to the role of details:

> Micropoetics goes into textual particles, but also into the cracks between them, attempting to fathom what is unspoken and unspeakable. It is thus not exclusively an art of analysis, but rather, primarily, of interpretation.[54]

The cultural archive in geopoetics is such a particle, a component that matters. It is a metaphorical detail, a kind of a crack through which one can reach the often-difficult matters related to a place. The geopoetological detail demands attention and analysis. Above all, however, as Winiecka writes, it requires interpretation and leads to interpretation.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[54]Winiecka, "Micropoetics and its contexts", 57.

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KEYWORDS

Robiński

geopoetics

a place's texture

Abstract:
The cultural archive is a terminological detail in the dictionary of geopoetics. This is how Elżbieta Rybicka described this indispensable part a place's texture (which is also created by experience and imagination). It is only when we adopt a micro perspective that we see that the cultural archive is as complicated a category as the place itself, and, additionally, it is further re-defined and re-contextualized by the archival turn. I discuss the problems related to the archive, its various types and the role it plays in the conceptualization of the place and identity associated with it, by interpreting the works of Janusz Szuber (*Las wielki i niedźwiedziów dosyć* [The forest is huge and there are enough bears]; *Świadectwo języka* [The testimony of language]) and Adam Robiński (*Kiczery. Podróż przez Bieszczady* [Kiczery. A journey through the Bieszczady Mountains]).

d e t a i l

SZUBER

THE ARCHIVAL TURN

cultural archive

Note on the Author:
Elżbieta Dutka – prof. dr hab., works at the University of Silesia in Katowice, the Faculty of Humanities (Institute of Literature). She primarily studies contemporary Polish literature. Her research interests center around the issues of space (mythical lands, cities, regions, landscapes, mountains) studied from different perspectives: geopoetics, new regionalism. She is the author of: *Ukraina w twórczości Włodzimierza Odojewskiego i Włodzimierza Paźniewskiego* [Ukraine in the works of Włodzimierz Odojewski and Włodzimierz Paźniewski] (Katowice 2000), *Okolice nie tylko geograficzne. O twórczości Andrzeja Kuśniewicza* [Not only geographical spaces. The works of Andrzej Kuśniewicz] (Katowice 2008), *Zapisywanie miejsca. Szkice o Śląsku w literaturze przełomu wieków XX i XXI* [Recording a place. Sketches about Silesia in literature at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries] (Katowice 2011), *Próby topograficzne. Miejsca i krajobrazy w literaturze polskiej XX i XXI wieku* [Topographical sketches. Places and landscapes in Polish Literature of the 20th and 21st Centuries] (Katowice 2014), *Centra, prowincje, zaułki. Twórczość Julii Hartwig jako auto/bio/geo/grafia* [Centers, provinces, alleys. Julia Hartwig's Works as Auto/Bio/Geo/Graphic] (Kraków 2016), *Pytania o miejsce. Sondowanie topografii literackich XX i XXI wieku* [A Question of Place. Probing literary topographies of the 20th and 21st centuries] (Kraków, 2019). She is the co-editor of collective volumes, including *Proza polska XX wieku. Przeglądy i interpretacje* [20th-century Polish Prose. Reviews and interpretations] (Volume 2, Katowice 2012; Volume 3, Katowice 2014). She published, among others, in collective volumes as part of the Nowy Regionalizm w Badaniach Literackich [New Regionalism in Literary Research] series (Universitas).

Detail and reading

Paweł Graf

ORCID: 0000-0001-9725-8726

> Discontinuity was a hallmark of Bohr's [...] model, which both Einstein and Schrödinger saw as a major weakness in a theory [...]. Not everyone [...] saw discontinuity as a vice, however. [...] a pioneering young physicist from Munich, Werner Heisenberg, proposed an abstract mathematical theory [...] in which instant jumps from state to state were de rigueur.[1]

If we assume that there is a difference between the detail and the particular,[2] and see the particular as a site of textual condensation, insofar as it emphasizes maximum continuity, reveals a careful network of internal connections, and manifests compelling semantic logic, the detail – on the contrary – marks the text with discontinuity. It, as if, transports meaning from the work to the reader. And the reader – as he examines details, savors them, and reflects on their idiosyncratic nature – turns into the Bachelardian dreamer:

> Suddenly an image situates itself in the center of our imagining being. It retains us; it engages us. It infuses us with being. The cogito is conquered through an object of the world, an object which, all by itself, represents the world. The imagined **detail is a sharp point which penetrates** [em-

[1] Quote after: Paul Halpern, *Einstein's Dice and Schrödinger's Cat* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 81-82.

[2] See: Paweł Graf, *Lektura i detal* [Reading and detail] (that is the introduction to this issue, which together with this article is a two-part whole in which I analyze how the detail functions in the text and in the process of reading).

> phasis – P.G.] the dreamer; it excites in him a concrete meditation. Its being is at the same time being of the image and being of adherence to the image which is astonishing. The image brings us the illustration of our astonishment. Perceptible registers correspond to each other. They complement each other. In a reverie which is dreaming on a simple object, we know a polyvalence of our dreaming being.[3]

Works of art, including works of literature, are filled with details. Details are usually not noticed in the process of reading, because we can mostly read, understand, and interpret the text without them. Indeed, details disturb us! They disturb us, insofar as they distract us from the continuity of reading and the read, drawing our attention to other places. Details disrupt the meaning of the whole and enchant the reader. "Penetrated by a sharp point of the detail," the reader is transported into new, surprising, and fascinating imaginary spaces. Respectively, if the reader focuses his attention on details, he maximally expands the process of reading, multiplies the read text, marking it, to paraphrase Roman Ingarden's term, with *places of indeterminacy* (which may be potentially filled out). It should be emphasized that such "additions" are subjective, insofar as they depend on the reader's sensibility, and may not be considered crucial in the process of "objective" interpretation. Perhaps, such places should be called *places of possible concretization*. A work of art thus becomes a catalyst for meditation. Something that constantly, through details, refers the reader to something beyond itself, to the ambiguous. A work of art is essentially discontinuous. *Detailed reading* (*reading of details*?) thus requires sensitivity, imagination, and perceptiveness. While it differs from the reading in which the reader looks for textual particulars, it is equally complex and artful. The reader must be able to move away from or beyond the search for obvious and/or predictable meanings.

> What is sensibility?, Michael Groβheim asks and he then explains: This phenomenological question must therefore be asked [...] in accordance with the motto of the phenomenological movement: "To the matters themselves!" Behind this slogan there is a concern for changing [...] the trend to simply overlook the object, by placing it in a *network of causes, functions or conditions* [...] [and thus – P.G.] The key to sensibility [...] is not simply the readiness to change one's state, but something that is best described as "a capacity for sympathy" [...] [it is – P.G.] a peculiar "harmony" between the experiencing subject and the spatial character by which one is "touched," "addressed," "enchanted." [...]. Sensibility is not a matter of the senses, nor of the soul, but of the *body*. [...] Sensibility is based on bodily communication through which we "feel" others in our own bodies. What is at stake here is [...] "control" [...]: "Control **is always also physical** [emphasis – P.G.] and comes into play in physical contact. [...]. If you are always on your guard, for example, because you are interested only in following the rules of your profession [...] you will be like a dark mirror, more or less looking past people and everything that is trying to tell you something, as long as it is not about what is directly communicated but about the co-vibrating nuances. On the contrary, if you renounce your self-control, at least to some degree, you may thus remain sensible to others and your circumstances.[4]

[3] Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of Reverie*, trans. Daniel Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 152.

[4] Michael Groβheim, *Fenomenologia wrażliwości* [Phenomenology of sensibility], trans. Michał Klemens, *Fenomenologia* 8 (2010): 16; 19–20. This text is a translation of the extended version of the lecture delivered by Professor Groβheim at Adam Mickiewicz University on November 27, 2009; the English version is based on the Polish translation [translator's note].

The above passage points to the bodily and the physical character of the detail. The physicality of *places of possible concretization*. Once we notice a detail, we have to change the position of our reading bodies. We have to get up and reach for a reference photograph, for the Encyclopedia, or for some other useful source. Sometimes, we have to get up and listen to a musical recording. Thus, we (temporarily) put aside the text we are reading. The dreamer of details must be prepared to abandon his reading and replace it with **counter-reading**. He needs to do something more – immersing oneself in reading and following the plot, the twists, and the textual particulars is not enough. And his reaction is always instantaneous, absolutely present, to paraphrase Karl H. Bohrer's theory of the now.

It should also be emphasized that while the particular is always intentional in the larger structure of a work of art, even if its understanding exceeds the sensibility of the reader, the detail transforms the text into something unintended, unpredictable, and private. It is in and through details, which are intricately woven into the texture of different works, that the reader and the writer may connect; importantly, they connect on the physical level of the text, unlike in interpretation, which is a form of counter-thinking. As Jan Mukařovský writes:

> Only as an integral whole does the work of art fulfil its functions as an aesthetic sign. And it is in this that we can see both the source of and the justification for the impression of absolute intentionality that the work of art evokes in us. Despite this [...] the careful observer cannot help but notice [...] that [...] there are many elements which are not intentional, which in individual cases exceed a given intention, in the work of art.[5]

Andrzej Kuśniewicz's *Lekcja martwego języka* [Lesson in a Dead Language] is a great novel. Studied and interpreted by many scholars, it revealed many of its secrets. It combines two important events and plotlines, namely the Great War, which determined the fate of people, nations, animals, and objects from 1914 to 1918, and the life of Lieutenant Kiekeritz, an aesthete who is forced to take care of things which he never considered important. At least, he thought that something other than war was truly important. The reader is presented with the opposition between ethics and aesthetics; he may reflect on the fragility of goodness as such and the fragility of an aesthetic object; he can follow a complicated plot. He may learn about the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or the love life and the erotic games played by different characters. Perhaps, he may, as I did in my book about Kuśniewicz,[6] ask who killed the main character, who appeared to die of consumption, or examine how the novel refers to the motif of the katabasis and the anabasis. Many different theories may be employed to interpret the novel.

[5] Jan Mukařovský, "Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art", in: Jan Mukařovský, *Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Essays*, trans. John Burbank and Petr Steiner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 89. Mukařovský devises a typology of unintentionality, distinguishing, among others, between subconscious unintentionality, unconscious unintentionality, or unintentionality which is a result of "inability" or an accident.

[6] See: Paweł Graf, *Świat utkany z prawdy i zmyślenia. O świadomości twórczej Andrzeja Kuśniewicza* [A world made of truth and fiction. Andrzej Kuśniewicz's creative consciousness] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Nakom, 2005).

The reader may also follow the details in the act of counter-reading. Let us examine some details in Kuśniewicz's novel. In the passage quoted below, we witness a tense meeting of two rivals, the lieutenant, and the forester, who in the end kills Kiekeritz:

> He has just put down the Lancaster double-barrel pistol down. He doesn't know, he couldn't guess, and anyway, he wouldn't even be able to understand the thoughts of his guest, still sitting, now half-reclining on the couch, with his legs stretched out. There is a bearskin here; it has been heavily worn out in some places. On the wall next to it – there is a colorful map of the Smorze-Felizienthal Forest District. On the desk, there is stationery and envelopes with the inscription "Government of the State of Smorze". It is a bold statement, but it is quite justified. Only two such "states" exist in this area: the Liebigs in Smorze and the Groedls in Skole. Vast spruce and, at times, beech forests extend all the way to the Hungarian border. The local beeches can reach several meters in circumference, so that it takes three men to encircle the trunk of such a giant. A real ocean of greenery, and for others, less inclined to poetize – a sea of building material and firewood. In some districts and divisions, for example in Mochnate, one *morgen* would bring four hundred cubic meters of solid timber. The smell of resin is everywhere. And on the sunny slopes there is also juniper, thyme and mountain bog gentian. And also mushrooms, so many mushrooms, saffron milk caps, but also others. There are penny buns, sticky buns, and honey fungus. Women walk around the forest and collect them into wide scarves, then they carry them to the town. Sometimes it is difficult to sell them. Now it is even more difficult, because of the war.[7]

It is basically your standard description. It is even a bit boring. We can "hear" the thoughts of the forester, who believes that his forest district, located next to the Hungarian border, is important, productive, and economically lucrative. At the same time, he is worried about the war, because it was destroying the small business.

But let us pay attention to the details. The double-barreled pistol, designed in 1852 by Charles Lancaster, which belonged to the forester is a textual particular; it emphasizes his "datedness," and the fact that he despises change. And change for the forester is personified by the lieutenant – a man of the world who invades the forester's private world together with the war. Respectively, the proper name "Smorze-Felizienthal" is a detail that is easy to overlook. And Felizienthal is one of the places where the troops of Bandera carried out (in 1944) the ethnic cleansing of Poles as part of the so-called Volhynia massacre. Most of the Poles were saved by the Hungarian army.[8] The knowledge of history allows us to combine both world wars and reflect on the future of the Hungarian-Polish-Ukrainian relations; it also allows us to interpret the rather puzzling title of Kuśniewicz's novel anew. Since there was also a German enclave in Felizienthal, and the forester's surname, Szwanda, is of German origin,[9]

[7] Andrzej Kuśniewicz, *Lekcja martwego języka* [Lesson in a Dead Language] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986), 19. This and other passages from *Lekcja martwego języka* were translated into English by M.O. [translator's note].

[8] https://przystanekhistoria.pl/pa2/tematy/zbrodnia-wolynska/76841,Wegrzy-wobec-eksterminacji-ludnosci-polskiej-przez-nacjonalistow-ukrainskich.html. The sources say that the Ukrainians murdered three people, a father and his two sons.

[9] Cf. http://genezanazwisk.pl/content/szwander

a reflection on a local or personal proper name turns into a reflection on History, and History for Kuśniewicz meant the complex and unexpected ways in which people's lives interlink. In turn, in the palace of the brothers Groedls in Skole there was, among other things, a collection of Rolls-Royces,[10] which refers us to Kuśniewicz's automotive passions (he took part in car rallies before the war). Such details allow the reader to experience and understand local culture. For example, the following passage

> Hypnosis sessions did not take place (except for one time, the first one, the very next day, in the evening, after the circus arrived) because the authorities banned them [...][11]

may inspire the reader to read Auguste Forel's 1914 book *Hypnotism*. He may also reflect on the interests of the people from the described era or think about what the authorities considered dangerous at that time.[12]

Numerous, detailed, references to saints, artists, works of art, and historical facts that are not crucial for the plot greatly expand Kuśniewicz's novel. Still, the aim of the detailed counter-reading is not to identify and discuss all possible allusions, activate all associations, exploit every possible lead. There are important details, such as the Volhynia massacre, which reveal the novel's historical and political "edge;"[13] then, there are pleasant details, like hypnosis, which expand the reader's cultural knowledge; and, lastly, there are irrelevant details, such as the names of different mushrooms – saffron milk caps, penny buns, sticky buns, and honey fungus (from the perspective of such details, the novel reads like a guide to mushrooms). Of course, distinguishing between important, pleasant, and irrelevant details depends on the reader, his approach to the text and his readerly strategy, and therefore it is not a pre-determined constant. All details are "abandoned entities;" entities that are at the same time part of the text and part of the counter-text.

Certainly, Kuśniewicz can be considered a writer of details, similarly to Bruno Schulz, while artists such as Witold Gombrowicz prefer particulars. The vertical particular[14] dominates in *Cosmos*; a sugar cube is an existential particular in *Pornografia*. And yet even in the works of such writers, advocates of the "intentional," we do find details. Inspired by Jan Gondowicz,

[10]https://blogi.kukushka.eu/totutotam/2017/10/30/skole-palac-groedlow/

[11]Kuśniewicz, 7.

[12]At least until the mid-1930s, it was assumed that individuals under hypnosis could commit criminal acts, such as murder, including political murder.

[13]However, we should remember that the relation between literature and history, ethics, politics or facts is not that direct. Analyzing names in the works of Marcel Proust, Roland Barthes writes: "Parma does not designate an Emilian city situated on the Po [the reader of details should be vigilant, Parma lies on the river Parma, which is a tributary of the Po – P.G.], founded by the Etruscans, and comprising 138,000 inhabitants; the true signified of these two syllables is composed of two semes: Stendhalian sweetness and the reflection of violets; see: Roland Barthes, "Proust and Names", in: Roland Barthes: *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 61.

[14]As we know, the plot follows vertical signs: vertically stuck needles, a hanging sparrow, etc.

who studies the particular in Gombrowicz's prose,[15] I examined[16] the following passage from *Ferdydurke*:

> Mrs. Filidor, totally defiled, tried with waning strength to pull on her gloves but – it's simply unbelievable! – the doctor from Colombo made a spot analysis of her urine and roared victoriously: "H2OC4, TPS, a few leukocytes, and albumin!"[17]

I focused on the particular and found out that that the chemical analysis revealed that Mrs. Filidor had ovarian cancer. Ovarian cancer was incurable back then – this information devastated the Great Synthetist and he lost in a duel with the Analyst. When I focused on the detail, I discovered that the quoted chemical formula does not exist (we can call the writer out on his made-up science). Respectively, we may also ask what "the rules of the game" were in his works of fiction and explore the relation between the chemical and the literary.

Some texts are made of details. These include, for example, Joe Brainard's *I remember* and Georges Perec's *I remember that*.[18]

> I remember being embarrassed to buy toilet paper at the corner store unless there were several other things to buy too.
> I remember taking my I.Q. test and coming out below average. (I've never told anybody that before).
> I remember that Betty Grable's legs were insured for a million dollars.[19]

Forgotten and yet remembered, the events mentioned by Brainard in the above list have no beginning and no end, unless the boundaries are set by the birth and the demise of the self. In any case, they do not form any logical whole. Perec writes in a similar fashion:

> I remember that Robespierre's jaw was broken by a gendarme named Merda, who later became a colonel.
> I remember that knitted silk ties were fashionable.
> I remember the Russian clown Popov and the Swiss clown Grock.[20]

[15]See, for example: Jan Gondowicz, "Palba", in: Jan Gondorowicz, *Pan tu nie stał* [That's my place] (Warsaw: Nisza, 2011), 82–86; Jan Gondowicz, "Skok w bok" [Jump to the side], in: Jan Gondorowicz, *Duch opowieści* [The spirit of the story] (Warsaw: Nisza, 2012), 138–141.

[16]See: Paweł Graf, "Powieść w świetle widzialnego – początek, detal, oczekiwanie" [Novel in the light of the visible – beginning, detail, expectation], in: *Powieść dziś. Teorie, tradycje, interpretacje* [Novel today. Theories, traditions, interpretations], ed. Anna Skubaczewska-Pniewska, Marcin Wołk (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2019), 112–130.

[17]Graf, "Powieść w świetle widzialnego – początek, detal, oczekiwanie", 128.

[18]Texts which focus on the particular, such as Nick Montfort's *World Clock*, are the complete opposite. Montfort enumerates a seemingly identical sequence of fragments, which, however, differ when it comes to microscopic particulars. We can thus experience the passage of time. For apparently these events happened in the same minute across the world; in fact, it is not instantaneity that is shown, but the passage of time. A similar strategy may be found in Georges Perec's *The Art of Asking Your Boss for a Raise*. If we focus on the particular, we can notice that the sequential similarity is only apparent, because time in human life moves in only one direction and subsequent enumerations are existential in nature – the same situation, different people – reminding us of our own mortality.

[19]Joe Brainard, *I remember* (New York: Angel Hair, 1970), 47, 49, 50.

[20]Georges Perec, *I remember that*, trans. Philip Terry and David Bellos (Boston: David R. Godine, 2014), 55, 57, 60.

The reader can either activate his own "I remember" or reflect on the re-memories and recollections selected by Perec and Brainard. Respectively, he may reflect on the difference in how we remember experienced facts, cultural facts, and fake facts. Details can be (and are) imitations. We can see that, for example, in Perec's "A Gallery Portrait," where the details are intentionally "imprecise." For example, when he writes about a painting by Degas, the writer provides a wrong address of the artist's studio (Victor-Macé 37 instead of Victor-Massé 37). When he describes the painting *Chess Players*, the writer falsely claims that the name of one of the players was Giochino Greco (instead of Gioachino Greco). Also, the color of the player's pieces is "wrong" (which I analyzed elsewhere).[21] Such nuances, if discovered, allow the reader not so much to follow the text as to follow the detail in its complexity, and provide a foundation for at least a hypothetical reflection on the history of the detail in literature.

Still other games with details which build counter-texts, which in this case becomes text, may be found in Antonio Tabucchi's *Stories with Pictures*.[22] Tabucchi discusses paintings or graphics by different artists. For example, he shows us the other side of a postcard and reflects on the potential, invisible, addressee hidden in its obverse. He reflects on the poetics of the letter or the reasons for sending postcards. When, together with the writer, we are looking at a fence in one of the engravings, we wonder what lies beyond, beyond the line of the horizon, in a place we can neither see nor reach. Looking at a figure in Giancarlo Savino's painting, we think about the relation between the painter and his models. To sum up, Tabucchi is a dreamer of details, and he invites us to dream as well. He invites us to analyze what is hidden – and at the same time what is secretly referenced in and through the detail.

In Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet*, we can see how particulars determine the perception of events – the successive changing perceptions of the title characters are described in four volumes; however, we can read the novel differently, savoring the details and the particulars of the city of Alexandria. As such, we can reflect on the fragility of artifacts. The first reading allows us to understand how individual perception works, insofar as it is always at odds with the perception of others; the second reading allows us to learn more about a world that no longer exists. It also destroys the belief in the autonomy of literature, which, through details, this time reveals itself to be also, almost physically, created out of the reader's sensibility. It seems obvious but let me emphasize it one more time: the detail allows one, like nothing else, to reach out of the text towards a poetic dream, making the reader and the author switch places. And while the text, with its particulars, may be an analogon of Heidegger's real object, the detail is a hidden real object that connotes a sensual object, as Graham Harman laconically observes:

[21]Georges Perec, "A Gallery Portrait," in: Georges Perec, *Three by Perec*, trans. by Ian Monk (London: Harvill Press, 1996), 157, 171.

[22]Antonio Tabucchi, *Stories with Pictures*, trans. Elizabeth Harris (New York: Archipelago, 2021).

> Although there may be an infinite number of objects in the world [in phenomenology, an object has a broader meaning than a thing – P.G.], there are only two kinds of objects – real objects, and sensual objects, which exist only in experience. [...] They are [...] the two distant poles of the universe.[23]

Schulz described it more poetically:

> Others liken these days to the apocrypha secretly slipped between the chapters of the great book of the year, to the palimpsests secretly inserted between its pages, or to those blank white pages onto which the eyes, tired of reading and tired of meanings, may bleed images and do away with colors on these empty Pages, paler and paler, to rest in their nothingness, before they are drawn into labyrinths of new adventures and chapters.[24]

Jerzy Limon's reading of Shakespeare's works perfectly shows what reading through/in detail can be. Limon selected various erotic moments from Shakespeare's works and showed the presence of Eros in the descriptions of erections, milking, and erotic and bodily allusions hidden in plain sight (village, fish, gate). Was Shakespeare a eulogist of sexual intercourse? We cannot be sure but that is how Limon proposes to read such erotic details.[25]

The opposition between the particular and the detail in literature brings to mind the word "asymmetry." The asymmetry of reading, the asymmetry of aesthetic views. As Martin Seel wrote, there is a difference between aesthetic perception (associated with particulars) and aesthetic imagination (a dream) (that is determined by how sensitive one is to detail):

> Whereas aesthetic perception takes up something in *its* appearing, aesthetic imagination makes something present in *an* appearing. [...] Whereas an object of perception continuously offers different impressions when we move in its presence, the objects of aesthetic imagination are constantly under the *direction* of this imagination. [...] This [...] means that the content of perceptions and imaginative projections is not the same, even if perceptions and projections refer to the same object [...].[26]

Of course, "proper" reading essentially boils down to understanding and interpreting the text, with all its particulars. It would be hard to deny that. At the same time, the dreamy construction of a counter-text by immersing oneself in details does not so much take us out of the work, seemingly closed within its limits, as it allows us, individually transformed, to return to the text, which has also been transformed. There are places of indeterminacy and places of determinacy in the text, and both are equally important and interesting. Mukařovský writes:

[23]Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (London: Zero Books, 2011), 47-48.

[24]Bruno Schulz, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów* [Stories. A selection of essays and letters] (Wrocław: Biblioteka Narodowa, 1989), 92. This passage was translated into English by M.O. [translator's note].

[25]Jerzy Limon, *Szekspir bez cenzury. Erotyczny żart na scenie elżbietańskiej* [Shakespeare Uncensored: Erotic jokes on the Elizabethan stage] (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2018).

[26]Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 76-77.

> The work of art intended as a whole – the work of art as a sign – would necessarily be a "res nullius," a common property without the capacity to affect the perceiver in what is proper to him alone.[27]

According to Jorge Luis Borges, "the Gnostics said that the only way to be rid of a sin is to commit it, because afterwards you repent it."[28] The study of details, this "sinful," egoistic, unnecessary contemplation of the unintentional, allows us to move beyond the text. Alas, it also allows us to later repent – repent interpretation, reading or understanding.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[27]Mukařovský, 98.

[28]Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse*, ed. Calin-Andrei Mihailescu (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 109.

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KEYWORDS

DETAILED READING

detail in literature

Abstract:
This theoretical article discusses how the detail may function in the text and what reading strategies it calls for. The article aims to present a model of a counter-text, which exists, as if, alternatively to the text proper – it emerges when the reader examines the textual details and the contexts they open.

INTERPRETATION

particular in literature

slow reading

Note on the Author:
Paweł Graf – dr hab., prof. UAM. His research interests include Polish literature and culture from 1910 to 1980. He is the author of the monograph devoted to Andrzej Kuśniewicz *Świat utkany z prawdy i zmyślenia. O świadomości twórczej Andrzeja Kuśniewicza* [A world made of truth and fiction. Andrzej Kuśniewicz's creative consciousness] (2005) and the book about Polish futurists, with references to Italian and Russian futurism, *Automobil w pędzie. Studia o futuryzmie i futurystach* [An Automobil at full speed. Studies on Futurism and Futurists] (2018). His research interests include slow reading, narrativism, phenomenology, microanthropology and thematology. He is currently working on a collection of essays entitled *Futurystyczne Universum* [Futuristic Universe].

Jolanta Brach-Czaina's micrology

Lucyna Marzec

ORCID: 0000-0001-6478-3997

For Agnieszka Wolny-Hamkało

Detail analyzed from up close, as a poetological notion – although it makes a difference, and making that difference is its main task – functions in such stylistically and ideologically diverse texts as *Listopad* [November] by Henryk Rzewuski, *Locus Solus* by Raymond Russel, *Lód* [Ice] by Jaeck Dukaj and *Rzeszot* [Sieve] by Bartosz Sadulski. Highlighting similarities is just as crucial. Detail makes the past present, it authenticates fantasy, or vice versa: it breaks down the cohesiveness and credibility of a message, making it unpleasant for the reader. Poetics of detail goes beyond literary types and genres. It also suspends the problems of mimetics and fictionality, as it refers to ontology, but it also touches them at the hottest spot: it binds together a score of epistemological issues, which have dominated literary theory for decades.

In the present paper I will be analyzing texts by Jolanta Brach-Czaina, which Grzegorz Grochowski accurately dubbed "textual hybrids" characterized by vague genology and complex

affinity: meditative, essayistic, poetic[1], in order to understand the poetological function of detail. Brach-Czaina loves detail, minutia, specificity. In her work, she combines the philosophy of existential risk with literary experiments. Her conceptual projects can be loosely connected with micrology, knowledge that is not universal, but also "strikingly subtle and insightful", requiring to "reflect upon one's sensitivity to nuance, to maintain vigilance and passion for detail, and moreover to be ready to accept what seems elusive, ineffable"[2] – as put by Aleksander Nawarecki, the greatest Polish apologist of micrology. Why *loosely* connected? Because Brach-Czaina's micrology is not "representative", it is a unique project. Sławomira Walczewska, who was her publisher, student, and friend, wrote that "Brach-Czaina fascinated people with her independence in life and in thought. She was a total, rather than desk thinker. Thinking was her life's function; not abstract life, but specific, her own. Her philosophy stemmed from her passions and fascinations, as well as her traumas"[3]. The present paper does not concern biographical issues; the main focus is on thinking and concrete-oriented writing, as well as an "organic" vision of thinking, writing as a function of life.

Detail and longing

In answer to Barbara N. Łopieńska's question about the role of philosophy in the modern world, Brach-Czaina confessed: "I do not distinguish philosophy as some extraordinary field of thought, and I do not think of it as humanity's lifebuoy. I only think that there is intellectual effort, and certain changes in ways of thinking, which is the domain of philosophers as well as authors, poets, or academics specializing in empirical sciences"[4]. Equating forms of cognition, expression, and discourse, immersed in ancient Socratic philosophy traditions, was related to the desire to cognize. "And if someone is haunted by the need to dig deeper, one has to act on it" – she said to Łopieńska. Over a decade earlier, she wrote in the introduction to an edited volume *Estetyka pragnień* [Aesthetics of desires]: "we do not externalize our desires to put the down, but to make ourselves aware of them, testify to their existence, as well as to fuel them"[5]. In the first essay of the volume, *Sofa*, originally entitled equally briefly *Uczta* [Feast] ("Twórczość" [Creativity] 1984 No 12, pp. 75–89), Brach-Czaina analyzes Plato's dialogue, arriving at similar conclusions as those published not long after by the philosopher, classical philologist, and interpreter Anne Carson in *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986).

For both scholars erotic desire leads to spiritual longing, longing for bittersweet knowledge, and the postulate of perfection and self-cognition. Carson goes into far greater detail in uncovering the poetic and philosophical senses of Eros, but nonetheless the final conclusion remains the same, personified in Socrates. She writes: "A power to see the difference between

[1] Grzegorz Grochowski, *Tekstowe hybrydy. Literackość i jej pogranicza* [Textual hybrids. Literariness and its borderlands] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2014).

[2] Aleksander Nawarecki, *Miniatura i mikrologia literacka. T. 2* [Literary miniature and micrology] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2001), 12.

[3] Sławomira Walczewska, „Konkret i dotyk" [Specificity and touch"], *Szum* 34 (2021): 35.

[4] Jolanta Brach-Czaina, „Kabaczek, piasek, liście, pazury" [Aubergine, sand, leaves, claws], *Res Publica Nowa* 11 (2001): 55.

[5] *Estetyka pragnień*, edited by Jolanta Brach-Czaina. Lublin: Wydaw. Lubelskie, 1988.

what is known and what is unknown constitutes Socrates' wisdom and what motivated his life-long search for truth. The activity of reaching out for that difference is one with which he said he was in love"[6]. Brach-Czaina enquires:

> According to Socrates, what power does Eros ultimately constitute? He is the highest desire. He leads through direct, full experience of life towards what is experienced as its most profound sense, to which a (difficult) road leads through meanders of life experiences rather than through their rejection and ascetic sublimation. [...] The erotic state is a potential one, the state of a yet unfulfilled possibility[7].

Desire needs imagination, it is the key to the world of imagination.

Hence both sensual love and the desire to cognize focus on differences and detail. Brach-Czaina reminds that "creating stimuli for the movement of feelings and thoughts, for the strenuous effort of imagination breaking into the sphere of super-consciousness, is the basic function of the erotic atmosphere of *Uczta*"[8]. Carson provides a detailed explanation of the Socratic method, as reported by Plato:

> He tells us exactly where Eros is located in the process of knowing or thinking. Eros lies at the intersection of two principles of reasoning [...]. We think by projecting sameness upon difference, by drawing things together in a relation or idea while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between them[9].

Eros would thus be a figurative element of every thought which goes beyond a formalized language. An impulse which sets metaphorical thinking in motion, or – as modern cognitive studies claim – thinking in general[10].

Eros would also be a metaphor of a metaphor, which can only be described using metaphorical languages, obviously metaphysical. Both Carson and Brach-Czaina reworked deconstruction for their own purposes and, agreeing with Derrida about the fruitless self-characteristic of philosophy as a discourse which transgresses metaphor in favor of notions, they remained faithful to metaphysics which "should penetrate to the horizon or to the depths of the proper, and in the end, there regain the origin of its truth"[11]. In *White Mythology* Derrida cites Lautréamont, who is baffled with and jocular about figurativeness: "It is an extraordinary thing, generally speaking, that force of attraction which leads us to search out (in order later to express) the likenesses and differences that lie hid in the natural properties of

[6] Anne Carson, *Słodko-gorzki eros*, translated into Polish by Renata Lis (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2020), 199. English version: *Eros the Bittersweet* (London: Champaigne, 1998), 172.

[7] Brach-Czaina, *Sofa*, in: *Estetyka pragnień*, 17.

[8] Brach-Czaina, *Sofa*, in: *Estetyka pragnień*, 26.

[9] Carson, 197-198. English version: 171.

[10] Dorota Rybarkiewicz, *Metafora w działaniu* [Metaphor in action] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2017).

[11] Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy " , translated into Polish by Wiktoria Krzemień, *Pamiętnik Literacki* [Literary diary] 77/3 (1986), 315. English version: New Literary History, Vol. 6, No. 1, On Metaphor (Autumn, 1974), pp. 5-74, 71.

objects that are quite disparate, and quite unsuited in appearance to take part in this kind of sympathetically curious combination"[12]. For both Brac-Czaina and Carson, metaphors – similarities and differences – offered a risky opportunity rather than posed a threat. By writing they acted against using up metaphors, for renewal and transformation. The syncretism of genres, discourses and fields extracted by Carson and Brach-Czaina from ancient texts, and at the same time practiced, immersed in contemporaneity, also results from subjecting to the rhythm of the desire to cognize, intellectual work whose main goal is determined by absorption of the world.

In terms of metonymy

When Kafka's philosopher from the parable "The Top" goes in pursuit of the toy, hoping that "the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top, for instance, was sufficient for the

understanding of all things"[13], he insults Brach-Czaina's particles of being and cognition. He is convinced that a piece, excerpt, synecdoche gives an accurate picture of the whole, and that the most proper way of cognition is to immobilize an object. "And whenever preparations were being made for the spinning of the top, he hoped that this time it would succeed: as soon as the top began to spin and he was running breathlessly after it, the hope would turn to certainty, but when he held the silly piece of wood in his hand, he felt nauseated"[14]. The philosopher is spinning around in one place because he cannot recognize that it motion is the essence of the top, and that when children play with it the point is to set it in motion and enjoy watching it spin. Kafka implies that if the philosopher watched instead of seizing it, and if he was able to think in terms of analogies, he would uncover many secrets. However, he keeps trying using the same method, possessed by his longing and deaf to warnings.

Similarly, Jolanta Brach-Czaina argues with the fragmentation method and looking for general laws in trifles. In *Szczeliny istnienia* [Slits of existence] she diagnoses a problem behind Kafka's protagonist's suffering:

> when philosophers despair about the silence of an entity, it results from not understanding the its language, which does not address us as a whole, but through existential concrete, meaningful particles. It is true that they are able to suggest the voice of a whole, but always sonorant in the particles of existence[15].

Brach-Czaina remains consistent in her dislike for the scalpel, microscope, and synecdoche, which takes her away from micrology conceptualized as "splitting hairs". They make, for example, a spinning top "a stupid piece of wood", silent and unwilling to be known:

[12]Derrida, 305. English version: 57.

[13]Franz Kafka, "Bąk" [The Top], in: *Opowieści i przypowieści* [Stories and parables], translated into Polish by Lech Czyżewski et al. (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2017), 477. English version: *The Complete Stories by Franz Kafka*, translated into English by Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books), 491.

[14]Kafka, 477. English version: 491.

[15]Brach-Czaina, *Wiśnia i rozumienie* [Cherry and cognition], in *Szczeliny istnienia*, 8.

> by fragmentizing the world we do not allow it to speak with its own voice, whereas when we allow something to catch our attention, we take a more modest stance through which we are allowed an insight into what surrounds us and depends on our will. Fragments of reality are parts arbitrarily cut out from the whole with our decision, typically motivated by inattention or short-sighted convenience[16].

Brach-Czaina remained skeptical about fragmentation in her later *Błony umysłu* [Mind membranes], just as she did in *Szczeliny istnienia*, written in the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, she reduced her dislike for synecdoche, as if she eventually agreed for the figurativeness of philosophical language and intentionally played with academic conventions. For example, when commenting on Marzena Morozewicz's exhibition *Łuski* [Scales] in 2001, she warned about the dangers of perceiving photography as a trace of life, testament, and experience. At the same time, she opposed photography with sculpture, that is, a cast of a body part: metonymy which slowly transforms into metaphor – dried scales, a plaster cast are discarded in favor of thin, frail imprints. This gesture – controversial, arranging media in a clear hierarchy – is difficult to interpret, although it is inspiring[17].

In *Błony umysłu* – a collection of micro essays first published in magazines – Brach-Czaina managed to find a form against fragmentation. It is characterized by condensed content, concise syntax, graphicness, and focus on detail: often small, minute, inconspicuous (heather, drop of water, armpit). Her conclusions take the form of jocular yet elevated paradoxes, charades, adages: "If I were to indicate a field of guaranteed boredom, I would look for it in intrusive visibility (*Wrzos* [Heather]); "Holding on to air makes you a realist" (*Nie ptaki, ale powietrznicy* [Not birds, but air chambers]); "Cognition is a caprice – fascinating and often useful – but existence is the foundation. And it is interesting that it seeks support" (*Śliski piec* [Sleek stove]); "Fragility of a cup forces to show ultimate respect for the collision moment" (*Małe ręczne pranie* [Small hand wash]). Scattered in different places in a text, paradoxes seldom take a conclusive form – and yet Brach-Czaina's writing skills exclude chaos and coincidence, which leads us to another trace of Socrates, also present in *Szczeliny istnienia*, as observed by Maria Cyranowicz: "The logical argument leads the reader, like maieutics, through questions and answers"[18]. According to Stanisław Borzym, in the case of Socrates, a bunch of similar characteristics: rigor of thought, restraint, and non-conclusiveness resulted from the fact that he did not have access to theory understood as a cognitive system[19]. The same thing can be said about Brach-Czaina: asystematicity, eclecticism, and independence make her philosophy indifferent to attempts at "explaining the world" completely. It is difficult to undermine the "applicability", or even "virality" of term-metaphors which we associate with her.

[16]Brach-Czaina, *Wiśnia i rozumienie*, in: *Szczeliny istnienia*, 11.

[17]Marianna Michałowska, „Filozofia w edukacji wizualnej: «Błony umysłu» jako ćwiczenie z fotografii" [Philosophy in visual education: Mind membranes as an exercise in photography], *Czas Kultury* [Time of culture] 1 (2022): 85.

[18]Maria Cyranowicz, „Wkroczenie w tajemnicę" [Entering a secret], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (1996): 101.

[19]Stanisław Borzym, *Obecność ryzyka: szkice z filozofii powszechnej* [The presence of risk: on common philosophy] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1998).

Brach-Czaina's figurative language does not refrain from characteristic epithets, comparisons, metonymies, and metaphors which have been absorbed by literature, culture, as well as the language of broadly understood theory as in Mike Bal's "traveling concepts", Derrida's proliferation, or Irigarian blooming. How is this possible? Once again, Anne Carson suggests the answer. Her interpretation of *The Top* differs from mine: "The story is about the delight we take in metaphor. A meaning spins, remaining upright on an axis of normalcy aligned with the conventions of connotation and denotation, and yet: to spin is not normal, and to dissemble normal uprightness by means of this fantastic motion is impertinent"[20]. Carson suggests that the philosopher from Kafka's parable does not seek cognition, and that looking for a lost toy constitutes the essence of philosophy (and his desire). In reference to language dissemination, Barach-Czaina would thus be saying that seduced by words, we let ourselves be carried away by the whirl of audacious thought. There is something to it, since analytical philosophy does not accept Brach-Czaina as a thinker precisely because of the interpretative potential of tropes and figures. Beata Szymańska, who is the same age as Brach-Czaina, enquired in her review of *Szczeliny istnienia*:

> How should one argue with metaphor? Does man become a cogitative reed? [...] Or is Zhuangzi right when he says that to live means to travel joyfully, hopping? Does Minerva's owl indeed set off at dusk? [...] But whoever would be bothered with [...] the rules of ancient philosophy? It is far wiser to agree with this book; to accept that crevices through which existence manifests itself appear in metaphor, in the language of objects, in everyday activities[21].

Szymańska – although not without reservations – is convinced by the figurative language of *Szczeliny istnienia*. However, she does not refer to its aesthetic qualities, but to *fronesis*, practical knowledge, cognition related to the postulate of ethical perfection. The ethical message of *Szczeliny istnienia* and *Błony umysłu* stems from *fronesis* understood in the spirit of Socrates. Figurativeness – similarly to the erotic symbolism of *Uczta* – has higher practical purposes. Brach-Czaina suggests that casual scenes conceal the more "bashful" desire of perfection, cognition, holiness. "The wave-like motion of the erotic atmosphere, its development, retreat, accumulation creates an equivalent of forms of supraconscious spiritual life in the formal structure"[22].

This is why I believe that Carson's reading of Kafka's parable – even though its glamorous effect is difficult to ignore – lies on the opposite end of Brach-Czaina's thought. Brach-Czaina offers a trope language without being carried away by it, favoring catachresis out of all tropes. She found words, phrases and expressions which fill in lacunae in both colloquial and philosophical dictionaries, which however does not mean that "fussing"[23], "crevice"[24], "meatiness"

[20]Anne Carson, *Słodko-gorzki eros*, 7. English version: xi.

[21]Beata Szymańska, „Problem zła i ścierka do podłogi" [The issue of evil and a floor rag], *Dekada Literacka* 5/6 (1999): 18.

[22]Brach-Czaina, *Sofa*, 23.

[23]Grażyna Latos, "Krzątactwo", in: *Encyklopedia gender: płeć w kulturze* [Encyclopedia of gender: gender in culture], edited by Katarzyna Czeczot et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, 2014), 253.

[24]Grażyna Latos, „Szczeliny istnienia", in: *Encyklopedia gender: płeć w kulturze*, edited by Katarzyna Czeczot et al. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, 2014), 523.

can be clearly defined. They cannot – their whole potential is based on probing the unknown and seeking forms for characterizing spiritual life. Nonetheless, they have numerous interpretations, which testify to their longevity [25].

Representation of existence

What does Brach-Czaina look for in particles of being and existential concretes if not the synecdoche of Fullness, Completeness, and detailed definitions? Aleksander Nawarecki suggests that melancholic solemnity is at stake here:

> Why do we need romantic abysses, if every crevice in everyday existence can be the most horrible abyss? [...] Brach-Czaina seems to say that the elevated, solemn, inexpressible remains within reach![26].

Brach-Czaina states clearly that this is about "representation of existence". *Szczeliny istnienia*, to which Nawarecki refers, focused on dramatic and tragic issues, *Błony umysłu* shifted the focus to the inconspicuous, "the world as a background" and experience of "everyday life". However, sublimity and melancholy prefer the approach of individual distance, focusing on self and own experiences confronted with the world, whereas Brach-Czaina called for engagement, and at the same time withdrawing claims of dominance, especially intellectual. According to Eelco Runia, since metonymies are used on everyday basis, they stem from the need for presence and sense of discontinuity of experience, life, history[27]. Brach-Czaina's "representation of existence" is more related to metonymically making particles of being present than metaphorical "meaning-giving".

Why did she select touch and haptic metaphors out of all corporal and sensual experiences? Why can the essay *Dotknięcie świata* [Touching the world] be considered her *credo*: "touching is a bilateral phenomenon. The world touches us when we touch it"[28]. In essence, the bilateralism of corporal experience – swallowing hot potatoes, kissing a body, lying on grass, cleaning the floor – allows Brach-Czaina and her readers to set off basic issues of feminist criticism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and posthumanism. The consequences of careful reflection upon touch lead to questioning the difference between the inside and the outside, familiarity, and strangeness, appreciating sensuality and corporeality. Brach-Czaina resigns from discursive language of "explaining the world" via theories, methods, or worldviews – and the academic habit to base thought on tradition and history of science. She multiplies visual variations about touching in order to highlight the simultaneous inevitability, inalienability,

[25]Katarzyna Lisowska, *Metaforyczność w dyskursie genderowym polskiego literaturoznawstwa po 1989 roku* [Metaphysics in the gender discourse of Polish literary studies after 1989] (Kraków: Universitas), 2019.

[26]Aleksander Nawarecki, „Czarna mikrologia" [Black micrology], in: *Skala mikro w badaniach literackich* [Micro scale in literary studies], edited by Aleksander Nawarecki, Monika Bogdanowska (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2005), 22.

[27]Eelco Runia, „Obecność" [Presence], in: *Teoria wiedzy o przeszłości na tle współczesnej humanistyki: antologia* [Theory of knowledge about the past and modern humanities: an antology], translated into Polish by Elżbieta Wilczyńska (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010).

[28]Jolanta Brach-Czaina, *Dotknięcie świata*, in: *Błony umysłu* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2003), 59.

and extraordinariness of experience. By shedding the weight of footnotes and references she keeps her thoughts light. She suggests that lives goes on beyond academia, which "touches reality only via paper"[29]. The concise form and sensuality of descriptions of "representation of existence" encourage to give up on reading in favor of experimenting in nature.

Inga Iwasiów demonstrates convincingly that Brach-Czaina's essays are characterized by "a symbiosis of great and small narratives", and she calls her style and method of writing "a crevice-membrane narrative":

> A membrane is something that overgrows, and as such it is similar to overgrowth, another type of language multiplication, wildness of life restrained by the rigor of a comprehensive examination. These categories can be considered creative poetics, a cognitive postulate, and at the same time an instruction for a view of me-in-the-world. The crevice strategy requires constant supplementation by its very nature, it cannot stand imitation[30].

The crevice-membrane narrative relies on detail and concrete. At the same time, it tries to generalize observations and seek for the essence. It needs accuracy, which should be understood comprehensively (following Italo Calvino) as a feature of construction that is well thought out (composition), vivid (able to describe in detail), and language that is both precise and subtle[31] – all of which can be said about Brach-Czaina's works. By comparing classics, such as Leopardi with Marianne Moore, and *Dinggedicht* poetry he shows that the motion between ambiguity and multiplicity, intellect and sensuousness define the key value: "The poet of vagueness can only be the poet of precision, able to capture the subtlest sensations with quick and reliable eyes and ears and hands"[32]. Precision is about producing, capturing, describing, and finding unobvious similarities and differences. Speck and detail have an equally strong effect in the crystallization process and entropy.

Vagueness and multiplicity lead to imagination and a mysterious, erotic ambiance in *Uczta*. Since Brach-Czaina did not seek the bliss of metaphor, but "existing in the form of existential concrete", I believe that looking at a spinning top she would see a material object which sensually affects both children and the philosopher, entertaining the former, and annoying and disappointing the latter. Interpreted via *Szczeliny istnienia*, the toy from Kafka's story would thus be a phenomenological object, as it "has the ability to affect others and attract attention"[33]. It is a *punctum* – the opposite of a *studium* from Barthes's famous distinction – but it refers to reality rather than photography (or some other medium). The centrifugal movement of a toy, which brings joy, bothers and worries – is completely "normal", characteristic, peculiar. From the perspective of studies into objects it is this movement that establishes the relationship

[29]Brach-Czaina, *Dotknięcie świata*, in: *Błony umysłu*, 60.

[30] Inga Iwasiów, „O narracji szczelinowo-błonowej: lekcje pisania na podstawie Jolanty Brach-Czainy" [On crevice-membrane narrative: writing lessons based on works by Jolanta Brach-Czaina], *Czas Kultury* 1 (2022): 12.

[31]Italo Calvino, *Wykłady amerykańskie: sześć przypomnień dla przyszłego tysiąclecia* [Six Memos for the Next Millenium], translated into Polish by Anna Wasilewska (Warszawa: Czuły Barbarzyńca, 2009).

[32]Calvino, 71. English version: *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, translated into English by Geoffrey Brock (Boston: Mariner Books), 70.

[33]Brach-Czaina, *Wiśnia i rozumienie*, in*: Szczeliny istnienia*, 12.

between objects and subjects (human and non-human – such objects can also attract animals). However, in *Szczeliny istnienia* the question of whether the spinning top was made by hand or produced by some machine, whether it was a collectible toy or a thousand-year-old museum artifact, is irrelevant, because it tells us nothing about its makers, owners, or users. From the perspective of Brach-Czaina, objects, phenomena, or natural elements have little in common with objects-metonymies of identity, life, characters. They are strangers to the status of testimonies or traces, and thus to historical, archival, or biographical conceptualizations. In *Błony umysłu* it is different: a cup opposed to a mug and the corporate culture of working in an isolated cubicle encourages a face-to-face meeting or a moment of reflection. A recipe for Galicia-style aubergine in tomatoes which need to be peeled with boiling water refers to a more menacing analogy – torture and skinning. Black mallow is compared to a Buddhist priestess (due to the color of her robes), and immediately afterwards with folk Easter palms (due to their shape). A stroll down an empty riverbed inspires considerations about the attractiveness of dead things and difficulties caused by changes. Brach-Czaina's associations are not coincidental. Sometimes they are driven by a synesthetic or intellectual association (similarity), and sometimes a paradoxical reversal, contrast of juxtaposition (difference), but they are protected from unambiguous reading by the camouflage of vagueness. A walk down a historical route was probably related to a trip abroad, and the Buddhist priestess who taught meditation was known by her name. Brach-Czaina blurs biographical signatures – third parties are required to read them.

Absorption

Brach-Czaina's writing method is subtle in its essence, and at the same time typical for all figurative transformations. In line with the metaphysical tradition, Brach-Czaina asks about "the possibility for the sense to show through, to go beyond physical facts, despite being tied to them"[34]. At the same time, she believed in the transformative and emancipatory power of language, despite all her reservations about inexpressibility. She connected physical facts with a realistic concrete, experience, or some state she lived through. Walczewska reminds us that:

> Everyday life is Brach-Czaina's element. It is not abstract, but concrete, full of fields outside of seriousness of words, or taboo. Concrete is one of the notions which Brach-Czaina opposes to philosophical abstractions[35].

Absorption is a technique of the crevice-membrane narrative: absorption of the abstract into the concrete, saturating concrete with abstraction.

In order to combine precision with vagueness, Brach-Czaina apprentices among artists who are sensitive to existential objects:

[34]Brach-Czaina, *Nie ptaki, ale powietrznicy*, in: *Błony umysłu*, 19.

[35]Sławomira Walczewska, "Konkret i dotyk" [Concrete and touch], *Szum* 34 (2021): 35.

> I do not think that anyone needs to be convinced to the aura of meanings surrounding a sausage, since Rafał Wojaczek demonstrated that clearly. Also Miron Białoszewski has put many objects in the right place in the order of being. And the fact that philosophers temporize is not poets' fault[36].

If putting objects in the right place in the order of being is a shared task of poetry and philosophy, it is rarely an order of social *status quo*, "common sense", or dictionary definitions. Brach-Czaina relies on the following poetic techniques: contrastive comparisons transforming into juxtapositions, rescaling (size of objects), focalization (zooming in and out), and synesthesia. We should also remember that syntax plays a major role in making her descriptions dynamic.

Mit rodzinny [Family myth] by Wojaczek, dated to 1965, to which Brach-Czaina refers, contains a blunt identification: "This is a sausage / This is my edible mother" and creates a suggestive vision of a man/child who craves a sausage/mother. Although the juxtaposition of hunger and emptiness, the pleasure of consuming and childish sexual fantasies is not revolutionary in any way, Wojaczek's poem is striking due to its apparent directness. Apparent – because juxtaposing a mother with a sausage directs readers not towards consumption, but towards a trivial resolution of a family myth – a founding myth. A coincidence leads to great expectations. The irony of the poem which was written when food production in People's Poland was down, also lies on connecting "my childish hunger" with scarcity economics and an oppressive legal system with show trials: early in 1965 a former manager of a state-owned company for trading meat was sentenced to death for bribery, four other defendants got life sentences, and several others – shorter prison sentences[37]. Looking at a sausage – processed, minced meat of poor quality and mixed source – triggers off existential feelings of mediocrity, randomness, hopelessness. At the same time this sausage is desired and dangerous. It encourages risk and obstinacy – as has been shown, it may even cost a life.

A common cloth that can be found in any household attracts Brach-Czaina's attention because "it is a primeval object which has accompanied our existential efforts to build everyday life"[38]. In philosophical meditation, the unattractive appearance and prosaic function of a cloth allow an insight into ontology and epistemology:

> Sometimes people throw up. […] Then we learn that what cleanses may become disgusting and also require cleansing. We reach processes which do not have a clear ending[39].

Out of tasks which comprise everyday cleaning – a repetitive chore whose results are not lasting – it is possible to pick one, cleaning with a cloth, and ask not only about the inevitability of decomposition of matter, but also about our hope for erasing the past and cleanse oneself of evil. Brach-Czaina contrasts the language of existential questions (seemingly universal and

[36]Brach-Czaina, *Wiśnia i rozumienie*, in: *Szczeliny istnienia*, 36.
[37]Dariusz Jarosz, „Mięso", *Polska 1944/45-1989. Studia i Materiały* 17 (2019): 318–319.
[38]Brach-Czaina, *Wiśnia i rozumienie*, in: *Szczeliny istnienia*, 14.
[39]Brach-Czaina, *Powaga ścierek*, in*: Szczeliny istnienia*, 128.

impersonal) with images of a dirty cloth which – although clearly sensual – disgust. This sensual analysis of a cloth is conducted "with a magnifying glass", directly: this is the only way we can notice the fibers, dirty and clean, which "are mixed, permeate each other like black and way in the grey of cloths"[40].

A detailed description of black mallow, a wild flower that embellishes country gardens, used in herbalism and industry as a dye, refers to Eros – god of love and sex:

> You just need to trace the flower crown with your middle finger, its corrugated, endless circle. At first it may seem difficult, as it requires focus. You are not touching a stiff hoop, but wobbly edges of overlapping petals. Gradually you begin to experience the softness of touch, and the buzz of unnecessary thoughts fades away. Any careless and abrupt behaviors are ineffective, and because of the mallow they should be seen as brutal, as they cause destruction, or even irreversible damage. You cannot squeeze mallow petals between your fingers. Only subtle touch can lead to mallow initiation and experiencing the liberating power of touches. Ideally you should mimic insect legs, which step on flowers without leaving a trace[41].

Although mallow and vulva rhyme [in Polish – PZ], the subtlety of Brach-Czaina's language facilitates a montage of transparent, overlapping images rather than making them metonymically present or identifying them. Handling mallow/vulva is described impersonally on purpose in order to make identity the act ambiguous. This is how a detailed description produces vagueness, and similarity and difference spin together on the shared axis of cognition.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

[40]Brach-Czaina, *Powaga ścierek*, 128.

[41]Brach-Czaina, *Czarna Malwa*, w: *Błony umysłu*, 50.

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KEYWORDS

Anne Carson

sensuality

Jolanta Brach-Czaina

micrology

detail

Abstract:
The paper discusses the writing and philosophy of Jolanta Brach-Czaina, connecting it to micrology and maieutics. This poetological reflection considering the function of detail and work of similarities and differences in Brach-Czaina's most significant works (*Sofa, Szczeliny istnienia, Błony umysłu*) identifies two tendencies of her philosophy: searching for a textual "representation of meaning" and a sensual description of "particles of being". The paper discusses Brach-Czaina's ambivalent approach to metonymy and synecdoche, and characterizes her style, which combines a focus on inconspicuous detail and non-conclusiveness of paradoxes. Absorption of concrete and abstraction, creating an impression of precision, and at the same time vagueness are key features of Brach-Czaina's poetics. Her philosophy has much in common with Italo Calvin and Anne Carson, whose parallel way to seeking the essence of cognition and poetic language has led to the Socratic theory of Eros.

SOCRATES

figurativeness

metonymy

Eros

METAPHOR

Note on the Author:
Lucyna Marzec – assistant professor at AMU Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology, editor of "Czas Kultury", member of the scientific board of AMU Inderdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies and Life Writing Working Group. Her research interests involve Life Writing, feminist criticism, and 20th-century literary life.

(Ir)relevant details in a story*

*The article appeared on the online journal «Patria Letteratura. Rivista internazionale di lingua & letteratura», on September 10th, 2013. Retrieved at: http://www.patrialetteratura.com/i-dettagli-ininfluenti-in-un-racconto/

Domenico Talia

ORCID: 0000-0003-1910-9236

In the folds of a story, details are often met (when they don't just stay hidden) by readers who would deem them unessential. Apparently useless elements, but capable of enriching the narrative, by showing it truer, more complete, more meaningful, and therefore – more beautiful.

Those who read stories, or novels, tend to follow the plot to fully understand their development, trying to grasp their meaning and purpose. The reader lets themselves be guided by the words, and by their own imagination, to "rob" the author of their story, to experience it fully, in a way that is suited to them personally. Characters meet, kiss, fight, sometimes they hit each other, even to death. Places appear, their details gradually unfolding in the reader's minds, inside their eyes. Here's a road, here's a mountain, here's the seashore, here's a snowfall, a cheerful crowd, or a somber and lonely woman walking down the street or just sitting in a dirty train station, waiting.

As we devour the story, we often engage in attentive reading, focusing on all the details we consider important, because we don't want to skip any fundamental aspects of the main narrative path, built by the author to guide us readers, only apparently passive, through the unfurling of the plot. Sometimes as we read, be it by necessity or scant attention, we leave behind those small details that sometimes appear in the sentences as we decode them. Details tucked in between the lines as we scroll through them to reach the end of an action, of a character's thought, or just to get to the bottom of the page. And yet, these many tiny elements that the novelist has spread along the reader's path, and that the reader occasionally stumbles upon, are not always marginal or minor, even when it seems so. There must be a reason for them to be there, following Mosca Lamberti's famous quote "cosa fatta capo ha" ("what has been done, cannot be undone").

These are little pauses in a plot, minimal spaces in which it feels like the story itself is slowing down to better breathe, to halt – even just for a moment – the succession of events and turn to seemingly unimportant, negligible aspects, that are nevertheless always present in a novel, or a story, be it long or short.

They are micro-interruptions that divert the reader's mind, presenting them with little things, nuances, trifles. They force the reader to become distracted from the narrative thread and turn their attention to some "almost nothing" that sheds light on a minor event, perhaps useless, not decisive, but pleasant in its inessentiality.

A pen rolling and then stopping by the edge of a table, a drop of coffee falling to the floor and expanding, dark and round. A sudden breath of wind ruffling a child's hair. A woman's scent slightly felt by the young man walking next to her. A little old door, opening in front of the protagonist. The white dots on a blue tie, knotted in English style. These are things that do not alter the course of events, they are not powerful enough to reframe a story. Sometimes, these details remain in the background; some other times instead they get to us, and we can't forget about them anymore. Some gain a deeper signification in our mind, while others get lost among other words and seemingly disappear, to our eyes at least, like they were never assigned any object, any quality, any event to refer to, any meaning to convey.

In *Don Quixote*, Sancho Panza's "bottle in the saddlebag", that he keeps hanging from his donkey, won't change the events in which Miguel de Cervantes drags his heroic knight; same goes for the "many birds joyfully greeting the new day", that won't have any influence on our protagonists' adventures during that day. However, these details, just like the description of Sancho's "ruffled head" as he leans over his apparently dead master, remind us that life, even in books, is not just made up of epic deeds, but finds its expression in the little things, too.

Little things, like the "black buttons" of young Charles Bovary's "green cloth jacket" as he comes to class, or "the leafless branches of the apple trees" and the "dark violet spots" in the French countryside, or the "satin book bindings" that Emma touches gently. Flaubert throws all these things at us, and many more, but none of this can prevent Madame Bovary from dying by arsenic poisoning. The same fate awaits Matvej's "creaking shoes" as he goes to Stepan

Arkad'ic, and Kitty's "farsighted eyes", as she realizes her "downfall is complete" just by looking at Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky.

These are the details that we find in the classics; however, all of this does not only apply to them. Opening Elsa Morante's *Menzogna e sortilegio* ("House of liars") to a random page would be enough to notice how the author describes the "singing of the greenfinch" the protagonist listens to, the "foot in the slipper" that Eduardo swings and mother's purse with its "worn out cords".

As Roland Barthes would put it, we are facing little narrative "luxuries", apparently useless elements with an aesthetic purpose, but there's more to them than just that. They are "leftovers", apparently meaningful (or meaningless), that can play a role in the semantics of the narration. A meaning that lives by brief appearances, not always easily or directly grasped – but it still exists, more or less openly. Quoting Barthes' words on the topic: "… right when those details should directly denote reality, all they can do is *mean* it, without ever stating it".

These are all minor elements, unessential on a surface level, rather marginal to the great semantics of storytelling. A work of literature would thrive even without them, it would stand on its own, healthy and well-fed, like an impeccable gentleman wrapped in an elegant grey suit. Nevertheless, those details add color to the story: they embellish the suit, make the narration steeper or rounder, sweeter or more bitter, truer, or unclear. In a word: real, just like life.

Unfortunately for them, details are more on the side of describing than on that of narrating; they appear to be part of the frame more than part of the painting; but thanks to them, a literary description can narrate the world, the people in it, their little habits, their hidden fears, their feelings that intertwine to become meaningful plots. They are tiny wildflowers dotting the green fields of a story that would go on without them. Tiny flowers, but full of potential to surprise and upset with their colors and fragrances. Minimal elements that are alive, and that wouldn't be mad at being crossed out or deleted, by virtue of their intimate modesty; but the reader should know better than to just think of them as some sort of "syntactic sugar".

KEYWORDS

reading

theory of reading

DETAIL

pleasure in reading

details

beauty of a text

literature

DETAIL IN LITERATURE

Abstract:
The article is an expression of appreciation for a way of reading that notices the smallest elements in a text, and the richness of the world it portrays. By comparing the reader who follows the main line of action in a story, and therefore goes with its rapid flow, to the reader who instead frequently pauses to look at those details that have been hidden in the folds of a work, the author acknowledges the latter as the one who fully grasps and enjoys the literary sense: someone who sees the work of literature as a faithful representation of life.

Note on the Author:
Domenico Talia is Professor of Computer Engineering at the University of Calabria. Among other things, he studies the creation and operation of new generation knowledge models, the presence and specifics of information in the cloud, and modeling tools; his citation index on Google Scholar exceeds 9,000 items. He graduated in Physics; however, more in general, the expression "Renaissance man" fits him very much. On one hand, he indulges in creative literary production: *Il sole e il sangue* ("The sun and blood", a collection of short stories, 2014), *Il colore del cielo e altre ipotesi* ("The color of the sky and other hypotheses", a collection of short stories, 2017), *Brevi finestre* ("Brief windows", notes and excerpts, 2020). On the other hand, he also expresses himself critically on literary topics, as highlighted by the translated article: *I dettagli (in)influenti in un racconto*.

Cerberus and the others. Monsters from the *Divine Comedy*

Lorenzo Montemagno Ciseri

ORCID: 0000-0001-6267-1043

Introduction[1]

> I think, from all I can learn, that heaven has the better climate, but hell has the better company.
>
> Benjamin Wade[2] (MacArthur, 1885, p. 500)

The most vivid memory of Dante's *Comedy* I've retained for years, from the high school desks to the "toilsome papers" of university, is that of an immense masterpiece, like it had been always presented to me – although just in theory, just on paper: such masterpiece remained totally unexpressed for me in the practice of daily study. It almost looked like it was a dismembered body whose pieces were made up of celebrated quotes («ye were not made to live like unto brutes»; *Inferno*, XXVI, 119), repeated suggestions («and [I] fell, even as a dead body falls»; *Inferno*, V, 142), and famous names (Virgil, Beatrice, Paolo and Francesca), that I was patiently attempting to reassemble, like a paleontolo-

[1] Lorenzo Montemagno Ciseri wrote two books on Dante, in which he analyzes the monstruous creatures dwelling in the Dantean otherworlds: *Mostri: la storia e le storie* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2018) and *Cerbero e gli altri. I mostri nella Divina Commedia* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2021). The translated fragments come from the latter: the *Introduction* to the book (9-15) and a conspicuous part (from the Three Beasts to Medusa) of the third chapter on Hell, I mostri della Commedia: Inferno. The entirety of the chapter is made up of the following parts: *The Three Beasts*, *Charon*, *Minos*, *Cerberus*, *the Erinyes* (*Furies*) and *Medusa*, *the Minotaur*, *the Harpies*, *Gerion*, *the Soothsayers*, *the Devils of Malebranche*, *the Serpents and Cacus*, *the Giants*, *Lucifer* (47-61). Ciseri's literary production on Dante has never been previously translated in Polish. Additional cultural references in the footnotes belong to the translator. The quotes from the *Comedy* are excerpts from Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy – Inferno*, trans. by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

[2] The author is quoting A. MacArthur, *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction*, Boston: Press of Geo, 1885, 500.

gist would do with the fossilized bones of an ancient, long-extinct creature. A great distance kept me apart from Dante's work, and I blamed it on the listless, misguided school approach I was subjected to; the gap could only barely be filled with the memories of hidden laughter underlining the grossest and most licentious passages by the Poet. For instance, when Barbariccia, commanding his fellow devils to get moving, «made a trumpet of his rump» (*Inferno*, XXI, 139); or when Dante mentions Thais' «filthy nails» just before calling her a «harlot» (*Inferno*, XVIII, 131-133). There was no other way for a teenager – although perhaps good-willed – to lighten up those seemingly never-ending hours, crammed with boring explanations and tiresome exegesis of the text. A lot has changed (or rather – everything) since I discovered teratology some years later, while studying for my PhD in History of Science. Teratology is a fascinating branch of biology that deals with monstrosity and physical abnormalities in living beings. Far from being terrified, perhaps trained by my youthful readings of Edgar Allan Poe, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Stephen King and Clive Barker, my world began to populate with monsters. Wherever I turned, and wherever I laid eyes for research purposes, something or someone would speak to me about them. The same thing was happening to me that Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park (2000, p. 9) mention in the preface to *Wonders of the world. Monsters, prodigies, and strange facts from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment*[3], when they admit that others would read authors and their works of literature for the sake of poetry, philosophy, or natural history, seeking compelling arguments between the pages – whereas they only saw monsters, lots of them, and everywhere. Something slithering, something abominable had been waiting there to be awakened, just like the great ancient gods inhabiting the depths of planet Earth in my beloved Lovecraft's stories; and it had just begun to make its way up the stream of the unconscious.

All the monsters that passively sedimented in me during my school years, oblivious, and clouded by teenage hormones, were strongly coming back to light. Just like George Andrew Romero's zombies coming out of their graves, memories of monsters from a much younger age were resurfacing among the recesses of my memory. Strange monsters from the mysterious East I read about in the introduction to my geography book; François Rabelais and Luigi Pulci's giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel, that we mentioned during literature class; and, of course, Dante's monsters from the Comedy. What a shame – I thought, and I keep thinking today, as a professor – that my schoolteachers (which I still fondly recall with great regard!) never took advantage of monsters as the amazing magnifying glass that they truly are, making use of their attractive perspective in order to transmit knowledge according to ministerial programs. Of course, all is not lost. I had the rare opportunity to rehabilitate and give further meaning to those long hours of hard work on Dante's cantos. I could re-read the *Comedy*, mainly *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, through their thriving population of monsters who had been waiting for someone to approach them, allowing them to reveal their innate charisma. Less poetry, more monsters, in a way. No one should feel offended, least of all – dantists, by the fact that Dante's work is a universal classic, it belongs to mankind, and – while this is far from being an excuse – I believe analyzing it through the eyes of a historian of teratology is nothing questionable. A paradigmatic example of this can be found in *Beatrice's eyes. What did Dante's world really look like?*[4], by Romanian physicist and essayist Horia-Roman Patapievici (2006), who proposes a personal, original interpretation of the Dantean cosmos.

[3] See Lorraine Daston, Katharine Park, *Le meraviglie del mondo. Mostri, prodigi e fatti strani dal Medioevo all'Illuminismo* (Roma: Carocci editore, 2000), 9.

[4] Horia-Roman Patapievici, *Gli occhi di Beatrice. Com'era davvero il mondo di Dante?* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2006).

Here's the thing: if I were to think about Dante's world I wouldn't take into account the greatest systems of his poetic architecture, or at least not them alone. I would rather consider, much more trivially, his amazing, otherworldly journey and the many fantastic creatures he meets along the way. Dante being taken under the wing of his beloved and introduced to the very vision of God, surrounded by light, beauty, divine glory, and celestial harmony, is not the most compelling part of this journey. The *real* journey, the *real* adventure, what makes the audience flock to listen, takes place in the underworld, and partially – perhaps – on the Purgatory. Moreover, from my point of view, Hell in general – and Dante's Hell in particular – is also the teratomorphic and teratogenic place *par excellence*. Here everything is monstrified, everything is distorted by the glowing light of the sulphureous flames: the devils, the damned, the guardians of infernal circles; who used to be a monster in life becomes even worse in Hell, and who was not a monster is turned into one – body and soul. Descending into the depths of the earth (and – of the human heart) can only lead to one conclusion, so well summarized by Kurtz's unsettling last words at the end of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (2000, p. 246): «Horror! Horror!». Despite everything, Dante looks a bit like Conrad's protagonist Charles Marlow, who had a true passion for maps when he was little: he used to spend many hours just staring at them, and as he noticed a blank space, he would put his finger on it and declare: «When I'm big, I'll go there» (p. 17). Dante, the poet, tells us about Dante, the character, the protagonist of his *Comedy*, who is fearful and scared of embarking in such an incredible journey; he often falls unconscious, and can barely stand the disgusting smells, the excruciating cries, the sight of agony, and the endless torture. At the same time the poet appears lucid and aware as he moves his character and builds his own choreography around him. This is all very fascinating to us, probably because we have decided – just like Alice – to go all the way down the rabbit hole to see how deep it is. All things considered, Dante is not too different from Lewis Carrol's creation: just like a child, he is inclined to amazement and wonder, and follows a spirit guide in "another" realm so that the garden becomes the «forest dark» and the hole in the ground is the very gate of the underworld. In this respect, Umberto Saba's thoughts on Dante's double role (as an adult and a child at the same time) can be quite illuminating:

> The miracle – Dante – is brought into existence only when the child and the man can coexist in the most extreme ways and given the most special circumstances. Dante is a small child, permanently astonished at the extent of what such a great man is experiencing; they truly are "two in one". Look at this little Dante as he winces, cries, lights up with joy, trembles with rage and (simulated) fear, performs, exalts and humiliates himself with coquetry, he stands to the stars right in front of those extraordinary things that can get – through his mediation – to the Dante dressed in *lucco*, with stubble on his chin! And how he enjoys those rewards and punishments (the punishments, especially), those devils and angels, those «courteous janitors», those living and those dead – who are way more alive than the living themselves! What an unbelievable journey! Is there any greater feast for one to dream of? And against him, and one with him at the same time, we have Dante: Dante as a whole man, a husband, a father, a warrior, a partisan, an exile – unhappy, yet glorious; a mature Dante, with all the tremendous passions of his time, at war against everyone else and (but not as much) against himself; constantly proved wrong by facts, but even more so convinced to be right; always with his eyes popping out of his head, hallucinated with hatred and love.[5]

[5] Umberto Saba, *Tutte le prose* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2001), 13-14.

By reading Dante's *Inferno*, one discovers, explores, and appeases darkness, both personal and suprapersonal, the so-called "dark side", the nemesis of light itself: a concept that was first theorized by Carl Gustav Jung in the first decades of the XX century, with all due respect to the *Star Wars* saga by George Lucas. Darkness is in every person – it represents all that is negative about the individual and mankind – but it can be found everywhere else as well – it embodies all that is negative about existence: in this form, we usually call it "evil". This second connotation of darkness has an archetypical core, which is as ancient as mankind; same goes with monsters, and the multiple ideas of a monster that every society in every age tends to develop, which are intrinsically archetypical as well. And just like darkness wouldn't exist without light, the monster can only be conceptualized through a direct opposition to what is normal, in a play of reflections, images and realities that self-define each other. However, when we look for thrills, when we are faced with something scary so that we cover our eyes – but our fingers are still spread out enough to let us take a peep in between them, we will know by then that the pull of the dark side has won out. With all due respect once again, but this time to Jung (who probably wouldn't be too surprised), it is no coincidence that Darth Vader's evil figure continues to generate the most profit when it comes to *Star Wars* merch sales, or that the fans of Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* cult tv show end up siding with the despicable protagonist Walter Hartwell White – almost without noticing.

In the end, no matter how we look at it, the *Comedy* has been exerting an unmatched attraction on us, and on global culture, for exactly seven hundred years. Dante's masterpiece was welcomed with overnight fame and immediate dissemination, as evidenced by the numerous 14th- and 15th-century manuscripts that have come down to us: at that time, such a flourishing production was second only to the Bible's. Forgive my triviality, or rather – just a simple observation: on par with all the greatest world classics, the undiminished success of this text has spanned the centuries, albeit showing a significant asymmetry when it comes to the fortune its cantiche were progressively met with. We can't deny that – regardless of our own point of view on the matter, including what I just said about the alluring power of darkness – following a "temporal selection" of some kind, Dante's *Inferno* has been able to absorb the blow of the biggest cultural shifts, where *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* performed less convincingly. The first cantica is, to this day, the most famous part of the Comedy, the most studied at schools, and undoubtedly for us the most compelling, vibrant, and suggestive. All of this at the expense of *Purgatorio*, but even more so – of *Paradiso*, which has gradually, and regrettably, lost its original impact. Either because of some eminent literary historians' judgement, like for instance Francesco De Sanctis, who blamed the unattractiveness of *Paradiso* on its (supposedly) monotonous architecture; or because, and here I'm referring to the *Writings on medieval thought* by Umberto Eco[6] (who agreed with Thomas Stearns Eliot on *Paradiso* representing Alighieri's peak poetical expression), we have long lost those philosophical tools that are indeed required to appreciate the deepest meaning of the third cantica, the references to the metaphysics of light and the medieval aesthetic standards that make it a masterpiece. Meanwhile, the *Inferno* – and I will come back to this, in the conclusions to this volume – thanks to some of its peculiar characteristics, not necessarily and not just poetic and stylistic in nature, was able to cross seven hundred years «just like the one who was the lightest», as Giovanni Boccaccio puts it, that is – just like the poet Guido Cavalcanti, featured as a character in one tale from the *Decameron*, where he flees from

[6] Umberto Eco, *Scritti sul pensiero medievale* (Milan: Bompiani, 2012).

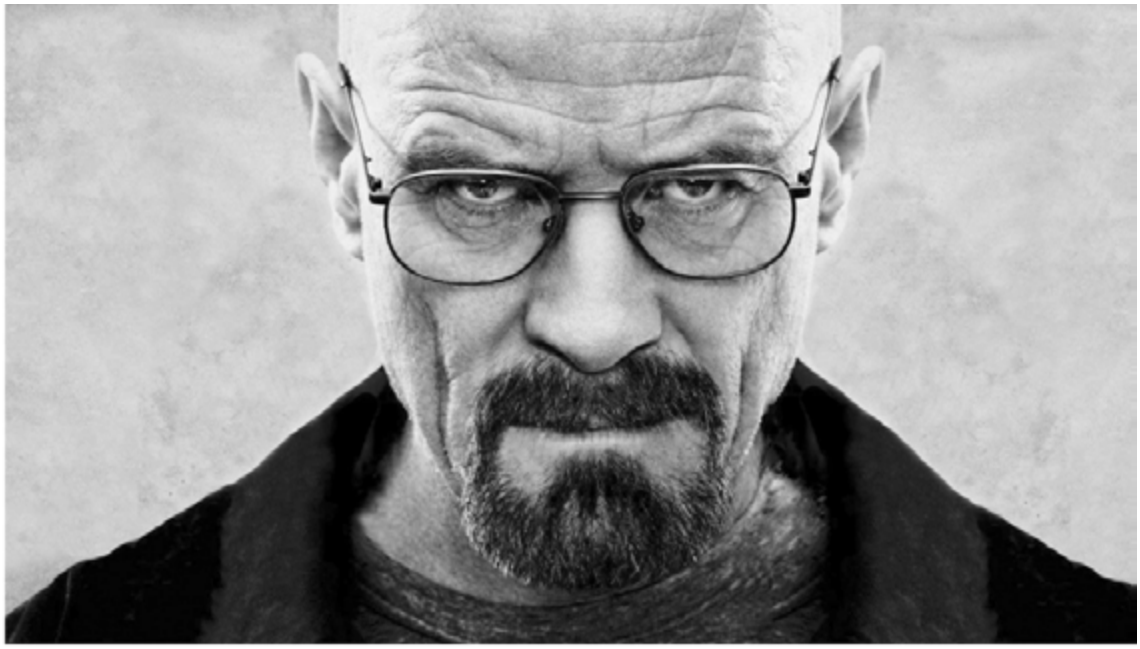
a group of harassers with a quick and nimble leap (VI, 9; Boccaccio, 1927, p. 24). Despite the topic being rather the opposite of light, Dante's *Inferno* sailed smoothly across the centuries and got to us, because of a set of key elements that are – and always clearly were – capable of attracting our attention. Here we can find a good deal of adventure, danger, unexpected encounters, and plot twists – in short: «brivido, terrore e raccapriccio» ("thrill, terror, and horror") as Cattivik[7] would maybe put it; there are generous amounts of *splatter*[8] and cannibalism, not to mention the rivers of blood, and the wide array of monsters. Anyway, otherworldly journeys have been around for quite some time before the *Comedy*; and therefore, prior to addressing its monstrous denizens, it is worth to summarize the previous episodes[9].

Picture 1: Cthulhu – the blasphemous entity from the series with the same name, created by Howard Phillips *Lovecraft*

[7] Cattivik is an Italian comic book character who first appeared in 1965 as the protagonist of a series created by Franco Bonvicini and illustrated by Luca Silvestri. Ciseri mentions Cattivik in the last chapter (that we haven't translated).

[8] A specific genre characterized by the conspicuous amount of gore and blood splattering everywhere.

[9] We are instead moving straight to chapter 3.



Picture 2: Walter White (played by Brian Cranston),
protagonist of the cult tv show *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013)

The monsters of the *Comedy*: *Inferno*

> Hey now, all you sinners / Put your lights on / Put your lights on / Hey now, all you lovers / Put your lights on / Put your lights on / [...]
>
> Cause there's a monster / Living under my bed / Whispering in my ear / And there's an angel / With a hand on my head / She says I've got nothing to fear.
>
> Santana *ft.* Everlast, *Put Your Lights On*[10]

As we approach the analysis of the monstrous figures inhabiting the *Comedy*, one of the first surprising things we notice is that, despite the massive presence of these creatures since the very first cantos of the poem, the word for "monster" ("mostro") doesn't show up in the text until the end of Purgatorio (XXXII 147), when the beast of the Apocalypse is described. Dante, virtuosic tightrope

[10]The song is available at the link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCBS5EtszYI.

walker of language, managed to describe such a conspicuous arrangement of monsters without ever making use of the simplest, most immediate, and most logical term there is to define and describe them – and we are still trying to wrap our head around this. Today we are used to refer to disadvantaged categories of people by different euphemistic periphrases along the lines of "differently something", so Dante would be celebrated as a champion of political correctness: his monsters would become the "differently normal" guardians of the circles of Hell, the "differently good" devils of Malebolge, the "differently ordinary" exotic or fantastic animals scattered here and there around the text. Jokes aside, Alighieri honors the symbolical-theological culture of the Middle Ages by distributing literary and mythological monsters along his path, without disdaining some peculiar quotes, or even just hints, to the anthropological-fantastic tradition of the fabulous East. The monsters of the Comedy are therefore placed in the wake of the classical tradition and their immediate success is due to them being, in a way, "famous monsters". This won't prevent Dante from adding his own twist, as we shall see later. But the fact remains that he moves effortlessly and freely even in the specific field of teratology, borrowing and perfectly arranging the right monsters in the right place. He puts them in charge of guarding the circles of Hell (what a perfect collocation for a monstrous being), he turns them into tormentors, puts some key passages of the text into their hands, interacts with them in a completely different and innovative fashion compared to his predecessors. He fears them as a human, but he receives no harm from any of them; he is not there to wrestle them into submission or kill them like the classical heroes did: on the contrary, he can often benefit from them, because on more than one occasion he can continue his journey thanks to them. Dante, in fact, has been granted an essential safe conduct: he can walk unhindered among the damned, because «it is so willed there, where is power to do/that which is willed»[11]. Virgil reminds him of it three times, in the presence of three different infernal monsters (Charon, Minos, and Pluto), with the immediate effect of calming their rage and silencing their legitimate concerns («and farther question not», *Inferno*, III, 95-96). Dante appears to be the third, or rather the first of the *Blues Brothers*: nothing and no one can stand in his way, because he's «on a mission from God», like the unforgettable brothers Jake and Elwood in John Landis' movie from 1980. But despite all of this, despite being guaranteed divine protection for the whole duration of his journey, Dante is masterful in sustaining narrative tension: whenever he meets a monster, that is – a potential threat, he is frightened and amazed, gets nervous and worried about a (possibly) impending danger, or is just sickened at the sight of these creatures' deformities and filth (which usually go hand in hand). This happens quite often, since Dante's *Inferno* is densely inhabited, run, and ruled by monsters, who form the backbone of its complex structural system. The monstruous denizens of Hell, who are akin to the damned in their diverse attitudes and transformations, appear to be (or just straight up are) based on a rich medieval bestiary, just like the entire *Comedy* can be read, and understood, as a medieval encyclopedia. We consider it "normal" for those figures who are born monstruous to be portrayed as such, in compliance with the literary tradition; on the contrary, it wouldn't be considered equally fair to those sinners whose damned souls dwell in a state of total degradation, even worse than that of those we'd regard as the lowest of all animals. This state can be explained referring to Dante's well-known idea of poetic justice, by which the sins committed during life are punished in a somewhat ironically appropriate manner. Once again, Dante is skilled in transforming what could have been a merely descriptive path (there's more examples of otherworldly journeys

[11]The quotes from the *Comedy* are excerpts from Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy – Inferno*, trans. by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, (London: MobileReference, 2016).

that are like this exactly) into a real adventure. This implies taking as much time as he needs, to find all the rhymes that he deems necessary, while describing to the smallest, goriest detail those scenes that still manage to spark our imagination. I will not go as far as to say that Inferno was always the most popular part of the *Comedy*, because it literally overflows with monsters – which in the rest of the work do not show up at all (except for some instances in the *Purgatorio*). No, I won't go that far. But the adventures and the thrill, together with the monsters and the horrifying punishments of the damned, are indeed key elements of a seven hundred-year-long success.

The three beasts

Let's get started with our teratological reading of the *Comedy*, not so much from a monster in the strict sense, as from an element of danger and adventure, something that foreshadows the fear of Hell as a theme: the three beasts encountered by the poet in the «forest dark»[12]. They also act as an introduction to the infernal guardians, who stand in Dante's way not just by physically blocking his path, but also with their monstrosity in full display. Nevertheless, in the classic tradition of medieval encyclopedias, bestiaries, and other peculiarities – which include, last but not least, Brunetto Latini's new[13] *Tresor* – strange folk, monsters, and wild animals often get mixed up, merging into one another, their boundaries blurred.

So Dante got lost in his famous «forest dark», and here he witnesses his path being blocked by these three beasts, a lion, a wolf, and a "lonza" (much likely a lynx). As we all know well, these figures are allegories, and their symbolical meaning is religious and moral in nature; however, we can also clearly see how they are connected to a much more concrete context of historical conflict with humans. A fight for survival, which was bound to be ritualized and dramatized, starting from a certain point in history, and giving shape to the equally brutal and gruesome Roman venationes[14]. These entertainments took place in the amphitheaters and consisted in the hunting and slaying of wild animals, including lions, wolves, and leopards. The games were often followed by the staging of a particularly cruel form of execution, the so-called *damnatio ad bestias*[15]: those who were sentenced to it were thrown to the beasts, who tore them to pieces and devoured them; among them were many Christian martyrs. It would be hard to think of the *Comedy* as devoid of any echoes of this, although mediated by doctrinal symbology – which is surely rooted in those medieval bestiaries that contained in fact information about all three beasts featured in the first Canto and accompanied the often quite creative details about their nature with a moralized commentary.

[12]Here the author refers his reader to the following three pictures:
PICTURE 1 – A fresco by Joseph Anton Koch, *Dante e le fiere* ("Dante and the beasts", 1825-26, Rome, Casino Giustiniani Massimo al Laterano);
PICTURE 2 – Lombard miniature with *Dante e le fiere* ("Dante and the beasts", first half of the XV century; Imola, Biblioteca Comunale, ms. 76 [ex 32], f.2v);
PICTURE 3 - Lombard miniature with *Dante e le fiere* ("Dante and the beasts", first half of the XV century; Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ms. It. 2017, f.10v).
They all show the three animals that appeared to Dante on his way to Hell.

[13]"New" from Dante's perspective. Brunetto Latini (1220-1294) was an Italian writer and politic, author of an *Encyclopedia* with a zoological chapter.

[14]*Venatio* (pl. *venationes*) means "hunting" in Latin. This type of "game" was popular among the Romans even before gladiator fights.

[15]"Sentencing to the beasts".

Anyway. As mentioned above, a "lonza" with a speckled coat shows up in front of Dante, at the very beginning of his journey. Many hypotheses were made about the zoological classification of this mysterious (for us) animal (a leopard, a panther…) but the beast can be probably identified with a lynx. There are several hints in support of this, starting from Latini's mention of the creature in the one part of the *Tresor* that deals with animals, where he says that the "lupo cerviere", or lynx, is characterized by a black-spotted fur, like a "lonza". As a matter of fact, Brunetto provides the same Latin etymology, *lynx*, for the names of these two beasts, drawing from the *Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville – a cornerstone of medieval encyclopedic culture, based in turn on Plinius the Elder's *Natural History* – when it comes to the physical description of the animal. There's also a possibility that Dante might have seen this beast with his own two eyes: a Florentine document dated 1285 states that an animal called "leuncia" was being kept in a cage and exposed to the public at the Palace of the Podestà, in Florence. Moreover, Dante's choice of this beast might have been influenced by his knowledge of Virgil's passage in the *Aeneid* where he speaks of a "speckled lynx skin" (*Aeneid*, I, 323; Virgil, 2012, p. 21). Finally, given the rich and diverse literary evidence of a creature called "lonza", and considering the quite approximate zoological systematics of the time, there's a chance that Dante wasn't necessarily referring to a particular species of carnivorous mammals; he was maybe just using "lonza" in the more generic sense of "wild animal", perhaps the result of an inter-species mating. Be that as it may, the symbolical meaning that early commentators attribute to Dante's "lonza" is that of lust, that keeps him from reaching the top of the hill[16] and causes him to slip back into his sinful doubts. The lion, with his «ravenous hunger» (*Inferno*, I, 45), stands for pride, while the gaunt she-wolf (*Inferno*, I, 49) stands for greed, which is not just about money, but also includes splendor and wealth in the worldly life.

Anyway, Dante's shock and dismay at the sight of the three beasts, with which we resonate empathically, are set against the first of many plot twists and narrative solutions that will resolve the most critical moments of the whole poem. Here, Virgil comes into the picture: Dante's guide, his mentor, sort of a *deus ex machina* who's not only going to accompany him for the first part of his otherworldly journey, but will also constantly pull him out of trouble and rescue him from the roughest situations, just like this one.

Charon

As Dante and Virgil continue along the path, entering Hell and approaching the «dismal shore of Acheron[17]», the first of the infernal rivers, we take a little step back to the epic of Gilgamesh, which represents one of the most ancient literary archetypes we know of that deals with otherworldly voyages. The protagonist, distraught over the death of his brotherly friend Enkidu, resolves to face a long and difficult journey (both physical and initiatory) that takes him to the so-called "islands of the blessed", in front of a council of gods, to ask his ancestor Utnapishtim about his achieved immortality (the name itself means "the one who found eternal life"). To reach him, however, he must overcome several obstacles, eventually stopping by the shores of

[16]The one the Poet is attempting to climb when he encounters the beasts.

[17]The "river or sadness" or – according to the etymology – the "river of lament".

a deadly sea that surrounds Utnapishtim's home and that no one except Shamash (the Sun) was ever able to traverse. The only one who can sail across this perilous sea, and help Gilgamesh get to the other side, is the ferryman Urshanabi. This passage is some thousand years older than the *Comedy*, and yet – doesn't it ring a bell? Nobody thinks, of course, that Dante was aware of the existence of the epic of Gilgamesh and was quoting it: we know it is not so, but we also know that whoever wanted to tell a good story revolving around travelling and adventure had to be familiar with the figure of the ferryman (and the one of the guide) as it was part of their cultural background and narrative devices. If the setting and the story allow for it, the ferryman (who is responsible of the outcome of the journey, that is to say – of the unfolding of the story itself) becomes even more interesting when his features are monstrified. This is what happened, for instance, to another famous ferryman from a completely different context: St. Christopher, who before the conversion was usually described as a quite feral giant; in one medieval iconographic trend – particularly fortunate among the Byzantines – he was even portrayed as dog-headed[18].

In Charon's case, his teratological metamorphosis, his transformation into a monster, happened mainly in the Etruscan world, where he ended up becoming a personification of death itself. Charun, Charon's Etruscan counterpart, who often appears on wall paintings inside the Etruscan tombs, is always characterized by monstrous features: wings, a crooked nose, pointed ears, and snakes wrapped around his arms. When it comes to the motifs of Charon's description, Dante draws them from Virgil; however, he must have been influenced, at least a little, by all these monstrous visions that got to him through the Latin works of literature dealing with underworld descents, as we have already seen.

In the last part of the III Canto of the *Comedy*, Dante and Virgil come across a huge crowd of souls, gathered by the river Acheron, waiting to get into the infernal ferryman Charon's boat. He is both described as a white-haired old man, who could perhaps convey an idea of frailty at first sight, and as a fiery-eyed demon, ill-tempered, strict, and punishing[19]:

> And lo! towards us coming in a boat
> An old man, hoary with the hair of eld,
> Crying: "Woe unto you, ye souls depraved!"
>
> (...)
>
> Thereat were quieted the fleecy cheeks
> Of him the ferryman of the livid fen,
> Who round about his eyes had wheels of flame.
>
> (...)

[18]Here the author refers the reader to a picture:
PICTURE 6 – *Cristoforo cinocefalo* (XVII century, Athens, Byzantine and Christian Muzeum).

[19]Here the author refers the reader to two pictures:
PICTURE 4 – A miniature of Charon (XIV century, Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. Holkham, misc. 48, 5)
PICTURE 5 – Michelangelo Buonarroti, Giudizio universale, detail of Charon (1535-41, Rome, Sistine Chapel).

Charon the demon, with the eyes of glede,
Beckoning to them, collects them all together,
Beats with his oar whoever lags behind.

Dante surrounds the infernal ferryman with dramatic details, and the whole episode strikes and grabs the reader's senses, through a constant stimulus of sounds, from the moans of the damned and Charon's cries of anger to his oar beating the souls' naked bodies. Visual contrasts are equally important, and they are realized in the mixture of colors that the Poet splashes on his monstruous canvas. Charon's white hair contrasts with the red embers of his eyes and the «wheels of flame» around them; this is all set on a dark, livid, funereal background, bluish to wine red, a hue that we associate with swollen soreness. Dante himself fall victim to a visible state of anxiety that borders on poetic tachycardia[20], and Virgil's comforting words are of very little help («it is so willed there where is power to do/that which is willed») as he silences Charon's reproaches about not wanting a living soul to get on board (which is something he probably had to allow more than once in the past, e.g., with the goddess Persephone, with Aeneas and Theseus, Pirithous and Heracles, Ulysses, Orpheus, and the Cumaean Sibyl[21]). Dante won't allow his readers to release tension; in fact, he adds to the horror of Charon's vision, of the tormented souls, of the dark infernal river, by introducing a plot twist in conclusion of the Canto: an earthquake so severe that it pushes his terror further than he would withstand, and as a crimson lightning flashes before him (one more splash of color!) he faints, he passes out. By virtue of this clever narrative trick, he hands over the whole scene to us in a crystallized, suspended form, retaining its colors and its soundscape, as he moves forward – to the next adventure, to more monsters.

Minos

This legendary and powerful king of Crete, who was described in different myths sometimes as fair and just, sometimes as cruel, had been assigned his role of infernal judge (often with his brother Rhadamanthus) since the time of Homer (*Odyssey*, XI, 568-570), and similarly in the *Aeneid* (VI, 431-3) and Statius' *Thebaid* (VIII, 40); therefore, his presence in the *Comedy* is not surprising. He is placed by Dante by the entrance to the actual Hell, that is – at the beginning of the second circle, where he sends the damned to their final destination, their eternal place of atonement. A brief but impactful apparition for this figure who fulfills his task in such a peculiar way, just as peculiar as the description that Dante offers of him:

There standeth Minos horribly, and snarls;
Examines the transgressions at the entrance;
Judges, and sends according as he girds him.

[20]Medical term for a fast heart rate.
[21]Priestess of Apollo who lived in Cuma (Campania, Italy).

I say, that when the spirit evil-born
Cometh before him, wholly it confesses;
And this discriminator of transgressions

Seeth what place in Hell is meet for it;
Girds himself with his tail as many times
As grades he wishes it should be thrust down.

However, none of the classical sources, starting with Virgil, provides a physical description of the infernal judge, let alone with such specific features. Here, Minos' appearance transcends the human and fades into the beast, into the horrifying, snarling creature that «girds himself with his tail». A monstrous hybrid who won't even try to conceal his own restless and angry disposition, a supreme judge thrusting lost souls into the abyss with hits of tail. A demon characterized with bombastic eloquence and vibrant animal physicality, whose slimy, curvy appendage wraps itself around his body, a paradoxical reminder of the tempting serpent of Eden who deceived Adam and Eve, coiled around the tree of knowledge in the biblical Genesis. But Dante's «journey fate-ordained» (*Inferno*, V, 22) can't be interrupted by anyone, not even by him, as Virgil insists that «it is so willed there where is power to do/that which is willed» (*Inferno*, V, 23-24). Thus, Minos' powerful words are useless, and he is forced to let Dante and his companion continue with their journey.

Cerberus

If we were to take attendance in a class composed of infernal monsters, as if the underworld were a school, there is one who would always be there to answer; one in particular who never missed class, not to brag!, and tested out of the "top tier representative guardian of the realm of the dead" unit with full marks. We are talking about Cerberus[22], the mythical three-headed dog with a serpent tail, covered with restless venomous snakes that hiss at his every movement, darting their horrid tongues. In Greek mythology he was chained by the gates of Hell and tasked with blocking the road to the living who ever attempted to enter (or to the dead who ever attempted to leave). There's no work of literature dealing with the otherworld that doesn't count him in among the denizens of Hell. He is mentioned in some of the founding works of our (and medieval) culture: the *Iliad* (VIII, 368), the *Odyssey* (XI, 623), Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (XI, III, 33), Hesiod's *Theogony* (311), Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (IV, 450-451), Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*[23] (II, 5, 126). We can state, without fear of contradiction, that Cerberus (together with Charon) is an *essential* monster, he has to be there, otherwise – would

[22]Here the author refers the reader to two pictures:
PICTURE 7 – Detail of a miniature showing Dante, Virgil, and Cerberus (XV century, ms. Urb. Lat. 365, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, F. 13r);
PICTURE 8 – Cerberus, illustration to the *Comedy*, by William Blake (*Hell* 6, 1824-27, London, Tate. Photo©Tate Images).

[23]A compendium of Greek myths and legends. The author was long believed to be Apollodorus of Athens, however – as this is a much likely false attribution – he is usually referred to as Pseudo-Apollodorus.

that even be Hell? Cerberus is a landmark of Hades and Avernus[24], he is what the Colosseum is to Rome, or the Eiffel tower to Paris: you get the idea. One can't venture in the underworld without meeting him, seeing him, or even just sensing his terrifying presence. Cerberus is also characterized by a peculiar and fitting genealogy: he is the son of Typhon and Echidna[25], brother of Ortro, Geryon's monstruous dog, and of the Lernaean Hydra, the monster with the many serpent heads, fought and slayed by Heracles. A whole family of monsters where no one's left out, a horrifying jumble, rarely met in classical mythology, that would quickly shame the Addams, the Munsters, and even the Sawyers, protagonists of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, where the cannibalistic spree killer Leatherface murders people with a chainsaw while wearing a mask made from his victim's skin. A very respectable curriculum, that of Cerberus, that qualifies him for the crucial task he must carry out in such a place of suffering and agony.

In the *Aeneid*, where Cerberus is described with serpents wrapped around his neck, his attempt to oppose Aeneas descent is rendered useless by the Cumaean Sibyl's intervention: she throws at him some flat bread[26] filled with honey and soporific herbs, which appeases and subdues him immediately. In the *Comedy*, Dante entrusts him with the task of guarding the third circle of Hell, in the VI Canto, where he becomes an instrument of torture and punishment for the damned, that he relentlessly «flays and quarters» with the powerful swipes of his claws. Cerberus, who represented both gluttony and civil strife in the Middle Ages, is not accidentally placed among the greedy, and is narratively approached in a way that alternates between the *splatter movie* style – to put it in modern language – and the grotesque:

> Cerberus, monster cruel and uncouth,
> With his three gullets like a dog is barking
> Over the people that are there submerged.
>
> Red eyes he has, and unctuous beard and black,
> And belly large, and armed with claws his hands;
> He rends the spirits, flays, and quarters them.
>
> (...)
>
> When Cerberus perceived us, the great worm!
> His mouths he opened, and displayed his tusks;
> Not a limb had he that was motionless.
>
> (...)

[24]In the original we have "Cerbero sta all'Ade, all'Averno", where *Averno* is the Latin name of the lake believe to be the entrance to the underworld, while *Ade* (Hades) is the Greek word for the underworld itself.

[25]Both were human-snake hybrids.

[26]In Italian "focaccia". According to historians, this type of stuffed bread was known to the Etruscans long before the founding of Rome.

Such as that dog is, who by barking craves,
And quiet grows soon as his food he gnaws,
For to devour it he but thinks and struggles,

The like became those muzzles filth-begrimed
Of Cerberus the demon, who so thunders
Over the souls that they would fain be deaf.

Let's not forget that Cerberus is one and "triune", with his three heads and three gullets, says Dante, with which he swallows the damned, exactly like Lucifer, so that he, too, is configured as just one more anti-Trinity. Monster «cruel and uncouth», in Italian: «fiera crudele e diversa» – a beast cruel and "different". Here, that of cruelty is a humanizing aspect, as it implies intentionality (cruelty for the sake of itself is not a thing in nature, where there is only place for innate behaviors and self-preservation instincts), whereas diversity should be interpreted via its etymological meaning of "otherness", a deviation from any standards of "normalcy".

As he describes Cerberus, Dante alternates between beastly and human traits, just like he had done previously with Minos (*Inferno*, V, 4): «There standeth Minos horribly, and snarls». A horrifying creature, whose snarling is a purely animal trait, similar to the tail that he girds himself with, to indicate which circle of Hell the sinner is to be sent to. Likewise, as if he were trying to boost the monstrosity of the hound of the underworld, the Poet hybridizes him, associating by contrast unnatural aspects to more familiar ones, which however come off as entirely uncanny in that specific context. «Foully anthropomorphic details», as Giorgio Inglese puts it in his comment to the *Comedy* (Dante Alighieri, 2007-17, vol. I, p. III, see notes): Cerberus' eyes, beard, belly, and hands, are juxtaposed to typically canine elements, like his barking and fangs, which contribute to both his perceived animalesque identity and his definitive monstrification. And his behavior becomes more fitting for a pet, or a guard dog, as he is ready to pounce on the two poets but is immediately pacified by Virgil, who throws a handful of earth into his throats (similarly to what happens in the *Aeneid*) as if they were meatballs. After all, we are now in the circle of gluttony, and Sigmund Freud would comment on the episode by arguing that this act appeases the monster, as if it were a child, by satisfying its oral stage.

And here is one more highlight of Dante's Cerberus: he goes from the mere guardian of Tartarus he used to be in Greek mythology, to an actual tool of punishment for the damned, which he plagues with his relentless, earsplitting barking (making them wish they were deaf) as he rends, flays and quarters them nonstop. The horrible monster, the «great worm», as Dante calls him, shudders like a rabid dog, in a rage so frantic he can't keep a single muscle still. Such uncontrolled animality is also described in the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*[27] (II, 15; Milan, 1977, p. III), which gives pride of place to Cerberus:

[27]In Italian: *Libro delle mirabili difformità*, edited by Carlo Bologna (Milan: Bompiani,1977). The book is made up of three parts, each describing different types of monsters, and was written in the VIII century in the Anglo-Saxon area, maybe by Aldhelm from Malmesbury.

> Cerberus [...] is described as three-headed: according to poets and philosophers, he guarded the gates of Hell to scare mortals off with his threefold barking. But they also recount with vile falsehood that the famous Alcides [Heracles28] carried him away in chains, all trembling, from the realm of Orcus, infernal sovereign, and when he was already provoked to a towering rage, he exasperated him with maddening howls.

The Heracles mention, as we saw in chapter I, refers to his twelfth and last labor, the most grueling of them all, which consisted of capturing Cerberus and taking him from the underworld to the land of the living, to obey king Eurystheus' orders. Dante quotes this one episode (*Inferno*, IX 98-99) as he mentions the still visible marks left by Heracles' chain on the monster's neck, once again making use of a very specific terminology, composed by words such as «chin» and «gullet», which recall Cerberus' double nature – human and feral.

Erinyes (Furies) and Medusa

High above the fortified walls of the infernal city of Dis there hover the Erinyes29, also referred to as Eumenides in the Greek tradition; according to Hesiod (*Theogony*, 183-187), they were born of Uranus' blood as it fell on Gaia (the earth) and impregnated her, after the god was emasculated by his own son, Cronus. In Roman mythology, these violent creatures were identified with the Furies and represented as snake-haired, monstrous flying spirits, holding whips or torches. They dwelt in the darkness of the underworld, and this is how Dante must have met them: needless to say – starting with the *Aeneid*, (VI, 571; VII, 324), but even more in the Ovidian *Metamorphoses* (IV, 451-454) and in Statius' *Thebaid* (XI, 65). Since the ancient times, the Erinyes are considered revengers of crimes and persecutors of criminals: they are tasked with punishing those misdeeds that human justice left unpunished, regarding themselves as the ideal protectors of social order – a very interesting curriculum to show off when aspiring to the position of soul-keeper in the otherworld. The source literature mentions mostly three of them, the ones that Dante too meets in the *Comedy*: Tisiphone, Megaera and Alecto, who jump to their feet as soon as they notice the two poets approaching, in a far from reassuring way, manifesting their rage at the presence of those strangers:

> (...) Mine eye had altogether drawn me
> Tow'rds the high tower with the red-flaming summit,
>
> Where in a moment saw I swift uprisen
> The three infernal Furies stained with blood,
> Who had the limbs of women and their mien,

[28]In Roman mythology, Alcides is one of Jupiter's sons, identified with Heracles.

[29]Here the author refers the reader to two pictures:
PICTURE 9 – Miniature in the style of the school of northern Italy with the Erinyes (1456, Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, ms .Plut. 40.I. F. 26r);
PICTURE 10 – Miniature with the Erinyes (half of XV century, London, British Library, ms. Yates Thompson 36, F. 16r).

> And with the greenest hydras were begirt;
> Small serpents and cerastes were their tresses,
> Wherewith their horrid temples were entwined.

These are hybrid monsters, characterized by feminine bodies and attitudes, but wrapped in water serpents – the "hydras" mentioned by Virgil in the Aeneid (VII, 447); their hair is intertwined with small snakes and cerastes, the so-called "horned vipers" (*Cerastes cerastes*, according to the nomenclature introduced in 1758 by Swedish zoologist and taxonomist Carl Linnaeus). In particular, the cerastes (that Dante draws from Statius) were very well known since the ancient times (they are mentioned by Plinius, Solinus and Lucan) and in the medieval bestiaries for their strong venom, compared to the one of the mythical and monstruous Basilisk. In fact, *Cerastes* is a genus of dangerous snakes, all quite feared by man. Dante's aim as he specifies their typology is to reinforce the idea of lethal perniciousness that comes with it, but also their repulsive appearance, characterized by two supraorbital "horns" that give the snake a rather… demonic look. The previously mentioned *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus* (III, 15), highlights the fact that the horns are not at all as dangerous as the jaws and tongue, which are terrifying and deadly. And we can well believe it.

Getting back to the *Comedy*, Dante tells us that Virgil recognizes the Erinyes at once, and lists their identities accurately:

> [And he] Said unto me: "Behold the fierce Erinnys.
>
> This is Megaera, on the left-hand side;
> She who is weeping on the right, Alecto;
> Tisiphone is between".

The issue of the symbology linked to the three Erinyes fueled the discussion for hundreds of years, starting from the fourteenth century commentators – who were indeed closer to Dante's culture, but this doesn't always make them more capable of grasping its actual meaning, often much simpler than it seems – to the modern ones, sometimes misled right by the unnecessarily elaborate comments of the formers. I personally agree with those who apply the methodological principle of Occam's razor – that is, we have no need to overcomplicate stuff and we should stick to the simplest solution, all factors being equal – so we can assume that the Erinyes are none other than the monstrous revengers and torturers from the classic tradition. This is more than enough as an infernal vision of the wicked and bloodthirsty keepers of the sinful denizens of Dis. And they cry, beat themselves with their palms, rend their breast with their fingernails, and call out loudly for one more terrifying figure to come forth: it's Medusa the Gorgon, daughter of Forco and Ceto. She was changed into a monster by Athena because she had the audacity to lie with Poseidon in one of the goddess' temples (or, according to an alternative version of the story, because she attempted to challenge her beauty). As a monster, she had the power to turn to stone anyone who dared to look into her eyes. According to the myth told among the others by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* (IV, 657 and following), she was decapitated by Perseus, but her head didn't lose its capacity to petrify

animals and humans, so that Athena placed it on her shield. The Erinyes, summoning Medusa to their aid, are basically threatening Dante with the ultimate interruption of his path to the lowest infernal circles by turning him to stone:

> Each one her breast was rending with her nails;
> They beat them with their palms, and cried so loud,
> That I for dread pressed close unto the Poet.
>
> "Medusa come, so we to stone will change him!"
> All shouted looking down; "in evil hour
> Avenged we not on Theseus his assault!"

Here the Erinyes, in the words ascribed to them by Dante, refer to the hero Theseus' myth, who descended to the realm of the dead to kidnap Persephone, sovereign of the underworld; he was imprisoned by the powers of darkness, and eventually freed by Heracles. In the classic tradition, Medusa was in good company of her two sisters, Euryale and Stheno, with whom she lived not far from the garden of the Hesperides and the realm of the dead. They were described as dreadful, snake-headed female creatures, with huge boar tusks, bronze hands, and golden wings they could fly with. They had sparkling eyes and their look, as previously suggested, was penetrating and petrifying at the same time, so that when Perseus slices off Medusa's head – Medusa was the only mortal among the Gorgons, as it is reported in some sources like the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus* (I, 38) – her eyes kept moving as if she were still alive. When it comes to the oldest commentors' different opinions about her presence in the *Comedy*, some of them (like Jacopo della Lana) sees her as the symbol of heresy, which transforms man into stone as soon as he turns away from the Scriptures, due to being seduced by the monster's sensuality. On the other hand, there are those – like Pietro di Dante, one of the Poet's sons – who propose an alternative vision of Medusa according to which she would be an allegory of terror. Be it as it may, from our point of view the monster is an instrument of wonder, a narrative device characterized with astonishing emotional impact that Dante – by virtue of his habitual skills – employs for us to fear for his fate, with the impending of such horror. Needless to say that his guide and master Virgil will once again save him from such a catastrophic hypothesis of failure: with swift and clever move, he makes him turn around and cover his eyes, overlapping his hands on Dante's in an extreme act of protection.

Translation: Chiara Taraborrelli

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KEYWORDS

teratology

DANTE

monsters in literature

Abstract:
The text shows how to read Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* through teratological analysis and attention to details. Pondering the monstrosities described in the work of the eminent Italian is a way to return the *Comedy* to our contemporary times and sensibility. The reader notices the importance of detail in the process of getting to know and understanding the text, which is an excellent introduction to the poem itself, and it also teaches a specific reading technique – focused on the analysis of the literary imponderables.

Divine Comedy

DETAIL IN LITERATURE

reading details

Note on the Author:
Lorenzo Montemagno Ciseri – graduate of Natural Sciences, Ph.D in History of Science, professor at the Universities of Florence and Siena and at the Giorgio Vasari Institute in Florence. His research interests are many, and they are all evident in his publications in the fields of teratology, history of science, biology, evolutionism, as well as in his teratologically oriented literary and comics studies. He is active on YouTube, where he contributes to science popularization by posting video lectures, for instance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22xnZHKKvX4

"Earth's Powder / in the Basilica of the Cosmos:"

Ecocatastrophe and its scale in Marcin Ostrychacz's *Cielenie lodowca* [*Iceberg calving*]

Dawid Borucki

ORCID: 0000-0002-9707-1272

See the scale

Examining the presence of catastrophic motifs in ecocritical texts, Lawrence Buell stated that, starting with George Perkins Marsh's 1864 book *Man and Nature*; *or*, *Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action*, five characteristic features recur in all texts which talk about the impending major environmental crisis.[1]

[1] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination. Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1995), 301–306. Marsh's work is considered the first English-language work to anticipate and warn against the long-term consequences of human impact on ecosystems.

The first motif is the figure of the network, essentially a system of inalienable dependencies between people and the environment. It is always presented as complex, multidimensional, and thus overwhelming. The second motif is biotic egalitarianism. It is a view based, among other things, on the recognition of the fact that since one of the ways to counter the impending catastrophe is to protect biodiversity, the death of non-human beings cannot be considered less significant than the death of human beings. Biotic egalitarianism thus challenges Peter Singer's human chauvinism.[2] The third and fourth motifs concern the scale: magnification, discovering the complexity and significance of seemingly insignificant events, and conflation, extending the connection between what is close and present and the impending catastrophe. Last but not least, Buell writes that the fifth motif is "the sense of imminent environmental peril" that permeates or binds all the other motifs; it is a deep conviction that a global catastrophe, a borderline moment for human civilization against which one should be constantly warned, is imminent.

These five motifs, although undoubtedly significant, require some further explanation and contextualization provided by contemporary ecocriticism. For example, the perception of the climate crisis as an imminent borderline event allowed, among other things, to perceive it in the context of the biblical Apocalypse. Such a vision dominates in the media, but the metaphor of the climate Apocalypse also frequently appears in scientific texts, pop culture, and literature.[3] This vision is so prominent in Western culture that Buell considered it to be the most powerful conceptual tool of ecocritical writing.[4]

Other scholars, however, point to the possible dangers of repeated references to Judeo-Christian motifs. For example, Julia Fiedorczuk points out that the conceptual categories connoted by the Apocalypse and the climate catastrophe differ. While the Judeo-Christian Armageddon marks the ultimate end of human domination – it is the inevitable result of divine intervention and a one-off event, a point in time, something that takes place in the future – the climate crisis should instead be read as the end of certain ways of inhabiting the planet and (importantly) a process that is already taking place; its intensity may vary, as it is determined by human influence.[5] The American literary scholar Lynn Keller concurs. Drawing on Frederick Buell, Keller writes about the destabilization of one of the guiding features of environmentally engaged writing:

> [...] the prominent function of environmental apocalyptic writing to date – as a warning that conveys to readers the gravity of current circumstances so as to avoid disaster – is being destabilized as human impact on the planet increases and the sense of ongoing crisis intensifies.[6]

[2] Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1975), 59-63.

[3] The term "apokalipsa klimatyczna" [Climate Apocalypse] generates 60,000 Google hits.

[4] Lynn Keller, *Recomposing ecopoetics. North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 101–102.

[5] Julia Fiedorczuk, "Przeciw apokalipsie" [Against Apocalypse], *Przekrój*, 11 August 2021, https://przekroj.pl/artykuly/felietony/przeciw-apokalipsie-julia-fiedorczuk.

[6] Keller, 98.

Indeed, the attempts to formulate literary warnings against the impending catastrophe turn out to be more and more ineffective, because the catastrophe itself is nowadays part and parcel of everyday life – it is not an event that may still be avoided. From this perspective, Buell's fifth and final motif may be questioned. Nowadays, instead of "waiting for" we are "dwelling in crisis,"[7] the complexity and functioning of which is extended on a planetary scale, and we need new creative tools to process it. Consequently, some authors believe that imagining an ecological catastrophe using apocalyptic scenarios is nothing short of a trap or an obstacle, making it more difficult to respond to environmental problems.

As long as the ecological catastrophe was treated as a future event, something that lies beyond the horizon (or around the corner), it could be freely and creatively processed and envisioned as something specific and finite, for example, the Apocalypse. Nowadays, as we are dwelling in crisis (which is clearly confirmed, among others, by the sixth IPCC Assessment Report[8]), it is extremely difficult to conceptualize, order, and make sense of it, especially in the face of processes that are significant even on a geologic time scale. Indeed, Aleksandra Ubertowska argues that:

> [...] global warming and its outcome in the form of the environmental catastrophe are beyond our comprehension in every respect – their scope, duration and potential results transcend the time and space of human life; it is impossible to understand global warming by means of simple analogies or comparisons.[9]

Timothy Clark agrees. He pointed out that there are simply no ways to effectively process the scale of the ongoing crisis.[10] However, Keller argues that we need to face the problem of the scale regardless of the limits of human agency and the tools which we have at our disposal. The problem of the scale lies at the heart of all kinds of initiatives that try to react to the anthropogenic degradation of the terrestrial biosphere.[11] Joanna Piechura also argues that while the role of imagination may raise some doubts, it remains the most basic instrument for conceptualizing the incredible dimensions of the imminent crisis.[12] Both authors encourage poets to look for a new language or new imaginative categories that would, firstly, capture the scale of the ongoing processes, and secondly, counter the awareness of being incorporated into them.

[7] Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life. Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[8] See: "The Sixth IPCC Assessment Report", February and April 2022, https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/. The IPCC Assessment Report is the largest climate report in the world. Over 700 researchers have analyzed 14,000 scientific papers over the course of eight years.

[9] Aleksandra Ubertowska, "Krajobraz po katastrofie: natura, historia, reprezentacja" [Landscape after the catastrophe: nature, history, representation], in: *Poetyki ekocydu. Historia, natura, konflikt* [Poetics of ecocide. history, nature, conflict], ed. Aleksandra Ubertowska, Dobrosława Korczyńska-Partyka, Ewa Kuliś (Warsaw, Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2019), 29–30.

[10] Patryk Szaj, "The time is out of joint. Anthropocene and Ecocentric Reading of Literary Texts". *Forum of Poetics* 24 (2021): 12-13.

[11] Keller, 31–34.

[12] Joanna Piechura, "Zaangażować wyobraźnię" [Use your imagination], *Dwutygodnik*, December 2021, https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/9874-zaangazowac-wyobraznie.html.

It seems that Marcin Ostrychacz makes such an attempt in his collection *Cielenie lodowca* [Iceberg calving]. The poems paint an extremely diverse and complex picture of events taking place on a planet in crisis. It should be emphasized that the catastrophe – intricate and beyond human comprehension as it may be – is a kind of underpinning of everyday life and something that has already affected our lives, and not a potential threat. Its traces may be found in, for example, the post-pastoral vistas of Zakopane (the poem *Świt w Zakopanem* [Dawn in Zakopane]), references to the bloody traditions of the Siberian peoples (*Megale Arktos* and *Ursa Minor*), the most important events in the history of human civilization (*Kroki* [Steps]), the deepening fear of artificial intelligence (*Wilki dogonią Słońce i Księżyc* [Wolves will catch up with the Sun and the Moon]), or, more directly, in the descriptions of civilizational chaos (*Strefa* [The Zone]) and economic crisis (*Słodkie trofea z wakacji* [Sweet Holiday Trophies]), and, of course, in the anthropogenic degradation of the biosphere (*Hibernakulum* [Hibernaculum]; *Ziemia, której nie ma* [The Earth That Doesn't Exist]; *Zwrotka* [Stanza]).

The accumulation of such diverse and seemingly distant events corresponds to Clark's and Ubertowska's sense of being lost, the impossibility of processing the size and the complexity of the crisis. However, Ostrychacz offers the reader a tool, a conceptual category, which allows him to adopt a more stable position. The entire collection revolves around the image of the Earth seen as a detail in the vast Universe. We observe the Earth, and the climate catastrophe, from a cosmic perspective and in the context of cosmic processes. Carl Sagan's pale blue dot seems to be an extremely important point of reference.[13] Such references appear for the first time in the poem *Dom* [Home], the first poem in the entire collection:

Paproszek Ziemi	Earth's powder
w bazylice Kosmosu	in the Basilica of the Cosmos
ogrzany gwiazdą.	heated by a star.
Elektryczny zygzak	Electric zigzag
uderzył o taflę	hit the surface
pierwotnej zupy.	of the primal soup.
Bakteria Ziemi	Earth's bacterium
w próbówce Kosmosu	in the test tube of the Cosmos
ogrzana gwiazdą.	heated by a star.<?>

The planet inhabited by humans for a moment ceases to be seen as Morton's hyperobject, an object of incredible size, and instead becomes small. Importantly, humans inhabiting it also become small. Its place in the solar system is revealed in relation to other, sometimes much larger, planets. Such optics returns in most poems. For example, in the poem *113 tys. km/h* [113,000 km/h]:

[13]See: Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot. A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

Asysta Jowisza wyrzuciła nas daleko,
a przeszłość się stała mniejsza od kwarka.
Wszystkiemu winne jest życie, które
panicznie boi się utraty samego siebie,
bo nawet medycyna nie zagwarantuje,
że wytrzymamy cywilizację
lub inną katastrofę.

Jupiter's assist has thrown us far away,
and the past became smaller than a quark.
It's all because life
is terrified of losing itself
because even medicine cannot guarantee
that we will survive civilization
or some other catastrophe.

Respectively, the author clearly shows his aversion to human civilization, especially considering its impact on the environment. Ostrychacz's poems remind us of Lawrence Buell's concept of biotic egalitarianism and seem to prove that the death of human beings would be beneficial for the biosphere. Buell, drawing on David Rains Wallace, writes: "[…] imagining that a world purged of humans by human-engineered environmental apocalypse would not be so apocalyptic […] because wildness […] would be sure to endure."[14] And Ostrychacz writes miniature poems which show the Earth after the apocalypse. The three-line poem *Wieżowce* [Skyscrapers] reads: "Po ssakach / zamieszkały w nich / ptaki" [After mammals / they were inhabited/ by birds] [23]. And the poem *Zwrotka* reads:

Przestwór wspomina ptaki.
Gleba wspomina lasy.
Woda wspomina ryby.
Nas nikt nie wspomina.
Wszystko chce nas zapomnieć**.**

The air remembers the birds.
The soil remembers the forests.
The water remembers the fish.
Nobody remembers us.
Everything wants to forget us.

Returning to the image of the Earth as a detail in the Cosmos, deliberately showing its insignificance as compared with the rest of the Universe, also allows us to overcome the belief that the climate catastrophe is unprocessable. Returning to the image of the Earth as a specific point in the Cosmos makes it easier to establish connections between events that, metaphorically speaking, would not reveal their relationality right away. A point is finite, comprehendible; it is much easier to map it and to process it. Such approaches and imaginations are consistent and deliberate. Natural environments and the progress of civilization, all kinds of human or more-than-human events, cannot belong to separate unrelated orders, not least because they all exist on a microscopic piece of cosmic rock. It can also be said that natural resources, seen in a planetary context, turn out to be limited and they cannot be exploited uncontrollably.

Such approaches and imaginations also help us process a particular paradox. Discussing the aforementioned concept of realism, Debjani Ganguly writes: "To talk of planetary realism is to register – linguistically, tropologically, and narratalogically – the paradoxical imprint of this fundamental shift in calibrating the scale of human habitation on earth as at once monumental and insignificant."[15] We must realize that humans will influence the terrestrial biosphere for incomparably longer than they existed as a species and a civilization, which is considered momentary from a geological perspective. The poet who looks at the Earth from

[14]Lawrence Buell, 304.
[15]Debjani Ganguly, "Catastrophic Form and Planetary Realism", *New Literary History* 2 (2020): 425.

a cosmic perspective, sees it as a detail, as a blue dot, recognizes that humanity is neither the first nor the last life form dominating the biosphere. Such a vision again relates (or cooperates) to a sense of humility before the more-than-human world, which may prove important, considering how difficult the relationship between man and nature is. Carl Sagan emphatically states:

Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of [...]. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. [...] Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light.[16]

Ostrychacz's poems can evoke in the reader almost the same response as the famous photograph. Capturing this feeling in poetry, however, would not be possible without first directing the poetic imagination against the usual automatisms associated, for example, with limiting the perception of reality to a certain locality.

The detail allows the poet to evoke a state (or stimulate a consciousness) of the astronaut looking at the Earth from the surface of the Moon. Edgar D. Mitchell, a member of the Apollo 14 mission, described it as follows: "You develop an instant global consciousness [...], an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world, and a compulsion to do something about it. From out there on the moon, international politics looks so petty. You want to grab a politician by the scruff of the neck and drag him a quarter of a million miles out and say: Look at that [...]."[17] Mitchell's experience is, of course, unique, but it can be assumed that in the analyzed poems a shift in imagination marks a shift in perspective; the Earth is seen in a different light, and its, for the most part, inaccessible image is restored. The adopted approach also clearly resonates with the postulates of building a more holistic vision of reality, which recurs in the eco-critical discourse.[18] Once again, working on a scale, intentionally recognizing, or seeing a detail in something that is considered maximal, reconfigures what we see. Just for a moment, we distance ourselves from the so-called clichéd forms of seeing, we change our perspective, because the conceptual challenges posed by the climate catastrophe demand it.

Find a counterbalance

We use imagination in such a way not only because we are working on a scale, but also because we want to find counterbalance. Indeed, in many poems the ecological catastrophe is not presented as imminent threat but as part and parcel of everyday life. Respectively, as Keller

[16]Sagan, 6-7.

[17]"Edgar Mitchell's Strange Voyage", *People*, 8 April 1974, https://people.com/archive/edgar-mitchells-strange-voyage-vol-1-no-6/.

[18]See, for example: Andrzej Marzec, "«Jesteśmy połączonym z sobą światem» – Timothy Morton i widmo innej wspólnoty" ['We are an interconnected world' – Timothy Morton and the specter of a different community], *Teksty Drugie* 2 (2018): 88–101, or Olle Widhe, "Modes of environmental imagination. The eco-movement and the representation of reality in Swedish children literature from 1967 to 1977", *Barnelitterært forskningstidsskrift* 1 (2019): 1–16.

proves, while many poems convey a sense of fear, breakdown, or threat posed by the climate crisis and the end of civilization, they also offer practices which are supposed to help one function in such an unstable reality. Keller writes:

> [...] poets also counterbalance the grief and despair of apocalyptic awareness through deliberate cultivation of pleasures grounded in immediate physical experience and perception. Without some counterforce, such grief and despair can prove paralyzing, both artistically and politically [...].[19]

Jorie Graham and Evelyn Reilly, whose works Keller analyzes in her book, adopt such a strategy. Regardless of whether their poetics at a given moment are humoristic, pastoral, or focused on a direct, sensual experience of reality in the company of non-human beings, the goal is to remind the reader about the growing need to appreciate the real physical existence and coexistence with the world, even by means of simple everyday practices. According to Keller, as a result, in addition to finding a counterbalance to the ongoing catastrophe, the reader also connects with her environment, which in turn fosters a more personal, ecological involvement.

At this point we should ask whether Ostrychacz's poems also derive pleasure from a direct, physical contact with everyday life and whether such a counterbalance to the apocalyptic visions is still viable, whether it is enough. Let us focus on the poem *Wziąć się za szczęście* [Get tough with happiness], which almost directly enters into a dialogue with the phenomena described by Keller. I quote selected stanzas:

Pokój w którym pod światło widać
ile jest kurzu i wirującej sierści
jak odcinki babiego lata
ze szczelinami na dwa centymetry w parkiecie
i nieszczelnymi oknami od których ciągnie zimą
czy to jest szczęście?

Czy cząsteczki brudu na moich stopach
pianka wydrapana z fotela jego czerwona
ekoskóra kocia sierść
resztki tytoniu włosów chipsów a nawet
resztki marihuany
czy to jest szczęście?

Czy powinniśmy jeść warzywa?
wszak udowodniono że drzewa porozumiewają się
a kwiaty lubią Schuberta i potrafią być
szczęśliwsze od ludzi.

A room where you look into the light and see
how much dust and fur is swirling around
like threads of gossamer
with two-centimeter-wide gaps in the parquet floor
and draughty windows which let the cold
in in winter
is this happiness?

Dirt on my feet
foam scratched from the armchair its red
eco-leather cat fur
pieces of tobacco hair chips and even marijuana
is this happiness?

Should we eat vegetables?
After all, it has been proven that trees communicate
and flowers like Schubert and can be happier
than people.

[19]Keller, 98–99.

The presented situation and the adopted poetics clearly stand out against the background of other poems in the collection. Reflection on the condition of the Earth in the planetary dimension, on the events that led to such a state, and the constant need to imagine people and civilization from a cosmic perspective are replaced here by what seems to be a very private insight into one's everyday life and one's home. Agnieszka Budnik additionally pointed out that, unlike other poems, *Wziąć się za szczęście* does not employ "we" and uses the personal "I" instead.[20] The "I" looks very closely at the surrounding space, emphasizing the bodily, sensual aspects of life. He notices dirt, looks at the layers of dust revealed by the light, traces of his own presence (pieces of tobacco, marijuana, hair) and the presence of other beings with whom he shares his space (cat fur). He also notices the width of the gaps between the floorboards. One can get the impression that the "I" manages to distance himself from catastrophic weather news and other apocalyptic premonitions, if just for a moment, and immerse himself in (as postulated by Keller) direct, deep experience. The "I" looks at reality, focusing on the inconspicuous details of his own existence.

The poet, however, ingeniously asks: "is this happiness?" This question is repeated throughout the poem (it returns at the end of almost all stanzas). The final couplet reads: "szczęście mogłoby być srebrne / ale nie miałem pewności" [Happiness could be silver/ but I wasn't sure]. These lines precede the final poem in the collection which describes people escaping from the Earth. It seems to prove that such an immersion failed to bring any kind of refuge or relief. Focusing on the everyday, the "I" finds only more doubts, more questions. He has to face disappointment, a sense of insufficiency or lack that fails to soothe his fear of the climate catastrophe.

Ostrychacz's lyrical "I" does not find refuge in everyday life, in physical coexistence, nor does he seem to believe in the agency of individual, pro-ecological engagement. The ironic doubt contained in the final quote exposes the superficial understanding of biocentrism and the limits of individual agency.[21] As an aside, let me add that a sarcastic take on the vegetarian diet, insofar as we need to stop eating plants for the sake of the biosphere, appears quite often in environmentally engaged literature. Even Ursula K. LeGuin joked about it in 2012.[22]

In *Cielenie lodowca*, a direct, bodily experience comes face to face (almost literally) with the impending cataclysm. It happens twice. Apart from *Wziąć się za szczęście*, *Sol lub ludzkość to film katastroficzny* [Sol or humanity is a disaster movie] is also of interest to us. This poem describes scenes before the "end:"

[20]Agnieszka Budnik, "Od zagłady ludzkości do pytania o szczęście" [From the destruction of humanity to the question of happiness], review of Marcin Ostrychacz's *Cielenia lodowca*, *Wielkopolska. Kultura u podstaw*, 14 August 2020, https://kulturaupodstaw.pl/od-zaglady-ludzkosci-do-pytania-o-szczescie/.

[21]Julia Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie. Wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* [Cyborg in the garden. An Introduction to Ecocriticism] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo naukowe Katedra, 2015), 53–56, 119–122.

[22]Ursula K. LeGuin, *No Time to Spare. Thinking About What Matters* (New York: Harper, 2017), 128-130.

koniec w plazmie brzmi lepiej
niż koniec z własnych
dłoni i złapalibyśmy się za nie
i tarzalibyśmy się po dywanie
[...]
taczalibyśmy się ze śmiechu
pękalibyśmy w obliczu
końca pięknego serialu
[...]
i uprawialibyśmy miłość
na podłodze
ostatnią miłość
w pozycjach naczelnych

the end in plasma sounds better
than the end made of our own
hands and we would hold them
and we would roll on the carpet
[...]
we would roll on the floor laughing
we would burst in the face
of the end of a beautiful TV series
[...]
and we would make love
on the floor
last love
in primal positions

In this case, happiness and carefreeness come hand in hand with despair and relief, insofar as they appear as a response to the ongoing destruction, the sudden insignificance of our lives. Although bodily pleasure is indeed contrasted with catastrophic suffering, it is only meant to ease the pain; it appears at the end, when nothing else is possible, and cannot be considered as a counterbalance to the mental and emotional burden of the crisis, the course and intensity of which are still subject to certain influences.

It seems that momentary comfort or relief in *Cielenie lodowca* is brought only by the imaginative scaling, deliberately looking at the Earth as a detail in a cosmic picture. Ostrychacz's lyrical "I" is extremely aware of and fascinated by the location of its home planet and the presence and the influence of other planets. This kind of sensitivity can be found, for example, in the poem *Dźwięki* [Sounds]. In the poem, we "listen" to the sounds made by various planets in the solar system, and compare them to different music genres, instruments, or (more broadly) the terrestrial audiosphere in general:[23]

Wenus dmie w didgeridoo
Jupiter puszcza ambient
Io dark ambient
Saturn psychodelę na odkurzacz,
[...]
Uran zloopował przelot F-16.
Neptun – fale, piasek
[...]
pierścienie Urana jak lodowe dzwoneczki
U nas idylla na rozlewiskach.

Venus blows into the didgeridoo
Jupiter plays ambient music
Io plays dark ambient music
Saturn plays a vacuum cleaner psychedelic piece,
[...]
Uranus looped the F-16.
Neptune – waves, sand
[...]
Uranus rings like ice bells
And we can hear the sound of idyllic backwaters.

[23]The recordings to which the poet refers may be easily found, for example, on YouTube or on different NASA websites.

The ongoing climate catastrophe and the social unrest associated with it, traces of which are present in almost all other poems in the collection, are completely absent in *Dźwięki*. Instead, a pastoral motif of idyllic backwaters has been introduced. Importantly, this kind of ignorance about or detachment from the ongoing crisis is visible when the "I" adopts cosmic optics. In this perspective, references to musical genres also seem important – they can also be found in the title of the poems *Megale Arktos* and *Ursa Minor*. As in *Dźwięki*, they refer to ambient, relaxing music. Listening to other planets – in a way the only form of contact available to the "I" – allows him not only to find respite, but also to expand his own imagination. He acknowledges that there are other worlds, apart from the Earth and the catastrophe that is taking place on it, and such a realization may be a counterbalance to the apocalyptic weariness, the feeling of being placed in a difficult, incomprehensible, and uncontrollable position. Similar processes may also be found in the poem *Kosmos podgląda kopulację żab* [Cosmos Peeps at Copulating Frogs]:

[…] To Kosmos.
Pozwala wątpić
i we wszystko wierzyć,
na przykład w mapy
bez Drogi Mlecznej.
Teraz nad nenufarem słucha
świergotu żab, nie znalazł
nigdzie indziej we Wszechświecie
żab o takim głosie –
[…]

[…] The Cosmos.
It allows one to doubt
and believe in everything
for example in maps
without the Milky Way.
Now over the water lily it is listening to
croaking frogs, it could not find
frogs with such a voice
anywhere else in the Universe –
[…]

Playing with the scale and unimaginable proportions, which plays a crucial role in the entire collection, lies at the heart of this poem. The "I" builds an imaginary connection between an event which may be easily overlooked (even from the surface of the Earth) and the vast universe. Fascinated with cosmic spaces and cosmic phenomena, the "I" also emphasizes how unique the terrestrial biosphere is. It can be said that native habitats are recognized as all the more unique when compared to the vast cosmos. Re-connecting with the habitat, an essentially pro-environmental process, as discussed by Keller, is possible through renewed appreciation, fascination, or reestablishment of a sense of belonging. In *Kosmos podgląda kopulację żab* we do not witness a close coexistence with the physical world and its inhabitants but, instead, re-connect with the world through distance; the poem makes it clear that the progressive, anthropogenic degradation of the Earth's biosphere has wiped out unique habitats and species – they were unique not only in the context of the Earth but also on a cosmic scale. One of America's most prominent environmental poets, W.S. Merwin, also called for such an approach and sensitivity.[24] Once again, the perspective has been shifted thanks to a shift in imagination, which enables one to process experiences differently.

[24] Julia Fiedorczuk, *Inne możliwości. O poezji, ekologii i polityce. Rozmowy z amerykańskimi poetami* [Other possibilities. On poetry, ecology and politics. Conversations with American Poets] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo naukowe Katedra, 2015), 37–38.

Summing up, the entire collection is built and focused on shifts in imagination which counter the obvious. The poet is able to see the Earth as a pale blue dot – a detail in the unimaginably vast Universe. This approach, importantly, allows one to come to terms with the fact that we are part of the ongoing catastrophe and to find a counterbalance to it. Of course, this is not to say that Ostrychacz tries to diminish its importance or seriousness or suggest that it is a completely unnoticeable event from the cosmic perspective. Perhaps, however, the climate crisis and its effects viewed in global, planetary optics become smaller, more noticeable, organizable, and understandable, which in turn could help one find more effective forms of counteraction. The collection essentially reduces vastness to a detail, thus restoring the image of the Earth that is otherwise hard to grasp. *Cielenie lodowca* thus tries to accomplish one of the most important tasks of environmental poetry – to see the Earth anew through writing (about) it anew, which (as a consequence) is meant to lead to more environmentally-friendly and ecologically-responsible decisions.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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KEYWORDS

ecocriticism

CATASTROPHE

Abstract:
This article is devoted to the analysis of Marcin Ostrychacz's poems collected in the volume *Cielenie lodowca* [Iceberg calving]. The article examines the poems using the concepts of the environmental catastrophe and the almost unimaginable scale on which it is taking place. Both concepts play a crucial role in the eco-critical discourse. The author tries to prove that by using the category of the detail, Ostrychacz strives to regain conceptual control over both notions. The poet sees the Earth as a detail in the cosmos and thus is able to process the phenomena which function on a wider planetary plane and find a counterbalance to the apocalyptic visions.

Marcin Ostrychacz

scale
ecopoetics

Note on the Author:
Dawid Borucki – born 1998, PhD student at the Doctoral School of the School of Language and Literatures at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Holder of the "Excellence Initiative – Research University" grant. His research interests include the environmental humanities and the theory and practice of literary translation. Together with the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology's scholarly circle of editors "Trantiputl," he is involved in the organization of cultural events promoting the art of editing and typography.

Karenin's ears, Grinevitch's fingernails

Ewa Kraskowska

ORCID: 0000-0003-4316-1675

I wish to achieve two main goals in writing this article. First, I am going to take a close look at Vladimir Nabokov's reading practice, as demonstrated in his American lectures on the Western literary canon, and Russian literature in particular, including Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Secondly, and more importantly, I want to read *Anna Karenina* (probably for the hundredth time in my life) using his method, paying particular attention to the presence and function of bodily details in the novel. I define the bodily detail as a part of the human body (e.g., the ear, the hand, the finger, the nail, the nape of the neck, the calf, a lock of hair) that is noticed by the characters in the novel and/or by the auctorial narrator.

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In his article, Kazimierz Bartoszyński distinguished between two types of "rereading." One centers on an academic analysis and interpretation of the text. Bartoszyński calls this type of "rereading," drawing on Roman Ingarden, "a scholarly reconstruction of the text." "Rereadings," Bartoszyński writes, "help verify the hypotheses formulated during the first reading [...]." The other type of "rereading," "literary rereading," is aesthetic in nature and focuses on the represented world, and Bartoszyński concentrated on this type in his article.[1] I will not discuss Bartoszyński's theory in detail – very interesting and thought-provoking, and based on phenomenology and reader-response theory, as it may be – and only say that my most recent rereading of *Anna Karenina* combines both types. My reading is academic, as evidenced by my earlier critical essays devoted to Tolstoy's novel,[2] but at the same time amateur, in the best sense of the word, insofar as I truly love Kazimiera Iłłakowiczówna's Polish translation of *Anna Karenina* and I could read it again and again.

Bartoszyński argues that rereading essentially "[...] re-contextualizes each fragment of the text and this new context differs from the one found in the first reading," which allows the reader "to notice in the text things that were originally overlooked."[3] "Karenin's ears" mentioned in the title of my essay cannot be overlooked even in the first reading, because the moment when Anna pays attention to them for the first time in her life after eight years of marriage completely changes the course of the plot. In the novel, Anna is on a train from Moscow to St. Petersburg, she is returning home; she has only just met Alexei Vronsky, who declared his undying love for her, thus disturbing the peace of her soul and destroying her marriage:

> At Petersburg, as soon as the train stopped and she got out, the first person that attracted her attention was her husband. "Oh, mercy! why do his ears look like that?" she thought, looking at his frigid and imposing figure, and especially the ears that struck her at the moment as propping up the brim of his round hat.[4]

At this point, Anna's mind performs "a kind of mental somersault," as Vladimir Nabokov vividly described it.[5] And this realization is indeed an Aristotelian recognition; that is, it marks a change from ignorance to knowledge. In a tragic plot, such recognition must be followed by peripeteia, that is the shift of the tragic protagonist's fortune, and this is what happens in Leo Tolstoy's masterpiece.[6] But it is not the plot, neither the ideological aspect of the novel, and not even the advanced modern ways of portraying complex characters, according to Nabokov,

[1] Kazimierz Bartoszyński, "O lekturze wielokrotnej" [On rereading], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (1990): 146.

[2] Ewa Kraskowska, *Czytelnik jako kobieta. Wokół literatury i teorii* [The reader as a woman. Literature and theory] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2007), 89, 92–93, 98–101, 115–128, 143–144.

[3] Bartoszyński, 150–151.

[4] Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Constance Garnett (https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1399/pg1399-images.html).

[5] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed., with an introduction, by Edward Bowen (New York: Harvest Books/Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1981), 58. Nabokov actually writes about "a kind of mental somersault" when he discusses Gogol's *Dead Souls*, and not Tolstoy's works.

[6] I interpret this scene in detail in my study *Powieść o socjecie a stereotypy* [The novel of manners and stereotypes] (Kraskowska, 92–95).

which define beautiful prose and, at the same time, the beauty of reading it. As Nabokov writes in his 1944 essay on Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, "gusto and wealth of weird detail which lift the whole thing to the level of tremendous epic poem"[7] are the most important. And in another lecture, he states: "his works, as all great literary achievements, is a phenomenon of language and not one of ideas."[8] Nabokov is not interested in what Barthes calls the "zero degree of writing," a linguistic or painterly naturalization of the represented world, with which realism is usually identified. A seemingly realistic detail, appropriately placed in the wider context, endows the masterpieces of realism with something that exceeds the limits of mimesis, something "weird."

Nabokov's writing method, apart from the linguistic peculiarities of his prose, owes much to precise descriptions of the details of the represented world. I shall not give examples from Nabokov's works; my article is, after all, devoted to Tolstoy's novel, and thus I shall quote instead from the introduction to *The Annotated Lolita* written by Alfred Appel Jr., who also compiled over nine hundred footnotes to this edition of the novel:

> [...] the apprehension of "reality" (a word that Nabokov says must always have quotes around it) is first of all a miracle of vision, and our existence is a sequence of attempts to unscramble the "pictures" glimpsed in that "brief crack of light." [...] the process of reading and rereading his novels is a game of perception.[9]

Appel also writes that reading realist works defined in such a way resembles looking at the *trompe l'oeil*, a highly realistic optical illusion, in which everything is seemingly obvious ("no symbols lurking in murky depths"). However, if you look at the painting long enough, it will "reveal something totally different from what one had expected." Let us remember these remarkable insights, for I shall refer to them in my conclusion.

In his "reading process,"[10] Nabokov acts as not only an interpreter but also a potential translator. His attitude to the art of translation was most fully expressed in his monumental and controversial project – the English translation of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, published in four volumes with extensive commentary. The preface to volume one is a manifesto of translational "literalism," that is, a form of translation that, as far as the "associative and syntactical" properties of the target language allow, closely reflects the "exact contextual meaning of the original."[11] The process of reading (of the source text), which I would like to call a "translation reading," pays very close attention to the detail; each word, each phrase is viewed as if under a microscope, and at the same time a unique, almost intimate, bond is created between the reader and the text. It is an experience so intense that it can inspire the translator to document it in writing, as demonstrated by numerous texts (essays but also

[7] Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 16.

[8] Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 61.

[9] Alfred Appel Jr., "Introduction", in: Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita. Revised and Updated*, edited with a preface, introduction and notes by Alfred Appel Jr (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), xx.

[10] Bartoszyński, 146.

[11] Vladimir Nabokov, "Translator's Introduction", in: Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 1, translated end edited by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), viii.

books) devoted to the process of translating a given work. In the relatively short history of Polish "translator's memoirs,"[12] the following works deserve recognition: Maria Kurecka and Witold Wirpsza's *Diabelne tarapaty* [Devilish troubles] (1970) devoted to the translation of *Doctor Faustus* by Thomas Mann; Elżbieta Tabakowska's *O przekładzie na przykładzie* [Translation through example] (1999) and *Tłumacząc się z tłumaczenia* [Explaining translation] (2009), which document the painstaking work of translating Norman Davies's historical books into Polish; and, most recently, Maciej Świerkocki's 400-page-long book *Łódź Ulissesa: Siedem lat i osiemnaście godzin z Jamesem Joyce'em w Dublinie i nie tylko* [Ulysses' Boat: Seven Years and Eighteen Hours with James Joyce in Dublin and more].

Nabokov's translation reading of *Anna Karenina* is all the more intimate and detailed because the writer actually intended to translate Tolstoy's masterpiece into English, alas this project was ultimately cancelled. Perhaps the best example of this kind of reading can be found in his essay devoted to *Dead Souls*, which begins with a semantic analysis of the Russian lexeme *poshlust*.[13] In his *Anna Karenina* lecture, Nabokov pays close attention to the techniques of representation, especially Tolstoian adjectives such as "shlupayushchiye," "shershavye," and "tuylevo-lento-kruzhevno-tsvetnoy" ("gauzily-ribbonly-lacily-iridescent"), or cultural realities, such as Russian cuisine ("cabbage soup and groats Shchi" or "grechnevaya kasha").[14] He does not talk about bodily details a lot,[15] and only in the context of a more or less comprehensive description of a given character. Indeed, I am interested in the details which are "weird," details which are taken out of context of the whole and applied in a synecdochical manner (*pars pro toto*). Let us take a look at some of them.

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In *Anna Karenina*'s interpretations, symbolic elements – individual objects or situations which somehow foreshadow Anna's fate or reinforce the overall meaning of the novel – play a very

[12]The term "translator's memoir" appears more and more often in the academic discourse on translation, as evidenced by the seminar organized in Lancaster in 2021 entitled "The Translator's Memoir/Translation as Memoir" (https://www.iatis.org/index.php/news/calls-for-papers/item/2357-the-translation-memoir-translation-as-memoir-9-july-2021, date of access 30 July 2022). The translator's memoir was defined there as "a reflexive writing practice on the personal and political intersection between identity and translation." Importantly, it differs from the reflection on the nature of translation in general, which has a much longer tradition. It was discussed in Poland in the anthology *Pisarze polscy o sztuce przekładu* [Polish writers on the art of translation] (the first edition came out in 1977 and was edited by Edward Balcerzan and originally discussed the texts from 1440 to 1974; the second edition came out in 2007 and was edited by Balcerzan and Ewa Rajewska and discussed the texts from 1440 to 2005).

[13]Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 15-18. Russian: *пошлость* – a word with a complicated history and etymology, currently used in a pejorative sense: wickedness, vulgarity, triviality.

[14]The Polish translator of the lectures, Zbigniew Batko, with admirable and exemplary meticulousness, checked each time how a given fragment or word was translated by Iłłakowiczówna, adding his comments to the text in square brackets: "[u Iłłakowiczówny «ozdobione kwiatami», ale zdecydowanie chodzi tu o barwy; ZB]" [in Iłłakowiczówna's translation 'decorated with flowers,' but we're definitely talking about colors here; ZB] (Nabokov, *Wykłady o literaturze rosyjskiej*, 260).

[15]For example, when Anna's appearance is described: "[…] Anna was rather stout but her carriage was wonderfully graceful, her step singularly light. Her face was beautiful, fresh, and full of animation. She had curly black hair that was apt to come awry, and gray eyes glistening darkly in the shadow of thick lashes. […] Her unpainted lips were a vivid red. She had plump arms, slender wrists and tiny hands" (Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 227).

important role. The most frequently noticed and commented on are: the train (and all related objects), a scary peasant with a curly beard, Anna's red bag, and Vronsky's mare Frou-Frou and its death during a race. Critics and scholars have often commented on how Tolstoy describes the physicality of his characters,[16] but symbolic meaning was probably only found in Karenin's ears and the respective "points" of Frou-Frou (especially her head). However, I am not interested in symbolism, but in artistic tricks, especially the most famous of them – defamiliarization, and its ability to provide the reader with a new perspective. I assume that there is no need to explain the principles of defamiliarization and de-automation because they are fundamental concepts in contemporary literary studies.

Let us start with Mihail Stanislavitch Grinevitch – with his hands, especially his fingers and his nails. He is a side character, a colleague of Stiva Oblonsky, Anna Karenina's brother, who is the head of an important state institution. We meet him in one of the opening scenes of the novel and see him through the eyes of Konstantin Levin, who, having come to Moscow straight from his country estate, visits Stiva in his office:

> Levin was silent, looking at the unknown faces of Oblonsky's two companions, and especially at the hand of the elegant Grinevitch, which had such long white fingers, such long yellow filbert-shaped nails, and such huge shining studs on the shirt-cuff, that apparently they absorbed all his attention, and allowed him no freedom of thought.[17]

Grinevitch's fingers and nails are mentioned several times, as a result of which Grinevitch turns into his yellow, long, curved fingernails, which resembles the way in which Gogol "made"[18] his brilliant short story *The Nose*. The above scene is mainly intended to show us how uncomfortable Levin is in Oblonsky's office, but it also makes the reader uncomfortable. So far, the realistic narrative has prevailed, with no disturbances in the reading process, but all of a sudden, we come face to face with Grinevitch's disgusting (abject) yellow fingernails. It absorbs our attention and allows us no freedom of thought just as it absorbed and arrested Levin.

In *Anna Karenina*, Levin is *the* one person who most often notices the graphic details of other people's appearance, and Tolstoy scholars see him as a *porte-parole* of the writer. These people are usually side characters and often do not fit in. Grinevitch's last name suggests his non-Russian origin, and although it is not explicitly stated in the novel, he may be a descendant of a Russified Pole, pursuing a career in the tsarist administration. During dinner with Oblonsky, Levin is struck by the sight of a French woman sitting at the restaurant cash register, who

[16]For example, a very interesting article by Michael Pursglove from 1973, i.e., before the era of computer stylometric tools, was devoted to the motif of the smile in *Anna Karenina*. Pursglove found that: "The smile is used in either or both these ways in Tolstoy's portrayal of no fewer than eighty-five characters, major, minor, and purely incidental. The noun *ulybka* and the verb *ulybat'sja* appear 613 times in the novel. The number of references per character ranges from seventy-eight for Anna herself to single references for characters such as Stremov, Princess Bohl, and even Levin's dog Laska." In one of the endnotes, Pursglove lists how many times a particular character smiles (be it a radiant, ironic, sly, or cold smile): Anna 78, Oblonsky 74, Kitty 68, Levin 47, Vronsky 46, Dolly 28, Karenin 10, etc. Michael Pursglove, "The Smiles of Anna Karenina", *The Slavic and East European Journal* 1 (1973): 43, 48.

[17]Tolstoy, n.p.

[18]Boris Eichenbaum, "The Structure of Gogol's 'The Overcoat'", trans. Beth Paul and Muriel Nesbitt, *The Russian Review* 22,4 (October 1963), 377-399.

was "all made up, it seemed, of false hair, *poudre de riz*, and *vinaigre de toilette*" [rice powder and toilet vinegar – E.K.].[19] Levin is also annoyed by the nervous tic developed by his tuberculosis-stricken younger brother Nikolay (a side character, rather unpleasant, but extremely important for the ideological aspect of the novel), which manifests itself in "a nervous jerk of his head and neck," "as if his neckband hurt him."[20] Other characters also dislike some idiosyncratic aspects of other people's physicality: Anna begins to notice her husband's ears, but also how he snaps his fingers, his ugly hands and his high-pitched voice, which, when he was very agitated, turned squeaky. Karenin in general is made up of such idiosyncrasies; Vronsky notices that he walks funny ("Alexey Alexandrovitch's manner of walking, with a swing of the hips and flat feet, particularly annoyed Vronsky"[21]). Often, it is the narrator who makes such observations, and in the case of *Anna Karenina* the narrator may be associated with the author. The narrator informs us, among other things, that the painter Petrov, whom Kitty met in Baden, had unusually shiny white teeth or that an Englishman, Frou-Frou's trainer, was "walking with the uncouth gait of jockey, turning his elbows out and swaying from side to side."[22]

I must emphasize that the discussed examples are not meant to be read as ugly or, in general, naturalistic, because there are many ugly people and naturalistically described situations in *Anna Karenina*. For example, let us consider Anna's internal monologue, which preceded her suicide. Anna rides through the streets of Moscow in a carriage, and then walks in desperation on a platform. Everything seems disgusting to her, she finds everything annoying, and she cannot help but notice how disgusting the people around her are: "some young men, ugly and impudent" hurry by; Vronsky's servant has a "dull, animal face;" and "[a] grotesque-looking lady wearing a bustle (Anna mentally undressed the woman, and was appalled at her hideousness)" runs down the platform.[23] The descriptions of extreme existential experiences, such as Kitty's labor or Nikolay's death (both seen through Levin's eyes) are long and shockingly naturalistic. Yet narrative sequences of this kind, producing a series of schematized aspects, to use Roman Ingarden's term,[24] are characteristic of Tolstoy's mimetic art and, while they influence the reader's emotions, they do not hinder the process of reading as such. This notwithstanding, individual, incidental, mentions of peculiar details of someone's appearance that evoke an abject reaction are examples of deautomatization, and thus essentially "defamiliarization," insofar as they disturb the mimetic reading. How does this mechanism work?

|||

In Jacques Lacan's eleventh seminar, known as *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, in Chapter Two, "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit A*," we read:

[19]Tolstoy, n.p.

[20]Tolstoy, n.p.

[21]Tolstoy, n.p.

[22]Tolstoy, n.p.

[23]Tolstoy, n.p.

[24]Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973), 255-275.

> What is it that attracts and satisfies us in *trompe l'oeil*? When is it that it captures our attention and delights us? At the moment when, by a mere shift of our gaze [emphasis – E.K.], we are able to realize that the representation does not move with the gaze and that it is merely *trompe l'oeil*. For it appears at that moment as something other than it seemed ...[25]

Trompe l'oeil literally means "deceive the eye" and it is the art of optical illusion, the art of representing visual reality in such a "true" way that the viewer experiences, even if for a short moment, cognitive disorientation and believes that the representation of the object is the object. The paradox of this art/trick lies in the fact that, being the ultimate product of artistic realism, it actually transcends and thus destroys the *mimesis* effect.[26] This term may be used as a theoretical metaphor and thus I propose to read Tolstoy's bodily details as literary *trompe l'oeils*. They interrupt the process of reading for a moment, and at first, we do not know why.[27] A closer look, a mere shift of our gaze, reveals that it is a literary trick which opens up a gap in the fictional world. What do we see through this gap? This is where Lacanian psychoanalytic language comes in handy: the scratch of Grinevitch's long yellow fingernails is a sudden piercing experience of the Real with the epitome of the Symbolic, which is Leo Tolstoy's epic prose.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[25]Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth, 1977), 112.

[26]Among Polish scholars, Michał Paweł Markowski was interested in the paradoxical nature of *trompe l'oeil*. In the description of one of his projects (which, unfortunately, he did not finish), he described it thus: "Mere things which had previously been inscribed in a broader significant frame and thus bestowed with many kinds of familiar meaning suddenly gained their uncanny autonomy destroying the safe contemplative distance between representation and the beholder, on which mimetological ideology is thoroughly based." https://www.ifk.ac.at/fellows-detail/michal-pawel-markowski.html, date of access 7 August 2022.

[27]While I describe my reading impressions, I believe that they may be intersubjective.

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KEYWORDS

bodily detail

REALISM

mimesis

Abstract:
The article focuses on the presence and function of bodily details in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. The bodily detail is defined as a single part of the human body (e.g., the ear, the hand, the finger, the nail, the nape of the neck, the calf, a lock of hair) that is noticed by the characters in the novel and/or by the auctorial narrator. An important point of reference for the analyzes and interpretations is the style of reading proposed by Vladimir Nabokov in his lectures on literature and Kazimierz Bartoszyński's theory of rereading.

rereading

Tolstoy

Nabokov

TROMPE L'OEIL

Note on the Author:
Ewa Kraskowska – born 1954, professor of literary studies. Head of the Department of 20th Century Literature, Theory of Literature and the Art of Translation at the Institute of Polish Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Her main research interest are women's writing and translation studies. In 2018, she published the monograph *Tyłem, ale naprzód. Studia i szkice o Themersonach* [Backwards yet forward. Studies and sketches about the Themersons] (Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań), and in 2021 she published the book *Ksiądz Kaingba, mój dziadek* [Father Kaingba, my grandfather], in which she reconstructs the history of her family on the basis of numerous historical documents and sources.

Details of the Shoah.

The Holocaust in Polish children's literature

Agnieszka Kwiatkowska

ORCID: 0000-0002-5178-631X

War changes perspective. Things that used to be considered trivial suddenly become important, and the color of your hair, the color of your eyes, or your name could be the difference between life and death. War takes away the right to look from those who are forced to hide, only allowing them to peek at the world in and through fragments. War forces one to play a difficult game of zooming in and zooming out, as time, as in Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński's poems, seems to run backwards, towards non-existence.[1] Trying to come to terms with such unusual circumstances, literary stories about war employ non-linear narratives, use details, and show the world as fragmented. Children's literature which deals with the most difficult war experiences presents the reader with personal stories, and often refers to the conventions of non-fiction, connecting with the real world through details. Main characters are immersed in

[1] Edward Balcerzan, *Poezja polska w latach 1939–1968. Książka dla nauczycieli, studentów i uczniów* [Polish poetry in the years 1939–1968. A book for teachers, students and pupils] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1998), 38–39.

the world of true fabrication, and the truthfulness of the story is determined by the details which refer to historical events. Such a convention calls for a unique reading style – the reader has to focus on details, behind which lies the unsaid and the implied. In Holocaust narratives, the most important things are, at first sight, unimportant – little pieces refer to a larger whole, to a longer story outside the text. Fragments of history found in the literary text become the pillars of postmemory – a frame around which the reader's awareness may grow. In order to notice such details and reconstruct the stories behind them, a careful and tender reading is required, one which significantly reduces the distance between the reader and the text. The reader looks at the textual world up close; the bond between the child and the adult who reads to the child, usually one of the parents, fosters interpretation, as the adult can add to what has only been implied in the text. Individual things, small gestures, individual scenes open the door to other stories – they have a life of their own, they grow, they transfigure, and as if reaching out of the text towards the reader, leading them towards a new path.

In order to notice a painterly or an architectural detail, one has to come close to it, almost touch a sculpture or a painting. Detail observed from such a perspective may seem strange, overexposed, grotesque, and out of scale. It distances itself from the work of art as a whole – it reaches out to the viewer and enters their world. In literature, details become malleable, three-dimensional; they come close to the reader and determine how the reader understands the story. Details touch and move. Focusing attention on details forces a shift in perspective. The viewer comes closer; they are too close to notice the broad context and full meaning of the work. Indeed, the viewer may subjectively decide to "cut the work into pieces," and focus exclusively on the most attractive parts (in Romance languages, the word "detail" – in French *détail*, in Italian *dettaglio* – points to the words *tailler* [French] or *taglio* [Italian] which mean to cut). In children's literature, however, the focus on the detail is usually inscribed in the text, which imposes a unique reading style; the detail functions like the synecdoche and particularly traumatic events are revealed only to those who are prepared for it, insofar as they are able to follow interpretive guidelines.

The detail instead of the whole

Children's books about the Holocaust often work in and through details by default; the reader has to focus on the details which are often shown against a blurred background, that is events that are too horrifying to be represented directly. A story of cruelty and pain cannot be told in its entirety – the narrative thus employs gaps, understatements, allusions, and suggestions that can only be read by those who have extra-textual knowledge, which in a sense prepares them to face the historical truth. Thus, the detail becomes a sign, a kind of reference which points to information from outside the text, historical facts which the child either knows about or which their parents and guardians know about and share with the child during reading.

Individual scenes are as if captured in a photograph found in a family album: a Jewish wedding, a family Sabbath, special dishes become pretexts which tell the story of a culture that no longer exists. The wedding of Dorka and Chaim, the protagonists of Cezary Harasimowicz's

Mirabelka [The Mirabelle plum tree], illustrated by Marta Kurczewska, is showered in purple light. Dusk, pieces of a broken glass, scattered beads – all this is both nostalgic and points to the looming disaster. The glass was broken, as is customary in Jewish tradition, to commemorate the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, but this image points to a different disaster, which will not only wipe out many temples from the face of the earth but also destroy almost an entire nation. The first part of *Mirabelka* only seemingly has a happy ending. The second part opens with the birth of Noamek, the son of Dorka and Chaim, and a description of the Mirabelle plum tree bearing fruit. The two main characters, who are also great friends, give and create life but the illustration found in the book is not joyful. The drawing shows a high brick wall, behind which one can barely see the tip of the Mirabelle plum tree. It is not a ghetto wall, not yet, but a wall between the backyards of neighboring tenement houses. However, placed in the foreground, the wall grows huge and makes it impossible to see the world; it makes it impossible to explore the world, foreshadowing the terror of segregation.

In her article on the visual synecdoche in children's books about the Second World War, Katarzyna Wądolny-Tatar draws attention to one of Jola Richter-Magnuszewska's illustrations in Beata Ostrowicka's book *Jest taka historia. Opowieść o Januszu Korczaku* [There is such a story. The story of Janusz Korczak]. In the double-page spread illustration, legs in black boots trample over white houses with red roofs. This image interrupts the story of everyday life in the Orphanage run by Korczak and introduces the reader to the most difficult parts of the plot. Wądolny-Tatar writes:

> The occupation and destruction of Warsaw was vividly expressed through the drawing of army boots with the trouser legs of gray German uniforms, with characteristic stripes on the sides, tucked into them. The perspective: showing one officer instead of thousands and parts of the body of the person who is "trampling (also literally in the drawing) all over the city instead of his full figure exemplifies the *pars pro toto* principle. The German giant represents the power of the invader and the scale of destruction. His power is also manifested in how he stands – firmly, with both feet on the ground – and his silhouette is evenly distributed on both opposing pages.[2]

Details in the illustrations often point to the unsaid, suggest a continuation of the interrupted story. The backyard wall is a harbinger of the ghetto walls. When Chana's braid gets caught in the door of a cattle wagon in Renata Piątkowska's book *Wszystkie moje mamy* [All my moms], as illustrated by Maciej Szymanowicz, the reader cannot help but imagine the little girl's fate (*Wszystkie moje mamy*, p. 22). In *Jest taka historia. Opowieść o Januszu* Korczaku, Korczak's book and glasses, a child's shoe, toys, and crayons found scattered on railway tracks imply what happened to the children from the Orphanage from (pp. 58–59). Glasses and shoes lying around also inevitably evoke associations with the warehouses of Auschwitz, as long as the reader knows about the history of the described events. Perhaps the drawings of shoes, in itself an inconspicuous detail, found in Iwona Chmielewska's *Pamiętnik Blumki*

[2] Katarzyna Wądolny-Tatar, "Synekdocha jako trop wizualny w książkowych ilustracjach dla dzieci (na przykładzie wybranych narracji słowa i obrazu o drugiej wojnie światowej)" [The synecdoche as a visual trope in book illustrations for children (the example of selected word and image narratives about the Second World War), in: *Literatura i inne sztuki w przestrzeni edukacyjnej dziecka* [Literature and other arts in the children's educational space], ed. Alicja Ungerheuer-Gołąb, Urszula Kopeć (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2016), 169–170.

[Blumka's Diary], terrify only the informed reader, insofar as the sinister history behind them is not explicitly recounted. However, whoever has seen the piles of shoes in Auschwitz, looked at the photographs or visited the museum at least once, will remember it forever. This image will come back to the reader; it will, in a way, be superimposed on the image of the elegant slippers on display at Rosenbaum's shoe shop, on the image of Janusz Korczak cleaning children's shoes, and on the image of the shoes abandoned by the railway tracks. In the perspective of the Holocaust, the world of things was privileged not only because, as Bożena Shallcross writes, material objects were looted, gathered, and catalogued. Shoes turn into a sign, one of the signs, which must be read and interpreted in the wider historical context. The Holocaust objectified people and rendered objects more important.[3] The reader's knowledge and/or memories transform seemingly insignificant parts of the text and illustrations into important testaments.

Playing with the perspective: Zooming in and out

The fairy-tale opposition between what is small and what is large, strongly rooted in childhood experience, was reimagined in World War II narratives. In Baczyński's poems, as Edward Balcerzan writes, "to tame means to scale something down."[4] Understanding requires distance, a perspective which renders people and things smaller. They can then be held in children's hands and thus become credible and accessible. Scaling down may be seen as "heroic,"[5] insofar as it paradoxically allows one to overcome childhood weaknesses and face reality. Scaling up, expanding, filling up the space, in turn, becomes a form of self-defense, defense against time running out and the constant threat of death.[6]

In children's literature, the opposition between what is small and what is large plays an important role, and a shift in perspective allows one to distance oneself from the dangerous world, escape, and find a temporary shelter. The size of different objects, it turns out, depends on the distance from which they are observed. The viewer may thus influence how they perceive reality by playing with the size of referents, by zooming in and out. Some things, however, pushed by an invisible force, must be in the foreground; they cannot be moved and thus invalidated. Historical facts endow otherwise unimportant or secondary details with great importance, so much so that they determine the value of a person. They cannot be removed from one's field of vision; they are huge, and they obscure all positive and negative aspects of the characters.

Usually, however, much depends upon the adopted perspective. Zooming in on the detail, bringing it to the fore, renders it more important, while zooming out makes the object seem smaller, almost unnoticeable – it disappears in the background. Little Helena from Joanna Rudnińska's novel *Kotka Brygidy* [Brygida's cat] understands such dependencies. Helena climbs a tree in her yard to look at the war-torn world from above, over the head of

[3] Bożena Shallcross, *Rzeczy i Zagłada* [The Holocaust and Things] (Kraków: Universitas, 2012), 25.

[4] Balcerzan, 37.

[5] Balcerzan, 37.

[6] Balcerzan, 39.

her babysitter, who is franticly running around below. Sitting in a tree, Helena sees three places of worship (a synagogue, an Orthodox church, and a Catholic church) where, according to her, three Gods live. She can also see the progressing destruction of the city, the glow in the sky over the burning ghetto, but also Stańcia, who from her perspective seems tiny, and her instructions are insignificant. Such shifts in the significance attributed to different events and people are one of the important themes of *Kotka Brygidy*, which shows how war transforms insignificant features into details of great importance – they ultimately define one's identity and place in history. Being Jewish is one of such features. For some characters, for example for the assimilated Kamil, it has been insignificant, and it is suddenly perceived as crucial.

The lives of different characters are also determined by their appearance, by little details that have not been important before. The comments about "looking good" (that is not looking Jewish) or "not looking good" (looking Jewish) may be found in many books. While children do not always understand such references, they always arouse curiosity or horror, grow to extraordinary sizes, come to the fore. Zosia, the protagonist of Andrzej Marek Grabowski's *Wojna na Pięknym Brzegu* [War on the Beautiful Embankment], with illustrations by Joanna Rusinek, heard her mother say that the Jewish woman hiding behind the wardrobe "looked 'good' but 'her son' did not look 'good.'"[7] Zosia thought Janek would have protruding ears or a hump. She was very surprised when she found out that

> The boy was just lovely. […] with jet-black, dreamy eyes and curly hair so black that in the lamplight it seemed navy blue. The only thing that could be pointed out was that his nose was too big, but I thought his aquiline nose suited him very well. He looked like a pirate of the south seas or an Arabian outlaw.[8]

While Zosia does not understand what it means to "look good," she knows that keeping the existence of the dark-haired boy secret is a matter of life and death. A different Zosia, the three-year-old protagonist of Agata Tuszyńska and Iwona Chmielewska's *Mama zawsze wraca* [Mom Always Comes Back], dreams of being an adult woman who looks "good." She thinks that it will keep her safe, although she does not understand what exactly she should look like.

The detail as a pillar of postmemory – biography

The detail is remembered, it is as if photographed, arrested in time. Susan Sontag writes: "The attempts by photographers to bolster up a depleted sense of reality contribute to the depletion. Our oppressive sense of the transience of everything is more acute since cameras gave us the means to 'fix' the fleeting moment."[9]

[7] Andrzej Marek Grabowski, *Wojna na Pięknym Brzegu* [War on the Beautiful Embankment] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Literatura, 2019), 57.

[8] Grabowski, 57.

[9] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 140.

The detail captured in a frame, also in a literary frame, on the one hand seems to exist outside of time, and, on the other hand, it clearly points to the passage of time. Stopped in mid-movement, the object, which comes to the reader again and again in the sentences which follow one another in a descriptive passage, lasts, although its owner inevitably passes away. It is no coincidence that, as Sontag points out, photography is the medium of postmemory.[10] A single moment, gesture, or situation captured in a frame gives rise to a story that refers to memories or builds a post-memory narrative. Photography is the art of the detail.

A post-memory narrative can be based on a number of details. Writing about biographical narratives devoted to Janusz Korczak's life, Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek argues:

> Biographical narratives addressed to children also gave the story a certain rhythm, although it is certainly not based on chronology but on the detail. The detail allows one to capture the essence of Korczak's life story, without celebrating its tragic finale. Indeed, what lies at the center of the rebellious hero's life story is the detail or, in other words, different centers that are everywhere and nowhere. Episodicity, anecdotality, and orality are not often found in mainstream narratives, because such stories function outside the center. The biography is therefore based on a fragment, on a fragmented confession, which, when arranged and organized, turns into a representation, into a narrative.[11]

Thus, Korczak's biography is told through a series of attributes, significant details that create the image of a person. Korczak's life is made of individual scenes and situations not only in the biographies discussed by Wójcik-Dudek, but also in the books *Jest taka historia* and *Pamiętnik Blumki*. In *Pamiętnik Blumki*, Korczak is seen in and through the details found in the illustrations and noticed by the children who lived in the Orphanage. We can see Korczak looking at young pea shoots grown by children, hanging shirts on a clothesline to dry, feeding sparrows, holding an umbrella over a group of children, holding a box of crayons in his hands, and wearing an apron with a floral pattern. Tiny flowers may also be found on Blumka's dress – they look like forget-me-nots, flowers of memory, because one keeps "a diary so that one does not forget."[12] Such scenes and details make up the story of Janusz Korczak. They become sites of memory, *lieux de mémoire* captured in the book, around which histories and stories may further grow.

In one of Gabriela Cichowska's illustrations to Adam Jaromir's *Ostatnie przedstawienie panny Esterki* [The last performance of little Esther], Doctor Korczak waters the geraniums. Outside the window we can see barbed wire and on the other side of the street we can see a German guard. The doctor is thinking: "I'm watering the flowers, poor plants. Plants in a Jewish Orphanage. Some respite for the dry soil."[13] Growing flowers, a peaceful and inconspicuous

[10]Sontag, 140–141.

[11]Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, *W(y)czytać Zagładę. Praktyki postpamięci w polskiej literaturze XXI wieku dla dzieci i młodzieży* [Reading the Holocaust. Post-memory practices in 21st-century Polish children's and young adult literature] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016), 113.

[12]Iwona Chmielewska, *Pamiętnik Blumki* (Poznań: Media Rodzina, 2011), 48.

[13]Adam Jaromir, *Ostatnie przedstawienie panny Esterki* [The last performance of little Esther] (Poznań: Media Rodzina, 2014), 94.

activity, helps one forget about the reality of living in the ghetto, if only for a moment. Korczak consciously chooses to pay attention to the details – to the banal, the trivial, the everyday – and thus challenges the *status quo*. Wójcik-Dudek writes that:

> A tactician in a weak position pays attention to details; he is able to render specific observations universal. It's an obvious choice. A strategy that is devoid of rules, devoid of constants, and defies all classifications, must be based on details; if the rules change, details can be quickly forgotten so that one may focus on a completely different center.[14]

As we move from one detail to another – watering the geraniums, feeding the sparrows, and looking after the children – we reach, linearly, the tragic finale. The selection of anecdotal stories and individual scenes, however, resembles how memory works, insofar as it brings to mind seemingly unimportant frames, akin to photos randomly selected from an album.

Identity details – Star of David armbands

Some details in Holocaust narratives become important in the text because their meanings and significance are determined by the war. Literature shows how war changes how we perceive the world. It also shows how the meaning of certain signs and symbols changes, as they are re-defined by the occupiers. A particularly significant detail, one which recurs in many of the discussed works, is the armband with the Star of David (or, in general, the hexagram as a symbol). Helena, the protagonist of *Kotka Brygidy*, at first does not realize what the mysterious armband means. However, the armband appears more and more often, stubbornly pushes itself to the fore, catches the eye, and occupies the girl's attention. When Helena finally puts the armband with this sign on her shoulder, she feels its ominous power – people look at her differently, the neighbors no longer smile when they see her, strangers try not to look at her. The meaning of the religious emblem changed as a result of war – war rendered it dangerous; war disfigured it, insofar as a detail which is viewed too closely takes on strange, sometimes grotesque shapes. It takes over the whole picture. It is no longer confined to the background. The Star of David – the seal of Solomon, a symbol of Judaism which may be found on tombstones, synagogues, or ceremonial textiles – is transformed into the stigma of death.

In one of the illustrations found in *Pamiętnik Blumki*, a windowpane with six cuts on it (vaguely resembling a bluish Star of David) breaks. This ominous foreshadowing of the Holocaust is thus confronted with the memories of one of orphans, Szymek the rascal, who used to "steal and throw rocks at windows."[15] In the Orphanage, Szymek takes part in cooking competitions organized by Madame Stephanie [Stefania Wilczyńska]. Blumka is a little afraid of her impulsive friend, but his misdeeds, assessed in the wider context, seem completely innocent in the face of the evil that is about to take place, as announced not only by the drawing of the Star of David, but also by the shower scene on the same page. The boy, who cries after chopping onions, is taking a shower. Water is pouring onto his head, and it looks like lined paper, like

[14]Wójcik-Dudek, 119.
[15]Chmielewska, 12.

a page in Blumka's diary. The scene is a terrifying foreshadowing of gas chambers, and a triangular piece of glass, which the main character has gently picked up, resembles a concentration camp badge.

Young Szymon, the main character of the novel *Wszystkie moje mamy*, also quickly realized that "these armbands are not decorative."[16] His older sister explained to him emphatically that the Star of David is a stigma, but one cannot get rid of it:

> The point is that the Germans must know at a glance who among the people on the street is a Jew. […] A Jew can be hit, knocked over, or even shot for no reason. […] They announced that they would immediately kill any Jew who showed up in the city without an armband.[17]

It comes as no surprise that Szymon, who managed to escape from the ghetto, is relieved when he can get rid of the armband. However, when he verbalized these feelings (he is a child after all), he had to flee again, as if the memory itself determined who he was:

> Namely, once I was standing with my mother Maria in a long line; we wanted to buy some bread. I was wearing a fur-lined navy-blue coat. It wasn't new, but it was very warm. Then I remembered something:
> "I used to have an armband with a big blue star on it. I always had to wear it on my sleeve. But now I don't have to, right?"
> Everyone heard what I said and stared at us.[18]

There is no such perspective, no such temporal or spatial distance, that would invalidate the meaning and the significance of the armband. Whoever brushes against it is marked with the inalienable stigma of the detail that defines and determines the life of the individual.

The perspective of a hiding place

Hiding places – a key motif in Holocaust stories – determine the perception of the world through details. In a claustrophobic space, one can neither look at the world from a distance nor keep one's distance. In a hiding place, everything is right next to the observer, close to their face, the lack of perspective overwhelms and makes the details grow and change their shapes. In frescoes which decorate cathedral walls, the painter must take into account the perspective so that the figures, viewed from below, appear proportionate. Similarly, whoever is looking at details in a claustrophobic hiding place should take into account how the extreme close-up deforms the image. However, it is difficult when one is forced to look (out) and forced to hide in a confined space. Then things appear to be something else than what they really are. They expand and transform. They take over the world. This is why in Irena Landau's *Ostatnie piętro* [The top floor] a little mouse, who lives in a den in a dark, cramped

[16]Beata Piątkowska, *Wszystkie moje mamy* [All my moms] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Literatura, 2018), 11.
[17]Piątkowska, 11–12.
[18]Piątkowska, 32.

wardrobe on the top floor of a Warsaw tenement house, becomes young Cela's friend and playmate. The girl, who has to be quiet as a mouse in a dark, stuffy room, seems to share the same fate as the frightened animal – she is dependent on people who also pose a threat to her very existence.

Children in hiding places often focus their attention on details. Limited space, being confined to a small room, a kind of mental isolation, and being cut off from the outside world (as a security measure) forces them to change their perspective, to look closely, to be satisfied with the perception of little pieces of reality. In *Mama zawsze wraca*, little Zosia learns what the world looks like outside her hiding place from her mother. It is her mother who brings her chestnuts, catkins, colorful autumn leaves with raindrops on them. She draws her a sledge and tells Zosia about Warsaw before the war. Mom also finds a piece of fabric with a floral pattern on it from which she makes a dress for Zosia's doll. Zosia becomes a mother to her doll. The love that the girl has for the doll is a reflection of the relationship between the daughter and the mother – it gives Zosia a sense of security and hope for survival. In a way, focusing on the doll, whose name is Zuzia, distracts Zosia from the apocalypse which is taking place around her – the detail obscures the whole, it is in focus, while the background remains blurred. As an adult, Zosia begins to tell her story by introducing the doll: "Her name is Zuzia. She is my doll. My little girl."[19] When she was taking care of the doll, she felt strong like her mother. She says:

> I was her mom. I felt great because I could be a mom, not a child. It was cold, we had nothing to keep us warm. And mom always knows where to find a blanket or a piece of fabric and where to find a potato or a carrot. […] Being a mom is the best. Everyone wants to catch the child, everyone wants to shoot the child, take the child away from their parents. I didn't want to be a child anymore, I just wanted to grow up. And be an adult.[20]

In comparison with the doll, the girl feels big, tall, and important. She becomes a mom, a creature that seems almost omnipotent to children. Zosia fights, trying to make sure that nothing can separate her from her doll, because she believes that mom should never leave her daughter. Life brutally verified her illusions. After the war, when Zosia and her mom were on their way to Israel, a group of orphaned children explained to her that in reality all moms die. The cabin in which Zosia's seriously ill mother lay was no longer a safe place. The vast sea – contrasted with the claustrophobic cabin and the claustrophobic hiding place, which is still present in her memories – no longer draws attention to the detail; all hope is lost. The vast world cannot be sewn up, pieced together, as Zosia would like. A ball of yarn and a piece of fabric with roses on it will not save anyone anymore.

[19]Agata Tuszyńska, Iwona Chmielewska, *Mama zawsze wraca* [Mom Always Comes Back] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Dwie Siostry, 2020), 1.

[20]Tuszyńska, Chmielewska, 19.

One or many

Noam, Blumka, Jutka, Szymek – different books tell personalized stories of different protagonists, which are often firmly rooted in the real world, based upon facts, and reminiscent of real people. Children's biographies – although each life has its own dramatic course – are representative of what happened to a generation and a nation. Twelve orphaned children surrounding Janusz Korczak in the photograph which gave rise to *Pamiętnik Blumki* may remind one of twelve disciples gathered around Christ, and they may also symbolize the twelve generations of Israel. What happened to those children is emblematic of the entire nation. The lives of these characters are monuments, built of words, erected not to commemorate a specific person but to commemorate all the people whom they represent. One of the characters in *Ostatnie piętro*, a Jewish boy who leads children out of the ghetto and is active in the underground resistance group on the Aryan side, is thus described in the author's note:

> Writing about Jerzy-Piotr-Chaim, the author thought about all Jewish heroic boys who fought for dignity and honor and died during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.[21]

A girl in a red dress – Dosia, Dorotka, or Dotty from Cezary Harasimowicz's *Mirabelka*, with illustrations by Marta Kurczewska – embodies the idea of representativeness. Different characters, with different cultural, national, and racial backgrounds, are in a sense the same little girl who, in a dialogue with the Mirabelle plum tree, discover their identity and roots. A red dress, a string of beads – these details recur in the illustrations of generations of little girls who must remember or learn about horrific war events in order to discover who they are and where they come from. A red coat, a reference to Roma Ligocka's book, decorations which resemble scattered beads from a Jewish workshop – such details have a hidden meaning and help place different characters in the wider context of history and tradition. Beads and sequins scattered in the yard under the Mirabelle plum tree are both a realistic detail, insofar as they enhance the mimetic and the factual, and a symbol. Beads, Mirabelle plums, and music shown in the illustration as colorful balls floating in the air – such small round objects are everywhere, even in the soil, water, and air. And Jewish culture is everywhere too. Although no longer part of the post-war world, Jewish culture will forever shape the neighborhood of Nalewki.

Representing details faithfully, Daniel Arasse argues, lies at the heart of mimesis, because it places emphasis on representing unique features of the world.[22] The detail, especially thus defined (as something particular; in Italian *particolare* means a small part), forges a connection between the text and the real (the world beyond the text). However, finding and concentrating on a detail depends to a large extent on the viewer/reader, who, in the act of perception, cuts the whole into little pieces, separates something from the larger whole. In this sense, the detail is "cut out" from the work, which breaks up the composition of the picture and blurs

[21]Irena Landau, *Ostatnie piętro* [The top floor] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Literatura, 2015), 86.
[22]Daniel Arasse, *Le détail: Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 1.

the wider context.[23] Arasse writes that the detail-*dettaglio*, also moves the image, not only because it isolates one element, submerging the whole, but above all because it breaks down the regular construction of perspective, which throughout the entire history of mimetic painting controlled the viewer's physical relationship to the image so that the full "effect" would manifest itself from the right distance.[24]

A similar shift takes place in children's literature. Placing emphasis on the detail, however, does not invalidate the whole represented in the text (usually shown in a discontinuous and fragmentary manner). Instead, it points to a different sphere of meanings which facilitates understanding. It is impossible to talk about the Holocaust in its entirety. Such events must consist of pieces, fragments, and literary details which point to the extra-textual reality. Details are gaps which connect literature with the personal experience of the author and the reader. Fragmented memories of real experiences and events found in the literary text speak through details; they, as if, reach out to the reader. The bond between the author and the reader, the bond between lifelike characters and young readers, which this gap creates, touches the human heart, evoking compassion and fear. Through literature and history, which may be seen through such gaps, the reader is able to experience the Aristotelian catharsis.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[23]Arasse, 160.
[24]Arasse, 160.

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KEYWORDS

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

the Holocaust

Abstract:
This article examines what role details and other similar artistic devices play in representing the Holocaust in contemporary Polish children's literature. The focus on the detail often forces a shift in perspective, both in the fine arts and in literature. Focusing on prominent and meaningful details renders the story less direct, and the cruelty of history is revealed through gaps in the narrative. Details stand for the unsaid and refer the reader to extra-textual knowledge. Details also allow one to engage in a game of perspectives: by zooming in and out on specific scenes or events one, alternatively, renders them more or less important. Children's books about the Holocaust are primarily meant to build memory and post-memory, and employ details to that end. Around and through details, the successive layers of stories may grow.

synecdoche

ILLUSTRATION

postmemory

Note on the Author:
Agnieszka Kwiatkowska – dr hab. prof. UAM. She works at the Department of 20th Century Literature, Theory of Literature and the Art of Translation at the Institute of Polish Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. She is member of AMU's Children's Culture and Literature Research Team. Her research interests focus on 20th-century Polish literature. She is the author of works on 20th-century Polish poetry (including the monograph *Tradycja, rzecz osobista* [Tradition, something personal] on the works of Julian Przyboś and the section devoted to children's poetry in the volume *Stulecie poetek polskich* [100 years of Polish women poets]) and children's literature (she has published, among others, on Danuta Wawiłow, Joanna Mueller, Anna Podczaszy, Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina, Dorota Terakowska, Cezary Harasimowicz , Rafał Witek, and Paweł Beręsewicz; she has written about the representation of the Holocaust in children's literature).

"Like a tender needle through the heart" – distribution and function of detail in Andrzej Stasiuk's descriptive strategies

Zofia Paetz

ORCID: 0000-0003-3500-4194

> „[…] I should return to Dukla. It appears like a reprimand whenever I think about myself too much."[1]

This reprimand seems to contain the sense of Stasiuk's story, the source of descriptive imperative, longing for a description that would be an antidote to egoism, a formula offering a chance to escape pathos, naïve emotionality, and escapist sentimentalism. Polish literature is haunted by Miłosz's spirit, and it proves to be a valuable ally of new descriptive studies. "Love means to learn to look at yourself / The way one looks at distant things / For you are only one thing among many."[2] These verses not only lead us to questions about the relationship between ethics and aesthetic transformation, but they also extend the perspective of thinking about delight in the context of description, changing an aesthetic stimulus to a whole strategy of extinguishing "I" and overcoming the power of ego. In his review of Miłosz's final book of poetry, Andrzej Franaszek identifies delight as the counterweight to self-love, a way to forgetting about self and love[3]. Here love is a decision rather than a feeling, an attentive attitude supported by emotions rather than dependent on them, understood as longing for unity vol-

[1] Andrzej Stasiuk, *Dukla* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2018), 21.

[2] Czesław Miłosz, *Miłość* [Love]. In *Wiersze wybrane* [Selected poems] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2018), 214. English version translated by Roger Housden, https://wordsfortheyear.com/2014/04/02/love-by-czeslaw-milosz/.

[3] See Andrzej Franaszek, "Jeden jasny punkt" [One bright point], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, https://classic.wyborcza.pl/archiwumGW/1674771/JEDEN-JASNY-PUNKT (date of access: 08.05.2022).

untarily supported by habits. For there are no grand emotions in Stasiuk's works, no delight understood as enthusiasm or applause. However, there is appreciation accompanied by some distance, a certain intense mindfulness which demands reality, thus daring to turn eyes and thoughts towards Dukla, that is, towards the world, with its bustling abundance. The attempt at going beyond oneself is obviously paradoxical: based on personal abilities, predispositions, and conditions, it is powered by giving the main role to subjects other than the one who describes in the drama of time, space, and action. In this sense, what happens in Stasiuk's novel seems to resemble the dynamics of shifts in modern post-secularism as discussed by Agata Bielik-Robson in "Literackie kryptoteologie nowoczesności, czyli o pierwszeństwie świata" [Literary cryptoteologies of modernity, i.e., on the primacy of the world].

Bielik-Robson writes about visibility economy, according to which "the world is only visible when God hides himself. But at the same time: the world is only visible when God – "a being of light" – is present in it in spite of everything."[4] She presents a story of the creator who steps back in order for his work to exist, holding back his own glory, because confronted with it, his creation has no chance for autonomous visibility. It is a story about setting boundaries, restraint, and distribution of attention which all make post-secular considerations an analogon of the literary game between creator, model, and material, according to which: "Literature would be [...] the art of illuminating detail: the ability to use the glow of «being of light» with attention, carefully, and using a whole system of mediators that put out the intensity of the source, shifting it from the center to the margin."[5] The increasingly more intense transformations focused on the subject are familiar with self-restraint and carefully studying the expansiveness of own cognitive and perceptive acts on the one hand, and on the other – the movement including non-human actors in the community of autonomous subjects. The describer and the world are unable to free themselves from each other – neither co-relationalism, nor direct access to the world which excludes intellect is sustainable. This embrace with reality – sometimes comforting, sometimes awkward or uncomfortable – needs to be retold, described – not faithfully, but honestly.

"Inward-turning histories"[6] – objects as transtemporal bridges

> I was standing motionless, my skin crawling. I saw matter in its ultimate downfall and abandonment in that forgotten, eroded shithouse. Minutes and years simply entered objects and exploded them from the inside. [...] That was when I decided to describe everything.[7]

[4] Agata Bielik-Robson. "Literackie kryptoteologie nowoczesności, czyli o pierwszeństwie świata"[Literary cryptoteologies of modernity, i.e. on the primacy of the world], *Wielogłos* 24, No 2 (2015): 16.

[5] Bielik-Robson, 17.

[6] For Michael de Certeau places are "fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the plain or pleasure of the body", Certeau, *Wynaleźć codzienność. Sztuki działania* [The Practive of Everyday Life], translated into Polish by Katarzyna Thiel-Jańczuk (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2008), 109. English version translated by Steven F. Rendall (University of California Press, 2011), 108.

[7] Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 75.

The centuries-old tradition of presenting time in a linear way has led to difficulties with perceiving it as a phenomenon taking place on a plane. Meanwhile in Stasiuk's prose experiencing time and history via physical spatial relations becomes the foundation for a descriptive strategy based on history preserved in objects. This strategy creates its own poetics and ways of imaging, and as such it needs to include contemporary actions for extending and deepening the consciousness of non-anthropocentric subjects and the accompanying agency of non-human subjects into its imaginarium. This aspect of the descriptive turn not only makes it resemble ecocritical studies, but it also starts a dialogue with new materialism and the turn to things. Bjørnar Olsen, author of the seminal *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects*, one of the best-known texts on materiality, links considerations about the role and character of the world of things, which so far have been connected mostly with the question of detail and granularity of description, with aspects of temporality and phenomenology of space, highlighted in Stasiuk's works. The experience of time manifesting itself in matter is the main stimulus leading to attempts at translating "the miracle of experiencing" into the language of literary description.

In the case of Stasiuk's prose we are clearly dealing with presenting experienced and linguistically processed space, incorporated in constellations of texts and images. Space proper to artistic and religious-philosophical texts, which Vladimir Toporov, author of *Space and thing*, calls mythopoetics characterized by a specific shape of a chronotype, in which:

> [...] time thickens and becomes a form of space (time "spatializes" and thus is taken outside, put aside, exteriorized), its new ("fourth") dimension. Whereas space, to the contrary, "contracts" internally intense qualities of time ("temporalization" of space), it is pulled into its motion [...].[8]

In considerations about Stasiuk's details, the organic tangle of space and time, as well as the role played by objects in its shaping seem especially interesting. According to Toporov, the mythopoetic space is integral and co-continued by the objects that fill it – it is not prior to them, waiting for them to fill in original emptiness; it is established and concretized by them. Landscape details are not subject to time – they carry time in themselves, they actively resist it or go along with it, they manifest their presence or hide from sight. Houses, farming tools scattered across yards, dusty shop displays, cold marble of church columns, hectares of fields patiently walked over by cattle every evening – materiality is soaked with time which accumulates in the world of objects, gestures, and landscapes. Each look at matter carries a question about the place for what has already passed, *spiritus movens* of the narrator's journey:

> What happens to time which has already passed? Where do events in which we have participated go? For instance, where is that summer day when we got on a train in Zagórze after hitchhiking for twenty hours across the whole country, from somewhere by the sea.[9]

The question concerns geographical coordinates, whether and where one can find a repository of time, a junk room full of the past, and a warehouse of what is coming next – it is an attempt at creating cartography of time, locating time on a grid, mapping it. Such an attempt

[8] Władimir Toporow, *Przestrzeń i rzecz* (Kraków: Universitas, 2003), 22. Translation mine, PZ.

[9] Stasiuk Andrzej, *Grochów* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2012), 56.

at dealing with temporality may be considered a realization of Alva Noë's variation theory put forward in *Varieties of Presence*, and the crystallization of time and memory in places and objects – one of paths leading to learning and practicing the ability to "gain access" to the world. Stasiuk's interest in objects, elements, details which – according to Olsen – make the past present and touchable, stems from his awareness of time accumulating in material things. Presence is thus considered to be some modus of accessibility – it concerns contact and relations, resigning from understanding the tangible, spatial closeness literally, following Noë who believes that objective, measurable distances seldom match the "experienced" spatiality. Such modus does not need to manifest itself as visible and tangible; it resembles a reflection about Heidegger's closeness and accessibility *modi*, although Noë observes that Heidegger perceived presence through the prism of thought, as a representation of a phenomenon, inevitably binding man with a contemplative attitude. In contrast, Noë's proposal seems to approach speculative realism which rebels against the dominating co-relational attitude, which assumes that there is an unbreakable bond between thinking and being, considering independent, separate access to each impossible. In the context of Stasiuk's prose, the combination of rejecting co-relationalism and post-anthropocentrism, manifested via a return to ontology whose aim is to restructure and replace the dominating subject category with perceiving humanity as one of many subjects. Obviously Stasiuk does not go that far, however, his attempts at overpowering anthropocentrism are in many ways parallel to Noë's ideas, who in his project about the relations between thinking and being tries to escape a vision of intellect separated from the world, positioning humanity as a forever distanced observer:

> Living is not a research project. No. As Heidegger would say, the meaningful world is always already there for us.[10]

Noë postulates opening, which allows to reach for the presence of the surrounding reality in all its forms. Focusing on individual objects allows the narrator to use what the past, present, and potential, on the one hand looking from a planetary perspective, and on the other – discovering the rule of the world in the micro-perspective at the bottom of a glass filled with black fernet. Stasiuk's images are not uniform, something keeps bursting them from inside, filling them with coincidental associations and recurring motifs which appear because of intrusive memories, with details pushing from different sides of time and space:

> Something is happening to time. More and more. Those events are as clear as the recent ones. They show. And now that I think of them, everything is happening simultaneously. Those events float to the surface, dark water parts, and here they are. Nothing has ever been lost? And now it returns?[11]

Stasiuk is trying to set many times in motion simultaneously – it is impossible to do it linearly, so he needs another dimension: he thus opts for presenting time via places and objects. He tries to get access to them through describing, seeing description as the key to the culture of presence, a method of discovering moments in which events appear simultaneously, allowing life to become consistent, and to see oneself from the past and from the future as the same

[10]Alva Noë, *Varietes of Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 10.
[11]Stasiuk, *Grochów*, 63.

person. Parallelism is thus the dominating dependence – landscape is seen as a network of times and time rhythms, with each element experiencing temporality differently, each with its individual pace, rhythm and cycle setting demands for the arsenal of notions and language of description. Description inevitably becomes a game with historicism epistemology, with its methodology based on studying the process of formation, genesis, and evolution of phenomena. How does one take into consideration the history of an object in a description, with sensual access to what can be seen here and now, in a specific act of perception conditioned by present circumstances as the basis? How can one transform the idea that the past is part of the present, which we discover as a material record of the past in the process of learning and gaining access to various forms of presence? Stasiuk seeks to answer these questions by translating the experience of time into space via descriptions of objects constituting a bridge between different temporalities, extracting times functioning in parallel, accumulated in matter.

Interrupted obviousness – considering detail as a way towards presence

Presence comes at a cost, it is fragile, temporary – it requires constant effort to be obtained; Noë observes that it is not given but achieved thanks to practicing gaining access to its various forms. On the other hand, Olsen considers disruption as a stimulus for recognizing it, following Heidegger's classical ways of uncovering presence, which makes absence, malfunctioning, inconvenience the conditions necessary for being noticed, and Latour's, in which using an object on an everyday basis makes it invisible. Objects that are broken, discarded, that manifest their uselessness with their presence, create a special tension able to inspire Olsen's unintentional memory, a disruption referring what is forgotten and put aside:

> Things may be actualized as "dialectical images", a term Benjamin used to denote instances or moments where the past comes together with the present – not in habitual (or ideological) harmony, but as an unreconciled constellation, a charged force field. In their residual state these othered things bring to attention the tensions between their own pre- or *ur*-history (of used, success, hopes, and wishes) and their after-history, their fate as stranded rubble in the present.[12]

A dried-up well without a winch, rusty farming tool, holey fence – defective, no longer useful things lose their obviousness, they rebel against typical classifications, demand being looked at without pragmatism. Stasiuk seems to combine the two attitudes, at the same time trying not to stop at the fact that an object is broken and the shock caused by an anomaly. His considerations regarding things and the descriptive game played with them are focused on the experience of a perceptual shift, which allows to extract data about a temporal and spatial dialogue encoded in things. Stasiuk's narrators seem to go through careful, long observation, meditation about time and space resulting from a conscious choice (the post-secular motif is present in Stasiuk's texts not only in visibility distribution). This meditation resembles deconstructionist solicitation, setting things in motion, things shaking down to their core:

[12]Bjørnar Olsen, *W obronie rzeczy. Archeologia i ontologia przedmiotów*, translated into Polish by Bożena Shallcross (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN Wydawnictwo, 2013), 256. English version: 169.

when the subject looks at the world, the world seems no longer obvious – things detach themselves from their functions, they begin to be perceived beyond their usefulness, they reveal themselves in their shapes, constellations, in the relation of time and space.

The sense that the world is unreal always results from stopping and closely looking at details emerging from a landscape – it is watching boats in a harbor from a cliff, looking at an untidy counter in a juke, inspecting your grandfather's crumbling farm. Each of these places reveals an aporia inscribed in details between striving towards autonomy and entanglement in a network of mutual relations and systems. The more the observer tries to adjust their eyes to the piece of reality they are looking at, the more problematic what they see becomes: massive horses become figurines in a nativity scene, storks resemble discarded toys, a monumental building turns out to be a model, and forests and cities are but sketches in pencil. Directly approaching the object that is watched is a process, it requires work in time: comparison and reference, so everything depends on the perspective – simultaneously spatial and temporal, as they are two sides of the same coin.

The mechanism in which the familiar seems alien and incomprehensible, depriving an object of the sense of taming the world and introducing a cognitive dissonance forcing to use a new language, to some extent resembles Freud's experience of weirdness, but without fear or disgust. The narrator is fearless – to the contrary, they seem to be engrossed by details, alluring, striking, offering a descriptive challenge. It is not enough to state that in the case of Stasiuk thinking about the detail equals thinking about the world. For him, the detail is the world – it takes the whole perceptive field, becoming a perceptive enclave, it is expansive, it absorbs time and space – its description approaches it to ultimately lose it from eyesight behind the horizon of events. In the radicalized movement between detail and generality, from time to time losing the clarity of this distinction, a manifesto of the freedom to talk about reality is contained, in which each of its elements is considered to be a full-fledged witness of life. "The miracle of experience", which Stasiuk considers to be the primary goal of his writing, does not belong exclusively to people – it is also given to a flock of sheep, a vault in an old church, dusty shop windows, rusty bikes, or evening mists.

According to Kathleen Stewart, who specializes in the descriptive turn in literature, the experience of weirdness, whose source constitutes the presence of an intangible thing which resists classification, is the basic stimulus leading to descriptive activity. Consent to being surprised and led, to contacting reality beyond a simple profit and loss account, is related to the need to revitalize the category of description as a linguistic tool expressing an encounter with reality which escapes simple notions:

> When people half-witness a thing of no kind, when they see, in other words, that something is a little off, they are moved to make a report not exactly by way of explanation, but out of a stranger faithfulness to the spirit of the unnamed thing they witnessed. [...] The objects themselves have a vital, even explosive, tension and torque of qualities. Their point of precision are not content but a pause in the very move to represent a finite, categorical real. Reality, Harman argues, is weird (and, I would add, generative) because it is itself incommensurable with any attempt to grasp it. Being in the world of autonomous things is a matter of writing in the gaps.[13]

[13] Kathleen Stewart, *The Point of Precision*, "Representations" 2016, No 135 (1), 34-35.

Description is always an attempt at approaching the elusive thing it describes: its history, characteristics which are currently perceived and inscribed in potential extensions. However, the grasp discussed by Stewart does not need to be an aggressive, annexing gesture – to the contrary, it may become the type of touch conceptualized by Jean-Luc Nancy, who sees in it a non-invasive movement of two bodies along each other, seeking closeness allowing for maintaining autonomy:

> A touching, a tact, like an address: a writer doesn't touch by grasping, by taking in hand (from *begreifen* = seizing, taking over), but touches by way of addressing himself, sending himself *to* the touch of something outside, hidden, displaced, spaced.[14]

Description, entangled in paradoxes, an attempt at presenting touch in a text through language, is simultaneously a form of auto-presentation and a manifestation of willingness to learn through opening a relationship rather than a conceptual elaboration. What is especially significant, it stems from detail – highlights powered by playing with perspectives of a part and the whole between which Stasiuk's protagonists travel. It is completely relational – the subject describes because they touch and they are touched, they initiate an account at the same time being led and transformed in it. Each detail of experienced constellations of actors – characteristics through which objects present themselves to them: smells, colors, textures, consistencies, and measurements – is a potential stimulus for discovering similarity, their parallelism to the Other, their own entanglement in the world. Thanks to understanding them, the subject can regain the identity of their body among other bodies and the sense of being an integral part of the world by discarding the alienated position of an interpreter.

Asymptotic description – constellations of details as new fields of eventuality

> These few things, tools and goods comprised extraordinary chaos. Everything looked as if it had been discarded halfway through some activity, abandoned, as if the world ran out of its energy then and there.[15]

The conviction that the experience of reality is gradable, and that things reveal themselves to a different extent has a clear Schulz character. For Stasiuk, this makes studying presence an inquiry into ways in which different phenomena manifest themselves and how their intensity fluctuates. This allows details to emerge, each phenomenon to appear, become weaker, fade away, making room for next ones, whereas description follows subsequent expressive demonstrations of their existence:

[14]Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, translated into Polish by Małgorzata Kwietniewska (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, 2002), 19. English version translated by Richard A. Rand, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 118-119.

[15]Andrzej Stasiuk, *Jadąc do Babadag* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2004), 55.

> The blue heat faded away a bit in valleys.[16]

> Mist goes up to the sky. It uncovers haystacks, black fences and sharp roofs. The air is dark green. The thick sky detaches itself from the horizon, the crack revealing the glow of another world.[17]

The movement of the world, uncovering and covering of its layers, tracing cracks, slits, revealing themselves in the short flashes of visibility, moments when detail meets the observer's eye, its isolations and manifestations of its own participation in constituting space-time, so obsessively studied and told by Stasiuk.

> The sky is swollen with light, but light remains imprisoned in it like air in a child's balloon.[18]

However, certain elements of reality are temporarily unavailable, blocked – only time discovers their new functions, awakens dormant characteristics, brings out their potential, making the virtual present.

In *Shimmering description and descriptive turn* Heather Houser proposes a pair of notions, *evoke* and *revoke* for working out the question of visibility in a text. What she calls "the paradox of presence" concerns not only the conflict between the awareness of a story's fictionality and the wish for it to be real, but also destabilization of the reader's position, stuck between movement and pause, distance and inclusion, presence, and withdrawal. The tension between the work of memory and awareness of the impossibility to actually evoke and recreate a moment makes it impossible to reduce description to a simple illusion of reality – it becomes necessary to recognize its dynamics of presence. By making description asymptotic, Houser sees the pulsing rhythm of zooming in and out as a special characteristic of description. This rhythm becomes a key characteristic of the dynamics of description based on sinusoidal movement, which is an expression of constantly seeking the moment of approaching the expression and image of an object.

However, there is no hope that it is possible to remain in that moment, as detail is always caught at a s p e c i a l moment, and the contemporary descriptor must know full well that every linguistic conceptualization of reality, by striving towards adequacy, has to participate in the fluidity and movement of the world:

> Houses shake off darkness like a dog shakes off water, white like skulls wearing shiny black glasses.[19]

> Constellations circulate and sprinkle cottages with light. Sharp roofs cut the light in half, it falls down and soaks into the ground like rain.[20]

[16]Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 113.
[17]Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 7.
[18]Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 8.
[19]Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 7.
[20]Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 186.

The micro perspective (careful observation, focusing on seemingly inconspicuous nuances) and the macro perspective (seeking sources, origins, and rules of experience) converge in Stasiuk's light metaphors. Light gives life and takes it away, becomes weaker, trickles, sometimes it is diluted and motionless, the only thing worth describing, although at the same time it is impossible to describe it – the only thing that can be done is to keep trying to conceptualize it. Inevitability is contrary to its dualistic, corpuscular-wave nature – being an electromagnetic wave and a stream of particles, and as such – constant motion, light exposes the world's movability, changing contours of things, their clarity, intensity. Przemysław Czapliński observes that it is symptomatic for Stasiuk's narrative strategies to transfer eventuality from the sphere of activity to the sphere of phenomena[21], which disrupts the reader's sense of change via linguistic means, thus forcing to attribute stability and dynamicity to each element of reality in a new way. Epithets in Stasiuk's prose define current states rather than general properties, with process as the main attribute of description – narrators talk about characteristics via activities, making the description of a network of relations dynamic here and now, pointing out relationships between things through modeling the collocations of verbs and adjectives. Mentioning minor activities, such as drinking a morning Albanian coffee brewed in a cup, releases history, a custom, tradition, ritual. Stasiuk collects snapshots from landscapes, facial expressions of people he passes by, what a person sitting next to him in a bar is eating – he collects sentences, simple notes, and observations in order to bind them with a reflective frame of a story.

> What has passed, returns. Like a tender needle through the heart. One detail suffices. A sound, smell, image, moment. You catch something in the corner of the eye, and what has passed returns with unexpected force.[22]

Detail emerges from the background, insistently marking its distinctiveness. However, the story provoked by it always relies on the changeable play of phenomena, which engages all senses through direct perception or work of memory and imagination. The subject not only sees and describes, but also hears, tastes, and touches. They not only watch, observe and interpret, but also participate in a non-verbal dialogue with their surroundings, initiating senses – witnesses and receptors of matter – opening themselves to presence catalyzed by attractive details: touching texture, an intense smell, tone. It is difficult to answer the question of what plays the main role in the spectacle of description: the one describing or what is described Likewise, aporias remain unsolved – aporias inspired by subsequent narrators, sometimes demanding to describe primary and timeless space, melting their "I" in the huge "now", sometimes claiming that

> Actually all I do is describe my own physiology. Changes in the electric field on my retina, changes in temperature, different concentrations of fragrance molecules in the air, oscillation of frequency of sound waves. This is what comprises the world.[23]

[21]Zob. Przemysław Czapliński, „Gnostycki traktat opisowy", *Kresy* nr 1 (1998): 142.
[22]Andrzej Stasiuk, *Nie ma ekspresów przy żółtych drogach* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2013), 9.
[23]Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 129.

Stasiuk consciously blurs the line between describing oneself and the world. However, regardless of where the line between "I" and reality lies, both moving towards the point where they become indistinguishable, the descriptor, constantly trying to go over the horizon of the culture of meaning, never stops confronting experiencing presence with linguistic matter, so that what exists "is not lost, keeps existing, so that the world is not overcome by nothingness"[24].

translated by Paulina Zagórska

[24]Stasiuk, *Nie ma ekspresów przy żółtych drogac*h, 141.

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KEYWORDS

SPACE

description

detail

Abstract:
The paper discusses the significance and role of detail in works by Andrzej Stasiuk, considered in the context of reevaluating literary description as part of the descriptive turn. It analyzes how the distribution of presence in his texts allows to present the experience of history through sensually experiencing spatial relations expressed through descriptive strategies based on describing history preserved in things – strategies stemming from the awareness of accumulation of time.

PRESENCE

descriptive turn

chronotype

TURN TOWARDS THINGS

Note on the Author:
Zofia Paetz – born in 1998, PhD candidate at AMU Schoold of Languages and Literatures. Her research interests focus on the descriptive turn and literary description in terms of studies into presence, as well as literary and scientific theory. Graduate of a literature curation M.A. program, passionate about popularization and animation of culture.

Andrzej Tretiak as a translation critic

Małgorzata Nowak

ORCID: 0000-0001-7923-6793

Andrzej Tretiak (1886–1944) was the founder of the Warsaw school of English studies and literary translation (he was a translator of Shakespeare's works); his broad scholarly interests also included the works of George Gordon Byron. In the history of the Polish reception of Byron, Tretiak went down not only thanks to his monographs published in the interwar period (*Literatura angielska okresu romantyzmu 1798–1831* [English Romantic Literature 1798–1831], *Lord Byron* [Lord Byron]), but also thank to his cooperation with Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza [Krakow publishing company], which published two volumes of Byron's works, edited by Tretiak, as part of the Polish National Library series. Tales in verse translated by Polish Romantic poets (1924) were published in the first volume, and the dramatic poem *Manfred* and the play *Cain* translated by Zofia Reutt-Witkowska were published in the second volume (1928). The collection of tales in verse is particularly important from the point of view of translation studies, as it contains Tretiak's comments on the selected translations in the form of almost several hundred footnotes. Tretiak confronts selected fragments of the Polish translations with the originals, paying attention to the changes made by the translators (additions, omissions), commenting on their choices regarding the use of equivalents, or sharing his own translations of relevant lines.

Tretiak explains to the reader that he chose to discuss translations made by Romantic poets because those writers felt and experienced Byron's poetry most deeply.[1] Apart from the general remarks about the quality of translations made in the introduction, the editor also openly names

[1] Andrzej Tretiak, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: Jerzy Byron, *Powieści poetyckie* [Tales in verse], ed. Andrzej Tretiak (Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1924), XLVII.

the best and the worst translators of Byron's works. These are, respectively, Julian Korsak and Antoni Edward Odyniec. Korsak, according to Tretiak, is the only translator who "truly conveys the nature of Byron's poetry" and "we find perfect equivalents in his translations; the rhythm and the poetics remind one of *Maria*; it is a masterpiece of Byronian influence in Poland."[2] Odyniec, on the other hand, "effectively misrepresents the Byronian spirit; numerous examples of such inaccuracies may be found in the footnotes to his translations."[3] It is worth noting that Tretiak's opinion is not corroborated by other scholars, be it in the nineteenth century or later. Marian Zdziechowski argued almost thirty years before Tretiak that Korsak translated Byron incompetently, and *Lara* was slightly better than the particularly weak *Prisoner of Chillon*, while Odyniec did not so much distort as, under the influence of his disposition, deprived Byron's lines of darkness.[4] In turn, Wanda Krajewska, a scholar active in the second half of the 20th century, considers Odyniec's translation to be the best Polish version of *The Corsair*, despite certain shortcomings that limit the character's psychological depth and despite the fact the poem was adapted to fit Polish political realities.[5] As for *Lara*, Krajewska writes that Korsak's translation lacks three essential features, namely a strong emphasis on the aristocratic theme, numerous Gothic elements, and emotionality. She concludes that Tretiak's opinion was too flattering.[6]

The aim of this article is to reconstruct the evaluation criteria adopted by Tretiak and to verify the claim that Korsak is a better translator than Odyniec. I shall look at Tretiak's footnotes to *The Corsair* and *Lara*, rooting my analysis in a comparative model of translation criticism. Due to the number of footnotes and comments, I shall focus on the comments which discuss key elements of the Byronic tale in verse: the protagonist and female characters, the poetics of mystery and the realities of the works set in Greece under Ottoman rule (*The Corsair*) and in medieval Spain (*Lara*).

Demonic face

Analyzing Odyniec's translation of *The Corsair*, Tretiak notes that the translator left out the following passage after line 136 "(on the brand) / Not oft a resting stuff to that red hand?"[7] (C, 340) – and immediately adds – "Conrad's 'red hand' is mentioned several times (this detail is systematically omitted by Odyniec). – This probably refers to Conrad's red glove"[8] (K, 127). In the original, these lines end with a question pertaining to the identity of a man who is looking down at the waves

[2] Tretiak, ," XLVIII.

[3] Tretiak, ," XLVIII.

[4] Marian Zdziechowski, *Byron i jego wiek. Studya porównawczo-literackie* [Byron and his age. Comparative and literary studies]. Vol. 2: *Czechy*, *Rosya*, *Polska* [Czechia, Russia, Poland] (Kraków: Akademia Umiejętności, 1897), 540–541.

[5] Wanda Krajewska, "Polskie przekłady powieści poetyckich Byrona w okresie romantyzmu" [Polish translations of Byron's tales in verse in the Romantic period], *Pamiętnik Literacki* LXXI, 1 (1980): 156–160.

[6] Krajewska, "Polskie przekłady," 172.

[7] All quotes from Byron's *The Corsair* are from: George Byron, *The Corsair* in: *The poetical works of Byron. Cambridge Edition,* revised and with a new introduction by Robert F. Gleckner (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 337–365; henceforth, I use the abbreviation C and provide page number in parenthesis.

[8] All Tretiak's comments on *The Corsair* and fragments of the Polish translation are from: Jerzy Byron, "Korsarz" [The Corsair], trans. Antoni Edward Odyniec, in: Jerzy Byron, *Powieści poetyckie* [Tales in verse], ed. Andrzej Tretiak (Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1924), 119—197; henceforth, I use the abbreviation K and provide page number in parenthesis.

from a hill (waves and not walls, as Odyniec writes, and which Tretiak, amazingly enough, fails to notice). This man turns out to be the protagonist. The fact that the translator failed to notice the red hand is indeed puzzling, all the more so if we consider that this term may be associated with Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In Book 2, a council regarding further warfare takes place in Pandæmonium and Belial describes God's punishing hand as "his red right hand"[9] (PL, 30). The lack of this detail limits potential interpretations, all the more so considering the fact that the origin of Byronic heroes may be traced back to the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. As Mario Praz points out, the Byronic hero is the same type of "rebel," and his characteristic features include, among others, loneliness, a bitter laugh, and a pale face which, at times, reveals suffering and strong passions.[10]

Conrad's face when he is left alone after Juan informs him that Seyd plans to attack him is a great example of such an expressive countenance. Let me quote a longer excerpt:

> Then – with the hurried tread, the upward eye,
> The clenched hand, the pause of agony,
> That listens, starting, lest the step too near
> Approach intrusive on that mood of fear:
> Then – with each feature working from the heart,
> With the feelings loosed to strengthen – not depart,
> That rise – convulse – contend – that freeze or glow,
> Flush in the cheek, or dump upon the brow;
> Then – Stranger! if thou canst and tremblest not,
> Behold his soul, the rest that soothest his lot!
> Mark how that lone and blighted bosom sears
> The seathing thought of execrated years!
> Behold – but who hath seen, or e'er shall see,
> Man as himself, the secret spirit free? (C, 341)

Odyniec translates the above as follows:

> Patrz! gdy wódz w nocy, z rozognionem czołem,
> Załamał ręce, szybkiem chodzi kołem,
> I nagle stanie, i zadrży – czy w ciszy
> Śledzącej zdrady kroków nie dosłyszy? –
> Patrz, jak się dziko groźna brew nachmurza,
> Gdy każdym nerwem wnętrzna miota burza.
> Patrz w jego wzroku na szaleństwo ducha!
> Iskrzy, mgli, krzepnie, i znów ogniem bucha.
> Patrz – jeśli zniesiesz widok tej katuszy, ––
> Jaki los jego! jaki pokój duszy!
> Jak, cel zawiści gminu, śród ukrycia

[9] All quotes from *Paradise Lost* are from: John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: HarperCollins, 2013); henceforth, I use the abbreviation PL and provide page number in parenthesis.

[10] Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1933), 59-60.

> Pożywa owoc występnego życia!
> Patrz! tam go poznasz; – lecz któż tak z badaczy
> Przejrzy człowieka? – któż ducha obaczy? (K, 132).

A dynamic enumeration of nouns used to describe Conrad from the very beginning poses a challenge for the translator. Odyniec chooses verbs instead, which perfectly reflects the dynamics of the original; the difference is that while Byron puts individual elements of Conrad's face and figure into sharp focus, Odyniec presents it to the reader as a whole. The subsequent difficult lines describing the strength of the hero's feelings are very vivid – here, respectively, it is Odyniec who emphasizes the detail, focusing on the eye, which literally becomes a mirror of the tragic soul. Again, Milton's Satan comes to mind. Waking up in hell, "round he throws his baleful eyes" (PL, 2), while his face, although disfigured by lightning, did not lose its clarity when it comes to the eyes: "but under brows/ Of dauntless courage and considerate pride/ Waiting revenge, Cruel his eye" (PL, 18).

Conrad is tormented by his passions, which affects his body. According to the translator, he is in fear of betrayal and, moreover, cannot stop thinking about some old unnamed crime, its possible repercussions, and punishment for it, and such thoughts torture him. The original does not mention any crime at this point – Conrad struggles to breathe as he thinks about the cursed past and his transgressions. The mention of the curse strengthens the infernal connotations but does not directly point to an immoral act – it may just as well indicate misfortune or the actions of the antagonist and/or supernatural forces. This notwithstanding, the theme of guilt is often repeated throughout the poem (it is connected with Byron's Calvinist upbringing), which Odyniec (as well as the translators of Byron's other tales in verse, e.g., *Parisina*) often changed, writing about crime instead, which limited the spiritual reading of the text.[11] The translator chooses to add that the hero is in fear of betrayal and that he is the object of envy of outsiders, referred to as commoners (which is difficult to justify considering the theme of *The Corsair*; the poetics of secrecy is not a sufficient explanation); however, he does not translate the original "stranger," using an imperative instead ("Patrz" [Look]), urging the reader to pay attention.

Tretiak translates the above fragment very literally; in his version, Conrad is like a transparent container for feelings which "puszczone wolno, aby nabrały mocy, a nie aby uleciały, które podnoszą się, skręcają, walczą, które krzepną lub rozżarzają się, płoną w policzkach lub parują potem na czole" [run freely to gain strength, not to fly away, which rise, twist, fight, calm down and inflame, burn in the cheeks or steam from the forehead]. Tertiak's equivalent of "blighted bosom" is "wypalone łono" [a burnt womb]. The final lines are the most interesting: "Patrz, – lecz któż widział albo kiedykolwiek zobaczy człowieka jakim on jest naprawdę, – ducha tajemnego zupełnie wyzwolonego (z materji)" [Look, but who has ever seen or will ever see a man as he really is, a secret spirit completely freed (from matter)] (K, 132). Odyniec in his version points to the impotence of empirical science in unravelling the mysteries of human nature, the spiritual side of which eludes understanding. Tretiak seemingly concurs, but for him man himself is but a spirit. Byron does not condemn matter; he only points to the mysteries of the human soul, which no one and nothing may control.

[11]Krajewska, "Polskie przekłady," 157.

Indeed, Byron describes the titular character in a similar way in *Lara*. Tretiak comments on this rather long description, referring to the use of specific phrases. What is intriguing, however, is his own translation of one couplet. Julian Korsak translates it as follows:

> Dusza, gardząc tem światem z myślami wszystkiemi,
> Zamknęła się w świat własny, daleko od ziemi.
> Wszystko zimno przechodząc, co po ziemi chodzi,
> W nim krew coraz to więcej ziębi się i chłodzi[12] (L, 214).

This, at first glance, quite complicated fragment Tretiak translates as: "w oryg. «tak zimno przechodząc (do porządku) nad wszystkiem, co przechodziło (stawało się) u jego stóp, krew jego zdawała się płynąć obecnie umiarkowanym strumieniem»" [in the original: passing so coldly over (acknowledging) all that passed at his feet, his blood seemed to flow with no haste] (L, 214), thus complicating it even more. And in the original, everything is much simpler: "Thus coldly passing all that pass'd below, / His blood in temperate seeming now would flow"[13] (LB, 317). Byron explains that Lara has distanced himself from the earthly world, emphasizing his coldness and detachment – his blood no longer boils at the sight of misgivings.

Gothic horror

Tretiak also refers to another fragment of the original which describes Lara's appearance. He points out that Korsak is guilty of a more serious technical shortcoming, namely misunderstanding the diction of the original. This error is closely related to the space in which the action takes place. On the walls of Lara's castle hang, as befits an ancestral seat, portraits of his ancestors. The stained-glass windows depict saints. However, in the Polish version, these saints are somewhat demonic:

> [...)] tylko światłość blada
> Księżyca kratą okien na podłogę pada,
> Oświetlając gotyckie sklepienia i szyby,
> Na których święci klęczą i modlą się niby.
> Kształty ich w fantastyczne przechodzą postaci:
> Żyją, lecz każdy z twarzy barwę życia traci.
> Włos ich czarny, zjeżony, twarz ciemna, ponura,
> I szeroko rozwijane, migające pióra,
> Ich postać strojąc w całą okropność mogiły,
> Jako godła upiora straszliwie świeciły (L, 208-209).

[12]All Tretiak's comments on *Lara* and fragments of the Polish translation are from: Jerzy Byron, *Lara*, trans. Julian Korsak, in: Jerzy Byron, *Powieści poetyckie*, ed. Andrzej Tretiak (Kraków: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1924), 199—299); henceforth, I use the abbreviation L and provide page number in parenthesis.

[13]All quotes from Byron's *Lara* are from: George Byron, *Lara*, in: *The poetical works of Byron. Cambridge Edition,* revised and with a new introduction by Robert F. Gleckner (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 366—383; henceforth, I use the abbreviation LB and provide page number in parenthesis.

Even considering Byron's fascination with Gothic aesthetics, this fragment sounds simply bizarre. Tretiak briefly explains that Korsak, due to a misunderstanding of the text, attributes Lara's facial features to these images: "Wpośród widmowych świętych z witraży, Lara też wygląda jak upiór «z nastroszonemi czarnemi lokami, z ponurem czołem, i z pływającym szeroko, potrząsanym [szybkim chodem] pióropuszem, które zdawały się być właściwościami upiora i nadawały jego wyglądowi całą tą grozę, jaką daje grób»" [Among the spectral saints in the stained-glass windows, Lara, too, looks like a ghost "with stray locks of black curly hair, a gloomy brow, and a wide plume (which moved as he walked); these features seemed to befit a ghost – he inspired terror, just as much as a grave"] (L, 209). Tretiak comments are neutral in tone, although Korsak's mistake is serious – Byron's diction is clear and precise at this point, leaving no room for any doubt:

> Through the dim lattice o'er the floor of stone;
> And the high fretted roof, and saints that there
> O'er Gothic windows knelt in pictured prayer,
> Reflected in fantastic figures grew,
> Like life, but not like mortal life, to view: –
> His bristling locks of sable, brow of gloom,
> And the wide waving of his shaken plume,
> Glance like a spectre's attributes, and gave
> His aspects all that terror gives the grave (LB, 368–369).

The pronoun "his" must refer to Lara, who at the beginning of the stanza returns to the castle from a walk in the garden and is completely alone.

Korsak, having over-stylized the saints in the stained-glass windows as ghouls taken straight from Gothic novels, fails to convey Byron's sense of horror and ghastliness. When one night the servants are awakened by strange noises coming from Lara's chamber, the translator renders the scene as if a murder was about to take place: "Słyszysz! czy kto wybija drzwi z Lary mieszkania: / Łoskot, dźwięk, krzyk i za nim straszliwe wołania" [Hark! Is someone breaking the door of Lara's hall:/ A sound, a noise, a shriek followed by terrible cries]. Tertiak's comment is very matter-of-fact in tone: "w oryg: «»Słyszysz! jakieś pomruki słychać w sali Lary»«" [in the original: "Hark! Some murmurs may be heard in Lara's hall"] (L, 209). He does not add that Byron showed much greater poetic skill than his translator: "Hark! There be murmurs heard in Lara's hall – / A sound – a voice – a shriek – a fearful call! / A long, loud shriek – and silence" (LB, 369). At the very beginning, the entire castle is dark and silent; there is only light in Lara's chamber; then, one may hear some disturbing sounds (whispers rather than murmurs), which gradually intensify. The silence is all the more so poignant after everything falls silent. Korsak fails to convey the growing tension, and completely ignores the fact that Byron uses monosyllables and alliterations to intensify the dynamics and drama. In the Polish version, a noise is heard immediately and for quite a long time, which implies a burglary or the presence of some uninvited guest, while the original does not rule out a supernatural interpretation – perhaps the ghost of one of Lara's ancestors, whose portraits hang on the walls, now stand before him; alternatively, perhaps Lara was talking to himself, grabbed his weapon in a frenzy before he fainted, and was revived by his servants? While Byron is subtle and rhythmically complex, Korsak, metaphorically speaking, does not beat around the bush – it may also be seen in the description of the castle, as pointed out by Tretiak.

"Dziki świst wiatru, łoskot spadającej cegły" [Howling wind, the noise of a falling brick], is in fact, according to Tretiak, "«»uderzający miarowo skrzydłami nietoperz, nocny śpiew wiatru od morza»«" ["a bat steadily beating its wings, the sound of the sea breeze at night"] (L, 211).

It is at night that Lara sets out with his faithful page to take part in his final battle. Korsak modifies the scene slightly: he adds "oczy łez nie ronią" [the eyes do not shed tears] when he writes about Lara taking his servant's hand and he also emphasizes how pale Kaled is, writing about "strasznej białości, jak kość od cmentarza" [terrible whiteness, like a bone found in a graveyard]. Tretiak observes that the original only points to the effect of moonlight, insofar as "nie ma tych wszystkich «»bladości»«" [the original does not mention "terrible whiteness"] (L, 237). However, Tretiak appears to be too meticulous: in the original, "moon's dim twilight" casts a shade on Kaled's face ("unwonted hue / of mournful paleness") (LB, 380). Korsak's translation stays true to sepulchral connotations and does not violate Byron's original.

Innocence and crime

Conrad and Lara have women who love them. Conrad's beloved is Medora; she is as mysterious as he is, and she is also highly respected by Conrad's comrades. When they return without their leader, who has been imprisoned, Odyniec describes her reaction to the terrible news thus: "jednak nie blednie, nie drży, nie upadła / W dziewiczej piersi wielkie czucia żyły / Dotąd własnej nieświadome siły" [alas, she does not turn pale, she does not tremble, she does not faint / Her maiden breast heaves with passion / which she did not know existed]. Tretiak comments: "«w dziewiczej piersi» zupełnie niestosowanie użyte w miejsce oryginalnego zwrotu: «pod tym łagodnym, pięknym wyglądem»" ["her maiden breast" has been used utterly inappropriately instead of the original "beneath that meek mild appearance"] (K, 172). Tretiak is so literal that his version becomes meaningless and makes sense only in the broader context of the entire passage. Byron describes Medora's reaction as follows:

> She saw at once, yet sunk not – trembled not;
> Beneath that grief, that loneliness a lot,
> Within that meek mild form, were feelings high
> That deem'd not till they found their energy (C, 357).

Evidently, Byron wishes to contrast Medora's gentleness and subtlety with the unexpected power of her emotions (over which, it should be emphasized, the woman has control), and the poet refers to form not so much in the sense of appearance but in the sense of the frame, the silhouette. Odyniec's translation may not be the best, but it conveys the main idea of the original. It is hard to say why it was deemed "inappropriate;" I do not think that Tretiak suggests that the translator implies something erotic, although when Odyniec uses the word "maiden" for the first time in *The Bride of Abydos*, he does so in the stanza where Byron emphasizes the physical beauty of Zuleika. Let us compare it with a scene in which Conrad saves Gulnare. His future savior is "najpiękniejsza" [the most beautiful], "postać niebianki, tronu godne lica" [she has the figure of a goddess, her face is worthy of a crown] (K, 154).

According to Tretiak, the first description of Gulnare, a Turkish slave from the pasha's harem

whose life Conrad saved, is far from satisfactory as "odbiegający od oryginału i charakterystyczny dla sentymentalnego przekładu Odyńca" [it differs from the original; it exemplifies well Odyniec's sentimental style] (K, 161). Tretiak does not justify this claim, neither does he point to other examples of sentimentality in Odyniec's text (the term "sentimentality" does not appear in any other footnote to *The Corsair*). Instead, he provides his own translation, as usual, emphasizing that he conveys the poetics of the original:

> Nie, to ziemska postać, z twarzą anielską! Jej białe ramię niosło w górze lampę, lecz delikatnie zasłaniało ją, by światło nie padło zbyt gwałtownie na powiekę tego zamkniętego oka, które otwiera się jedynie ku swej męce, a raz otwarte – raz tylko jeden może się zamknąć. [Sens tego zdania, że Konrada czeka jedno tylko wybudzenie, gdyż następny dzień przyniesie mu śmierć – i że myśl o tem nie pozwoliłaby mu zasnąć na nowo]. Ta postać z okiem tak ciemnem i licem tak świeżem i ciemno-kasztanowemi falami strojnych w kamienie drogie i zaplecionych włosów; z kształtami wiotkiej wróżki dobrej – bosą stopą, co świeci jak śnieg i jak on cicho pada na ziemię – jak ona przeszła…" [No, it is an earthly figure with a heavenly face! Her white arm raised a lamp, but gently shaded it so that the light would not fall too violently on the lid of the closed eye, the eye which opens only to witness its torment, and once opened, may close but once [The meaning of this sentence is that Conrad may only awaken once, because the next day will bring him death – and the thought of it would not let him fall asleep again]. That figure with an eye so dark and a face so fresh, and braided dark auburn wavy hair adorned with precious stones; like a fairy, with a bare foot that is white like snow, delicate like snow, she walks without making a sound…] (K, 161).

This translation, as was the case with Conrad's description, is philological and adheres strictly to the original; Tretiak even explains the metaphor, although it is not very complicated. And there would be nothing particularly unusual about it if it were not for the fact that Odyniec translates this fragment thus:

> Nie! – choć anielska w licu piękność świta,
> Ziemski to tylko jest anioł – kobieta!
> Wzniesioną lampę w jednej trzyma dłoni,
> Drugą jej światło przed uśpionym chroni,
> By blask niewczesny nie padał na oczy,
> Co z snu otwarte, wnet znów śmierć zamroczy.
> W powiewnej bieli, postać jej w milczeniu
> Jak duch wiejący posuwa się w cieniu.
> Lekka, wysoka – pierś tylko i lica
> Mdłe światło lampy zaledwie oświeca.
> Włos, rozpuszczony na białej odzieży
> Jak smug ciemności, wpół na piersiach leży,
> Wpół spływa z ramion; stopa jak śnieg biała
> I jak śnieg cicho na ziemię spadała (K, 161–162).[14]

[14]Byron's original reads: "is it some seraph sent to grant him grace?/ No, 'tis an earthly form with heavenly face!/ Its white arm rais'd a lamp — yet gently hid, / Lest the ray flash abruptly on the lid/ Of that clos'd eye, which opens but to pain./ And once unclosed — but once may close again./ That form, with eye so dark, and cheek so fair./ And auburn waves of gemm'd and braided hair;/ With shape of fairy lightness — naked foot./ That shines like snow, and falls on earth as mute" [translator's note].

The Polish translation does not differ too much from the English text, conveying all the original meaning, except when comparing Gulnare to a fairy, her hairstyle, and her outfit. Byron does not mention the latter. Odyniec writes that the woman wears white and that her hair is unbraided, and he has his reasons. White connotes purity and innocence, while unbraided hair may symbolically refer to an erotic undertone of the scene (as a sign of female desire). This perspective renders Gulnare, as a character, more complex – having fallen in love with Conrad, she decides to betray her husband. Odyniec's translation also points to the sensual nature of her infatuation, which would be at odds with the rules of sentimental poetics. By emphasizing the whiteness of the outfit and the darkness of the hair, Odyniec maintains the contrast created in the original by juxtaposing the woman's dark eye with her pale face. Tretiak's comments are thus unsubstantiated.

However, Gulnare's betrayal is not motivated by desire; the woman kills Seyd to save Conrad. Tretiak notices that Odyniec added two details to her description right after the murder: "[.....)] dodane szczegóły ubrania Gulnary, że postać «»bielą otulona»« i że «»szat krew nie plamiła»« (w. 1685 i 7)" [[.....] Odyniec added some details about Gulnare's clothes, writing that she was "wrapped in white" and that "blood did not stain the clothes" (verses 1685 and 7)] (K, 183). Tretiak does not seem to understand that Odyniec is thus consistent, because in his version the heroine wears white, and that he increases the contrast between the moral "purity" symbolized by the color white and the drop of blood on the woman's forehead, which points to the crime she committed; indeed, Conrad is initially misled by the whiteness of the clothes – he is relieved to find no traces of murder, and it takes him a while to realize his mistake. In the original text, Conrad looks at Gulnare's hands, but he does not notice any weapon or any other disturbing signs: "Nor poniard in that hand, nor sign of ill" (C, 361). Of course, Odyniec does not translate the original word for word, but he conveys the atmosphere of the entire scene.

In *Lara* (which, according to Tretiak, is the sequel to *The Corsair*), the Polish scholar argues that Gulnare appears as Kaled, Lara's page, who, as it is revealed after Lara's death, turns out to be a woman. Korsak had great problems with conveying the double identity of this character, which Tretiak simply explained thus: "Zaledwo więcej żywy, niż pan ukochany. / Kochany! nigdy w piersi ludzkiej nie spoczywa / Miłość podobnie szczera, podobnie prawdziwa!" – „Korsak nie mógł tu wybrnąć z trudności podwójnego znaczenia *man*; mężczyzna i człowiek: w oryg: «niż ten, którego on kochał! O nigdy jeszcze w piersi męskiej nie żyła tak wielka miłość»" [Just more alive than the beloved./ Beloved! Never before has a love so sincere, so true/ been found in a man's breast! – Korsak could not resolve the difficulty of the double meaning of man; as a male and a human being: in the original "than that he loved so well./ Than that /he/ lov'd! Oh! never yet beneath/ The breast of man such trusty love may breathe!"] (L, 242-243). It should be noted that Odyniec also faced a similar problem. He had to find a way to translate the word *homicide* in reference to Gulnare. He chose the word "zbójczyni" [wrongdoer], and Tretiak criticized him for that. Tretiak wrote that calling a woman who murdered her husband, and who in the original was described by means of "the sublime word *the Homicide*, the matricide" a wrongdoer is "trivial" (K, 186). The translation, however, is by no means simple. The verb *homicide* refers to murder regardless of the gender of the victim, so Odyniec does not make a semantic mistake. In order to keep the rhythm of the poem, he turns "zabójczyni" [murderer] into "zbójczyni" [wrongdoer], which suggests breaking the law, but the question of the murder is thus displaced into the background (but the reader is aware of that). Tretiak

places emphasis on the double meaning of "mąż" [man] both as a male and as a husband, which from his perspective highlights both the horror and the singularity of the woman's crime, but using the word he chose in a line of eleven syllables seems impossible.

This notwithstanding, Korsak had also other problems with Kaled. After Lara's death, he/she does not want to leave his beloved's body and descends into madness, the symptoms of which resemble Karusia's insanity from Mickiewicz's ballad *Romanticism*. Korsak writes that in the page's eyes one can see "ogień rozpaczy" [the fire of despair] similar to despair seen "jaki w gniewie niesilnym gra w oczach tygrzycy" [in the eyes of the tigress helpless in her anger]. Tretiak explains that Korsak mixed up two concepts: he writes about "w gniewie niesilnym," while the original reads "Her eye shot forth with all the living fire/ That haunts the tigress in her whelpless ire" (L, 246); Korsak thus confused "helpless" with "whelpless," as in deprived of whelps, puppies. The tigress was whelpless, that is angry because it lost her cubs, Tretiak explains, and not, as Byron incorrectly puts it, puppies. Did the translator really make a mistake? The Polish equivalent of the word "whelpless" does not exist, so Korsak would be forced to use a neologism like "bezszczenny," but perhaps he did not want to use it or perhaps he did not think of it. However, it cannot be denied that the rage of the tigress who lost her cubs is in a sense helpless – the tigress is not able to change what happened, so perhaps it was a deliberate choice on behalf of the translator. Still, at the same time, the entire line is difficult to understand, because the cause of the animal's anger is not explained. Also, the original lines quoted by Tretiak are not "incorrect;" Byron simply used a metaphorical epithet.

Turbans and djerids

Tretiak also pays close attention to the equivalents used to describe the realities of the represented world. He notices, among other things, that the names of weapons are used incorrectly. According to Korsak, during a battle described in *Lara*, "na łękach siodeł błyszczą tarcze i dziryty" [shields and djerids shine from the side of the saddle] – the translator made a mistake and referred to the djerid, a throwing spear used in Asia and North Africa; probably, he was under the influence of Byron's other tales, in which Orientalism plays a very important role (L, 236). Korsak is also wrong when, in the description of the battle, he points to its center. "Tam, gdzie ogień najgęstszy nieprzyjaciel trzyma" [Where the enemy fire is the greatest], Tretiak writes, "u Byrona niema wzmianki o broni palnej, tylko o strzałach z łuku" [Byron does not mention firearms, only arrows and bows] (L, 238). Indeed, given the feudal social structure that actually triggered the conflict (Lara's personal motives are not as important; he only used this opportunity to escalate a situation that was already very difficult), the mention of firearms is an anachronism (elsewhere, Tretiak draws attention to Korsak's misunderstanding of the lines concerning the relationship between landowners and peasants).

According to Tretiak, Odyniec also makes a "military" mistake – he writes that Conard has to give his weapon to the armorer before the battle. Tretiak notes that "płatnerz – rzemieślnik wykonujący zbroje i części uzbrojenia służące do walki ręcznej; w owym czasie już pojęcie nieużywane i do pewnego stopnia psujące efekt wiersza, – W epoce romantyzmu o tyle znane, że często spotykano je w romansach historycznych Waltera Scotta" [the armorer was a craftsman who made armor and weapons used in hand-to-hand combat; at that time, the term was no longer in use and to

some extent ruined the effect of the poem; – In Romanticism the term was often found in Walter Scott's historical romances] (K, 128-129). This remark is surprising because Byron uses the word "armorer" (C, 340), which in Polish means the same as in English. It is disputable whether the tone of the poem is negatively affected, as the use of this equivalent in no way disturbs the meter.

According to Tretiak, Odyniec is also not able to convey the oriental aspects of the work, i.e., the presence of Turks. When Medora reproaches Conrad for abstaining from alcohol, in the Polish version she says: "Drżysz jak muzułman, gdy puchar obaczysz" [You tremble like a Muslim who sees a cup], and this, according to the Polish scholar, is "zanadto ostro oddane powiedzenie oryg.: «»jesteś więcej niż muzułmanin»«" [too literal a rendition of, in the original, "Thou more than Moslem when the cup appears!"] (C, 344). Medora, however, does not mean that Conrad is better than a Muslim (which is implied by Tretiak), but that her beloved is even more reluctant to drink alcohol than Muslims, and drinking alcohol is forbidden by Islam.

At Seyd's feist, Conrad is unmasked as a dervish and a fire breaks out. Seyd orders to capture the uninvited guest, but to no avail. "Próżno wre baszy wściekłość rozdąsana" [It is in vain that the Pacha pouts in anger," Odyniec writes. Tretiak adds: "Odyniec miał wyraźne upodobanie do słowa: dąsać się, rozdąsany itp. — tu użyte zupełnie niewłaściwie" [Odyniec must have liked the word "to pout, pouting" — it is used here completely inappropriately] (K, 152). However, Tretiak does not provide any additional examples from Odyniec's translation, and, we may conclude, is thus unable to justify the fact that he accused the translator of being fond of the word. Indeed, we do not find it anywhere else in Odyniec's translation of *The Corsair*, and the translator only uses it once in his version of *The Bride of Abydos*. Byron describes Seyd's "angry cry" (C, 349). Given that Gulnare says that her life depends on her master's whim, Odyniec's translation is not unfounded.

Shortly afterwards, the fight becomes more and more fierce. In the Polish translation, the corsair's enemies flee, and many people die: "Toczą się głowy po krwawej podłodze" [Heads are rolling on the bloody floor] (K, 152). Tretiak questions the intensity with which the battle is described: "w oryg.: «»po komnacie leżą porozcinane turbany»«. Odyniec z zwykłym sobie brakiem umiaru artystycznego wprowadza pojęcie odcinanych głów, co wymagałoby nadludzkiej siły Konrada, a – jak wiemy z opisu jego osoby – nie był on herkulesowego wzrostu ani siły; – zasadniczym rysem jego była odwaga i dzielność, nie siła fizyczna" [in the original: „The cloven turbans o'er the chamber spread." Odyniec, with his characteristic lack of artistic moderation, introduces the concept of decapitated heads, which would require Conrad to possess superhuman strength, and – as we know from Conrad's description – he was not of Herculean height or strength; – he was courageous and brave, but he did not have superhuman strength] (K, 152). Indeed, Byron does not describe a massacre but people who run away in panic and lose their turbans. Still, Tretiak's comment about Odyniec's "characteristic lack of artistic moderation" remains a mystery – the Polish critic does not comment on it further in any other footnote, nor does he give any examples from Odyniec's other works or translations.

Byron portrays Conrad not only as a warrior, but also as a leader. Tretiak points out Odyniec's inaccuracies in how he portrays the relations between Conrad and the other pirates. Describing Conrad's overwhelming influence on the others, the translator writes: "Wszystko ma w mocy, by zgraję zaślepić" [He has everything in his power to blind the mob]. Tretiak critically notes: "zgraję

— w oryg. crowd, tłum. Nasi tłumacze i naśladowcy Byrona często przesadzali w oddawaniu uczucia pogardy dla ludzi […], nadając w ten sposób niewłaściwą cechę antydemokratyczną jego utworom" [the mob – in the original: the crowd – Our translators and Byron's followers have often exaggerated the feeling of contempt for the people […], thus incorrectly presenting the English poet's works as anti-democratic] (K, 143). Of course, Byron opposed all forms of tyranny, and he also advocated for the Luddites in the House of Lords, but there is hardly any reason to think that calling a group of robbers who hold their leader in the highest esteem misrepresents Byron's original.

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This analysis clearly shows that Tretiak values fidelity in translation above other things; his understanding of fidelity involves striving for formal rather than dynamic equivalence. Tretiak comments on any and all violations to this rule, usually in the form of dynamic equivalents (adding single words, conveying the meaning of the original at the expense of philological differences). When the Polish critic shares with the reader his own translations of particularly "heretical" lines, he does not make any attempts to preserve the poetics of the text; he writes in prose, striving for the greatest possible degree of literalness – sometimes even at the expense of the meaning of individual sentences. Tretiak's priority is, of course, to provide the reader with a version that is as close to the original as possible, which – if we take into account the fact that, with the exception of Mickiewicz, other Polish translators of Byron's works were "minor" and less talented authors – is fully understandable. Overall, however, this approach is problematic for a number of reasons. Paradoxically, despite his scholarly emphasis on fidelity, Tretiak at times mistranslates Byron's original text.

First of all, Tretiak's philological translations in prose deprive Byron's texts of their expressive force based on the relationship between metaphors, rhyme, and rhythm. Stanisław Barańczak would definitely say that Tretiak made two cardinal errors at the same time: not only did he turn poetry into prose, but he also turned this prose into bad poetry.[15] While we might defend Tretiak by saying that his study was meant to be a scholarly and not a poetic text, the Polish critic in fact did not include the relevant fragments in English (except for single words or epithets), despite the fact that his translations were marked with the note "in the original." Had he indeed included them, his translations would have been purely utilitarian – helping people who had little or no knowledge of English understand the original (although everyone would have at least recognized the rhyme scheme used by Byron). And Tretiak's translations and remarks are not always, despite his best efforts, an accurate representation of Byron's poetics, which may be seen, for example, in the analyzed fragments concerning the emotions seen on Conrad's face or the paleness of Kaled's countenance. Tretiak openly mediates between the English author and the Polish reader; therefore, he is responsible for making the Polish reader understand Byron's poetic genius.

Secondly, because Tretiak pays so much attention to the philological aspect of the analyzed translations, he only criticizes. He does not emphasize particularly successful or interesting

[15] Stanisław Barańczak, "Mały, lecz maksymalistyczny Manifest translatologiczny albo: Tłumaczenie się z tego, że tłumaczy się wiersze również w celu wytłumaczenia innym tłumaczom, iż dla większości tłumaczeń wierszy nie ma wytłumaczenia" [A small yet maximalist translation manifesto or: I explain that I translate poems also in order to explain to other translators that there is no explanation for most translations of poems], *Teksty Drugie* no. 3 (1990): 32–33.

solutions used by the translators, and this does not allow him to fully assess their skills. What's more, because he focuses excessively on the details, the Polish scholar is unable to analyze larger parts of the text as thoroughly: his remarks about, for example, Odyniec's sentimentality are unsubstantiated. Indeed, Odyniec's translation is very often openly criticized, while Korsak's mistakes are discussed in a completely neutral tone. It seems, therefore, that his assessment of both translations is purely subjective and unsubstantiated.

In addition, Tretiak reads and judges both translations outside of their historical context, which does not allow for an objective review. While the Polish critic openly states at the beginning of his study that the translations made by Polish Romantic poets were chosen deliberately, he almost completely ignores the Romantic poets' approach to translation. And the Romantic theory of translation, on the one hand, stated the utilitarian nature of translations (i.e., simply allowing the reader to get to know the works of a foreign author), and, on the other hand, it clearly emphasized that the translator may be seen on an equal footing with the poet – as a genius who approaches foreign works on their own terms, thus enriching their respective national literatures.[16] Tretiak knew well that for the translators he selected, as practicing poets, philological fidelity was not the most important issue[17] and he still based his assessment solely on this aspect. Such an approach, almost by default, implies that the translators would be criticized – Tretiak had his own binding definition of a good translation, and he was blind and deaf to all other definitions that contradicted his.

What is even more astonishing is the fact that Tretiak attributes the extraordinary success of Byron's works among the European youth to his libertarian views and descriptions of passions, which he sees as innovative in Romantic literature,[18] but at the same time he seems to completely ignore the fact that Byron's works were so influential because the translations of his works resonated with readers as much as the originals. This, from today's perspective, obvious sign of a good translation and the translator's skills,[19] is of no importance to the early twentieth-century scholar.

In Tretiak's approach, a certain duality is evident – he consistently distinguishes between the historical-literary order and the translation order. Viewed from the perspective of the history of literature, a work that translated into Polish is always attributed to the author of the original, along with the entire, often complex, context related to the mediatory role of the translator (which, in such an approach, is naturally relegated to the background). On the other hand, when Tretiak analyzes the translated text as such, it becomes an ideal construct, intended to be a mirror image of the original. This mirror image may supposedly be created under any circumstances, regardless of the social and historical conditions. These perspectives are always parallel, never perpendicular, but they have one thing in common – they are hardly a mature reflection on the translator.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[16]Susan Bassnett, *Translation studies* (London–New York: Routledge, 2002), 69.

[17]Tretiak, "Wstęp," XLVII.

[18]Tretiak, "Wstęp," VI-–XII.

[19]Katharina Reiss, *Translation Criticism. The Potentials and Limitations. Categories and Criteria for Translation Quality*, trans. Erroll. F. Rhodes (New York: Routledge, 2014), 33.

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KEYWORDS

a tale in verse

Andrzej Tretiak

George Byron

Abstract:
In 1924, the Polish National Library published Andrzej Tretiak's edition of George Byron's tales in verse. In the introduction and numerous footnotes, Tretiak explained why specific translations were selected and ranked them in terms of quality, pointing out the mistakes and the changes made by the translators. Tretiak also evaluated the solutions chosen by the translators, at times comparing them with his own translations. The article presents a critical analysis of Tretiak's comments to two translations, "The Corsair" and "Lara," which allowed him to conclude that the best Polish translator of Byron was Julian Korsak, and the worst, Antoni Edward Odyniec.

TRANSLATION CRITICISM

the poetic novel

ROMANTICISM

Note on the Author:
Małgorzata Nowak – b. 1995, PhD student at the Department of Romantic Literature at the Institute of Polish Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Her research interests include: the problem of evil in Romantic literature, Polish reception of George Gordon Byron's works, the history and criticism of literary translation. She published her work in "Pamiętnik Literacki."

Literature's grammatical dynamic – a research perspective

Krzysztof Skibski

ORCID: 0000-0001-7548-1687

a shadow on asphalt
a man walking down the street
grey on grey

E. Tabakowska, *nie-pełna pustka* (2016, s. 50)

Too many questions

Designing possible characteristics of grammar could be a source of many metaphors. Fully aware of the fact that metaphor, too, is ambiguous, I would like to assume that a reference to some rule would be an obvious shared feature resulting from such activities. Such a reference would be obligatory, variable, overriding, modified, and the like. In this context, dynamic suggests complex, non-linear systems observable beyond laboratory conditions.

The questions which should be asked on that occasion refer to phenomena implying grammar rather than so-called defining features. A similar way of thinking will appear in this paper in a different context; however, it is based on a model of using language conditioned by the awareness of certain basic, common cultural categories (understood in a discursive way, including social context). This usage is about creating various and mutually dependent

periphrases which are in a dynamic relation with the categories mentioned here[1]. It would resemble discussing minimal poetry with Elżbieta Tabakowska (of course without using the word haiku). What is the source of such situations? First and foremost, from the wish to make the message specific and individual, from detailed aims which are lost in basic categories, and ultimately – from the need to have a conversation without restrictive identifications. Nuances stave off the temptation to name, leading interlocutors towards a periphrasis conditioned by situationality. Let us go back to Ludwig Wittgenstein's seminal *Philosophical Investigations*, where he refers to a "grammatical" character of considerations regarding a phrase from St. Augustine's *Confessions*[2]: "we eliminate misunderstanding by making our expressions more exact; but now it may look as if we were aiming at a particular state, a state of complete exactness, and as if this were the real goal of our investigations"[3]. And this is only about situations of intentional explanation, that is, a communicatively simple transmission of information (without hidden or ambiguous aims).

This is nothing new. However, if we looked at this dynamic equivalence, that is producing texts not only in a situational relation, we could ask further questions about rules for producing such texts, and thus also about grammar motivating this language practice. This is a valid question also because such relationality is a test for grammatical operability.

Let us analyze an example which also refers to considerations about poetic defining[4]:

[1] This paper was inspired mostly by Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose fascination with "language games" facilitated capturing many key dilemmas, also in terms of reception of literary texts, which is the main focus of my considerations here. As a special way of using language (due to the basic communicative situation), literature has a bigger exemplifying potential than texts produced by everyday practice. The peculiar character of literary language is another problem, discussed (among others) by Marek Zaleski in "Niczym mydło w grze w scrabble" [Like a blank in Scrabble] (on affects in Magdalena Tulli's prose): "Each use of language participates in its systematicity, but systematicity manifests itself through use. According to Deleuze literature is such a manifestation of language in which essences (and differences) are the clearest due to individual style" (*Teksty Drugie* 6 [2013]: 35).

[2] I would like to stress that Augustine's phrase (*Wyznania*, XI, 14) refers to a situation when a person knows what time is, but is unable to explain it. This can take considerations about description further in order to analyze whether explaining is based on an ostensive definition (in reference to a specific language user), which is transposed *ad hoc* to description depending on a situation, or on an elaborate synonymous phrase referring to the experience and knowledge of the person asked (the explaining person). This dilemma obviously refers to an isolated situation – both in a conversation and in the literary communicative process such events can be singled out. Nonetheless, constructing description (regardless of the name of the basic category) is typical in language use. I shall elaborate on that issue as well as on specific poetic definitions later in this text.

[3] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Dociekania filozoficzne*, translated by Bogusław Wolniewicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2000), 66 (p. 91). English version: *Philosophical Considerations* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), translated into English by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, cxix

[4] Anna Pajdzińska studied poetic definitions (see her revised and updated 1995 essay in *Wiersz – złożony sens* [Poem – complex sense], Lublin 2021), highlighting the context of discussions about the validity of this notion, as well different scholarly approaches, many of which left out such definitions even though they discussed issues convergent with the problem of such understood equivalence. Towards the end of the essay Pajdzińska writes: "The more astonishing the relationship between the defining and the defined is, the bigger the role of a text. If the reader does not find even one element that would direct towards how the text should be read, they are left to their own imagination, knowledge and ingeniousness in order to uncover the sense of a poetic construction, in attempts at finding the rue organizing artistic thinking. Every poetic definition is – to some extent – an act of creative cognition, not only of a poet, but also readers, who are elevated to the role of co-creators" (102).

Kafka's style

for Jakub Ekier

words
take the end between them

this is when the sentence dishevels itself
a thought stretches itself out

and the end calms down
with its own syntax
(Piotr Matywiecki, *Powietrze i czerń* [Air and blackness, p. 64)

Such a characteristic of Kafka's style has little in common with specifying understood as using simple language, explaining or defining. The reader is given a task[5] in the form of texts (most likely read by them). Thus equipped with elementary data, an orienting category (style), they set off on a grammatical[6] quest leading to understanding the interpretative project constructed by themselves.

Conversation is different in that periphrases are negotiated, that is, interlocutors creatively react to what they receive (and understand from what they say), and next – probably also in terms of categories which are too obvious – they conduct situational tests motivated by the grammar of language use.

Literary communication in which the reader actively participates in constructing a text (due to interpretative projects, intertextual references, critical discussions, etc.), as well as various literary analyses indicating considering grammatical dynamic due to specific phenomena – not purely literary, but peculiarly present in literature. This is mostly because of the status of artistic texts. Consistently believing that literature is unique, that is has special strategies for language use, and that it freely exploits linguistic potential begs questions about going beyond paradigms, creating new expressions, functionalizing linguistic elements traditionally associated with other registers, as well as the imagined borders of literary hermeticity[7].

Considering how much has already been said about literary language, I would only like to briefly discuss a few phenomena, which may shed a new light on literary grammar. This grammar has

[5] See Joanna Szwabe, *Odbiór komunikatu jako zadanie poznawcze* [Receiving a message as a cognitive task] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2008).

[6] It should be stressed that – according to Wittgenstein – here periphrases are seen mostly as grammatical exemplifications. The most commonly exposed level of lexical reflection is considered irrelevant from the perspective of constructing "explanations" or descriptions. This is because text organization determines the quality of linguistic elements and their functionalization, and thus legitimizes the need to use a specific language unit (which of course does not undermine the legitimacy of semantic considerations in reference to lexical units).

[7] For instance, Joseph Hillis Miller writes in *On Literature*: "Literature exploits this extraordinary power of words to go on signifying in the total absence of any phenomenal referent. […] A literary work is not, as many people may assume, an imitation in words of some pre-existing reality but, on the contrary, it is the creation or discovery of a new, supplementary world, a meta-world, a hyper-reality" (translated into Polish by Krzysztof Hoffmann, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2014), 26–27. English version: (*On Literature*, London: Routledge, 2002), 15-18.

been studied[8] alongside expectations of literature[9], which in turn resulted from both a specific historical-literary context, and (partially) from normative expectations of literary language. However, I shall not discuss these aspects here, focusing on specific phenomena instead[10].

Impression of transgression

The first issue concerns the frequent conviction that language rules undergo extension in literary texts. Peculiar connectivity, neologisms, changes in real referentiality, modified phrases, borrowings, intriguing inversions – this is just a handful of examples. The perspective of going off the beaten track becomes the central organizing category; justifying deviation or extension becomes the subject of analysis, or it organizes the way we think about arguments in favor of assessment.

However, if we were to assume that a literary utterance (as some kind of parenthetic thinking) is first and foremost a cognitive task subordinate to a nonlinear recipient, that is, one whose purpose does not refer to closed categories, it is potentiality rather than transgression that comes to the fore. In other words, reading a literary text (as a multi-factor linguistic construction with varied grammatical potential) does not mean (just as in the case of reading tasks) finite decoding and establishing affiliation – not only in the space of critical-literary, political, or biographical discourses, but also linguistic. This is because achieving relevance (according to D. Sperber and D. Wilson's theory)[11], that is, a specific moment when a premise is justified, is one thing, and reaching the idealized state of radically transforming a piece of literature, that is, exhausting all receptive possibilities, is another. However, this is not due to readers' inability, but to betraying a text's literariness[12]. Anticipating later claims we could also add that the fluidity and ambiguity of a literary text understood as a seemingly closed system is

[8] We should stress the role of texts by Roman Jakobson demonstrating the co-dependency of poetics and linguistics (see *W poszukiwaniu istoty języka. Wybór pism*, t. I i II [In search of the essence of language. Selected texts, vol. 1 and 2], edited by Maria Renata Mayenowa [Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1989]). See also the volume of *Forum of Poetics* on the same topic (26/2021); *Gramatyka poezji?*[Grammar of poetry] by Henryk Pustkowski (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Pax, 1974), especially its opening essay, but also chapters about the phraseological picture or Miron Białoszewski's and Tymoteusz Karpowicz's "linguistic" idiopetics; works by Maria Renata Mayenowa, Teresa Skubalanka and Jadwiga Puzynina, who laid foundation for contemporary Polish studies into literary language.

[9] See e.g. Julian Kornhauser, *Poezja i codzienność* [Poetry and daily life] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2003), *Język nowej literatury* [Language of new literature], edited by Kazimierz Michalewski (Łódź: Primum Verbum, 2012), *Języki literatury współczesnej* [Languages of contemporary literature], edited by Jan Potkański, Maciej Libich, Antoni Zając (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022).

[10] The present paper uses only a selection of texts, and so these illustrations are representative and anticipatory. The outlined questions will be elaborated on soon – they are signaled here as a research perspective.

[11] See Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance. Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995); Deirdre Wilson, "Relewancja a interpretacja tekstu literackiego" [Relevance and interpretation of a literary text], translated into Polish by Elżbieta Tabakowska, *Przestrzenie Teorii* 18 (2012): 203–217; Ewa Mioduszewska, "Teoria relewancji" [Relevance theory], in: *Metodologie językoznawstwa. Podstawy teoretyczne* [Linguistic methodologies. Theoretical foudations], edited by Piotr Stalmaszczyk (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2006), 155–174.

[12] As Giorgio Manganelli put it: "Literature is a trick, an artifact of a uncertain and at the same time inevitable purpose. A trick containing other tricks ad infinitum: a sentence, coined like some metal, contains a buzzing metaphor […]. This is what literature's fantastic provocation, its heroic, mythological bad faith is about. Using sentences «deprived of sense», «unverifiable» claims it creates worlds, imitates endless rites. Nothingness is its property and domain. It composes nothingness according to a catalogue of projects, signs, schemes. It provokes and challenges us, it gives us magic animal skin, a mechanism, a dice, a relic, the absent-minded irony of emblem" (*Literatura jako kłamstwo* [Literature as a lie], translated into Polish by Joanna Ugniewska [Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2021], 225–226). Translation into English mine, PZ.

characterized by a grammatical dynamic which causes limited levels of freedom rather than final some effect of reading.

Such an assumption – although in itself not original – allows to consider several detailed phenomena which focus on thinking about grammar opening possible forms of a text, relationships between its elements, and ultimately – on the dynamic process conditioned by grammatical potential.

Discontinuity of a poem

Free verse allows to discuss the first example. Verse is conceptualized as a syntagmatic project whose grammatical structure forces the reader to consider sufficiency conditions or leads to complements motivated by the standard of language use[13]. In addition, syntagmaticity implies relations between elements in a verse at the same time relativizing relations indicated by the free verse convention, which is significant in terms of literary grammar. Let us consider a poem by Krzysztof Siwczyk:

***
We have plenty of each other. We have
disdain for
trophy goods. This parcel
was racketeered. I let myself be carried away
by ludic emotions and I admitted that those
who never doubt it were right.
They are so polite when they convince
themselves, thinking that I am
who knows exactly, who? I am convinced.
I talk for an hour, listening carefully.
Then I am quiet, chronically healthy,
meanwhile they are struggling with
symptoms of a jolly disease.
I like being mistaken for someone else.
I like being asked about my identity.
As far as I know, someone like this used to be, but
what do I know?

(*Gdzie indziej jest teraz* [Elsewhere there is now], Poznań 2011, p. 43)

The independence of the verse (regardless of the way the consequences of open verses are classified – enjambment or effects of verse ellipses) is the foundation of two phenomena: the grammatical potential of a completed phrase and revised co-dependence of elements of a phrase in a verse. The former can be illustrated using the following examples:

[13]See Krzysztof Skibski, *Poezja jako literatura. Relacje między elementami języka poetyckiego w wierszu wolnym* [Poetry as literature. Relations between elements of poetic language in free verse], 8 (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2018).

We have plenty of each other. We have
disdain for
trophy goods. This parcel
was racketeered. I let myself be carried away
by ludic emotions and I admitted that those
who never doubt it were right.
[…]

The initial verse evokes repetition or parallelism. The verb „to have" anticipates the following verse, which is a simple way to bring to mind a repeated phrase, but with differently placed accents (due to this clause exposition). Thus, despite the transformation which arranges the transition to the following verse ("We have / disdain for), thinking in terms of excess may be set off, that is, the tension between repeating the phrase and transforming it. This is additionally reinforced by the word "plenty", which justifies this kind of excess.

We may assume that such reasoning is excessive as well. On the other hand, another part of the same excerpt increases the cohesion of such grammatical thinking. The phrase "We have / disdain for / trophy goods. This parcel / was racketeered" is followed by "I let myself be carried away". This example (considered as a peculiar wordplay) indicates the following collection of cohesive factors:

– *we have each other*
– *we have*
– *disdain for excreted goods*
– *I let myself be carried away* (the phrase is ambiguous in this context).

The effect of such semantic density (reinforced by free verse) focuses on relativizing individual subjectivity. First simply due to generalization ("have"), and then due to equating the subject and the object mediated by grammatical potentiality. Such a creation of the subject-narrator is consistently present throughout the poem (although later in its weaker version, i.e., a person without their characteristics[14]).

Demetaphorization is not a finite process, which is also how exploiting grammatical potential (semantic two- or multi-way) can be understood – strongly correlated with the structure of the poem. Let us analyze a longer excerpt:

They are so polite when they convince
themselves, thinking that I am
who knows exactly, who? I am convinced.
I talk for an hour, listening carefully.

[14]This is always the case when phraseological constructions are used:
They are so polite when they convince
themselves, thinking that I am
who knows exactly, who? I am convinced.
[…]
I like being mistaken for someone else.
I like being asked about my identity.

Here once again we can see self-referentiality ("themselves" opening a new verse, highlighted potentiality of the verb "convince" – whom? Concerning what? To what?). The subject-narrator is once again syntactically pushed away: the verse opens with "themselves", followed by "thinking that I am / who knows exactly, who?". This is followed by another example of distancing the subject-narrator. The phrase "I talk for an hour, listening carefully" confirms playing with grammatical potentiality – and thus with the semantic potentiality of the whole poem. We are dealing with implied colloquialism: in Polish "nawijam godzinę" [I talk for an hour] refers to the phrase "nawijać makaron na uszy" [literally "pull pasta over someone's ears, i.e., "pull wool over someone's eyes", PZ] – becomes simultaneously a reflection of self-referentiality. This loosening of rules of phraseological reconstruction can take us further – to regularly *listen carefully* [Polish "set one's ear"], but metaphorically *talk for an hour*.

Siwczyk's poem is dominated by peculiar disintegration. The consistently questioned explicitness is confirmed on the level of collocation, phraseology, free verse, and even general style of the poem. Based on that (although it is just a thought projecting the interpretative process) it is possible to postulate including phraseological ambiguity in the (free) verse in phenomena proper to the grammatical dynamic of literature.

Revision of excessiveness

The works discussed here share one characteristic – their structure provides a critical insight into the question of excess, which allows to go beyond assuming normative conditioning with a simple (idealizing) data transmission. Both the poetic description of a writer's style in Matywiecki and the peculiar potentiality game in Siwczyk's poem allow for an additional comment regarding redundancy. The peculiar density of this phenomenon (simply the variety of symptoms, but also the multifaceted look at them[15]) seems to correspond with the dynamic of grammar, because first and foremost, such thinking does not lead towards establishing the hierarchy of grammatical elements (this can only result from a specific interpretative project determined by premises assumed in the text). This perspective allows to consider the syntagmatic non-uniformity of verses, the potential of open phrases (i.e., phrases which can be completed in a regular or usual way), but also texts with any diegetic irregularity[16]. In this context, let us consider a poem by Krystyna Miłobędzka:

> I tried to say myself using a whole forest
> one wanted to say using a son, a grandson
> it said itself using the sun, wind
> cloud
>
> (*gubione* [lost], Wrocław 2008, p. 30)

[15]See Agnieszka Kula, *Redundancja w mediach. Studium pragmalingwistyczne* [Redundancy in the media. A pragmatic-linguistic study] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2017).

[16]This can be a simple change of the subject-narrator, any disruption in the cause-and-effect relationships in a narrative or utterance, or the presence of poetic definition (thanks to which an explanation takes the form of metonymy, metaphor or metalepsis; see Pajdzińska).

The first attempt at "saying oneself" (not *expressing oneself* or *saying something about oneself*) is expressed using a regular verb (*I tried*) which – also without changing anything in the typical order of elements in a phrase – creates a complex verb form: I tried to say (myself). Therefore, self-reference is the only atypical element, although this observation is semantic rather than grammatical (grammatical in the sense of some mechanical practice of combining accommodated elements).

Here we may verify the initial wish to list attempts which perhaps are not chronological: "one wanted to say…" can be seen as problematizing the regular form ("I tried…"), a footnote to a linguistic representation whose motivation may not have been convergent with a conventional or even intentional expression. A person speaking in nature implies metaphorical thinking – a person as a part of nature talking about their human sublimations would be its simple reversal. This would lead us to such elements as can be found in the second verse: "one wanted" ("I" in the context of some bigger entity; "I" as a part of something which determines my actions), "to say using a son, a grandson" (i.e., social categories which are supposed to intentionally express the personal and separate thought of the subject).

Furthermore, in the next verse subjectivity (separateness, personality) becomes an inseparable part of the natural whole. The impersonal form of the verb ("it said itself" – no potential ambiguity like in "one wanted") and the categories emphasized in the verse show a change in perspective – it is thus a somewhat more advanced stadium of expressing (oneself).

From this perspective, the final verse ("clouds") gains potential to become a syntagmatic condensate. Such a conclusion may raise doubts – it is only a noun emphasized in the form a separate verse. However, if we were to look at the whole text from the perspective of its internal grammatical dynamic, we could assume that not separating syntagmatic qualities constitutes a generic equivalent of possible descriptions.

Thanks to such reasoning we would once again refer to redundancy only to (at this point) highlight its intriguing textual manifestation: it can be analyzed in reference to absence, i.e., potentiality which – based on a grammatical analysis – is more than limitless space of all linguistic possibilities. We deal with collocations within a separated text (or implied intertextual relations in case of intertextuality of hypertextuality) in each situation.

Let us consider two more questions which are related to conceptualizing grammatical dynamic of literature, although these will be just outlined in reference to more extensive issues which are beyond the scope of this paper.

Scopes of ambiguity

As a notion, condensation is equally operative and general. The examples discussed so far refer to condensation represented in different ways, which is mostly due to the form of verse, as well as the consequence of any (literary, *ad hoc*, conventional, or even faulty) texts. Continuous texts in which both redundancy and – more broadly – grammatical dynamic manifest themselves in original ways should also be seen from this perspective. Let us make some general observations regarding grammatical potential on the example of Ignacy Karpowicz's prose:

> I was sitting at a bar after my evening dose of drugs mixed with alcohol, watching my hotel companions with a growing inclination towards "wrong states". None seemed sad nor truly joyful. Only one couple stirred boredom thickening like polenta. I focused on them. In their twenties. He was blond, lanky, with a messy ponytail. Blurred features. Easygoing. In contrast, she looked as if she had just been to Ascot. Arrogantly elegant, polished finish, indestructible. She ignored the blowing wind with indifference, like a quarry queen. Not a single lock of her hair moved.
>
> She was chain-smoking using a long pipe. The smoke went up to in an unnaturally straight line. She hardly spoke to her companion. I was wondering when she had been defrosted.
>
> (*Cicho, cichutko* [Quiet, so quiet], Kraków 2021, p.71)

The narrator changes how he constructs the description from the moment he spots the couple ("Only one couple stirred boredom thickening like polenta"). The short sentences affect the fluidity and focus of the story, although there are moments of focus and sharpening of details. The short phrases read like additional notes, private annotations ("Blurred features. Easygoing"; "Arrogantly elegant, polished finish, indestructible"). The accumulation of characteristics creates an impression of a snapshot frozen in time, during which the reader can take a closer look at the couple. The impression of such a meta-order mostly suggests that the two people (like a peculiar metaphorical expression) match neither their surroundings, nor each other. Thus condensation (as well as implied omission – which is also part of the grammatical plan) marks the grammatical dynamic and facilitates thinking about ambiguity also in narrative spaces, although it is of a different sort due to the structure of the text. This results from changes in the rhythm, sarcastic style of description, and a certain excess in characterizing.

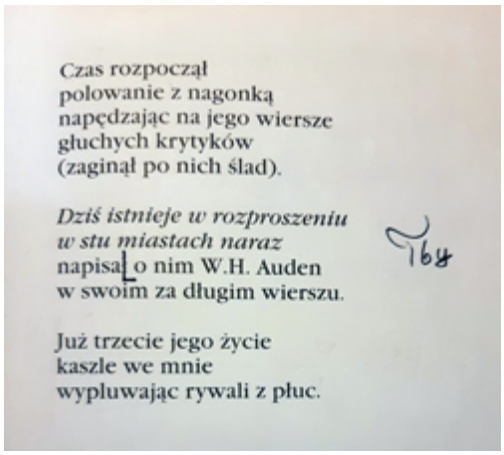
Finally, let us consider one more notion which is becoming increasingly more significant in linguistic studies, and which is in line with the way of conceptualizing literary grammar outlined here. Ambiguity is also a kind of fluidity – according to John Bryant[17] – which should be seen in reference to a "version" of a text. Such a perspective refers to seminal studies into textual genetics[18], as well as issues related to translation. Although it is impossible to recapitulate previous studies in one paper (which is also trying to propose an analytical linguistic perspective), it is possible to refer to... a condensate. Let us look into an excerpt from a poem by Ewa Lipska from her book of poems *1999 – John Keats*[19].

[17]John Bryant, *Płynny tekst. Teoria zmienności tekstów i edytorstwa w dobie książki i ekranu* [The Fluid Text. A Theory of Revision and Editing for Book and Screen], translated into Polish by Łukasz Cybulski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2020); Henning Lobin, *Marzenie Engelbarta. Czytanie i pisanie w świecie cyfrowym* [Engelbart's Dream - how a computer takes away our writing and reading], translated into Polish by Łukasz Musiał (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2017).

[18]For a more extensive discussion with complete reference lists see *Forum of Poetics*: Adam Dziadek, "Przedteksty a relacje intertekstualne (w kontekście krytyki genetycznej)" [Avant-texts and Intertextual Relations (In the Context of Genetic Criticism)], 17 (2019): 6–27, Jerzy Borowczyk, "Zmagania z początkiem. Przedtekst wybranych opowiadań Włodzimierza Odojewskiego (na materiale z poznańskiego archiwum pisarza)" [Struggling with the Opening.The Avant-text of Selected Short Stories by Włodzimierz Odojewski (Based on Materials from his Poznań Archive)], 22 (2020): 26–51.

[19]Kraków 1999, p. 67–69.

The value of the next example does not lie in how the poem was originally written in the manuscript, nor in translations (although it could, because there are numerous translations of Lipska's poetry)


Czas rozpoczął
polowanie z nagonką
napędzając na jego wiersze
głuchych krytyków
(zaginął po nich ślad).

Dziś istnieje w rozproszeniu
w stu miastach naraz
napisał o nim W.H. Auden
w swoim za długim wierszu.

Już trzecie jego życie
kaszle we mnie
wypluwając rywali z płuc.

[Time has started
a battute hunt
setting dumb critics
on his poems
(they went missing without a trace)

Today exists in dispersion
simultaneously in a hundred cities
W.H. Auden wrote [would write]
about it in his poem, which is too long.

Already his third life
is coughing inside me
spitting rivals out of my lungs

The correction noted in the right margin changes the mood of the verb in reference to a poem by W.H. Auden was added by the poet during a meeting with fans (on April 4th 2000). Thus, it is just a small note regarding the grammatical dynamic which manifests itself in different versions of a text, in their corrected (often multiple times) manuscripts, in more or less scrupulous proofreading, editing (also post mortem), and finally also in texts modified by authors themselves during their careers. I would like to emphasize that this means that all versions of a text – assuming relativized chronology, i.e., that none of them becomes philologically invalid – define literary grammar as a research field. Thus, Auden wrote or would write the poem that is too long, and maybe someone else did/would do it.

Grammar of (apparent) repetitions

Another reference to repetition refers to a replica, i.e., apparent repetition which remains in relation to something that becomes a potential or expressed equivalent. This results from the wish to at least partially summarize the review of phenomena specifying grammatical dynamic in literature conducted here. Looking from a different perspective – noticing grammar as the space where cognitive processes mediated in created and re-created texts are constantly taking place – may allow to consider a somewhat different characteristic of literary texts, as well as the way they function, and a philological analysis. Ambiguity, iteration, condensation, and fluidity can be distinguished in the cognitive process, although they remain connected (from the perspective assumed here).

I have used the phrase "a seemingly closed system", which may be associated with more than philology. However, we could assume (metaphorically speaking) that literary grammar defines the extent of freedom in realizing a cognitive task by the recipient. This means that the

reception of a literary text, despite distinguishable stages conditioned by reaching the state of relevance, is not an organically finite process. The dynamic foundation of grammar determines the space of alleged communication, that is, seemingly one-directional negotiation of phrases. The cognitive mechanism conditioned by grammar allows to construct interpretative projects (through e.g., attempts at reconstructing idioms, classifying lexicon, explaining metaphors and extensive metaphors, establishing how much collocations can be extended, eliminating ellipses, etc.) revealing the tension between language use a specific form of language emerging from a literary text. Of course, this also applies to relations between different versions of texts, translations, and adaptations. In each case this means a non-linear activity (as a whole), whose elements perhaps deserve a separate analysis – like "grey on grey" from the haiku from the beginning of this paper.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

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KEYWORDS

condensation

LITERARY GRAMMAR

Abstract:
The paper outlines a research perspective in reference to literary grammar. A philological analysis of literary texts allows an insight into several peculiar manifestations of grammatical dynamic assuming that texts have linguistic potentiality determined by various factors. These factors include syntagmaticity, specificity of situational language use in reference to repeatable textual elements, categorization mechanisms or – in a slightly different conceptualization – textual fluidity. Examples discussed in this paper are an introduction to basic elements significant in grammar-oriented analyses. Ambiguity and redundancy are identified as two most significant issues.

r e d u n d a n c y

non-uniformity

PERIPHRASIS

Note on the Author:
Krzysztof Skibski (1977) – PhD, D. Litt., linguist, Polish philologist, professor at AMU Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology. His research interests include literary language (especially in contemporary poetry), methodological problems in linguistics, colloquiality, semantics and phraseology. He teaches courses in contemporary linguistics and cultural reading of literature. Author of papers published in (among others) "Język Polski", "LingVaria", "Przestrzenie Teorii", "Forum of Poetics"; author of monographs: *Antropologia wierszem. Język poetycki Ewy Lipskiej* [Anthropology in verse. Ewa Lipska's poetic language] (2008), *Poezja jako literatura. Relacje między elementami języka poetyckiego w wierszu wolnym* [Poetry as literature. Relationships between elements of poetic language in free verse] (2017) and *Literackie gramatyki ciągłości i nadmiaru. Próba filologiczna* [Literary grammars of continuity and excess. A philological attempt] (jointly with Jerzy Borowczyk; 2021).

Details and War Writing.

An Interview with Christopher Merrill

Christopher Merrill
ORCID: 0009-0000-9469-8188

Tomasz Mizerkiewicz
ORCID: 0000-0002-4419-5423

Tomasz Mizerkiewicz (TM) An important aspect of your war writing is the role of the detail. How do details constitute your war writing? Why is there such a need for them? Is it influenced by the image of the detail?

Christopher Merrill (CM) My practice as a poet is what informs my travels. The American poet Howard Nemerov said, poetry in an act of attention, and I take my bearings as a traveler from the idea that the act of attending is what I do. By searching out the unusual detail I have a better chance of discovering something truthful about a situation. For many years I was a house sitter for W. S. Merwin, who said something similar—that a lot of his poems arise from him noticing something in his garden—a particular palm, say, that he has planted—and that has been my experience as well. Early on in my prose writing, during my first trips to Italy to cover the World Cup and then to war zones, I had to remind to myself to pay attention, to set time aside each day not only to transcribe interviews I had conducted but just to simply write down everything I saw, what I smelled, what I tasted, what I was reading, jokes people told. The daily act of trying to reconstruct things that happened over the course of the day forced me to pay closer attention. You mentioned images: it is difficult for a writer to compete with the images of war, but one thing that happens when you look too long at these images

of war you become numb. We have thousands of examples coming from Ukraine in the last three months. How do writers compete with that? They can't. What they can do is provide some of the texture around that image. Think of Vedran Smailović, the Bosnian cellist who played for 17 days straight in Sarajevo's Bread Market after a Serbian shell killed 17 bystanders. He played Albinoni's "Adagio in G Minor," the score for which was reconstructed from the only page to survive the firebombing of Dresden, and his daily performances represented for me a new way to think about the artist's role in a war zone. Vedran was a complicated figure—among other things, he began to charge journalists for interviews—and rehearsing such details can render a scene and situation more complicated, closer to what lived experience is about. So, I'm always reminding myself to pay attention. A perfect example of that takes place in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, where I went on a cultural diplomacy mission; when it was time to fly back to Kabul, I walked with a diplomat—my control officer—across the runway. There was a stop light, as if we were on a street. The diplomat was panicking, wondering which plane we had to board, while I watched a predator drone take off in front of us—which the diplomat didn't see. It was sort of funny to see someone so far inside her own head, trying to do her job, that she didn't see the drone. That night, at the Embassy dining facility, I mentioned that I had seen predator drone take off from the air base outside Jalalabad. Another diplomat said, No, you didn't. Immediately I thought, that will go in a piece of writing. I had already written up my notes about what had happened that day, and now I had a larger context for what I might write: Don't write about this, the diplomat was saying, and of course I wrote about it. That's what writers do, right? The diplomats had given me a way to think about all the details I had registered during that mission, and I wrote not only an entry in *After the Fact* but also an essay for *Granta*. Everything I write is informed by my hunt for details.

TM How would you explain the form of attention appearing when you are witnessing the scene of war? Is it like you cannot get used to the situation when you are in danger and alerted by this state?

CM A heightened sense of danger usually propels me to pay ever closer attention to whatever I may experience. I have a metabolic need to take notes, because an act of attention, of observation, can help me overcome the fear I may feel. In my Poznań lecture, for example, I described spending a day in a basement in Sarajevo with shells landing all around us: how one man dealt with his terror by telling jokes, a woman took deep breaths, and I decided to write down everything—jokes, stories, conversations. I'll describe what happens, not with any hope that I would survive the shelling but with the knowledge that if I did survive, I would have made a record of this trial, which I might be able to shape into a piece of writing.

TM This may raise the question about the time gap. You are making notes about something that was imprinted on you because of what was happening and some very alerted awareness of the situation. The book that you wrote with Marvin Bell is titled *After the Fact* and there you use some notes from different places around the world you have visited, like Mozambique, Vietnam, Chile, Libya. How does this after-the-factness influence your war writing? There is the primordial scene of the Polish non-fiction writing in Ryszard Kapuściński's book on Iranian revolution when he arrived there when the revolution was over. Maybe sometimes you can see things correctly when you come after the fact?

CM Remember the conceit that Kapuściński starts with. He's got all those photographs spread across the floor, each one of which inspires a story; when he gets bored with one photograph, he moves on to the next. He has a tactical reason for proceeding in this way: he acknowledges upfront that he has arrived after the fact of the Iranian Revolution—hence the long digressions where he finds himself in rooms with different political activists arguing and smoking and making plans, all while he takes notes to try to make sense of what happened. So much of what occurs in a war zone is recorded by journalists arriving after the fact of a battle, a massacre, a bombing. Think of the revelations that came when Ukrainian forces liberated Bucha, a suburb of Kiev: journalists embedded with the Ukrainian troops were horrified by the videos the soldiers took. Enduring truths about those videos may come from writers who with the passage of time may see more clearly what they saw that day. I had the experience many times of writing a piece of journalism only to find many months later that when I went to rewrite it for a book that I had missed the import of what I had reported on, because I didn't see that lager thing, which is what we imagine the literary temperament to be about – teasing out the different meanings of what you find. When you see something terrible happen, your instinct is to write against it, but that's not the whole story, is it? A good journalist makes sure to hear different viewpoints. In my country, where we have Fox News airing rightwing propaganda around the clock, its audience tends to fall for a set of beliefs that are not tethered to reality. The real writer tries to break through propaganda of the left and right, in order to discover a more nuanced understanding of the facts. That's why *Homage to Catalonia* has survived all these years: George Orwell used the full range of his imagination to document for the age what he took notes on during the Spanish Civil War.

TM The state of after-the-factness stressed by the title of your book is very important. We live in the era of fake news, so we need this time gap, these after-the fact moments to make our own comments and see what was really happening within the space of facts. This is where writers need to operate.

CM We know that at this and every moment in history political figures and armies create the facts on the ground. A perfect example was Ukrainian President Zelensky going to the front yesterday, making sure to be videotaped close to the fighting: this is part of the information war that plays such a vital role in this catastrophe. Journalists captured what they could and then got out, thinking all the while about what was going on around them amid the sound of shelling, which might make it hard to hear Zelensky in the video. But awareness of that larger context is what a writer will later seek to try to understand.

TM At the end of Kapuściński's book on the Iranian revolution he observes the huge political effects of the everyday activities of people, he watches a woman who went to the office and tries to arrange something. This is what we find in your book, a similar perspective of everyday activities.

CM I'm happy to say I stole that from Kapuściński. Daily life is where the ordinariness of war takes place, with people just trying to survive. There's a scene in *Only the Nails Remain* that details a lunch with humanitarians, eating Danish ham, which was not good, and that sparked a debate about who had eaten the strangest meal in various postings around the world. When

I wrote up that scene I thought: what I'm describing is the daily life of war: fried bees and scorpions, different things from the sea. Then a psychiatric nurse said: That's nothing. Once in West Africa I ate the fetus of something. What was it? one of us asked. Something, she said, with a touch of wonder in her voice. This detail is so haunting, in part because it arises from a lunch of the blandest imaginable food. Remember these humanitarians are often young idealistic going from one disaster zone to another. How do they keep their balance? When I asked what they might be searching for, a long conversation ensued: sometimes when you are in a war zone you feel a little less crazy that you did back in the regular world. This seemed to me to be part of the larger story I was trying to tell.

TM Relying on some details you also need to rely on some informers and the relation with them in this special situation. For instance, in your notes about a man in Libya and his opinions. How would you see relationships that you establish in the scenes of war?

CM When I was just getting started doing these kinds of books I was living in New Mexico and became great friends with the nonfiction writer Frederick W. Turner who wrote books about his travels around of Gulf of Mexico, into New Orleans' jazz traditions, through the American West. He once told me that wherever he went he had a knack for finding someone who could explain that place to him. If you are a foreign journalist in a war zone, you need such a fixer and translator, you need one you can trust. When I wrote a book about World Cup soccer I brought my college soccer coach with me, and when I wrote about war, I used fixers and translators who knew how to open closed doors. They presented me with different kinds of possibilities of what to write about in the service of capturing the truth of the different conflicts that made up the wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia. I would look very closely at them during interviews to ask: is this person saying this because of that or because of this? If he's taking you to dangerous place, you need to weigh what he is offering. For example, I wrote a magazine article when it looked like there might be a war between Serbia and Montenegro. I couldn't get a visa to Serbia, but I could get to Montenegro, where I found a fantastic fixer. I told him I wanted to talk to soldiers from the most recent battles in Bosnia and Kosovo. He set up one meeting with a war criminal and the next one with a sniper who shot people like the war criminal. The best part of this story occurred when it was time for me to go to the airport. When I went to check in at Montenegro Airlines, I learned that my flight had left an hour earlier, because they had only two planes and one was broken. What to do? The next available flight was four days later, so we went to the headquarters of Montenegro Airlines in Podgorica to see if someone there could help. Inside were three large posters with bold lettering: Africa, the Middle East, South America. I turned to my fixer. He said, These are places we wish we could visit. Then we sat down with a very beautiful woman, and when she stepped away to ask a colleague for help, my fixer said, We may not get you out of here, but at least we get to look at her for a while. Soon she returned with a proposition: If you will pretend to be an employee of Montenegro Airlines, we can fly you to Athens tonight, where we will pick up the Montenegrin national basketball team from the World Cup. From there you can find your way home. This crazy story embodied everything I came to love writing about the Balkans: a little corruption over here, war criminals over there. When I boarded the plane, which I had all to myself, the flight attendant told me exactly where to sit. Sometime later she came by to ask me if I had enough room. I guess, I said. In Athens I checked into a hotel, and

the next morning I told a Delta agent what had happened. He said, That is such a great story, I will find the way to get you home. Meanwhile I was paying attention, taking notes so that I would have a story to tell when I got home.

TM But there we can tell that there are two kinds of relations between fixers and writers or journalists. We have those called "parachuters" who come only for few days and seek for rather sensational materials and we have those who look for some other kind of contact with people at war and their attention is being attracted by other things as well.

CM You need parachuting journalists who have large platforms in order to get big stories out. But you also need writers who can take a longer view, looking for the telling details that might suggest other truths. I knew a wonderful photojournalist in Bosnia, named Elizabeth Rappaport, who said something I treasure: I like to get inside somebody's beer. Which is to say: she was less interested in photographing horror than in the ways in which that horror can inform the quotidian. Thus, in an Ustaša bar in Croatia she took a memorable picture of civilians and paramilitaries toasting one another, the memory of which still makes me shudder. It was important for her to spend time developing relationships with people, to take a look around the corner. That is what I want to do in my writings.

TM You mentioned during your lecture in Poznań about the new journalism and Michael Herr's book *Dispatches*.

CM When you think about Herr's book, about Francis Fitzgerald in war zones, George Orwell, Martha Gellhorn, those who dig in for a spell to get the story – that's the whole ticket. Another friend was a terrific daily journalist in Sarajevo. But he put this material into a book, it fell flat. I asked another writer why this book didn't work, and he said: It lacked vitamin R, resonance. A book of literary war journalism has to be more a record of episodes; it has to have vitamin R. This is something you can teach, if you can point out what a writer discovers in the act of writing. Herr did that, and so did Neil Sheehan. Tim O'Brien wrote two great books about the Vietnam War, *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried*. But I like to tell students that when O'Brien returned from Vietnam, he wrote a novel, *Northern Lights,* which is not very good. Then he wrote series of non-fiction pieces for the *Washington Post*, which were subsequently collected in a book, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. I think this work of literary journalism freed his imagination to write great works of fiction: once he got all the facts out of his system, he was free to invent—which points to a difference between daily journalism and what a literary writer might try to make.

TM There are images from war zones presented by strong media and attracting our attention, but sometimes writing creates images in different way and these images are more various. Maybe writers are re-creating images imprinted on their minds in the war zones?

CM I think there are structures of meaning we are or are not alert to. I remember that image from Srebrenica in *The New York Times* of a woman who hanged herself from a tree, which crystallized the terror of the war, the news reports on TV, in print, and in photographs. It may have inspired Bill Clinton to order strikes on Serbian positions. In thirteen days, the war was

over. But it took three years to get to that point—three years of journalists recording massacres and atrocities, laying the groundwork for military action to end the horror.

TM There are some iconic images that could be productive such as a pregnant woman in Mariupol's hospital, something you cannot remove from your mind.

CM Nor could you invent it. The horror of the Russian shelling of the maternity hospital is an emblem of their genocidal intentions. Of course, we read that Putin doesn't believe that Ukraine and the Ukrainian language even exist. A missile strike on a maternity hospital is the sort of image that can make a writer say: this is where I will begin to try to render the horror.

TM When you meet something you cannot invent, it complicates the situation of a writer who needs to compose it, to give it some form. You and your friend decided to give it a form of letters to stress this coexistence of what is authentic and what is composed.

CM I took a seminar with the novelist and *New York Times* book editor Charles Simmons. He said he was in a habit of writing to a dear friend a letter every Sunday night. Then one day he thought that instead of writing letters to him he would write a book of letters, which became his first novel. Marvin and I did something similar in *After the Fact*. There is an inherent tension in the book, he was 20 years older than me, from a different generation, and he was retired from fulltime teaching, while I was traveling around the world for the International Writing Program. He had his poetics, and I had mine. He was either in Iowa City or Port Townsend, Washington, and most of my dispatches came from distant places. What interested me is how this tension governed our first volume, which was subtitled *Scripts & Postscripts*. We finished the second volume, subtitled *If & When*, in the first month of the pandemic. And the unfinished third volume, *Here & Now,* was written when we were living five miles away from each other, unable to travel anywhere. What tension there was dissolved by the end, and we were both conscious of it. When Marvin summons childhood memories, he does it in a different way than I do, in part because mine were conditioned by my travels.

TM The problem of composition is always at stake. The writer needs to avoid making his work purely an aesthetic subject.

CM Think of Czesław Milosz writing his suite of poems "The World" in the form of a school primer, describing idyllic scenes from nature to balance the horror of living in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. I begin *Only the Nails Remain* in the basement under shelling debating with some humanitarians what to read. I had Saint-Jean Perse *Collected Poems*, someone was reading *The Destruction of Yugoslavia,* and a third had an anthology of erotica. No one felt the need to read *The Destruction of Yugoslavia,* since we were living it. And no one cared for Saint-Jean Perse, because as Szymborska observed, "two people per thousand like poetry." But erotica – oh, yes, we believe in that, since our lives might be snuffed out with the next shell. What a complex relationship we have to different forms of storytelling in a war zone.

TM How did it happen that war writing became so important to you. Because this experience is ruining you and building again, how did you find your path in that?

CM It wasn't the path I thought my life would take. I was in high school when the draft for the Vietnam War ended, so there was never any danger that I would have to go to war. And yet here I am, having spent time in war zones in the Balkans, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq. I wrote a little book called *The Old Bridge: The Third Balkan War and the Age of the Refugee,* which has a scene about a humanitarian friend with an armored personnel carrier picking me up at the airport. Her driver kept looking at me, and then he said, We went to high school together. Small world. He was the only graduate from this private high school to enlist in the military in the immediate aftermath of the war, the Mỹ Lai massacre, the illegal bombing runs over Laos and Cambodia. It turned out that my classmate and I had much to discuss. I should note that my original journey to Slovenia was to write a piece for the nature magazine, *Sierra,* about two poets walking to the mountains after the Cold War. But in these wars of succession, of one order giving way to another, I glimpsed the outlines of a story I might be able to tell. When I finished *Only the Nails Remain,* I took this job in Iowa, thinking I was done with traveling. Now I would raise my family and run the International Writing Program (IWP). But the IWP is funded largely by the Department of State, which obliges me to travel as a cultural envoy to places of strategic importance, which in time included more hazardous travel—to Syria and Lebanon, Iran and Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq. I undertook these missions to help ensure that funding for the IWP would continue. But these travels were not unlike what I had experienced in the Balkans: war is a great clarifier about historical processes taking place at any given moment. My post-9/11 travels in the Islamic world were enlightening for me in the same ways as the wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia were.

TM Since you are running this program in Iowa, let me ask how can you teach writers to write about war? There are no manuals for that, no techniques ready at hand.

CM It is the same preparation as for any writing endeavor, which begins with studying good models—which for me include the originators of modern war reportage, Tolstoy and Whitman, and their truth-telling heirs, Orwell, Gellhorn, and Michael Herr. Then you do what good young journalists do in a war zone: watch how their elders gather and corroborate facts, record anecdotes, and sift through material from interviews they conduct, imitate one and then another until they develop their own style and voice, and hope for the best. The intangible is the desire to go to certain places to tell a story. You either have it or you don't—which is why war can clarify matters for a writer: do you want to be there or not? After conducting cultural diplomacy missions to Libya and Iran, I sensed that Afghanistan and Iraq might be next on my itinerary, which meant I would probably try to write about these conflicts. I wondered how I would respond if such a possibility arose. In the end I agreed to go almost without a second thought. I was ready to tell these stories, from a different angle of vision than what had governed my travels in the Balkans. Now I would write from a diplomatic viewpoint, where I could see how things operate behind Fortress America, if you will.

TM I know that in your writing programs you sometimes rely on the kind of working that is meeting of the experienced writer and the young writer. Why do you think it is so important? Is it meeting of these two situations, tension caused by different positions of writers?

CM If you teach a semester-long course, a guest writer can offer not only a different way of thinking about writing but clarify some things for the students, ratifying or contradicting

previous lessons, offering a new perspective. My class International Literature Today relies on lectures by the visiting writers, who provide students with different ways to think about writing, each of which may inspire a student to try something new. A superb war journalist in our time, went to Iowa to study fiction writing. But it turned out that she is a gifted nonfiction writer, and in her journalism, she deploys what she learned in the Workshop, the writerly habits she cultivated here, to write books about the wars in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Syria. For she has the skill set and courage to ask tough questions and uncover facts that will make their way into a book.

TM You have mentioned the process of clarifying, which is very interesting, because we usually connect the experience of war with totally chaotic events.

CM Oh, it's pure chaos, but as a writer you try to bring order to it, which perhaps I did in *Only the Nails Remain*. It has, I hope, a fair bit of humor, since that is one way people make sense of it all. I tell writing students to watch stand-up comics work, because they must distill language to its bare essentials and can teach you something about timing. To write about war you might want to watch war films to see how different directors frame certain shots and ask yourself why they did it that way. Can you do something similar on the page?

TM The last question is about memory. Do you have some detail that helped you clarify your writing, and maybe that has clarified you as a writer of war. Were there some moments and some details that made you realize that you are the one to write about it.

CM In the republics of the former Yugoslavia I was intrigued to see that poets and writers were taken seriously, as they decidedly are not in the United States. But the debates in literary and artistic circles in the different republics were not unlike some of the debates in American literary circles. So, I brought to the Balkans my own experience as an American poet. Take, for example, the great Serbian poet Vasko Popa, whose work I had first read in America: it meant something altogether different when I read it in Belgrade or Podgorica. This clarified some of my thinking about the poet's role in society. Likewise, when I interviewed Radovan Karadžić in Belgrade on New Year's Eve, 1992, I thought: what a buffoon. He was holding the whole world hostage to his murderous whims, and he was just an opportunist—a poet who was having fun killing people. That gave me insight, too.

KEYWORDS

war journalism

NONFICTION

Abstract:
In the interview Christopher Merrill explains the role of concrete details in war writing and war journalism. He reveals how drawing on details allows the writers to build the larger context for images of destruction and experiences in the war zones. Merrill recollects his memories from his trips around former Yugoslavia during the Balkan wars, from his journeys to Afghanistan, and other countries. He explains how to teach war writing by looking at good models. According to him only the challenging experience of the war zones lets the writer clarify if he wants to engage into war writing.

DETAIL

war writing

Note on the Author:
Christopher Merrill – published seven collections of poetry, including *Watch Fire*, for which he received the Lavan Younger Poets Award from the Academy of American Poets; many edited volumes and translations; and six books of nonfiction, among them, *Only the Nails Remain: Scenes from the Balkan Wars, Things of the Hidden God: Journey to the Holy Mountain, The Tree of the Doves: Ceremony, Expedition, War*, and *Self-Portrait with Dogwood*. His writings have been translated into nearly forty languages; his journalism appears widely; his honors include a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres from the French government, numerous translation awards, and fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial and Ingram Merrill Foundations. As director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa since 2000, Merrill has conducted cultural diplomacy missions to more than fifty countries. He served on the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO from 2011-2018, and in April 2012 President Barack Obama appointed him to the National Council on the Humanities. |

The poetics of "chochlik"

Marek Hendrykowski

ORCID: 0000-0002-7180-9902

"In the cup a little devil".
Adam Mickiewicz, *Twardowski's wife*

"the market adorned with be-auty"
Miron Białoszewski, *Ballada od rymu*
[Un-rhymed ballad]

Contemporary literary studies, in a methodological research alliance with linguistics, closely examines such issues as entropy, potentiality, redundancy, and probability in texts of culture.

We can see it, for example, in Bogumiła Kaniewska and Krzysztof Skibski's insightful analytical study published in the 26th issue of *Forum of Poetics*. Discussing Magdalena Tulli's prose, both authors write about "a particular design of the world, which is determined by the choice of narrative."[1]

Every such "design of the world" portrays certain events, be it fictional or real. This is true not only for art, but also for the real world, whenever the broadly defined act of conveying information or communicating takes place.

One way or another, what all messages have in common is, on the one hand, that their meaning is semantically organized (and super-organized in the case of works of art,) and, on the other hand, that the shadow of entropy looms over them.

[1] See: Bogumiła Kaniewska, Krzysztof Skibski, "If things are to go on..." – potentiality and entropy in Magdalena Tulli's early prose", *Forum of Poetics* 26 (2021): 34.

We are talking about the entropic periphery of the message, behind which lies the zone of alternative meanings: the zone of indeterminacy, mystery, potentiality, accidentality, and ambiguity. In other words, it is the zone of communication risk, where the devil never sleeps.

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"Chochlik," that is the Polish folk demon of misprints and slips of the tongue, as an object of interdisciplinary studies, combining literary studies, linguistics, and cultural anthropology? Of course, and why not?

The passion for deciphering enigmatic codes and palimpsests that animates our lives has been inspiring scholars and artists for centuries. Science and art go hand in hand whenever it comes to understanding the incomprehensible, the mysterious, and the surprising – the hidden meanings of the secret code of culture, appealing in its mystery. And not only when it comes to words and images, but also, for example, when it comes to the social and cultural expansion of new media in the 20th century – a topic that became Marshall McLuhan's lifelong passion.

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Joking aside, only a person with a truly unconventional and extremely sophisticated sense of humor could call his academic book *The Medium is the Massage*. What was this all about? What deeper meaning may be found in this juvenile prank? Especially considering that the book was after all published by a renowned New York publishing house more than half a century ago?

Medium – message. Message – massage ... A scholar like Marshall McLuhan is sometimes an artist and a poet; he can set words and concepts free. They are freed from everything that, as academic terms, they should express in a linguistically disciplined manner. They are liberated from their routine semantic limitations.

Liberated words and liberated images. Not only in surrealist art: in the works of Buñuel, Dali, Chagall, Magritte, and Cocteau. There is something more at play here: a creative approach to the absurd. Each time it is triggered by an unfortunate semantic slip, a mistake, a minor mishap which leads to unexpected consequences – a creative error that gives rise to profound, sensational discoveries.

And such discoveries are not only being made today. They were also made back in the 19th century when movies and film editing were born. Georges Méliès's camera jammed while he was filming traffic in the Place de l'Opera, and an omnibus was instantly transformed into a hearse when the film was developed.[2]

[2] Sergei Eisenstein, "Georges Méliès's Mistake", trans. Richard Taylor, in: Sergei Eisenstein, *Writings 1922-1934* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 258–260.

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Message > *massage*. It does not really make sense. What is it about? Pure nonsense. An unusual association. A strange association. Does massage have anything to do with communication? Apart from the fact that the two words sound similar, there is no connection between them. As unfortunate as it is bizarre, the pairing of the two semantically completely unrelated nouns seems to be nothing more than an absurd rhyming coincidence.

Or maybe it is an ordinary typographical error (the two words, after all, are similar), and instead of the word *message*, there suddenly appears – quite ridiculous in this context – the word *massage*? I do not think so. It is not your ordinary typo.

Such extraordinary incidents have fascinated scholars and artists for centuries. The scientific metaphor and the artistic metaphor as a mistake? Not every type of mistake, however, only the one which leads to consequences – the one which turns the meaning of a given word or expression on its head – a bizarre mistake.

In this particular case we are dealing with a truly horrendous mistake. Fortunately, it was creatively tamed and capitalized on by the author. What does one have to do with the other? The word "medium" absurdly combined with the word "massage." Freud would be interested in studying such a mistake. Perhaps he is not the only one?

A metaphor, a metaphorical epithet, a metaphorical comparison, catachresis as an act of imagination – an associative error with surprisingly significant cognitive and communicative consequences? An error that challenges routine meanings and disrupts logic – provided that it is treated creatively – may allow one to discover something unusual, something creative.

The poetics of Marshall McLuhan's texts, rather eccentric in the way he expressed his thoughts, shows that the author enjoyed playing with language. He did not comment on this subject explicitly in his writings. However, the very title of one of his books, *The Medium is the Massage*,[3] suggests that he was interested in the question of the "creative error."

The *salto mortale* which McLuhan performed in the title of his book is a truly risky, crazy, and excessive stylistic trick, which gains momentum from the ingeniously used figure of association called catachresis.

McLuhan's intriguing title suggest that "chochlik," the demon of misprints and slips of the tongue, must have been involved. Indeed, in Polish, an error and a little folk demon are both called "chochlik." And I do not refer to any error but a special kind of mistake which, contrary to the author's intentions, invades the message and gives rise to unexpected new meanings.

[3] Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, coordinated by Jerome Agel, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York, Bantam Books, 1967).

Communication incidents which involve "chochliks" are usually perceived as accidents. And "chochlik" is a magical creature. It is a malicious and mischievous trickster. It is invisible and it is responsible for surprising errors which are suddenly noticed in communication.

In *The Medium is the Massage*, the error is a result of the author playing with language. As in the Latin maxim *per aspera ad astra*, in which, let us note, our imagination is stimulated by the abyssal distance between the semantic fields of both nouns which, what is important, sound similar.

Message/massage. What massage? At first, one thinks that this association, this pun, is a mistake; there must a typo in the title of McLuhan's book, and no one has noticed or corrected this typographical error.

Is "chochlik" to blame? Someone will ask: what "chochlik"? What demon? What is it? We do not know much about these creatures. Let us therefore examine the etymology of this Polish word.[4] First of all, "chochlik" is a close relative of "chochoł" (a straw wrap which, according to Polish folk legends, was endowed with magical powers). Secondly, although this word seems to have a respectable and long history in the Polish language and a *par excellence* literary provenance, only the latter is true. It turns out that it was elevated to literary status and employed for the first time, and *nota bene* borrowed from the Belarusian language (where "chochlik" literally means a young "shoot" of a plant or tree), by Juliusz Słowacki.[5]

Thirdly and finally, this mischievous creature (imp, goblin, hobgoblin, gnome, "the demon of misprints;" in German *drückfehlerteufel*), although invisible, has control over us. Depending on how much it is able to do, it likes to mix up people's plans and get its own way. In the end, it always wins.

In Polish, but also in other languages, such as German, the word "chochlik" is often connected with printing errors. It is recorded in the history of language. But this history is in fact more complicated. "Chochliks" do not make all incidental mistakes. Misdeeds they commit, confusing the communicating parties, are much more perverse, abnormal, and sophisticated.

"Chochlik" has been aspiring to the honorable title of a true poet at least since the times of the futurist Velimir Khlebnikov. As a rule, this poet did not correct typographical errors in his texts, recognizing their poetic potential.

By the way, in German and in English such typos are referred to by means of a descriptive expression. Unlike in Russian, in which there is a word *oshibka*. A creature which acts in the human world is playfully and tellingly called in Russian *besionok*, or a little devil.

[4] See: Aleksander Brückner, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* [Etymological dictionary of the Polish language] (Krakow: Krakowska Spółka Wydawnicza, 1927), entry "chochoł", 181.

[5] "Chochlik" is also part of the history of Polish architecture. In 1908, in the courtyard of the property at Sienkiewicza 17 in Zakopane, a small, quaint villa called "Chochlik" was built; it was designed by Stanisław Witkiewicz and Teodor Axentowicz.

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What is the difference between "chochlik" and a simple, trivial typo? Well, one fundamental thing plays a role here: the resulting confusion. It can be said that "chochlik" is a truly subversive typo. The prosaic typo is a mere error with no consequences.

It is different with "chochlik." "Chochlik" means something. It interferes in and distorts the message, expressing something completely different. Every time it interferes in the message, the meaning changes.

It is a secret and secretive being; it is a magical creature – it maliciously wishes to wreak havoc. This demon of chaos imperceptibly meddles in the work of the typesetter, the typist, or the linotypist from behind their back; it creates confusion in something that was supposed to be perfect.

Does it rearrange letters? Yes, it is known for that, but not only that. It also rearranges syllables, words, phrases.[6] Therefore, it should not be reduced to merely an error in print.

We find such mistakes also outside the universe of the printed word. Like a jack-in-the-box, it also pops out of the box in the iconosphere and the audiosphere, whenever there is an unexpected, unintentional, surprising distortion of the original broadcast. I will come back to this point later.

For the time being, let me clearly state that we do not find such mistakes only in print. Apart from writing and print, the same distortive mechanism operates in the case of images. As well as in-between words and images – in all kinds of textual-verbal-iconic combinations, such as cartoons, comics, and memes. As for the name itself…

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By its nature, it is tiny and imperceptible. Although it can lead to confusion and sometimes make a huge mess, we do not call it "chochoł." Instead, we use the diminutive form "chochlik," which can be seen as an intentional act of magical taming.

The inconspicuous "chochlik" acts locally – it may be found in the microstructure of the text. Called into existence and residing in our imagination as something invisible, but spectrally present, it intends – this is its secret strategy – to remain insignificant, inconspicuous, and thus almost imperceptible *in statu nascendi*.

[6] I will never forget Stanisław Barańczak's puzzled face when he bought and opened a new issue of "Nurt." To his dismay, his essay, originally entitled "O interpunkcji dziennikarskiej" [Punctuation in journalism], was titled "O interpretacji dziennikarskiej" [Interpretation in journalism].

I have already mentioned "chochliks" in the visual arts, for example, in photomontages or the process of retouching. Nearly one hundred years ago, Stalin used retouching to create his version of the historical memory of the revolution. He ordered Soviet experts to remove the image of his bitter enemy Leon Trotsky from all official photographs of Lenin.

In the artistic photomontage, "chochlik" plays an extremely important causative role. It can be said that it lies at its heart. It transforms the chaos of odd elements into a coherent system – the higher order of meaning designed by the artist. In the compositional super-organization of the photomontage, every element is a "chochlik." Rodchenko, Heartfield, Berman, Szczuka, Podsadecki and other masters of collage and photomontage made it the *spiritus movens* of all their semantic operations.

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Indeed, "chochliks" may be found not only in the logosphere but also in the iconosphere (all kinds of images) as well as the audiosphere (i.e., audio images). Thus, let us ask about the basic property of the poetics of "chochlik."

It all boils down to its causative function in the process of communication. "Chochliks" are usually to blame for communication errors and breakdowns. They distort the message. Whenever they are noticed, they confuse everyone involved in the act of communication.

Not just because no one has noticed them before. Also, and perhaps above all, because a slight defect, a minimal shift, a damage, or a distortion, unexpected as it may be, produces significant semantic effects. A local glitch that appears out of nowhere suddenly and completely distorts the overall meaning of the message.

To illustrate this with an example, I will refer to a real event involving an anarchic "chochlik" which took place in the summer of 1968 in downtown Poznań, in the dark post-March era of political turmoil. The 5th Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party was fast approaching. Everything had to be in order. Propaganda experts, as usual, were hard at work, doing their best.

In the Stare Miasto district, along the very busy Podgórna Street (at that time Walki Młodych), big signs on wooden poles, letter by letter, were stuck into a lawn. Every letter was painted on a separate plate. Together, they read: BUILDERS COLLECTIVELY SUPPORT THE RESOLUTIONS OF THE 5TH CONGRESS OF THE PARTY. The word "builders" referred to the nearby construction company.

Just your normal communist slogan. A bit stiff, as you can see and hear. One day an autumn storm came over the city; the wind blew harder than usual, and a strong gust of wind knocked over some of the letters. Which letters? The letters p,o,r, and t in the word SUPPORT. Poor things fell on the grass, but so much more was destroyed in that moment. There was no end to the joy of the more observant passers-by.

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"Chochlik" introduces minor changes into the text, but they are inversely proportional to the meaning of the whole. The resonance between the two gives it the exposed status of a surprising incident that it silently triggers.

Its *specialité de la maison* are not gross errors committed on a monstrously large scale, but punctual, minor mistakes, painful as a bite of an insect – they are small, almost painfully amusing, distortions. The difference between "chochlik" and a simple mistake is that the former is never a simple mistake, for example a trivial typo. The disruptions with which this little demon surprises us suddenly take on an insidious, anarchistic, meaning of their own.

Let me also comment on the attempts to use the energy it releases in a controlled way. "Chochlik" is used in various ingenious ways in the arts. These include, for example, the stream-of-consciousness technique, different forms of non-verbal language, aleatoric music, Dadaist and surrealist experiments, innuendos, the so-called "old wives' tales," automatic writing (*écriture automatique*), the artist's signature on portraits painted by Witkacy (especially those created under the influence of drugs or alcohol), and the use of accidents in the performing arts, etc.

It is this unintentional semantic excess and the creation of new meanings that distinguishes "chochlik" from a mere typo. The typo is, so to speak, a "neutral" textual incident. Neutral in the sense that it only "produces" the error itself; "chochlik," on the other hand, unexpectedly creates new subversive meanings.

It is true that we most often find it in writing or in print, but not only. We can also find it elsewhere. Whenever this little demon makes itself known, it turns into a cheeky usurper – it turns out to be a feisty, defiant, malicious trickster. It changes the author's intent and introduces chaos into the communication process, turning it on its head. As a result, it makes us function in a permanent state of danger even when it does not appear. Why is that?

Acting with absolute impunity in the network of reality, it reminds one of a performance artist. Surrealistically innocent, each time it appears, it surprises and excites everyone and everything around it, putting parentheses or meaningful quotation marks around them. It is not limited to words only, but it must necessarily introduce an element of chaos into the existing order – it introduces anarchy into what seems to be permanent and definitive.

Carnivalization is an inalienable functional feature of "chochlik's" genetic code. This carnivalesque (in Bakhtin's understanding) aspect of "chochlik," insofar as it subverts and distorts not so much the established order of the world as the imposed order of its textual (*ergo* symbolic) models, effectively undermines and ridicules everything.

Not only natural language falls victim to it. The social reality, with its various messages, is also the target. Especially reality that is controlled, often by force, where people are given orders. Such reality aspires to the status of a closed and coherent text.

When, in the summer of 1982 during martial law in Poland, dwarfs (distant cousins of little demons and "chochliks") appeared on the walls of different buildings in Wrocław, and soon in other Polish cities (they were painted by the Orange Alternative led by "Major" Waldemar Fydrych), it was a sensation that soon led to an important change – "chochlik(s)" gained new-found fame and importance. The innocent artist mocked and ridiculed the dangerous opponent, beating it at its own game.

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There's more. The humorous and playful version of "chochlik" has its stony-faced counterpart – a grim, dark, and serious "chochlik." Seriously? Yes, indeed.

This specter, this threat posed by an unintentional mistake which nevertheless leads to disastrous consequences (let us recall here the nightmare of the proofreader, Aleksei's mother, in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror*, who wakes up in mortal terror), is so important that it should be discussed in greater detail.

I shall draw on cultural anthropology and information theory at this point. Considered from this perspective, "chochlik" – as a magical creature that is a product of human imagination – becomes an elusively dangerous image equipped with collective memory. What is it an image of? What does this abstract entity personify?

Is it abstract? Or maybe, on the contrary, it is very concrete. Well, both the serious and the playful "chochlik" are special, insofar as, although invisible, they make their presence known and influence the process of communication. As products of human imagination, essentially virtual, they turn out to be painfully real when we consider the damage they cause.

This intruder embodies entropy which invades the ordered microcosm created by people who want to formulate and convey the message. Because of "chochlik," this ordered microcosm – this structured logical text which we aspire to create – suddenly collapses like a house of cards.

The supposedly coherent "design of the world" falls apart against our will, even though it was supposed to protect us and free us from the unwanted, threatening, and involuntary disturbance in the communication process. The message in a specific language (be it verbal, iconic, audible, etc.), which makes communication possible in a given cultural system, is destroyed from the inside.

Such a frivolous interference leads to profound consequences. "Chochlik" may be annoying, but apart from extreme cases, it does not pretend to be something dangerous, something demonic. Due to its disposition and the role it plays in our lives, it is playfully malicious and perverse. It is a joker, a trickster like no other. It loves pranks. We know and accept that.

Exposed to its antics, we do everything in our power to prevent them. We know from experience that it can make its presence known at any moment. We should not assume that it has disappeared forever if it is not to be found at any given moment. As an embodiment of entropy, it can appear at any moment.

We know from experience that the risks associated with its antics are real. We try to minimize them, but we cannot completely rule them out. As an actor existing *in potentiam* in the multimedia semiosphere, "chochlik" may be invisible but he is nevertheless constantly present in our lives.

If we choose to anthropomorphize and magically personalize "chochlik," we also accept the otherwise unpleasant fact that despite all our efforts we, humans, with our imperfections, are all fallible. So much for the observations of the cultural anthropologist in this respect.

The linguist, in turn, would probably add that the actions of "chochlik" do not exist in the rules of the language system (*langue*) but appear incidentally and asystemically in a given message (*parole*). "Chochlik" only makes its presence known in *parole* and disturbs its internal order. Which does not mean that it exists outside the language system as such.

"Chochlik," in order to make itself known, needs the rules of the language system to exist. On the one hand, it follows them; on the other hand, it violates them (even though it refers to them). Language as a set of relations is a necessary frame of reference for it. Thanks to it, it becomes noticeable as an error, a surprising excess that occurred in the process of communication.

Unexpected results. We often call such errors "slips of the tongue." There are countless anecdotes about slips of the tongue on the radio, television, stage, etc. One time George Bush thus described his working relationship with Ronald Reagan: "We've had triumphs. Made some mistakes. We've had some sex . . . uh . . . setbacks."

This example shows the act of communication has its acoustic counterpart in the form of a mishearing (it is, as if, the opposite of a slip of the tongue). "Chochliks" can work their magic in and through sounds, creating hilarious errors based on rhyme, everyday expressions, phrases etc.

Either way, playful and ingenious, "chochlik" pokes fun at the idea of striving for absolute perfection. It teaches us that, regardless of our efforts and intentions, there is such a thing as chaos in the world.

It is therefore the embodiment of entropy, the harbinger of chaos, a visible manifestation of decay. It distorts and destroys the perfect structure of the message "from the inside." Once "chochlik" interferes in the message, the message turns on its head; it contradicts itself. It becomes disinformation.

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"Chochlik" teaches us humility. It makes us aware not only of the possibility, but also of the inevitability, of error, which may appear in what we would like to make perfect and permanent. It makes the cultural anthropologist study how man approaches his work. It also makes him reflect on something more, namely the fragility of all products of culture, both material and symbolic, insofar as they may fall victim to entropy at any time.

Where did it come from? The social psychologist would probably say that it came from transference. Whenever an error occurs unexpectedly, people do not necessarily blame an unspecified external factor – an almost metaphysical entity that exists independently of them.

Something else is at stake here. When we blame "chochlik," when we blame the dark forces, we want to justify a mistake by anthropomorphizing it. Thus, it becomes part of culture.

Why do we do this? It seems that we are trying to regain control by turning the unpredictable into the predictable (at least to some extent). The mischievous "chochlik," who is part of our collective imagination, becomes someone familiar, someone tamed: a domesticated tenant in a highly imperfect reality in which we exist together.

"Speak of the devil," "the devil never sleeps," "a handsome devil," and "the luck of the devil." Compared to "chochlik," there are much more powerful dark powers at play here. "Chochlik," however, is not a devil but a trickster. It does not destroy man using infernal powers but, as a malicious spirit, mocks our efforts to finally make something (be it a text, an image, an artifact, a project, an action) perfect and complete. Hard as we may try, whatever we create will never be free from imperfections.

In itself, it poses a real challenge to the principles of praxeology. A true praxeologist will categorically deny its existence. "Chochlik"? Of course not! What is it? We are rational human beings and we must stay that way; let's all be rational. There are no "chochliks" in the world. We, humans, make mistakes, and we are responsible for them – not some "chochliks."

Wait a minute... Or maybe "chochlik" does exist, since – surprised by the inexplicable error – we are quick to blame it for our mistake. The collective imagination rooted in language and culture, which once gave rise to it, justifies (let us add: to some extent) the immanent imperfection of the planned result.

"Chochlik" does exist. It has been present in our lives for generations as an archetype – as a magical creature, as a personification of entropy. It was brought into existence by human imagination and the need to personalize the incomprehensible. It is as much an elusive virtual phantom as it is a causative force. It's right next to us, even though it's not there. It is truly incomprehensible how this can be, we ask ourselves. The near-supernatural status we assign to it implicitly translates into the inexplicable.

The cognitive scientist and the neurophysiologist would say that all this takes place in the human mind: in the parietal and temporal lobes of the left hemisphere of the brain. The latest research indicates that the right hemisphere also plays a role in this process. Everything is closely related to praxis – whenever we try our utmost to prevent "chochlik" from interfering.

This symbolic entity exists so that we do not blame ourselves. It is an "external" force which we can blame for our errors. We don't make them. The little demon is to blame. It is a force that exists in our thoughts and imaginations so that we can laugh at the belief in the absolute perfection – our failed attempts and efforts to avoid errors.

Once we blame "chochlik" for something, once we bring it into existence, it becomes an actor in the spectacle of our shortcomings. It was no accident that Sigmund Freud spoke of "slips". The term *eine fehlerhafte Aktion*, which he often used, does not refer to "chochlik." However, it can also be applied to its countless antics and pranks. Alas, there is one fundamental difference – we have not provoked or made those mistakes. On the contrary, they were meant to happen: they are entropic "mistakes."

In both cases, we are dealing with uncontrolled excess – an alien factor intervenes and it confuses the meanings and disturbs the process of communication, also insofar as it creates its own meanings.

Whenever we happen to witness such an interference in the communication process, we realize how important redundancy is. Redundancy protects the intended and programmed (*resp*. correct) meanings, safeguarding against misreading and/or misunderstanding the message.[7]

> And a clank. "The devil!" said he,
> "Well, my friend, why have you come?"

Invading the text and demolishing it, "chochlik" turns on its head both the message and the reality in which it functions. In any case, the message is a conventional "design of the world;" it is an agreement between the communicating parties. It may be fraught with risk at times:

> In the cup a little devil.

Mickiewicz's ballad *Twardowski's Wife*, unparalleled in its simplicity, presents in and through the language of poetry the deep connections and dependencies between information (the pact) and entropy (the effects of signing it). As a result of an unexpected interference, the thing that was supposed to keep the pact made with the devil in check suddenly disintegrates, and its literal meaning falls deeper and deeper into the abyss of the unexpected.

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Thus, the presence of "chochliks" in the universe of human existence has been significantly expanded. We started from their, so to speak, standard version. Then came the poetic version, and finally we discussed something that extends beyond the limits of both a mere slip of the tongue and an artistic experiment.

Of course, there is a fundamental difference between meaning-making in artistic texts and non-artistic texts, as postulated by semioticians of cultural texts. And we should not focus

[7] See: Agnieszka Kula's brilliant study *Redundancja w mediach. Studium pragmalingwistyczne* [Redundancy in the media: A pragmalinguistic study] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2017).

solely on the former. If something may be defined as a text of culture, we should examine it as well.

The individual and the collective desire to bring order to both personal and social life is repeatedly challenged by chaos – and we try to get rid of it at every step. More broadly, this desire pertains not only to art but also to non-scientific and non-artistic texts.

While we tend to believe that all human creations and works which may be categorized as texts of culture, or which aspire to such a name, are rational and logical in one way or another (that is, they have been rationally conceived in one way or another), "chochlik" and its actions are not.

Living right next to us, as the shadow of our Sisyphean efforts to stop entropy from increasing, "chochlik" unceremoniously mocks all human endeavors. It does not care that we want to communicate in a coherent and communicative way.

Is "chochlik," then, a figure of absurdity? Does it represent a secret conspiracy of fate – a scandalous offence against reason? But if it is an offence, then who committed it? Exactly. Instead of blaming ourselves, we blame the forces beyond our control. "Chochlik," not us, is responsible for what happened – against our will. Therefore, pointing to it and blaming it for our human errors is usually accompanied by a helpless shrug of the shoulders.

I have already mentioned that we do not only find "chochliks" in print but also in speech – as slips of the tongue. George W. Bush once said "our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we." He later corrected himself, but it was too late.

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Marshall McLuhan, as we probably all know and as his texts demonstrate, loved charades, language games, puns, etc. He would probably excel in a game of innuendos. The absurd phrase *the medium is the massage* reads like a linguistic joke, almost like a deliberate slip of the tongue.

The essentially catachretic metaphor that is thus created owes more to the fact that the words message/massage sound similar than to the fact that there might be a logical connection between the two – it would be difficult to come up with a sensible semantic explanation of the phrase *the medium is the massage*.

We can draw some generalizations at this point but only on one condition: that we do not treat the message/massage mix-up as a one-off incident but rather – within the limits offered by artistic license – as a deliberate feature of poetics. And I mean the poetics of the open work – open to such an extent that it will transform the unpredictable into the predictable and the surprising into the deliberate.[8]

[8] Umberto Eco, "Openness, information, communication", and "Chance and plot: Television and aesthetics", in: Umberto Eco, *The open* work, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

McLuhan was quick to recognize, especially in relation to the media, this complex and multi-faceted semantic relationship between the *what* of the message and the *how* of the message. The *how* is closely related to the manner and the properties of the *what*. In short, we should focus on the goal (that is the intended deeper meaning) of the message/massage mix-up.

It seems that this is what the intellectually provocative and erroneous title *The Medium is the Massage* aspired to. Was the error made by "chochlik"? Yes and no. The author made it. He mischievously tried to summon magical powers. And he was creative and bold enough to try to tame and control the element of language.

In the electronic age, the medium can be anything, and it can also be a "massage." What at first makes no sense actually signifies. The word *message*, used in the context of McLuhan's reflection on the mass media, is on some metaphorical level similar to the word *massage*. The two words sound similar but they also carry other meanings.

The statement *the medium is the massage* is not absurd at all. The media are indeed used to "massage" the general public. And if they are not, if they only inform and try to remain independent, the government cannot use them for this purpose. And thus they pose a potential threat to those in power.

In one of the most recent Polish hack-and-leak scandals, one of the Polish Prime Minister's emails to one of his subordinates was made public. It read: "You have to massage our public opinion and prepare it for the fact that some changes must take place. Or even, using marketing language, you must create such a need." The Polish P.M. supposedly said this in 2019, after winning the elections, in connection with the intended takeover of the free media (that is the media that were critical of the government).

* * *

And so, we finally arrive at the extended understanding of the concept "text of culture." A text of culture is not only a work of art but also everything beyond – any and all products of human minds and hands.

A poem, a novella, a novel, a movie. And so many other things. The constitution, a parliamentary resolution, a ministerial ordinance, a building, decor, a court judgment, a highway code, an opinion, an instruction manual, a lesson in school, an academic lecture, a spectacle, a concert, a dance party, a football match, all other sporting events, a park, a calendar, an inventory, an obituary, a wedding ceremony, a recipe, a philosophical dissertation, a game of solitaire, a horoscope, etc., are all, broadly speaking, texts of culture.

All signifying human actions, be it individual or collective, are also texts of culture, including a telephone conversation, a letter, a text message, an MMS, a meme, an email, a dream, small and big ideas, news and fake news, political games, diplomacy, forms of government, etc.

Plato was critical of the world designed by poets. I wonder how he would feel about the idea that the state is a text. It is essentially a text that combines the past, the present, and the future – it is a macrotext of the culture of social coexistence and systemic organization. And since the state is our collective, multi-authored text, we should do everything we can to neutralize a deadly virus that poses a great threat to citizens, whenever it appears.

It goes without saying that words and images play an important role in these processes as integral components and carriers of social practices. Democracies, unfortunately, are still not very effective, and totalitarian regimes teach us that the meaning of words (and images) and the manner in which they are used is a very serious matter.

If "chochlik" appears under such circumstances, it is not just a joke or an innocent prank made on April Fool's Day. As a tool of manipulation, it becomes an extremely serious joke – a joke with deadly consequences.

We know from other people's and from our own experience that it can be very harmful. Considering the damage it causes, it should be treated seriously. Although it is very often used to justify one's negligence and mistakes, in fact it does not justify them in any way.

Apart from the above, there is another sinister kind of "chochlik." A historical joke that is deadly serious. It is as dangerous as it is unpredictable. It should be remembered that not all cultural products are rational – there are limits to this claim.

On the one hand, any cultural text is a symbolic entity. On the other hand, in order to signify, it draws on the real. However, it does not make it a reality in the strict sense of the word. One must never be confused with the other. Nominalism, whenever it becomes a doctrine imposed on the practice of social life, can be extremely costly. We should never confuse the products of language with reality. And this reflection does not only hold true for art, nor is it purely academic.

A few decades ago, one of the most visionary filmmakers in history made one of the most harrowing comments ever made about the Anthropocene. In an unforgettable scene in *Apocalypse Now* in which American helicopters attack a Vietnamese village to the sound of Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," Francis Coppola showed the madness of war and the frenzy of destruction – made possible thanks to ultra-modern technology.

As long as something is a function of culture and civilization, it is also a text of culture. However, barbarism that annihilates it, in all its forms, is definitely not a text of culture. Man is not only a creative being. In the name of "higher culture," he can also methodically destroy and annihilate everything that exists – both with and without his participation.

Nero, who probably considered himself the greatest musician, poet, and artist in history, thought that the apocalyptic fire of Rome would become his greatest work of art. He played a cruel trick on his subjects and ordered that the Eternal City should be set on fire.

* * *

As an agent of political life, "chochlik" can, under certain circumstances, pose a deadly threat. The history of the world teaches that we should always remember about it. Because we never know when the little demon will suddenly, and ominously, appear.

In the past, the political leaders of the Weimar Republic, Chancellor Franz von Pappen and President Paul von Hindenburg, believed that they could plan the future of Germany, which was sliding into chaos, to be as predictable and orderly as possible. Should democracy be threatened, they would try and stop Adolf Hitler.

They were wrong. Respectively, President Boris Yeltsin made a fatal and dreadful mistake when he anointed first as prime minister and then as his successor an inconspicuous pawn, a KGB officer named Putin. As soon as he became Russia's new president, Putin felt so confident that he did not even bother to call Yeltsin to thank him.

Words uttered publicly, as well as unfortunate images and events for which we blame fate, have one thing in common – they suddenly trigger an avalanche of disastrous consequences in social, economic, and political life.

Both the individual and the community have to deal with such consequences all the time. As for words and images, the unexpected consequences of circulating them in a reckless manner are even more dangerous, if we consider the power of the contemporary media.

A casual remark made during a speech, a hasty opinion uttered by the head of a national bank, or an irresponsible statement made by the leader of a European state who announces that he cares about the "racial purity" of his nation – these are just a few random but vivid examples recently reported on the news.

We should take words seriously. But the human tongue is a beast that few can master. It strains constantly to break out of its cage, and if it is not tamed, it will run wild and wreak havoc. The same applies to a certain category of images that are circulated in public. They also resonate with a surprising echo. Not only through what was explicitly presented in them, but also through what was indirectly suggested – such subtexts often lead to unpredictable social effects in the process of communication.

There is one more very wise old saying that I would like to quote: "the fool shoots, but God carries the bullet." Is it a warning? It is something more than a warning – it is a chilling reminder.

Homo informaticus does stand a chance in his fight against the overwhelming chaos. As long as he acts prudently. There is a huge gap between the unpredictable (entropic) and the predictable (which belongs to the sphere of information) – we find there accidents, possibilities, probabilities, calculations, forecasts, predictions, ways in which risks can be managed, etc.

In the process of communication, as in all human endeavors, it is impossible to completely eliminate chaos. It is an undesirable but ubiquitous element of the power play. Instead of ignoring it, we should constantly develop and improve methods to prevent it.

* * *

One last thing on which I would like to comment is explaining the presence of "chochlik" in our lives in either a rational or an irrational way. Is it something absolutely unpredictable? Or perhaps it can be prevented because there exists a certain margin of predictability? And we can hypothetically determine it if we recognize it, predict it, and explain it in terms of chaos theory?[9]

When we say that within the limits of culture, all texts, all actions, and even the most absurd acts can be read, interpreted, and explained rationally, we should remember that this includes, somewhat paradoxically, also the irrational.

The network of coordinates of the world in which we live today, stretched to the limit, contains cumulative *coincidentia oppositorum* of opposing elements of entropy and information. The constant conflict between the two affects our lives, both in terms of the material and the symbolic, constantly posing a threat to everything we try to build and create.

And fate also plays a role in the conflict between entropy and information; fate, and various random and unforeseen "accidents," cannot be ruled out.

They say accidents happen. Yes, but does this statement – supported by experience as it may be – mean that they cannot be avoided? A combination of skepticism and prudence leads us to believe that in their struggle against entropy, the individual and the community, after all, do stand a chance.

It is impossible to completely eliminate "chochliks" either from the higher order found in any "text of culture" or from our lives. We cannot protect ourselves against such unforeseen circumstances. However, we can try to minimize the chances of "chochlik" appearing and mitigate its effects.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[9] Henri Poincaré, Edward Lorenz, Benoit Mandelbrot and others contributed to the innovative theory of chaos, which we owe to 20th-century mathematics. Over time, it has found numerous developments and applications in various fields of science.

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KEYWORDS

poetry

POETICS

text

"THE DEMON OF MISPRINTS"

Abstract:
An interdisciplinary study which examines the poetics of "chochlik" [the demon of misprints and slips of the tongue] in different texts of culture, from poetry to social and political life.

Note on the Author:
Marek Hendrykowski – humanities professor affiliated with the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology, The McLuhan Communication Study Centre, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.

Implementing chaos.

Some notes on *Il dettaglio e l'infinito. Roth, Yehoshua and Salter* ("Detail and infinity. Roth, Yehoshua and Salter") by Luca Alvino

Chiara Taraborrelli

ORCID: 0000-0002-0261-2794

critics: Luca Alvino, *Il dettaglio e l'infinito. Roth, Yehoshua e Salter* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2018)

Luca Alvino[1], as a writer, is sensitive to details, so the word "detail" in the title of his last critical work comes as no surprise. *Il dettaglio e l'infinito* is a collection of short essays, dedicated to three writers who are deeply original in their poetics, themes, atmospheres, political commitment, but move on the common ground of attention to chaos and the *minutiae* of human existence. Philip Roth, Abraham Yehoshua and James Salter, in the author's opinion, belong to a group of narrators who do not deny the need for transcendent constructions, categories and taxonomies to which our scattered, unorderly reality can be traced back to, in order to favor its

[1] Luca Alvino was born in 1970 in Rome, where he lives and works to this day. He graduated in Italian Literature, and he is known as an essayist, translator, and poet. In 1998, he released *Il poema della leggerezza* ("The poem of lightness"), published by Bulzoni: a monograph on Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Alcyone*, where the poet presents experiences, smells, sounds, visuals, and flavors of Tuscanian summers. Alvino is a member of the editorial staff of «Nuovi Argomenti», for which he writes critical essays, and a review of contemporary Italian poetry and poetic translation; he also contributes on a regular basis to the cultural blog «Minima & Moralia» (https://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/). In 2021 he published his latest literary work, the poetic collection *Cento sonetti indie* ("A hundred indie sonnets"), by Interno Poesia.

systematization by man; at the same time, however, these three authors reject any delusional paradigm of a universe regulated by order, and focus not on the "vertical" pursuit of concepts such as the eternal or the infinite – concepts that are in themselves distant, elusive, and watered down in the ocean of abstract thought on a metaphysical level – but on a "horizontal" investigation carried out with disenchanted clarity, anchored in experience, based on the detection of details conceived in a dynamic fashion, nestled in the tangible concreteness and chaos of planet Earth.

Luca Alvino writes in Italian, and makes use of the word *dettaglio* which, however, has two Polish equivalents: *szczegół* and *detal*. These two terms are almost synonyms, but not entirely: there's a slight difference to pinpoint, especially by considering the use of the Polish word *detal* in the fields of art and architecture. *Szczegół* is more general, it is a detail in its broadest sense; one would describe something *szczegółowo* by listing everything that seems relevant to them in a particular context – a good example of this would be an eyewitness reporting a car accident to the police. A "detailed" description in this sense strives to be thorough, complete, and it's often prompted by practical need. *Detale*, on the other hand, are not necessarily game-changing details, those on which the reconstruction of the dynamics of the accident would depend. They are minor elements, captured for whatever reason by the lens of momentary perception, which contribute to creating an atmosphere, revealing flashes of fleeting, and yet fully developed mini-worlds, plunged into the immanence of things, ready to show themselves only to those who seek to see them. Back to our road accident scenario, such *detale* could be well represented, for instance, by a flicker of golden hair behind a window of the crashed car; by a green-white-red sticker attached to the rear windshield; by a baby car seat, empty, placed right next to the driver – a young man, who died instantly in the crash. One particularly interested in details would wonder who these people were, and how fortunate that the baby was not on board that day! From time to time the detail (*detal*) becomes a catalyst for stories, thoughts, emotions, analogies; empowered merely by being noticed, it takes on further meanings: it turns into a symbol of a whole existential condition. This is how, according to Alvino, we can catch glimpses of infinity through the pages of Roth, Yehoshua and Salter.

Therefore, the three authors' goal, pursued through the above-mentioned "horizontal" investigation (i.e., the obstinate pursuit of these *detale*), consists in dismantling the greatest systems, disrupting our most trusted and familiar grids of thoughts – those we have come up with in a whole lifetime of persevering, as well as natural categorization of the universe – pointing out flaws and forcing us to finally face diversity; not merely in order to accept it as a reality that is distinct from us, but to allow it to change us from within, to have an influence on our lives. Roth, Yehoshua and Salter's literature is a call to *implement chaos*. Alvino highlights how this attitude is consistently reflected the three writers' prose.

For Philip Roth, contamination can't be disregarded: one who rejects confrontation with the world, out of fear of unsought change, runs the risk of becoming an *unanticipated self* ("imprevisto se stesso")[2], that is – one who refuses to partake in the flow of history, crystallizes in a form that would otherwise be momentary, and "no longer belongs to the world of the

[2] Alvino L., *Il dettaglio e l'infinito. Roth, Yehoshua e Salter* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2018), 36.

living"[3]. This concept echoes Luigi Pirandello and his fortunate metaphor of life as boiling lava, which however risks solidifying into a "form" at any given moment, turning into rock, cold and still, and thus losing any attitude to trans-formation, any openness to the dialectic of change, to a fertile succession of unforeseen events, conflicts, and opportunities, albeit traumatic, for growth. In Pirandello's thought, "forms" constitute – first and foremost – masks, which can be put on and taken off, to determine the way we look in front of other people and have an influence on their ideas about us. Nevertheless, what Roth seems to be telling us is that a mask can be worn in front of the self as well, every time we envision ourselves like monoliths – pretending to be immune to confrontation and phobically avoiding an idea of weakness that springs from even just a theoretical possibility of changing one's mind.

The Rothian literature Alvino examines in his essays also lets us have a taste of the immediate (as in, *non-mediated*) relationship that children establish with reality: free and devoid of those grids of thoughts that are built upon experience, they approach the world with the freshest eyes and a knack for noticing details that is bound to fade away as they grow up. Roth guides his readers through the process of getting to know ("conoscere") a multifaceted reality, studded with *minutiae* that we, as adults, are used to simply recognize ("ri-conoscere": it literally means "to get to know again") without focusing on it, hardly ever dwelling on what is not essential to everyday life. Roth engages with this idea of infinity in a compelling fashion, proceeding by enumeration and accumulation of details; he also shows a liking for adjectives, which he exploits to compensate for any lack of descriptive power on the part of the noun, edging nearer to an increasingly effective rendering of the ultimately elusive mutability of the immanent.

Abraham Yehoshua uses art, music, and the cathartic experiences that they manage to unleash, to emphasize his conception of beauty as an actual negentropic (that is: working in a way that is opposite to natural entropy) miracle, a stunning and unexpected manifestation of order which requires effort, care, and energy consumption to assert itself, and last over time; in Alvino's words, therefore, "it links back to the transcendental, to the conviction that necessity, indeed, is actively at work behind chaos, channeling nonsense into the reassuring framework of a project"[4]. To understand Yehoshua's thought, one should not overlook his take on the Jewish people. It looks like the Jews viewed themselves as one nation exclusively in the diaspora, and "the history of Israel appears to consist in a perpetual flight from rigid and pre-established borders, as if divine election had relegated it to a state of continuous migration"[5]. In this sense, the process of defining cultural identity (which can't rely merely on geographical coordinates when it comes to the Jewish people) and the concept of confrontation, connection, fertile contamination, are of key importance. Alvino states, with Yehoshua, that the identity perspective is inherently narrow, and that only *connection* can prevent a sense of belonging from becoming caught up in self-centered withdrawal. In the novel *Fuoco amico* ("Friendly Fire"), the call to retranslate the Bible from English into Hebrew embodies this openness to contamination, which is vital to avoid the transformation of a whole people

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 103.

[5] Ibid., 93.

into an *unanticipated self* as Roth would call it: the act of retranslating the Bible from English into Hebrew implements the chaos of confrontation, the fertility of connection, the instability of change.

James Salter is defined by Alvino as an "extraordinary master of the art of zooming in"[6]. According to Salter, details are "the only tangible aspect of reality, the accidents in which the complex phenomenology of humanness manifests itself"[7]. Every detail is grasped in its immediacy, brushed on the page in separate strokes that show an impressionistic taste, and dilated to the point of almost freezing it in time; and such small, cozy, self-referential worlds, fleeting yet complete, just like the many distinct frames of an old silent movie, are faced by the overwhelming force of an inevitable fate, cursed with a dark, incongruous, chaotic design, which can only be understood through the "inessentiality of each individual"[8], the insignificant *minutiae* behind which infinity itself has its hiding spot[9]. Consistently with such a disturbing background of chiaroscuro hues, Salter plays with the reader, scrambling information on purpose to lead them astray. He doesn't strive to clarify misunderstandings, nor does he care about being mistrusted as an author: he just wants to shed some flickering light on a multiple, confusing, and elusive reality, that won't submit to the dominion of logical reasoning. "Reality is never made simpler, not even when broken down into frames; (…) on the contrary, it is pursued and captured in its entirety, with the passionate greed and eagerness of the enthusiast who yearns to possess the whole thing. *All that is,*"[10] Alvino concludes, quoting the title of James Salter's latest novel with its refined and disruptive erotic charge.

Alvino's prose is transparent and fluid. Even without having read anything he examines, the reader would be able to follow and appreciate his analysis to the end, thanks to his precise language, his clear arguments, and his authentic love for literature that every page of the book exudes. *Il dettaglio e l'infinito* is just as compelling as a great novel, as much as one's allowed to say something like this about literary criticism. Through continuous references to the texts and the use of quotes to provide examples, Alvino gets to the point by letting his readers identify the elements he speaks of in the quotes themselves, to better understand their value according to the analysis. Moreover, in a subtle yet effective way, the reader is invited to apply these ideas not just to other authors, but even to different art forms, while also catching a glimpse of an alternative and new approach to the world as human beings: a suggestion to *implement chaos* in the everyday life.

[6] Ibid., 9.
[7] Ibid., 127.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 139.

KEYWORDS

Luca Alvino, Philip Roth, Abraham Yehoshua, James Salter, Luigi Pirandello, il dettaglio, l'infinito, detail, infinite, infinity, Jews, Jewish history, Bible, Ebrei, storia ebraica, Friendly Fire, All That Is

JAN BŁOŃSKI

metacriticism

literary criticism

Abstract:

Il dettaglio e l'infinito by Luca Alvino is a collection of short critical essays dedicated to three famous novelists, Ph. Roth, A. Yehoshua and J. Salter, who devote their creative effort, according to Alvino, to chaos and the *minutiae* of human existence. They reject any delusional paradigm of a universe governed by order, instead focusing their narrative attention on the flickering dynamism of existence, unorderly in all its manifestations. Luca Alvino's prose is transparent and fluid, and his work offers not only a precise and clear analysis of the literature examined, but also more or less occasional hints that encourage the reader to apply the same reasoning to other authors and arts other than literature, eventually suggesting glimpses of an alternative way of approaching the world surrounding us and its expression.

Roland Barthes

THE PLEASURE OF READING

Note on the Author:

Chiara Taraborrelli – (born 1994, Guardiagrele, Italy, Abruzzo) is a full-time PhD student at the Faculty of 'Artes Liberales', University of Warsaw. She is interested in contemporary Italian and Polish literature. She is currently working on a dissertation on the presence and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in Italian fiction and creative nonfiction, analysed with the tools of Narrative Medicine. She teaches Italian as a foreign language. She has published a monograph (UW Publishing House, 2022) on the Polish reception of Dante: *Un Dante polacco. Saggio sulla ricezione della figura e dell'opera dantesca in Polonia, dal Quattrocento a Miłosz (Polish Dante. Recepcja postaci i twórczości Dante w kulturze polskiej od wieku XV po Miłosz)*. She made her debut as a writer in 2021 with the book Mesarthim Arietis.

Towards affect

Sławomir Buryła

ORCID: 0000-0001-9838-0467

critics: Marek Zaleski, *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* [Intensity and other related matters], (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2022)

Marek Zaleski – a scholar who specializes in 20th-century Polish poetry, the author of the classic works *Przygoda drugiej awangardy* [The adventure of the second avant-garde] and *Formy pamięci* [Forms of Memory] – in his most recent book, *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* [Intensity and other related matters], ventures into the more and more popular field of affect studies. Zaleski writes about memory and thus returns to the problems he discussed years ago; however, this time his approach has a different focus – emotions – as he reflects on such concepts as shame, resentment, envy, boredom, fear, and ecstasy. Zaleski examines them in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Polish poetry and prose because, as he argues, literature is the best tool with which one may fully experience life.

Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne is divided into three parts with slightly provocative titles: I. *Historyczne, więc teraźniejsze* [Historical, therefore present]; II. *Nienormalne, więc normalne* [Abnormal, therefore normal]; III. *Anachroniczne, więc żywe* [Anachronistic, therefore alive]. Part I consists of *Świadectwo* versus *wydarzenie*. W czerwonej Hiszpanii *Ksawerego Pruszyńskiego* [Testimony versus event. In Ksawery Pruszyński's Red Spain]; *Historyczna teraźniejszość, czyli przestrzeń afektu* [The historical present, or the space of affect]; *Natręctwo niepamięci naszej o Zagładzie* [How we obsessively try not to remember the Holocaust]; and *Czarny sekret* [A Dark Secret]. Part II consists of *Linoskoczek nad otchłanią normalnej nienormalności* [A tightrope walker over the abyss of normal abnormality]; *Niczym mydło w grze w scrabble* [Like soap in a game of scrabble]; *Ekstazy Jana Błońskiego* [Jan Błoński's Ecstasies]; *Herbert* trickster [Herbert the trickster]; *Estetyka zmąconych emocji, czyli estetyka zwykłości – o Dorocie Masłowskiej dwukrotnie* [The aesthetics of disturbed emotions, or the aesthetics of the ordinary – about Dorota Masłowska twice]; *A jednak* [And yet]; and *Podróżny media-światów* [A traveler in media-worlds]. Part III consists of *Alaryk* ante portas, *czyli korzyści z anachronizmu*

[Alaric ante portas, or the benefits of anachronism]; *Katastrofa jako metafora, czyli historia afektywna* [Catastrophe as a metaphor, or affective history]; *W zniewoleniu szczęśliwi. Raz jeszcze o* Zniewolonym umyśle *Miłosza* [Happy in captivity. Once again about Milosz's *Captive Mind*]; *Wstyd jako katastrofa Innego* [Shame as the tragedy of the Other]; *Kłaniając się okolicznościom* [Bowing to circumstances]; and *Słowo zapomniane?* [Forgotten word?]. It is not my intention to discuss all of Zaleski's essays in detail. Instead, I shall focus on the few chosen texts which are, nevertheless, representative of the reviewed collection.

Zaleski's book is a collection of essays which have been previously published in various journals and post-conference proceedings, but they all share a common theme, namely affect. One can get the impression that the essays were written with a larger whole in mind from the very beginning. *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* has monographic ambitions. Indeed, we learn that the study of affects was financed by a grant received by the members of the Literature and Culture of Late Modernity Research Group at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

When Zaleski writes about affect in art, he often draws on psychology, mainly psychoanalysis, especially as codified by Sigmund Freud, but also on the findings of Jacques Lacan. He also often refers to post-structuralist thinkers (Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, to name a few), as well as the latest humanist publications.

Zaleski operates between four main categories – memory, identity, language, and affect – arguing that all four coexist and condition each another. Such a perspective is visible, for example, in an extensive essay devoted to Dorota Masłowska ((*Estetyka zmąconych emocji, czyli estetyka zwykłości – o Dorocie Masłowskiej dwukrotnie*). Zaleski argues that in Masłowska's prose, language is the medium of the aesthetics of the everyday. Language is also both determined by and reflects one's identity. It is both the source of affect and a manner in which it manifests itself. The spoken, living word, and the relationship between the word and orality, so important to Masłowska, also play a substantial role in Piotr Sommer's poetry (*Kłaniając się okolicznościom*).

In a number of essays in *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne*, the experience of the Second World War is an important point of reference, at whose center, the author places Polish-Jewish relations, or to be precise, the unprocessed memory of Polish-Jewish relations. In *Historyczna teraźniejszość, czyli przestrzeń afektu*, Zaleski proposes to look at the past not so much through the prism of the victim's false sense of guilt, but through the prism of shame. Being stigmatized makes the stigmatized feel shame. "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured," Jean Améry said.[1] Although the researcher does not refer to Améry and his concept of the tortured individual, Zaleski and Améry both say the same thing, which is also expressed by Primo Levi – "the injury cannot be healed."[2] The victim is forever humiliated. One cannot break free from this vicious circle.

[1] Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 34.

[2] Primo Levi, Levi, Primo. "The memory of the offense", in idem: *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books,1998), 14.

Zaleski interprets Magdalena Tulli's novels and Michał Zadara's play *Sprawiedliwość* [Justice] but he does not mention the feeling of shame that should be felt by the persecutors, the active participants of the anti-Semitic campaign in March of 1968. Roman Bratny, the author of the anti-Semitic novel *Dawid, syn Henryka* [David, Henry's son] which was published at the height of the anti-Jewish campaign, did not feel ashamed, even after many years.[3] The leading commentator of the era, Kazimierz Kąkol, did not feel ashamed either (as evidenced by the memoirs entitled *Marzec 68. Fakty i mity* [March 1968. Facts and Myths]).[4]

Zaleski argues that shame and oblivion define the most sensitive aspects of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II (*Natręctwo niepamięci naszej o Zagładzie*). What would those relations look like if not for the veil of oblivion that the communists cast over the war experience (not only over how Poles treated the Jews)? No one can tell for sure. There is no doubt, however, that Polish literature has commented on such inconvenient truths. Stealing, blackmailing, betraying, participating in and committing murders, the phantasm of Jewish gold, plundering – Polish prose and poetry comment on all these difficult things. It was the collective memory that did not want to accept disgraceful facts and memories. "As long as it hides the truth, a secret is not a lie, but a procedure performed on our knowledge about the world, and at the same time on the truth" (p. 126), Zaleski writes in *Czarny sekret*.

In *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne*, Zaleski comments on the works of several different writers he has previously discussed in other essays. Magdalena Tulli is one such writer. Zaleski's essays on Tulli's hermetic prose are the most interesting in terms of proposed interpretations.[5] *Czarny sekret* and *Niczym mydło w grze scrabble* are not only some of the most intriguing interpretations of Tulli's novels but also some of the best essays in the entire volume.

The essay *W zniewoleniu szczęśliwi. Raz jeszcze o* Zniewolonym umyśle *Miłosza* is retrospective in nature. Zaleski adds psychoanalytic tropes to the rich history of the reception of the Nobel Prize winner's essay, arguing that "Milosz's idiosyncratic approach towards psychoanalysis should be discussed in a separate article" (p. 348). Zaleski points to the ambivalence over love and fear – two emotions that the New Faith evoked in the individual.

It seems that readers of *The Captive Mind* were too quick to dismiss Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski's perspective, especially when he asked about why the intelligentsia collaborated with communists. His approach cannot be reduced to the observation that *The Captive Mind* is but an abstract, contrived attempt to understand eastern totalitarianism. Apart from fear, Herling-Grudzinski talks about artistic conformity – finding one's role in and taking advantage of the new world.

[3] See: Roman Bratny, *Rozmowa z Anonimem* [Conversation with Anonymous] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej, 1988), 25.

[4] Kazimierz Kąkol, *Marzec 68. Fakty i mity* [March 1968. Facts and Myths] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1981).

[5] See: Bogumiła Kaniewska, Krzysztof Skibski, ""If things are to go on..." – potentiality and entropy in Magdalena Tulli's early prose", *Forum of Poetics* 26 (2021).

Milosz also does not differentiate, as Zbigniew Herbert did in an interview with Jacek Trznadel, between "kids" and "veterans."[6] Tadeusz Borowski and Jerzy Andrzejewski or Jerzy Putrament may not be judged with the same severity.

The strategy of Ketman, so often referred to as the *modus vivendi* of how intellectuals and artists functioned under communist rule, ultimately turns out to be disastrous for the individual. It creates the illusion of victory over the New Faith. However, the question arises as to how Ketman was perceived by others. Could the outsider, the uninformed citizen of the People's Republic of Poland, notice or recognize this camouflage – this supposedly intricate game one played with the System? He only saw and understood what was visible, in the open, and openly declared, while the essence of Ketman (concealing true thoughts and beliefs) remained hidden. The uninformed citizen did not, could not, notice Ketman's contestatory thoughts and actions, because they were hidden.

Zaleski does not refer to secondary sources extensively. It seems that he mainly wants to introduce the Polish (academic) reader to some English-language publications (while many have been embraced by the Polish academia, Zaleski reads them in a new critical context, reinvents them conceptually). What I missed in *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* was an engagement with Rita Felski's works. I thought about Felski when I read about Jan Błoński's admiration for literature. I would like to learn whether Zaleski finds Felski's texts useful in interpreting Błoński's reading strategy (e.g., as concerns Felski's notion of attachment).[7]

The essays collected in *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* may be divided in accordance with one more criterion. The book then works as two separate collections of, for one, case studies which discuss individual texts or the entire oeuvre of a given author, and, respectively, essays which go beyond the perspective of a single author and their work (works), presenting the reader with a broader critical repertoire. The "case studies section" would consist of *Niczym mydło w grze w scrabble*; *Ekstazy Jana Błońskiego*; *Herbert* trickster; *Estetyka zmąconych emocji, czyli estetyka zwykłości – o Dorocie Masłowskiej dwukrotnie*; and *W zniewoleniu szczęśliwi. Raz jeszcze o* Zniewolonym umyśle *Miłosza*. And the "wider perspective section" would consist of *Czarny sekret*; *A jednak*; *Historyczna teraźniejszość, czyli przestrzeń afektu*; *Natręctwo niepamięci naszej o Zagładzie*; and *Słowo zapomniane?* A certain regularity can be noticed here: texts which are essayistic in nature usually belong to the second category. This is the case with *Podróżny media-światów*.

Podróżny media-światów addresses a very important issue, which is increasingly being recognized as one of the most important contemporary critical questions. That would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. Although Jean Baudrillard talked about such problems in his study of simulacra and simulation back in the 1980s, his main point of reference was television, whose role had since been overshadowed by the Internet and video games. For Zaleski the development of virtual reality is problematic. The (futuristic) concepts of the avatar and

[6] Jacek Trznadel, "Wypluć z siebie wszystko" [Spit it all out], in idem: *Hańba domowa* [Native shame] (Warsaw, 1986).

[7] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

the matrix are more of an opportunity than a threat to the issue of identity, as seen in, for example, Francis Fukuyama's *The Last Man* or the so-called post-apocalyptic prose.[8] However, the traveler in media-space has not finished his journey yet. And who knows if he ever started it. The poetics of the essay, however, is not the only one or not even the dominant one in the reviewed collection. Such essays as *Estetyka zmąconych emocji, czyli estetyka zwykłości – o Dorocie Masłowskiej dwukrotnie* read like "traditional" academic dissertations (*Świadectwo* versus *wydarzenie*. W czerwonej Hiszpanii *Ksawerego Pruszyńskiego* is also very academic in nature).

Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne reads like a crossover between a strictly academic text and an essay. It is not the only book of its kind to explore the poetics of the essay. The essay *A jednak* (dedicated to Marek Bieńczyk) has the strongest focus on poetics.

Słowo zapomniane? moves towards the poetics of the essay. It is a laconic and coherent discussion of one of the most important features of modern culture – a new understanding of the category of beauty. Although Immanuel Kant distinguished between the beautiful and the sublime, this distinction was confirmed and recognized as universal only in the twentieth century. The Holocaust played a huge role in recognizing the importance of the sublime (and the fact that the beautiful followed the sublime). The question of representation, which Zaleski discusses extensively in other essays (e.g., *Świadectwo* versus *wydarzenie*. W czerwonej Hiszpanii *Ksawerego Pruszyńskiego*; *Historyczna teraźniejszość, czyli przestrzeń afektu*), and the related question of the (un)representability of the Shoah (as a traumatic experience) put emphasis on the sublime at the expense of the older, purely aesthetic, understanding of the beautiful. Today, the sublime is being colonized, as Zaleski rightly puts it, by ethics, which often takes it hostage.

Alaryk ante portas, *czyli korzyści z anachronizmu* is as original as *Słowo zapomniane?* (both texts are concise and yet insightful; there is no room for overly long arguments and even longer footnotes). It may come as a surprise, but anachronism has a future (actually, its history is being remade as we speak).

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[8] See, for exmaple: Lech M. Nijakowski, *Świat po apokalipsie. Społeczeństwo w świetle postapokaliptycznych tekstów kultury popularnej* [The world after the apocalypse. Society in the light of post-apocalyptic texts of popular culture] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2019).

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KEYWORDS

methodology of literary studies

Abstract:
The article discusses Marek Zaleski's monograph *Intensywność i rzeczy pokrewne* [Intensity and other related matters] (Warsaw 2022). The reviewed book reads like a crossover between a strictly academic text and an essay. In a number of different essays, Zaleski insightfully analyzes the category of intensity and related notions of collective and individual memory. Discussing the problems of contemporary Polish prose, the scholar draws on the findings of the new humanities.

the new humanities

Polish literature of the 20th and 21st centuries

Note on the Author:
Sławomir Buryła – literary scholar, literary critic, professor at the Faculty of Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw. His research interests include 20th-century editing, contemporary Polish literature, especially WW2, occupation and Holocaust prose. He is the author of, among others, *Opisać Zagładę* [Describing the Holocaust] (Wroclaw 2006, 2nd edition Toruń 2014), *Wokół Zagłady* [Around the Holocaust] (Krakow 2016), *Rozrachunki z wojną* [Coming to terms with war] (Warsaw 2017), and *Wojna i okolice* [War and other things] (Warsaw 2018). He is the co-editor, together with Dorota Krawczyńska and Jacek Leociak, of the monograph *Literatura polska wobec Zagłady (1939–1968)* (Warsaw 2012, 2nd edition Warsaw 2016, English version: *Polish Literature and the Holocaust (1939–1968)*, Peter Lang 2020) and the two volumes of *Reprezentacje Zagłady w kulturze polskiej* [Representations of the Holocaust in Polish culture (1939–2019)] (Warsaw 2021). He is also the editor of several collective volumes on contemporary Polish literature (including the five-volume synthesis *Pogromy Żydów na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku* [Pogroms of Jews in Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries]). Most recently, he edited the anthology *Getto warszawskie w literaturze polskiej* [Warsaw Ghetto in Polish Literature] (Warsaw 2021).