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Poetics, or the Resistance of Forms and Attitudes

A work of literature often turns out to be a formally complex yet effective form of resistance towards threats, wounds, annihilation. The attitude of the writer, their approach, is the ultimate result of a literary work of art.

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Poetics, or the resistance of forms and attitudes

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Contemporary multidisciplinary resistance studies and practices explore many intriguing literary works. Some writers argue that the literary forms they develop are also forms of resistance and resilience. However, this formal aspect of literary forms as *resistance and resilience seems rather mysterious. Let us thus, for example, draw on Amanda Anderson and compare the creation of a literary character to the (therapeutical) process called rumination. The readers may in this process experience and get to know the character's obsessive and intrusive thoughts which, in turn, makes us reflect on the possibility of how one may cope with them. The poet Janusz Szuber, who suffered from a chronic disease throughout his adult life, repeatedly tried to approach his biography in his poems, searching for a form that would allow him to effectively resist the pain he experienced. In the last self-edited anthology published during his lifetime, he noted that he had finally managed to "adopt an attitude" towards the existential fear of death. Paradoxically, as he said, he embraced unstructured biographical "drifting," that is, instead of constantly brooding over his fractured biography, he began to experience and record every moment. Each was an unexpected and invigorating moment*

of contact with the Zeitgeist. *Another example is Florin Irimia's* The Mystery of the Chinese Toy Cars. *In this book, the Romanian writer tried to face the trauma of his childhood, including the divorce of his parents, the difficulties of life in a communist state, his Moldovan identity (which was deemed problematic in Romania), and many other painful problems. Unresolved problems came back to haunt him years later in his novel. As a result of literary rumination, the protagonist-writer finally developed an attitude that allowed him to resist the burden of the past. A work of literature thus often turns out to be a formally complex yet effective form of resistance towards threats, wounds, annihilation. The attitude of the writer, their approach, is the ultimate result of a literary work of art and it is, in essence, a question of form.*

The articles in this issue of Forum of Poetics *touch upon various formal aspects of resistance and immunity in literature. Jerzy Franczak, drawing on, among others, Roberto Esposito's reflections on the nature of immunization, presents a new theory of literature as a theory of literary immunity. His take on immunization and communization in literature opens up a vast new area of research. Anna Gawarecka describes how interwar Czech literature absorbed the "alien" body of circus art and thus developed innovative attitudes in modern Czech literature. Sonia Nowacka explains how Walter Crane tried to heal modern art through a new approach to decorative art that was often rejected by the avant-garde. Lin Xin, in his reading of Stanisław Lem's* Solaris, *shows that a threat of annihilation posed by a gigantic alien creature forces the staff of a planetary research station to quickly develop effective coping strategies so as not to allow the cosmos to affect their psyche. Jinlin Li writes about autothematic Chinese poems, analyzing many surprising formal solutions and, above all, the changing attitudes of poets tormented by their will to create. The outstanding contemporary poet Grzegorz Wróblewski explains in an interview that his mysterious texts known as asemic writing are an attempt to respond to the challenges, influences, and threats of our times. This attempt is not based on semantic games but on a constellation of attitudes towards the world of matter and culture. Agata Stankowska discusses the value of literary polemics in developing new writerly attitudes towards ideas and rhetorical challenges that authors face in the process of – as we would say – painful interpersonal rumination. Finally, Jadwiga Zając writes about the anthology of Anna Świrszczyńska's poems edited by Konrad Góra which showed the poetess as capable of constantly "transforming ways of thinking." Sympathetic to all those who suffer, Świrszczyńska continued to believe that well-crafted lyrical forms may lead to a better future for all those hurt by private and social life.*

Poetics, as we can see, connects with literary practices and forms of resistance on so many different levels. The question of attitudes or approaches to threats and wounds developed by/in literature, in turn, inspires reflection on the affinities between literature and the visual arts with all their means of expression.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

Philosophical immunology
and literary immune strategies

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The SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic directed general attention to issues of health and biological immunity. The global crisis it triggered also provoked inquiries of a different kind, concerning the role of the state and the competences of supranational institutions, the nature of freedom and the limits of democratic powers. The matter of individual immunology proved to be inextricably intertwined with socio-political problems that could be called issues of collective immunology.

This intertwining was often described by means of paradoxes. Judith Butler pointed out that the pandemic is a factor exacerbating social inequality, thereby worsening the situation of the elderly, as well as precarious and low-wage workers, while simultaneously highlighting the economic and social roles of these groups and the importance of invisible forms of social welfare[1]. At the level of political governance, the virus was equated with a terrorist threat, which involved the suspension of many of the rights of liberal democracies. Giorgio Agamben saw the pandemic as a pretext for expanding biopolitical power and implementing new mechanisms of social control[2]. Byung-Chul Han diagnosed the failure of liberal democracies and the triumph of the Asian state model, which enforced obedience and was more willing to use surveillance technologies[3]. In a more dialectical view, the pandemic was sometimes presented as a test for Western democracies. After all, citizens of liberal states expected resolve in their governments' management of the crisis, at the same time fearing restrictions on their freedoms. This contradiction gave rise to further paradoxes: as

[1] Judith Butler, "Capitalism Has Its Limits", Verso Blog 30.03.2020, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits, accessed 11.03.2025.

[2] Giorgio Agamben, Where Are We Now?: The Epidemic as Politics, transl. by Valeria Dani (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

[3] Han Byung-Chul, The Palliative Society: Pain Today (Cambridge-Oxford: Polity Press, 2021).

Ivan Krastev argued, COVID accelerated the deglobalization trend, triggered by the 2008-2009 crisis, while exposing the limits of renationalization; it provoked processes of national unity, simultaneously deepening pre-existing social divisions and inequalities[4]. It could also - or at least it should, according to Slavoj Žižek - not only expose the fragility of human life, the illusion of individualism and the weakness of capitalism in the face of danger, but also draw attention to the need for developing other patterns of collective action, new forms of social solidarity[5].

Language games applied to describe these legal-economic and socio-political entanglements often referred to the vocabulary of the sciences of immunity. This is how the social pathology caused by the virus was described by Donatella Di Cesare. In her view, the introduction of the "rule of experts" was, in fact, the decreeing of a state of emergency, which reinforced the brutality of the capitalist system and resulted in social "suffocation" (as reflected in the metaphor of asphyxia). The resultant, unprecedented immunity logic, in the words of the "sovereign virus" theorist, further excluded the poor and vulnerable[6]. Let us note that even diagnoses that did not draw from the language of immunology - such as those cited above – can be easily reformulated in those terms. The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of biological organisms and community ties and made visible the subcutaneous system of tensions between the individual and the collective, the self and the alien, the friendly and the hostile - a system that permeates every domain of human activity and can be precisely described in the methodologies of immunity studies.

Dialectical adventures

As is generally known, immunology is the study of the body's immune system, its structure and functioning, i.e., its ability to respond to pathogens (bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites, allergens, etc.). At another level, it also describes emergencies of the entire system, i.e., immune disorders, immunosuppression or autoimmune diseases. The transition from the diagnoses of the biological and medical sciences to the domain of philosophy does not, of course, happen by mechanically copying a system of concepts or ordering schemes; this is an attempt to outline similar perspectives, to transfer techniques for capturing and problematizing phenomena, to sensitize to the peculiar dynamics of change. Central to philosophical immunology are issues familiar to (not only modern) political thought, such as the self-determination of individuals, the cohesiveness of social groups, exclusions and antagonisms. These are reformulated by means of a specific vocabulary that is based on an endless dialectic, and imposes an anti-essentialist approach, preventing static approaches. Moreover, these issues are extrapolated to other areas of thought - from anthropology to cultural studies or the sciences of art and literature.

Following from its etymology, the dialectic of obligation and lack thereof is the primary one. The Latin word *munus* meant obligation, service, debt or gift, while *immunus* describes exemption from these obligations. In the words of Roberto Esposito, perhaps the most important thinker of this trend,

[4] Iwan Krastew, Nadeszło jutro. Jak pandemia zmienia Europę [Tomorrow has come. How the pandemic is changing Europe] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2020).

[5] Slavoj Žižek, Pandemia! COVID-19 trzęsie światem [Pandemic! COVID-19 is shaking the world] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Relacja, 2020).

[6] Donatella Di Cesare, Un virus souverain. L'asphyxie capitaliste (Paris: La Fabrique Editions, 2020).

> insofar as the members of the *communitas* are bound by the same law, the same obligations or gifts to be given (these are the meanings of *munus*), *immunis* is the one who is free from them or exempt from them, who has no obligations to the other and can thus preserve their intact substance of the subject, being master of themselves[7].

Thus, the poles that determine the pendulum movement of immunization processes create, on the one hand, boundless submission to law and duty, complete melting into the community, and on the other hand, the severance of all collective ties or neutralization of their impact, the achievement of complete inbreeding and autonomy. They are unattainable, and approaching each of them risks upsetting the state of unstable imbalance (deregulation of the collective bond, dissociation of the individual self). Pendulum movement by no means denotes simple diachrony, for example, in a pattern of alternation. Esposito presents this permanent, irremovable tension in terms of a "perfect co-implication of the two concepts," which

> precludes the possibility of a simple historical succession, assuming the succession of one after the other and the replacement of the original community (through its transgression or loss) by the individual, society or freedom, depending on the optimistic or pessimistic assumptions of some philosophy of history[8].

Community forces one to go beyond what is one's own. As an expropriating force, it threatens the individual and blurs their boundaries, forcing them to turn toward others: "it exposes everyone to contact, and to – a potentially dangerous - infection from others"[9]. At the same time, it is a prerequisite for the constitution of the self, since this process does not mean locking oneself into what is idiomatic and idiosyncratic but negotiating autonomy through the renewal of conflict and the tension it creates. The Italian philosopher sums up this dialectical process in these words:

> If the former [*communitas*] commits individuals to something that pushes them outside of themselves, the latter [*immunitas*] rebuilds their identity, protecting them from risky proximity to that which is different from them, freeing them from any obligations to which they are subject, and locking them back into the husk of their subjectivity. Where *communitas* opens, exposes, and expels the individual to the outside, releasing them toward their exterior, *immunitas* brings them back to themselves, locks them anew into their skin, and, eliminating what is outside, directs externality inward. After all, what else is immunization if not a preventive internalization of the external, its neutralizing appropriation?[10]

Let us try to list the consequences of such thinking in a community. It leads one to abandon traditional conceptions of the social contract - as argued provocatively by Giorgio Agamben or Jean-Luc Nancy[11] - and even to consider *communitas* as an entity that is as necessary as it is impossible, relatively "melancholic" (where melancholy means the source difference that "separates the existence

[7] Roberto Esposito, Pojęcia polityczne. Wspólnota, immunizacja, biopolityka [Political concepts. Community, immunization, biopolitics], transl. by Katarzyna Burzyk et al. (Kraków: Universitas, 2015), 69.

[8] Esposito, Pojęcia polityczne, 70.

[9] Esposito, Pojęcia polityczne, 83.

[10] Esposito, Pojęcia polityczne, 84.

[11] Greg Bird, Containing Community. From Political Economy to Ontology in Agamben, Esposito, and Nancy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

of the community from its essence"[12]). Immunization and communization are forces with opposite vectors affecting a perpetually dangling, collective body, which is never identical with itself.

The self/non-self distinction is - as in biological immune systems - a necessary element in establishing and defending communal rights and interests. Hence, the inevitable consequence of the formation of *communitas* is projecting the other/stranger and sometimes moving them to the position of the enemy. Exclusion, stigmatization, hateful rejection and elimination turn out to be a potential effect of the constitution of the community's exterior. Esposito depicts these processes in terms proposed by Carl Schmitt, where politicity is the domain of antagonism, a renewed division into friends and enemies, which is a condition of state sovereignty. However, the Italian thinker shifts the emphasis: he recognizes hostility as a systemic product, resulting from the logic of immunization, from the work of defense mechanisms which they set in motion and which recognize threats and respond to them. He acknowledges that this leads to the exclusion of individuals and groups and the strengthening of biopolitical power[13], but does not claim that different practices of politics are impossible. The politics of immunization may lead to violence and war, but it is possible to develop an alternative conception of community. Schmitt's theory of politicality seems insufficient, and his critique of liberalism needs to be taken up and moved in a different direction: individualism, designed to fully autonomize the subject, isolates the subject against risk and alienation, but leads to alienation and weakens social ties. It is necessary to move away from purely negative categories, to think of *communitas* as an open entity, to allow individuals to function outside the ideology of self-sufficiency, in overt relationality and interdependence[14].

Neutralizations and complications

A special (and particularly interesting) case are autoimmune diseases, in which the body's immune system recognizes - rightly or wrongly – danger and begins to act to its own detriment. This is an example of a paradoxical intertwining of stability and change: the desire to defend the status quo triggers a mobilization that changes the basic parameters of the entire system and turns out to be self-destructive. However, it also seems important to maintain a sense of the dynamic struggle of opposites when thinking about the excesses of hyperprotection. Transgressing the dialectic often results in a monolithic and static view, as in the case of closed system thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Byung-Chul Han.

The author of *La Transparence du mal* [*The transparency of evil*] focuses on the phenomena of over-prevention, or hyper-immunization, which, in his view, ultimately leads to the abolition of defense mechanisms. The Specter of the Same[15], circling over the globalized world, announces the risk of self-destruction. The social body of Western countries is destroying its own defense mechanisms by failing to expose itself to the virus of otherness. Cultural homogenization and

[12]Esposito, Pojęcia polityczne, 39.

[13]See Roberto Esposito, Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy, transl. by Timothy C. Campbell (Lanham: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[14]See Roberto Esposito, Politics and Negation. Towards an Affirmative Philosophy, transl. by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity 2019).

[15]Jean Baudrillard, Przejrzystość zła: esej o zjawiskach skrajnych [The transparency of evil: an essay on extreme phenomena], transl. by Sławomir Królak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2009), 74.

the intensification of mechanisms of disinfection and sterilization give birth to new pathologies, of which terrorism remains a symptom, but the basic threat seems to be devouring its own cells, stunting development and growth. A catastrophic vision of an imploding system was developed by Byung-Chul Han, a philosopher of excessive immunization which leads to the disappearance of otherness and turns into a terror of positivity. According to the author of *The Burnout Society*, the ultimate triumph of globalization is the moment of utter aestheticization of difference and the blocking of the vitalizing powers of negation of negation. Infections, or pathogen threats from outside, are replaced by diseases of surplus and overload, or infarctions.

The new violence of positivity, signaled by exhaustion, does not provoke any defensive reaction, and the primary threat is "manifestations of neuronal violence, which is not viral, because it cannot be reduced to any immunological negativity"[16]. Both approaches propose holistic and monistic visions[17]; they similarly disarm the tension arising on the lines of the individual-the collective and the same-the other[18]. Thus, they neutralize the problematic potential offered by dialectical variants of philosophical immunology.

There are, however, complications prompting not so much the abolition as the sublimation of the game of differences. The paradigm based on the our/ foreign distinction has been in crisis for a variety of reasons - the impetus has also come from biological sciences. New research has prompted a reformulation of the old concept of the immune self. On the one hand, it has been discovered that the autoimmune response is an important part of the body's physiology, and on the other hand, that the recognition of harmless foreign bodies as part of the body remains important for maintaining integrity and health[19]. Autoimmunity and tolerance have challenged many "obvious truths", such as the anatomical distinctiveness of the organism (which turns out to be part of a symbiotic system) or the constancy of defensive reflexes (which do not include "beneficial" viruses and parasites). In the new model, the immune system combines protection, repair and development. It not only protects from potential threats but also builds and cleanses the body and maintains internal homeostasis[20]. Without encapsulating the continuous (synthesis-free) dialectical process, such an approach better captures the difference inherent in all identity.

It is worth noting that the modern understanding of biological immunity emerged in connection with changes in political and social thinking. The concept of immunity originally had a legal-political meaning, describing, as I have already pointed out, exemption from social obligations (especially taxes and military service), so it first referred to the social body and only later to the physical body. Medicine assimilated this way of thinking, contributing to the individualization of the body, i.e., to conceiving of it as a self-sufficient system that must defend itself against foreign

[16]Byung-Chul Han, Społeczeństwo zmęczenia i inne eseje [Burnout society and other essays], transl. by Rafał Pokrywka, Michał Sutowski (Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2022), 23.

[17]Inge Mutsaers, Immunological Discourse in Political Philosophy. Immunisation and its Discontents (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), 97–101.

[18]It is central to Jacques Derrida's reflection on hospitality and autoimmunology. See Michał Kłosiński, Ratunkiem jest tylko poezja. Baudrillard – Teoria – Literatura [Only poetry can save us. Baudrillard – Theory – Literature] (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2015), 208–227.

[19]Bartłomiej Świątczak, „System odpornościowy, ja immunologiczne. Wprowadzenie" ["The immune system, the immune self. An introduction"], Avant 1 (2012): 216–217.

[20]Thomas Pradeu, Philosophy of Immunology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 9–11; Mutsaers, 48–50.

elements. This approach remained consistent with the modern idea of individual sovereignty and liberal individualism[21]. Questioning the latter beliefs, in turn, dovetailed with challenging the immunological understanding of the body - the fiction of a separate system struggling against an external threat. In both domains, there was a parallel shift away from the concept of the monadic subject, abandoning the logic of confrontation and military rhetoric, and instead adopting a more relational approach that considered the interconnectedness of the organism and the environment, as well as the individual and the collective. In this way, the modern paradigm of immunization, which can be characterized by the dispositions of sovereignty, ownership and freedom, or, to put it briefly, self-ownership and free disposal of property, started to crumble[22].

This has a crucial impact on redefining the concept of subject. Since a clear division into "one's own" and "foreign" is disappearing in favor of a tangle of functions and dependencies, it is impossible to distinguish a unified bionomy of a living organism. Alfred I. Tauber argues that

> from this ecological point of view, there cannot be a narrowed self-defining entity referred to as the self. Thus, if one refers to the overall ecology of the immune system - a broader context that includes universes perceiving and acting both internally and externally - boundaries must remain open to allow free exchange between the host and its environment[23].

The concept of *ego* must give way to the term "self". The philosophy of the subject thus names a specific form of self-referral - one that accepts its own opacity, non-sovereignty and entanglement; one that resists the compulsion to discursiveness and self-explanation[24]. The philosophy of the natural sciences depicts the resistant self as a process, a continuous elaboration of its own definition based on dynamic patterns that emerge in the process of defense/preventive attack[25]. Tauber himself proposes a broad spectrum of these empowerments, the so-called punctual-elusive continuum. Its boundaries are defined by the purely hypothetical (if not impossible) punctual self and the perfectly ungraspable self[26], and in between is an infinite multiplicity of practices and techniques of the self.

Immunological plots

The paradox of immunization is that it is meant to protect the community, but it can also weaken it. In addition to the risk of confronting a stranger/enemy, there is a threat of excessive isolation, which induces stagnation. "What protects the individual and collective body is also what prevents it from developing. What is more, it is that which, beyond a certain point, destroys

[21]Ed Cohen, A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[22]Mikołaj Ratajczak, „Poza paradygmat immunizacji: biopolityka w projekcie filozoficznym Roberta Esposita" [„Beyond the paradigm of immuization: biopolitics in Roberto Esposito's philosophical project"], Praktyka Teoretyczna 3 (2011): 178.

[23]Alfred I. Tauber, „Od immunologicznego ja do działania moralnego. Komentarze" [„From the immunological self to moral action. Commentaries"], Avant 1 (2012): 314.

[24]Roma Sendyka, Od kultury „ja" do kultury „siebie". O zwrotnych formach w projektach tożsamościowych [From the culture of „I" to the culture of „self". On reflexive forms in identity projects] (Kraków: Universitas, 2015), 14–18.

[25]Moira Howes, „The Self of Philosophy and the Self of Immunology", Perspectives in Biology and Medicine 42 (1998): 127.

[26]Alfred I. Tauber, The Immune Self: Theory or Metaphor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 135–136.

it"[27]. Because of this healing-poisoning power, one can venture a claim that the logic of immunization is *phármakon*. Violation of the fragile dialectic of constancy and change leads either to neolatry, i.e., unbridled worship of novelty, or to neophobia. Change, as A. David Napier, writes

> is necessarily a dangerous process. Not only can society, as many intellectuals fear, control our actions with ruthless precision, it also attempts to limit continuous and unlimited transformation. In other words, inhibitory cultural tendencies exist not only to enslave us, but also to protect us from uncontrolled growth, which we can witness biologically in every tumor[28].

The stories of societies are arranged in tales of disequilibrium or the dominance of one member of this opposition of stagnation and death or evolution and rapid transformation. What has been outlined above in strictly synchronic terms, when transposed to a timeline, becomes the basis of immunological plots. Diachronic depictions are proposed by almost every thinker cited here. They usually portray Western modernity as an era of limiting social mutations and a growing inability to contact the other, to replace communication with confrontation. This perspective explains both the triumphs of nationalisms and political extremisms, and the growing obsession with security, in the name of which individual freedoms are confiscated. Esposito even proposes forgetting traditional characterizations of *modernitas*, such as "secularization" or "rationalization," and presents the history of the West in terms of the progresses of immunization. In their course, the unit becomes an "absolute" individual (set apart from the collective and secured from relation to others), whereas *communitas* loses its sense-making powers. "Absolutism", literally meaning detachment and uprooting, becomes the hidden destiny of the era[29].

The most interesting grand narrative, however, was constructed by a philosopher using the immunological vocabulary on his own terms. Peter Sloterdijk distinguished between three types of synchronized immunization systems: biological, socio-cultural and symbolic. "Above the automated and unconscious biological basis," he writes in *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* [*You must change your life*], "rise mechanisms that help to cope with strangers and aggressors, and with random events and death, respectively," that is, those that provide a sense of existential security and the relative permanence of the image of the world, "compensation for the obviousness of death and the transgenerational permanence of norms"[30]. This is firstly about systems of solidarity (of the hospitality kind) and their extensions (legal systems), and secondly about religions and cultures[31].

There is no room here to discuss the two elaborate contexts in which Sloterdijk's immune reflection appears: the theory of anthropotechnics, i.e., the study of historically variable forms of human self-discipline and self-formatting practices, and the theory of spheres, those "forms of

[27]Esposito, Pojęcia polityczne, 100.

[28]A. David Napier, The Age of Immunology. Conceiving a Future in an Alienating World (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 101–102.

[29]Roberto Esposito, Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community, transl. by Timothy C. Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 12–13.

[30]Peter Sloterdijk, Musisz życie swe odmienić. O antropotechnice [You must change your life. On anthropotechnics], transl. by Jarosław Janiszewski, Arkadiusz Żychliński (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2014), 14–15, 625.

[31]Peter Sloterdijk, After God, transl. by Ian Alexander Moore (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 191–192.

space equipped with an immune-systemic effect"[32], protecting against external dangers, and taking on a wide variety of forms (from caves, houses and cities to nations, religious communities or shared worldviews). Let us just recall the immune plot as told by the philosopher. Modernity is supposed to become a period of catastrophe spread over centuries. The post-Enlightenment era proliferated rational explanations of the world, disenchanting it, which in immunological terms meant the over-compensation of symbolic (religious and metaphysical) systems. Their place was taken by pure externality, exposed by the processes of globalization (during which it turned out that we do not live inside the sphere, but on its surface). In the end, a comprehensive twilight of immunity happened. Sloterdijk depicts this twilight using a spherological vocabulary as the disintegration of social macrospheres, their pluralization and entering the "foam" stage; society turns into "an aggregate of microspheres of different sizes (couples, families, enterprises, associations)[33]". The task of philosophy is to study the cognitive, ethical and political consequences of this state of affairs, as well as to design possible actions. As for the latter, the author of *Die Verachtung der Massen* [*Contempt of the masses*] reiterates the call for a new "co-immune bill", that is, balancing losses and communal gains[34], even calling for a reflexive co-immunization, that is, the establishment of a universal "macrostructure of global immunizations" [35].

In this perspective, applying above-cited conceptual games, I have recently tried to interpret Michel Houellebecq's *Anéantir* [*Annihilation*][36]. Spherology, which can be read as a "genealogy of the sense of solidarity"[37], enables one to see the inherent sense of cooperation in various community practices, while at the same time highlighting everything that limits it or renders it ineffective. The French writer paints an evocative picture of a world in which co-fragility and co-isolation inhibit a sense of security and true interpersonal closeness. However, one could ask a more general question: what function does literature play in this arrangement? Does its role boil down to making epochal diagnoses (which would make it a kind of undogmatic symptomatology)? Or does it operate in yet another way? Belonging, along with other cultural practices, to the symbolic sphere, does it stimulate or weaken social immune mechanisms? Does it not itself weave great immune plots?

Literary strategies of resilience: six hypotheses

Let us state the following: the point here is neither to highlight works, concepts and currents inspired by crises of resilience (such as pandemics[38]), nor to examine literature through a thematic key as representations of themes of collective health (this is especially true of science

[32]Peter Sloterdijk, Bulles. Sphères I, transl. by Olivier Mannoni (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2002), 31.

[33]Peter Sloterdijk, Écumes. Sphérologie plurielle, transl. by Olivier Mannoni (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2002), 52.

[34]Sloterdijk, After God, 192.

[35]Sloterdijk, Musisz życie swe odmienić, 629.

[36]Jerzy Franczak, „Komunikacja i koimmunizacja. Wokół Unicestwiania Michela Houellebecqa" [„Communucation and co-immunization. On Michel Houellebecq's Annihilation"], Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa 4 (2024): 42–49.

[37]Przemysław Wiatr, Peter Sloterdijk – ćwiczenia z prowokacji [Peter Sloterdijk – exercise in provocation] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2024), 123.

[38]For example, Elizabeth Outka demonstrates, how the Spanish flu of 1918 r. influenced Modernist literature – Virginia Woolf's and T.S. Eliot's fragmentary essays are supposedly the products of pandemic fears. Elizabeth Outka, Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

fiction, but not only[39]). This is not even about analyzing the interference of immunological and poetological discourses[40]. This is about trying to reformulate the basic issues of literary studies in terms of this relatively new vocabulary.

Let us begin with the simplest of assertions: literature is one of the symbolic practices, which is part of a process pervading the entire social body; one which creates, (re)defines and revitalizes communities, while enabling the constitution of subjects. It takes an active part in the dialectic of immunization and communization, whose mutual negation is, as Esposito writes, "the source of all vitality, as both collectivities and individuals establish themselves by negating what negates them"[41]. Let us try to break down this process into movements with specific vectors and illustrate them with simple examples from modern literature.

1. Literature negates the collective in the name of the individual or negates the individual in the name of the collective

On the one hand we are dealing here with the discourse and practice of communal duties, or obligations - depending on the variant - to the nation, religious or civic community, ethnic group or social class. This involves the alternation of romantic and positivist attitudes, a shifting of emphasis, a remodeling of grand narratives, and a reformulation of political strategies. Nevertheless, the ethics of service and the depreciation of the individual prevail. This happens in heroic-insurgent, martyrdom and messianic narratives, as well as loyalist-socialist and revolutionary narratives, developed by both conservative modernism and the avant-garde. They are favored in periods of danger to the collective body, i.e., turmoil and war - the culmination of 20th-century Romanticism is simply the imposing language of messiahship - and weakened by moments of peace and social relaxation. This scheme is curiously complicated by the revolutionary-collectivist option, which maintains similar slogans ("the individual is nothing, the individual is nonsense!") during periods of relative social order, yet, viewed in terms of class struggle.

On the other side are the fierce defenders of the individual, usually associated with high modernism, striving to uproot the individual from the bondage of social patterns of behavior, falsified values and inauthentic identities, crafted worldviews, collective beliefs and madness. This strategy of resilience is summarized in Witold Gombrowicz's audacious project to "reassert oneself in the self against everything," especially against an era that repeats "stern admonitions: you are nothing, forget yourself, live others"[42]. Notably, this defense of the individual forced a constant distancing from the expropriating forces - it is not a coincidence that having repeated the "I" four times, the author of *Dziennik* [*Diary*] takes to paging through the London press only to enter into an impassioned polemic with it. Endless war - this is the way of being of a subject shedding the communal *munus*.

[39]Glyn Morgan, "New ways: the pandemics of science fiction", Interface Focus 11 (2021); Ronald De Rooy, Monica Jansen, "Immunity and Community in Italian War Novels Set in Afghanistan", Configurations 3 (2017): 373–392.

[40]Huiming Liu thus described immunological plot lines in T.S. Eliot's essays and postcolonial mutations of these issues in J.M. Coetzee's works. See Huiming Liu, "Immunological Poetics and Postcolonial Echoes: Traversing the Medical Narratives From T.S. Eliot to J.M. Coetzee", Literature Compass 1 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.70017.

[41]Ratajczak, 177.

[42]Witold Gombrowicz, Testament. Rozmowy z Dominikiem de Roux [Testament. Conversations with Dominic de Roux] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2012), 98–99.

2. Literature stages paradoxes of double (multiple) negation

Each of the above-outlined movements can be described in terms of a double negation, i.e.: "in the name of the individual, literature negates the collective, which negates the individual," etc. Somewhere in the background, there is a *regressus ad infinitum* ("...negates the individual, which negates the collective," etc.), which is a sign of the unleashed game of opposites. The language of immunity which we rely on sensitizes us to this coupling, to its consequences and side effects. Attempts to subordinate the individual to the collective give rise to unconscious or denied emotions; aggression and self-aggression, grief and melancholy accompany mobilizations and metamorphoses, self-persuasion and self-love (when the mobilized self of today puts to death its incarnation of yesterday). Even in the most schematic works (e.g., Tyrtaic lyricism, social realism or anti-socialist realism) they are present as symptoms.

Regardless of the intertwining of these contradictory affects, the negation of that which negates that which negates, etc., builds up a perspective of duplicate reflections and multiplies, on a *mise en abyme* basis, the image of that which was to be annihilated. The same applies to literature, which presents itself as an anthropology or politics of the strong subject, and which reveals a deep dependence on its negativity - if only on that national-religious community that tries to "kneel" the wayward individual (as in Kazimierz Brandys' *Wariacje pocztowe* [*Postal variations*]), and which turns out to be indispensable for self-poetic gestures[43].

Literature thus keeps alive many themes and "cursed problems", not only by deliberately addressing them, but because it allows them to persist as dialectical background. They are present *per negationem* on multiple floors of immunization and communization. The meaning of the work thus seems difficult to stabilize - in a critique of the "posthumus births of a bygone era", the negated image of the maladjusted or hostile individual may prevail over praise of the collective, and the fieriest apology of the anarchized individual may be underpinned by a longing for a (negated) communal horizon. Of course, there is no need to reduce all of this to symptoms, and it need not always be about a simple juxtaposition of the singular and the plural - literature is, after all, one of the most subtle tools for a deliberate problematization of the psychic and social worlds.

3. Literature shows or provokes complications and neutralizations of immunization/communication processes

Generalizing from the above-mentioned arguments, one might point to two variants of dissolution of the individual in the collective: the utopian and the dystopian one, and the way in which they are connected by an inverted symmetry with two variants of the individual's struggle for their rights. Utopian depictions (good collectivity absorbing unhappy and alienated individuals) are accompanied by pejorative depictions of the individual refusing to enter the collective, while dystopian depictions (evil collectivity destroying the happiness and autonomy of individuals) are accompanied by positively valorized images of the individual fighting for

[43]Siege can also be considered a metaphor for the condition of the individual. A simplified version is exemplified by the struggle between Scheme and Sensitive Exception, shown in Kropka nad Ypsylonem [Dot on Ypsylon]. Notably, the destruction of one is linked to the annihilation of the other, which in Edward Stachura's strange allegorical poem is rendered with the figures of the atomic apocalypse.

freedom and the right to self-determination. Nevertheless, against the temptation of such chiasmatic figures, literature excels at constructing complex, asymmetrical or unstable systems.

Of course, what is meant here are not just utopian or dystopian works in the generic sense (although it is not hard to find examples of highlighting maximum ambivalence, from Stanisław Lem's *Powrót z gwiazd* [*Return from the stars*] or Aldous Huxley's *The island* to Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy), but a proliferation of questions that disrupt the clarity of divisions and criteria of valuation. Is the social body compact or dispersed? Singular or plural? Homogeneous or multivariant? Does it obliterate the difference that individuals bring, or does it incorporate it and undergo change itself? Or does this relationship fall outside the schemes of whole and part, alienation and disalienation? Similar complications arise in thinking and writing the subject. Even the above-quoted beginning of *Dziennik*, despite the strength of the subject's assertion, gets caught up in paradoxes of deixis (what subject is indicated by the pronoun "I"?), hypostasis (is there an essence of this subject?) and iterability (is it tense-sensitive, is Tuesday's "I" the same as Monday's?). The "I" problematized by literature often turns out to be entangled, relational and decentralized, now oscillating towards the "self", now approaching the edge of disappearance. This happens to the accompaniment of doubt: is the individual not a function of the social? Is it not the result of disciplinary actions, the sum of internalized orders and prohibitions? What if it constitutes an abstract entity, a hanger-on for roles and identities? We should add that this applies as much to social roles as to gender roles: "immunity-as-defense", operating on the principle of autoimmunity, manifests itself in the mechanisms of producing femininity and masculinity, setting in motion a system of differences and creating threatening forms of queerness (like the discourse of effeminacy[44]).

Complicating the relationship that philosophical immunology places at the heart of social life leads to significant corrections. For example, the self-determination of the subject turns out to be contingent and highly problematic, while freedom becomes a unifying, de-individuating power. For Esposito, it appears "as a relation and in relation: the exact opposite of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency" [45]. It is "the inner exterior of the community - that part of it which resists immunization, does not identify with itself, remains open to difference"[46]. What the thinker includes in general formulae remains the matter of literary reconstructions and deconstructions. Complication turns into neutralization when the play of opposites endures for a moment, when the tension between the members of a dichotomy is subject to reduction or momentary invalidation - if only through inverting patterns, generating incongruence, and exploiting various forms of comedy.

The stakes of fictional, textual and linguistic games are higher than establishing the individual in opposition to the collective or reinforcing the collective at the expense of the individual, and even higher than gaining insight into their life-giving nexus, i.e., the dynamics of multiple creation through negation. Complicating the picture of this relationship leads to the displacement of oppositions

[44] Tomasz Kaliściak presents his biopolitical project of masculinity in these categories. See his Płeć Pantofla. Odmieńcze męskości w polskiej prozie XIX i XX wieku [The gender of the henpecked ones. Non-dominant masculinities in Polish prose of the 19th and 20th centuries] (Warszawa, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016), 11–19.

[45] Esposito, Pojęcia polityczne, 87–88.

[46] Esposito, Pojęcia polityczne, 93.

(own/others', created/imposed, authentic/fake, private/public) preserved by other social discourses. In this way, literature becomes a form of action enmeshed in the fluctuations of social systems.

4. Literature negotiates its immunology with systemic response mechanisms or it confronts them

Resilience has been described outside the thematic key as a metaphorical space for literary self-reflection. Johannes Türk noted that many writers (from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Marcel Proust and beyond) viewed writing in terms of a protective inoculation; on this basis, he defined literature as a communal immune institution that "offers forms that expose and provoke conflicts in order to provide protection against them"[47]. In doing so, he came close to the well-known view of rhetoric as a form of resistance, where original communication strategies can protect individuals and groups from manipulation or propaganda[48]. However, it is worth expanding this kind of thinking beyond the model of symbolic prevention.

Such an experiment was proposed by Przemysław Czapliński, who combined reasoning in terms of "social hormones" with immunological concepts and distinguished different types of collective immunity, as well as different types of literary interventions in different socio-political systems. The immunology of totalitarianism achieves homeostasis at the price of society's destruction, while dystopian visionaries warn of the dangers of a politics of happiness (Aldous Huxley) or hatred (George Orwell), which eliminate the ability to fight and to build bonds, respectively. The immunology of liberal democracy - especially in the brief inter-episode of the "end of history" - turns into immunosuppression, as there are no clear threats in a world transformed into a job market and a giant amusement park. Neoliberal immunology, on the other hand, transfers the basic mechanisms of a society of discipline to the model of a society of achievement; it turns orders and prohibitions into incentives and opportunities. In the latter two systems literature (drawing on tradition, taking up historical utopias and strategies of revolt) seeks a new type of hormonal and immune balance. Examples cited by the researcher illustrate the thesis that "for democracy not to be devoured by capitalism and/or turn into authoritarianism, it is necessary to weaken voluntarily an individual immune system and make room for social foreign bodies"[49]. Literature attempts to transform the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, to change the rules for counting minority groups and communities of resistance in the communitarian calculus.

This seems to coincide with Donna Haraway's recognition, in which she views the contemporary immune system as a kind of biopolitical map that enables self-recognition in a network of social differences, that is, "maintaining the boundaries of what can be considered the "self" and the "other" in key spheres of norm and pathology"[50]. The areas of interest for us, which represent a privileged field of exploration for literature, span beyond the pattern of

[47]Johannes Türk, „L'Immunité de la littérature: Introduction ", Acta fabula 7 (2024), http://www.fabula.org/acta/document18395.php.

[48]Charles Paine, The Resistant Writer: Rhetoric as Immunity, 1850 to the Present (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[49]Przemysław Czapliński, „Kłopoty z równowagą. O immunologii, polityce i francuskiej literaturze XXI wieku" [„Problems with balance. On immunology, politics and 21st century French literature"], Teksty Drugie 4 (2024): 120.

[50]Donna Haraway, Siminans, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991): 204.

simple confrontation. For, as the philosopher writes, resilience can be seen in terms of shared specificities. This umbrella term encapsulates "semi-permeable selves, capable of interacting with others (human and non-human, internal and external), but always with specific consequences; situated possibilities and impossibilities of individuation and identification; partial mergers and threats"[51]. In this frame, literature is not so much a representation or diagnosis as a specific social activity, jointly responsible for creating patterns of being and ways and directions of action, shaping the collective imagination and drawing horizons of expectations.

Let us quote a simple example. If philosophical immunology defines culture as "a set of preventive measures (norms, laws, practices, exercises, rules, recommendations, etc.) whose task is to neutralize threats known to a given culture"[52], then clearly literature takes part in pointing out and/or calling into existence these dangers. Even if it creates a future that is not coming - thus building a kind of counterproductive immune systems - one should remember that unrealized futures also affect the present. The perception of "today" is, after all, connected with the vision of tomorrow, "anticipated visions of the future," as Justyna Tabaszewska writes, "shape our behavior in the present"[53]. The gap between the anticipated future and the one that has occurred gives rise to active "affective differences" [54], but also those past futures that reside in the realm of fiction exist in the form of affective facts. "Every event that may have come, but which has not," says the researcher after Brian Massumi, "leaves behind an unresolved excess. This excess shapes how we perceive the present, and with it, the past"[55]. Literature can both support ontological power (ontopower), with its affective mobilization, prevention and preemption[56], as well as attempt to disarm it, but whether it aligns itself with dominant immune systems or works against (in spite of) them, it remains an essential and active part of them.

5. Literature creates and strengthens relationships between resilience, responsibility, responsiveness and narratability

The way literature operates can be linked as much to healing (reworking of traumas) as to a preventive support of resilience. Tabaszewska suggests treating it as "a space for exercising and strengthening collective resilience"[57]. At this stage of our deliberations, we can expand this proposal. To do so, let us take advantage of the polysemy of the Polish verb *odeprzeć* 'to fend off'/ 'to give a reply', whose primary meaning is "to force someone or something to back away, to reject, to repel someone or something, to defend oneself against an attack," and secondarily "to answer, reply." The latter meaning exceeds a purely defensive frame; it no longer involves merely repelling an attack or argument but simply participating in a conversation - the one described by the form *odparł(a)* 'he/she' replied', ubiquitous in dialogue. Resilience would thus involve the responsiveness of the individual (refining patterns of expression, remaining in a reactive coupling with the

[51]Haraway, 225.

[52]Wiatr, 122.

[53]Justyna Tabaszewska, Pamięć afektywna. Dynamika polskiej pamięci po 1989 roku [Affective memory. The dynamics of Polish memory after 1989], (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2022), 23.

[54]Tabaszewska, 38.

[55]Tabaszewska, 28.

[56]Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

[57]Tabaszewska, 69.

outside) and the collective (responding to what is idiomatic, maintaining contact with otherness), as well as communal and subjective responsibility (a network of ethical obligations and relations of concern). It is also impossible to separate it from the constant testing of the limits of narrating that which is singular and that which is plural, of existence and the co-inhabited world.

In Sloterdijk's anthropological reflection, man is a technopoetic animal, whose condition is founded on an ecstatic way of life, that is, on the taming of the exterior using technology and speech. "Coming into the world" is inextricably linked to "coming into language," and the taming of the inhuman or "monstrous Exterior" happens precisely through linguistic mediation. In the digital age, as Sjoerd Van Tuinen adds, "written compositions (*Schriftsätze*) of technology develop beyond translation and no longer generate taming (*Anheimelungen*) or make the world friendly. On the contrary, they expand the scope of externality and that which is unassimilable"[58]. Thus, the role of literature may be subject to redefinition. Modernity bet on expressing the inexpressible and searching for the "missing word", recognizing the limitations of anthropocentrism and seeking access to reality *in crudo*, to the minutiae of experience and the atoms of the soul. What matters today is sustaining the anthropotechnical exercise, the ethical appeal and the taming of a world that has become alien.

6. Literature internalises the processes of immunization and communization

The phrase "a world that has become foreign" appears in Wolfgang Kayser's memorable definition of the grotesque, which points to yet another plane of immunological analysis, making it possible to reformulate the recognition of historical poetics. Definitions of literature, discourses and conventions of reception that shape its understanding, the genological system, the rules of decorum and dominant poetics, are subject to constant change, which operates on the principles of action-reaction and unification-differentiation. The history of literary forms is arranged in stories of their codification and decodification, structure and destruction, consolidation and decay, making them resemble vividly the great immunological plots. The grammaticalization of the major poetics at specific stages of development can be likened to literary communization, while the activities of revolutionaries and the search for more capacious forms are a kind of immunization practices, relieving them of their duties to the system and serving to protect the individual writing project.

In this context, it would also be easy to present the specifics of particular techniques and figures. For example, parody, whose role remains crucial both for the birth of great forms (the novel) and for the programmatic and intergenerational dispute - would be a vituperative defensive reaction (negation of what it negates). Pastiche, a recreative form, would be a communicative attempt to regain what is lost through negation, or an attempt to de-escalate dialectical processes. This perspective also prompts general reflections. One can wonder whether modernism was a formation that supported immune (immunization) processes, while postmodernism attempted to go beyond this paradigm and operate in the space of post-immune relaxation and "overcoming" (i.e. "recovery" in the Nietzschean/Vattim sense), while the avant-garde, which is positioned so differently in this constellation, worked to intensify the violence of dialectical processes, declaring revitalizing goals, while producing unpredictable complications; sometimes - neutralizations.

[58]Sjoerd Van Tuinen, "Transgenous Philosophy: Posthumanism, Anthropotechnics and the Poetics of Natal Difference", in: In Medias Res. Peter Sloterdijk's Spherological Poetics of Being (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 56.

These remarks necessarily concise and general in nature, and probably not free from simplifications and risky leaps of thought. This is a derivative of the experimental mode of thinking: after all, this is about terminological attempts that cover all areas of literary research. I hope that this preliminary reconnaissance may encourage polemics or further research, and that the benefits of transferring the immunological dictionary to literary studies will at least offset the potential harm.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

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KEYWORDS

philosophical immunology

Roberto Esposito

Abstract:
The article opens with a recapitulation of the most important theories in the field of philosophical immunology - from the pioneers of this reflection, working at the intersection of the medical sciences and the humanities (Alfred I. Tauber) to closed system thinkers (Jean Baudrillard, Byung-Chul Han), with a particular focus on dialectical (Roberto Esposito) and diachronic (Peter Sloterdijk) approaches. This overview is followed by an analysis of the processes of immunization and communization, as well as the complications associated with the constitution of communities and individual subjects. Finally, literary strategies of immunity are the object of consideration; this is a proposal to reformulate traditional literary issues through the vocabulary of immunology.

Peter Sloterdijk

LITERARY THEORY

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Jerzy Franczak (born 1978) – D. Litt., professor at Jagiellonian University, writer, essayist, literary scholar, employed at the Faculty of Polish Studies at Jagiellonian University. He works on modern and avant-garde literature, philosophy and anthropology of literature. He is the author of novels and short story collections, as well as scholarly books and essays. His recent publications include: *Maszyna do myślenia. Studia o nowoczesnej literaturze i filozofii* [*The Thinking Machine. Studies on Modern Literature and Philosophy*] (Universitas, Krakow 2019), *Errant Letters: Jacques Rancière and the Philosophy of Literature* (Peter Lang, Lausanne 2023), *Zemsta wyobraźni* [*Revenge of Imagination*] (PIW, Warsaw 2025).

"Circus variations" in interwar Czech literature

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Hanuš Jordan writes in the introduction to the monograph *Orbis cirkus* (2014) that the history of the Czech circus has not yet been comprehensively described. He somewhat pessimistically concludes that:

> Due to the lack of scholarly studies, Czech public opinion learns about the circus from other sources – especially from fiction, for example, from Eduard Bass's most popular novel *Umberto's circus* (1941), which is a required reading in schools and has been further popularized by the TV series directed by František Filip (1988). As a result, the Czech people believe that *Umberto's circus* is a real famous family circus. They believe that the talented children of Czech farmers, like Vašek Karas, were excellent acrobats and even became the co-owners of the enterprise. In every European circus, there was a Šumava band… But in reality, everything was different…[1]

For Jordan, therefore, Eduard Bass's famous novel, which created (and embedded in cultural memory) ideas about circus life, is misleading. It is "because of" Bass's novel that the Czech reader has a vision of the circus in which fact is mixed with fiction to such an extent that they can no longer distinguish between them. It is not possible to tell reliable and unreliable information apart. Such complaints, understandable from the point of view of a historian interested in the "objective truth" and worried about the "distortions" of fiction, to a large extent become irrelevant when a literary scholar takes a look at the strategies used by the prose writer to represent the circus world. It might turn out that, as Grzegorz Kondrasiuk writes,

> We always **perceive** the circus through meaning. As if this phenomenon could only be touched by some form of representation, through an image, a text […]. We write about, think about, and evaluate the circus, inscribing it into the present order, the current matrices of understanding, where it does not quite fit…

[1] Hanuš Jordan, Orbis cirkus. Příběh českého cirkusu [Orbis circus. The story of the Czech circus] (Prague: Nakladatelství Akademie múzických umění v Praze, 2014), 21. All translations from Czech into Polish were made by Anna Gawarecka. In the present English language version of the article, all translations into English are based on the Polish text, unless stated otherwise.

> Such operations leave us with excess, with a sense of inadequacy. We want to get rid of all clichés but in the end we are left with a projection of longing for freedom and organicity that have been lost in modern times.[2]

Indeed, while in the Czech context the "imagology" of the circus has been shaped by Bass's monumental saga, it does not have to raise reservations or cause scholarly concerns. The novel's value lies not so much in the naïve identification of the characters with their potential authentic prototypes, but in the "historicization" of the narrative. It combines different discourses, bringing together fiction and essay writing. In other words, in the absence of scholarly studies, the novel *Umberto's circus* "has the right" to function as a reliable source of knowledge concerning the roots, evolution, and glory days of the European circus. This right, by the way, is no longer questioned in the current era of poststructuralist pantextuality (additionally reinforced by cultural studies and the narratological affinity between literature and historiography, as explained by Hayden White). Rafał Mielczarek writes:

> Interpretation as fiction (i.e. a product) blurs the line between content and its representation. [...] Nevertheless, relying on existing interpretations allows us to draw on various cultural texts (not necessarily scholarly ones) in our quest to understand the circus. Geertz's comparison of *Madame Bovary* to an ethnographic report confirms that fiction, similarly to film or theatre, is able to convey the unique nature of a given reality just as well as non-fiction.[3]

Recognizing the documentary value of Bass's novel about the European career of the multi-generational Berwitz and Karas circus families does not diminish its literary value. Rather, it reminds us that a mimetic representation of a (model) world complicates but does not rule out exploring the epistemological potential of the fictional narrative.[4] The sophisticated game between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* in *Umberto's circus* might be confusing for the reader (as stated by Jordan). Overwhelmed with all the information, the reader is often forced to determine for themselves whether the "circus lives" presented in the book are, exclusively and individually, fictional, as experienced by the characters, or whether they should be treated as "islands of references" in the "sea of fiction." Even a cursory comparison of the history of the titular Umberto's circus with the history of the world and Czech circus reconstructed in the aforementioned monograph *Orbis cirkus* proves, however, that Bass knew the topic well. In the absence of relevant studies, Bass decided to present his knowledge of the circus, probably acquired as a result of what could only be described as field research, as an entertaining fictional story about the international career of a talented Czech performer (in accordance with the ancient maxim that literature should "teach by entertaining"). The respective narrative sequences rely on durative narration. The lasting, repetitive nature of the presented phenomena, events, and behaviors is emphasized, which suggests the exemplary and synecdochic dimension of the "model" circus run by the Berwitz and Karas families, as well as its history and business strategies. The reader should perceive them as representative of all traditional circuses:

[2] Grzegorz Kondrasiuk, "O cyrku w świecie widowisk" [The circus in the world of the spectacle], in: Cyrk w świecie widowisk [The circus in the world of the spectacle], ed. Grzegorz Kondrasiuk (Lublin: Warsztaty Kultury, 2017), 14–15.

[3] Rafał Mielczarek, "Robienie cyrku. Krótka historia zmiany – od rytualnego eksperymentu do eksperymentalnej sztuki" [To make a circus: A brief history of change from ritual experiment to experimental art], in: Nie tylko klaun i tygrys. Szkice o sztuce cyrkowej [Not just a clown and a tiger: Essays on circus art], ed. Małgorzata Leyko, Zofia Snelewska-Stempień (Łódź: Łódź University Press, 2019), 24–25.

[4] It should be noted that the writer, "aware of the risks" which could arise from a literal interpretation of the novel, warned the reader that: "not everything that seems true in literature is a reliable linguistic copy of specific existing facts" (Eduard Bass, Lidé z maringotek [People from circus wagons][Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1972], 15).

> When circumstances were favorable and there were no hindrances, and if all the men could be used, Kerholec was able to erect and ready the main tent and the neighboring side tents in two hours and a half [...]. Things went more slowly in the larger cities, where Berwitz loved to stage a colorful parade on their entry. [...] Somewhere on the edge of the suburbs the cavalcade would form, the men and women would put on their most brilliant costumes and then ride into the city to the sound of trumpets and the march music of their own band, most of them mounted on their resplendent horses. The wild beasts were dragged along in show cages, while the other animals were led in the procession. Finally came the giant Bingo, whose monumental appearance formed the climax of this strident and picturesque form of publicity, so dearly loved by all.[5]

Published during World War II (in the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia writers were treated better than in occupied Poland, which does not mean that Nazi censorship was not active there), *Umberto's circus* (and, to use a modern term, its spin-off, the collection of short stories *Lidé z maringotek* [People from circus wagons] published in 1942[6]) has thus become deeply rooted in the Czech cultural space, as a kind of *summa* or crowning achievement of the already established conventions of representing circus themes in literature.

It was a crowning achievement because this subject had already appeared in Czech literature, somewhat later than in other European literatures, in the 1910s and the 1920s. Its "overpresence," both in prose and poetry, was associated with the rehabilitation of the marginal, proscribed, or taboo aspects of mass entertainment. At that time, cultural peripheries offered literature (and art in general) new motifs and problems. The exploration of both gave rise to, in some cases, sociological observations (as in the novels by Ivan Olbracht, Karel Poláček, and Eduard Bass) and, at other times, to the avant-garde "glorification of the 'low' arts" and discovering in them new sources of artistic inspiration (Karel Teige, Vítězslav Nezval).

In 1913, in the *Almanac for 1914*, a collection of programmatic essays and literary manifestos which marked the departure from the idea of *l'art pour l'art* and called instead for art as an integral part of everyday life (a slogan that later guided the entire Czech interwar avant-garde), Stanislav Kostka Neumann, a poet who at the time was promoting futurism, published a poem entitled *Cirkus*. *Cirkus* employed almost all the motifs of the "avant-garde circus reflection," from praising the "modern aesthetics" of the advertising posters, through delighting in the kitsch character of the show (including the cavalcade before the performance), the "perfect execution" of individual "acts," and the exoticism associated with trained animals. Respectively, in the essay *Otevřená okno* [Open windows] devoted to, to put it briefly, "airing the stale atmosphere that is stifling Czech culture," Neumann contrasted positive (vitalist and futuristic) tendencies with negative ("current") cultural trends. The positive trends were:

[5] Eduard Bass, Umberto's circus, trans. William Harkins (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1951), 127.

[6] To justify the use of this term, anachronistic in relation to the customs of Bass's era, let me quote the writer: "A certain brilliant reviewer noticed that during the writing of Umberto's circus, I must have cut a lot of material and that unused good material must have been lost in the process. This was really the case, and I thought that from what was not included in the novel, I could easily put together another book. However, when I returned to the subject, it turned out that it was not that simple, because in a novel, as in life, many characters can function beautifully and usefully next to each other, but in solitude they only vegetate. So, I chose a few most attractive episodes and tried to place them in a new space. [...] However, I did not feel like the whole was endowed with some kind of novelistic coherence, especially since this was not my intention from the beginning. I assumed that the reader's imagination would be activated and that they would fill in what I had consciously omitted" (Bass, Lidé z maringotek, 16).

> Machinery, sports grounds, central slaughterhouse, Laurin & Klement, crematorium, future cinematograph, the Henry Circus, concert of a military band, world exhibition, railway station, artistic advertising, iron and concrete.[7]

The most important interwar avant-garde initiatives (above all the literary, painterly, and theatrical trend of *poeticism* developed by the Devětsil Art Association) largely accepted this repertoire of glorified attributes of modernity, partaking in Neumann's fascination with contemporary mass culture institutions and communication strategies:

> **In the new world, the function of art will also change.** It will no longer be an ornament that renders life more beautiful. Life's raw and powerful beauty does not have to be hidden behind decorations. Art will no longer come from life. Art will no longer be intended for life. Art will be an immanent part of life. Its concept should be redefined. Let art elevate the soul, just as sport elevates the body. We refer to sport, or perhaps to acrobatics (as a perfected and idealized sport), and not to mysticism, metaphysics, or religion, because the mental and the physical are today widely seen as equally important.[8]

Poeticism was a reaction to the direct and explicitly articulated ideological involvement of proletarian art (which was a dominant trend among the members of Devětsil in the early 1920s). It thus marked a programmatic change. Still, most members of Devětsil believed in the final (perceived in terms of the end of history) global victory of communism. Understandably, the rift between the experimental ambitions of the avant-garde and the "obligation of political subordination" inspired a renewal of the conservative formula of "official art," which at the time was still positioned at the center of the cultural field (and seen in academic and symbolist painting, bourgeois drama, realistic and/or decadent novels). In the eyes of the young reformers, it had been long dead. The members of Devětsil who called for the transformation of the universal anthroposphere found inspiration in the peripheral and proscribed fields of popular literature and "folk entertainment." Both seemed to express the aesthetic preferences of the proletariat which they, for ideological reasons, glorified. When adapted well, they could be a great example of the "avant-gardization of working-class tastes."[9]

Unlike film and sports, that is fields often mentioned in discussions about radical reconstructions, modernizations, and regenerations of culture, the circus has a long history, dating back to ancient times. What is more, its power is based on tradition, on repeatable scripts.[10] The circus

[7] Stanislav K. Neumann, Ať žije život: volné úvahy o novém umění [Long live life: Free reflections on new art] (Prague: Nakladatelství František Borový, 1920), 68.

[8] Karel Teige, "Umění dnes a zítra" [Art today and tomorrow], in: Revoluční sborník Devětsil [Devětsil revolutionary anthology], ed. Karel Teige, Jaroslav Seifert (Prague: Edice Skrytá moderna, 2010, reprint of the 1922 edition), 199.

[9] Cf. Ewa Mrowczyk-Hearfield, "Współistnienie formacji kulturowych: modernizm, postmodernizm, kultura masowa" [Coexistence of cultural formations: Modernism, postmodernism, mass culture], in: Odkrywanie modernizmu. Przekłady i komentarze [Discovering modernism: Translations and commentaries], ed. Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 419.

[10] According to Paweł Stangret, "despite many changes and attempts to reform the circus, the circus technique – the very essence of the circus – remained unchanged. It thus functions as a nostalgic memory of the 19th century and as such as a 'poor' and 'low' spectacle. The ossification of the circus formula meant that going to the circus became a ritual comparable to seeing a museum exhibition. Carol Duncan points out that it meets all the requirements of a ritual (it is liminal, repetitive, exclusive, etc.). [...] The museum is a stagnant form, just like the circus or, to be more precise, the discourse of the circus, which was codified by the creators of modern art. Such an attitude fits into one of the basic dichotomies of the avant-garde. It oscillates between novelty and repetition" (Paweł Stangret, "Awangardowa rehabilitacja cyrku" [The avant-garde rehabilitation of the circus], in: Cyrk w świecie widowisk, ed. Grzegorz Kondrasiuk [Lublin: Warsztaty Kultury, 2017], 145). Cf. Carol Duncan, "The art museum as ritual", in: Carol Duncan, Civilizing rituals (London: Routledge, 1995), 7-20.

respects the "horizon of expectations" of the recipient who expects that they will see something they have already seen many times. It does not take into account avant-garde dreams of absolute, and thus unachievable, innovation. Karel Teige writes:

> The whole nomadic framework of the circus is basically traditional. [...] The circus is not developing: it has probably achieved such acting and theatrical perfection and such a high standard that it is no longer able to develop. Its charm, moreover, lies in its old-fashionedness – and this is indeed a very Dadaist charm. The circus repertoire remains more or less traditional and unchanging; it is a universal folk show with a predictable program based on established solutions which are so attractive that they seem new, although they always stay the same. While on the stage of literary life trends follow one another with dizzying speed, so that theatres, some of which are twenty-five years behind, have to catch up with the "spirit of the times," in the circus we can still admire the beautiful acrobat and Japanese equilibrists who climb the ladder just as they did fifty years ago.[11]

Teige, probably the most radical supporter of cultural modernization inspired by constructivist ideals, does not really come across as a supporter of anachronistic spectacles with their outdated tools of artistic expression. However, he respects the circus, primarily because – and in this respect the main theoretician of the Czech avant-garde followed in the footsteps of many other European reformers of the performing arts – it inspired attempts to renew or even "save" theatre, which, as was believed, had exhausted its innovative potential and should seek "new" and surprising models of regeneration. In the 1928 essay *S clowny a komedianty* [Among clowns and comedians], Teige, writing about negative and positive traditions, as the said differentiation could help young artists turn their reformist ambitions into action, argued:

> There is no room for literary or academic theatricality in a circus performance, there is no room for psychological hypochondria reminiscent of Ibsen's or Wedekind's plays. The circus does not talk about subjective emotions and moods. Instead, it is a constant, risky, and tense struggle, in which life is literally at stake. Modern theatre, the kind that [...] wants to be truly modern and authentically theatrical – can learn almost everything from the traditional circus, or at least that which is basic and absolutely necessary. [...] Comedy in its pure form, without repulsive, pointless, conversational gestures [...]. Because the circus is not only about clowning and acrobatics. The circus is above all an example of harmony. It teaches hard work and hidden strength.[12]

In Czech cultural memory, the use of "circus-like" tropes in theater is often associated with the Liberated Theatre (*Osvobozené divadlo*), an avant-garde theatre company founded by Jiří Frejka (as part of Devětsil) in 1925. It first staged a "Molière-esque" play entitled *Cirkus Dandin*, which dramatized scenes from circus life, as actors imitated the gestures and actions of jugglers and

[11] Karel Teige, O humoru, klaunech a dadaistech [About humor, clowns, and dadaists], vol. 1: Svět, který se směje [The world that laughs] (Prague: Akropolis, 2004), 59. One of the leading Czech theatre "innovators" Jindřich Honzl concurred: "The circus is only and exclusively a theatre of reality... In the circus, one does not care for Ibsen's psychological paradoxes, which almost no one can understand. In the circus, one triumphs over the world, people, and animals thanks to the power of muscles and nerves. The victories of the circus performers amaze and delight. [...] Discipline gives the circus eternal youth, while the theatre dies in its senile perversion, trying in vain to excite itself... The circus's raw emotions are a far cry from theatrical aping; its goal is production, not reproduction" (Jindřich Honzl, Roztočené jeviště: úvahy o novém divadle [The spinning stage: Reflections on new theatre] [Prague: Odeon, 1925], 24, 164).

[12] Teige, O humoru, klaunech a dadaistech, 60–61.

acrobats. Respectively, we must mention Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich (the V+W duo), who, from their very first joint show (*Vest pocket revue*, 1927), not only drew inspiration from *varieté*, the circus's "sister art," but also developed a specific "clown" stage persona (including costumes and characteristic make-up; they would also recite improvised nonsensical dialogues between the scenes of the comedic-parodic play that in no way corresponded to the plot).

In his memoirs, Voskovec emphasized that tricks "borrowed" from circus performances could modernize theater. He also quoted Vsevolod Meyerhold who was delighted with the plays of the V+W duo. Meyerhold also saw innovative potential in circus techniques. This proves that Czech artists and European reformers had a common source of inspiration. Voskovec emphasized above all the transgressive character (imperative) of acting "on a tight rope" and "without a safety net," where make-believe gave way to absolute and unconditional authenticity (akin to being on the verge of death).[13] Similar conclusions may be found in contemporary metatheatrical reflection. Some called for fusing art with life. Respectively, others emphasized the autotelic dimension of the circus world – its "isolation" and cerebral nature – which did not require any references to the real.[14] Voskovec and Werich, writing about the music hall (a show which was related to both the circus and their own concept of the theatre), stated, for example:

> We do not intend to be biased and proclaim that theatre will be saved by the music hall. […] It is no coincidence that the sources of theatre lie in religion, while the Parisian music hall stems from café-concerts. The difference between the two does not lie in their purpose either: the music hall is meant to entertain, while theatre is supposed to evoke deeper experiences. These differences should be sought deeper: in actors and clowns. […] Theatre, to put it briefly, works with substitutes: painted canvas represents a forest, and a young man with a glued-on mustache pretends to be a respectable old man. Bullfighters, jugglers, clowns or showgirls, on the other hand, only show what they have mastered. For theatre, performance is a tool; for the circus, performance is the goal.[15]

In most plays staged by V+W (who were also playwrights, directors, and actors in episodic roles), these maximalist ideas clashed with slightly different functions (of both the circus and the theatre) and strategies for controlling the viewer's reactions. They did not necessarily reflect the radical declarations cited above. On the one hand, their comedic plays, based on "increased" intertextuality and inspired by "great cultural themes," engaged in a (most often parodic) dialogue with the literary tradition. On the other hand, a simplified take on "clownery," devoid of all Romantic, sacral, and demonic connotations, did not invite deep philosophical interpretations. The clown was not a tragic, dangerous, or grotesque figure. He did not suffer from existential despair or social exclusion:

[13]Cf.: "I have attended many schools all over the world, but none of them compares to Cirque Médrano. I did not receive a diploma, a title, or a certificate, but I would not give up what I learned there about theatre and comedy for anything. […] In this world of very real sur-reality, in the enchanted land of gladiators, I was convinced that a performance – any performance – must be performed on a tight rope and that authentic acting, like true acrobatics, means playing without a safety net" (Jiří Voskovec, Klobouk ve křovi. Výbor veršů V+W [1927–1947] [A hat in the bush. A selection of writings by V+W [1927–1947] [Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1965], 233).

[14]Cf. Tomáš Winter et al., Cirkus Pictus. Zázračná krása a ubohá existence. Výtvarné umění a literatura [Circus Pictus. Miraculous beauty and miserable existence. Fine arts and literature] (Cheb, Řevnice, Prague: GVU, Arbor vitae, Artefactum, 2017), 5; Katarzyna Donner, "Idiomy (nowego) cyrku" [Idioms of the (new) circus], in: Cyrk w świecie widowisk, ed. Grzegorz Kondrasiuk (Lublin: Warsztaty Kultury, 2017), 213.

[15]Jiří Voskovec, Jan Werich, "Music-hall a co z toho pošlo" [Music-hall and what it inspired], ReD – měsíčník pro moderní kulturu 7 (1927–1928): 265.

> Let's take a closer look at clowns: Why have they always [...] been the crowd's favorites? Liked by both the intellectuals and the simpletons? The clown's stage persona is complex. Their organs have more pipes and registers than the greatest instruments in the world. And whatever song they play on them, it always vaguely sounds like *vox humana*, the voice of the people. *Vox vulgaris* is equally distinct, and then there is the voice of the absurd and *vox nonsensi*, the voice of nonsense. People rush to the circus to hear it. And they want to hear it, they need it like air: they want to laugh.[16]

Poeticism, especially in poetry, was different. It was more interested in the tightrope walker and the conjurer and the symbolism associated with both figures than in "pure" clownery. In both cases, as is best demonstrated by two poems by the leading representative of the trend Vítězslav Nezval – *Podivuhodný kouzelník* [The strange wizard] (1922) and *Akrobat* [The acrobat] (1927) – the title characters become metaphorical incarnations of the avant-garde artist who has the magical, alchemical, power of transforming reality (the wizard) and influencing crowds (the acrobat):

> Byl očekáván příchod akrobata
> jenž kráčel po laně z madridské katedrály
> přes Řím Paříž Prahu až na Sibiř [...]
> pln koketérie kreslil v kozelcích půvabná akrosticha [...]
> Rozšířila se pověst o tomto muži
> jenž prý léčí svou gestikulací chromé od narození
> a vesnice doprovázely svá procesí o berlách[17].

However, the messianic and redemptive quest of Nezval's acrobat ends in failure – the hero falls and dies. This defeat is sometimes interpreted as marking the start of the so-called carnival of Poeticism, i.e. the period in which members of Devětsil (somewhat artificially, ideologically) reduced art (in this case poetry) to the function of a "safety valve." Poetry was seen as cathartic, as a means of getting rid of negative emotions and frustrations caused by the oppressive social order.[18] It is no accident that Artuš Černík listed the circus among the praised "delights of the electric age."[19]

[16] Jan Werich, "Knihkupectví (Hříčka pro klauny)" [Bookstore (clown prank)], Plamen 1 (1964): 52.

[17] "They were expecting the arrival of an acrobat / who walked on a tightrope from the Madrid cathedral / through Rome, Paris, Prague and all the way to Siberia / [...] full of coquetry, he drew charming acrostics with his somersaults, / [...] News spread about this man / who supposedly heals congenital disabilities with his touch / and entire villages followed him on crutches in processions" (Vítězslav Nezval, Básně noci [Poems of the night] [Prague: Odeon, 1966], 70–71).

[18] Writing about the romantic identification of the poet with the jester, Monika Sznajderman invokes the myth of the artist's "alienation" (indirectly present in one of the possible interpretations of the failure of the acrobatic performance). According to Sznajderman, this alienation can be understood "on many levels: as the alienation of the character, his role in society and culture, the values, meanings, and orders of meanings he represents. It is often said that the freedom of the artist, his cultural image, defies conventional masks, official façades, socially conditioned costumes [...]. The artist should abandon all conventions, also to discover a different person behind a given individual, and a different world behind this world [...]. This in itself places the artist in direct proximity to the clown and the jester; he is both" (Monika Sznajderman, Błazen. Maski i metafory [The jester: Masks and metaphors] [Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2000], 169–170).

[19] Cf.: "It is known that the migration of peoples, the Middle Ages, and the modern era, gas furnaces, and the electric diamond grinder were born from human dissatisfaction with the world. For the same reason, fairy tales were created, and Columbus set out to conquer America. The clucking of hens pleases housewives, but only until the circus arrives with its magnificent wagons, jungle themes, the illusion of the Sahara, real lions, zebras, rattlesnakes and monkeys, vaulters, clowns, jesters, Roman wrestlers. The brilliant human mind which always wants to explore the unknown, the new, as well as the contemporary economic and political drive towards communist revolution, the need for strong sensory impressions, the fascination with beauty and the wonders of the world... All these attract people to the circus. Who would dare to disregard the circus these days?" (Artuš Černík, "Radosti elektrického století" [The joys of the electric age], in: Revoluční sborník Devětsil, ed. Karel Teige, Jaroslav Seifert [Prague: Edice Skrytá moderna, 2010, reprint of the 1922 edition], 138).

Optimism and a felicitous view of human life, which initially determined the vision of the circus as just a space of "carefree entertainment," still resonate in the novella *Rozmarné léto* [Summer of Caprice] (1926) written by the outstanding Czech avant-garde prose writer Vladislav Vančura. While they are somewhat tamed by the inevitable victory of everyday routine, they point to the dream of replacing the obvious and permanent axiological and habitual model of "small-town life" with an "alternative"– a nomadic lifestyle of wandering jugglers, free from all social obligations:

> Oh, she exhaled, feeling that she was bereft for a moment of all her self-assurance as a citizen, and wiped away a tear with the back of her hand. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. How I long to conjure with fire and to wander the wide world juggling with those little round things. How wonderful to be thinking no more than three days ahead, to be peregrinating from one town to another. How marvelous to plan a performance from beginning to end and then to repeat it day after day before people not one of whom, besides ourselves, knows what's going to happen next! […] The splendour of it![20]

We find in the novella, which engages in an intertextual (and polemical) dialogue with Nezval's poem, the motif of a tightrope walker's fall caused by the thoughtless (or complicit) spectator. Although it is presented in a humorous tone and does not lead to any serious health consequences (and certainly not death), the fall triggers reflection on the mechanisms of reception, which, often unconsciously or deceptively (due to the ethical dilemmas associated with them) render circus performances more attractive:

> The old man slowly approached the rope, which hung down alongside one of the supporting poles, and then […] began jerking and shaking it, all the while repeating his demand that the magician stop being foolish and climb down. Several neighbours of the troublemaker started admonishing him, but before they could intercept the hand of mockery or madness, the great pole fell, and with it, with a cry of terror, the unfortunate tightrope walker fell. […] Dear God! Some […] thought that this terrible fall was part of the performance, and they began to applaud.[21]

In Ivan Olbracht's *Bratr Žak* [Brother Žak] (1913), one of the first texts to refer to various aspects of the circus discourse in Czech literature, this sophisticated play with the viewer who is expecting the tightrope walker to fall is formulated explicitly:

> During their exercises, they did not install a safety net beneath them. What sense can there be in working when you know that it does not matter whether you succeed in your jump or not […]? And he could sense how exciting it would be for the audience if one of them fell – the thrill, the excitement, the shouts, the terror. […] Accompanied by the music of the drums, which grew louder and louder, they imitated an uncontrolled fall, which, however, did not end in a bloody splat in the sawdust at the bottom of the arena. After a split second of silence, filled with terror, the foot would be caught in the scaffolding. They liked to tease the audience, and the audience rewarded them with applause.[22]

The above shows that circus performance is considered authentic, if life is put at risk. Such risk, part and parcel of the tightrope walker's act, makes him, as Jean Starobinski suggest-

[20]Vladislav Vančura, Summer of Caprice, trans. Mark Corner (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2006), 200-201.

[21]Vančura, 160-161.

[22]Ivan Olbracht, Bratr Žak. Román komediantského osudu, lásky a zrády [Brother Žak: A novel of comedic fate, love, and betrayal] (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1957), 53–54.

ed and as has been already mentioned, an alter ego of the avant-garde artist.[23] They both cross boundaries in and through their art, sacrificing oneself in the face of constant danger. They agonizingly clash with other experimenters in pursuit of novelty that can never be fully grasped or understood.[24]

Olbracht, representative of the political (left-wing) trend in Czech literature, did not of course draw such comparisons or parallels, as he was much more interested in the social exclusion of travelling jugglers (who, as the writer demonstrates through the life of his characters, rank even lower in the community hierarchy than performers from stationary and traveling circuses), their displacement, and more or less voluntarily chosen homelessness. In *Brother Žak*, a story subtitled *Román komunistantského osudu, lásky a zrady* [A novel of a comedic fate, love, and betrayal], the narrative respects the characters' identity. It means, among other things, that the circus craft is not, as is most often the case (also in Bass's iconic novel), observed from a distance. Benevolent as such an image might be, it still repeats (both positive and negative) clichés. By giving voice to the comedians, Olbracht tries to show the circus environment from the inside and offer the reader a narrative that differs from the dominant discourse, in which, as the authors of the monograph *Cirkus pictus* remind us: "Behind romantic ideas about a glamorous world, we find displacement, difficult living conditions, and even poverty that often accompanies a nomadic existence."[25] And more. *Brother Žak* was published in a collection of three short stories titled *O zlých samotářích* [About bad loners] (1913) that directs the gaze towards social taboo, not, however, in order to discover Hrabal's "pearls of the deep" but to accept the right of the excluded to feel anger, hatred, and rebellion against bourgeois ideology and lifestyle. And both, as Roland Barthes proved, are considered to be "given" and natural and, thus, non-negotiable.[26] When the roles are reversed and the comedians are considered to be right, they act as spokesmen for Otherness (although not yet in the metaphysi-

[23]In his famous essay Portrait de llartiste en saltimbanque, Starobinski, examining the "eternal" relevance of circus aesthetics, stated: "Without a doubt, this interest can be explained by purely external factors – in the coal-black atmosphere of society immersed in industrialization, the world of the circus and the noise of the fairground created a wonderfully shimmering island, a surviving part of childhood, a land where [...] illusions and spontaneous sounds of life whirled deceptively before the viewer, exhausted by everyday monotony. But there is [...] more. [...] The choice of such a topic cannot [...] be exhaustively explained by visual stimuli. In addition to the pure pleasure of looking, there is a different tendency, a psychological bond, which makes the modern artist experience some mysterious nostalgic understanding with the microcosm of farce and elementary magic. In most cases, one must speak of a special form of IDENTIFICATION" (Jean Starobinski, "Artysta kuglarzem" [The artist as a street performer], trans. M. Trenkler, Pismo Literacko-Artystyczne 11-12 [1986]: 132). The above quotation was translated into English from the Polish version.

[24]Ondřej Kavalír also lists agonism among the primary "anatomical" features of the avant-garde (together with activism, anti-traditionalism, nihilism and belief in the future). It is, he writes, "characterized by an ambivalent spirit of competition, struggle, and sacrifice. We are talking here about the avant-garde artists' typical drive to go further than others, to the limits of the impossible, even at the cost of failure, the drive to transform the impending catastrophe into a miracle of a new form. In this case, the artist is a victim-hero, an authentic explorer of possible aesthetic worlds. Thus, to refer to the original meaning of the avant-garde, he is an advance guard, marching at the front. As such, he is always exposed to extreme danger, ready to sacrifice himself in the name of those who will follow. The avant-garde artist sees art in terms of fatalistic obligation. Like a Romantic, he sees it as salvation and threat at the same time" (Ondřej Kavalír, "Evropa modernismu a avantgard" [Europe of modernism and the avant-garde], in: Revoluční sborník Devětsil, ed. Karel Teige, Jaroslav Seifert [Prague: Edice Skrytá moderna, 2010, reprint of the 1922 edition], 220).

[25]Winter et al., 5.

[26]Cf. Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 139.

cal sense, as exposed by contemporary (popular) culture).[27] They show that past resentments, the inferiorization of the Other, are not limited to the "eternal" conflict between society that respects "institutionalized" norms and circus performers who reject/violate them.[28] In Olbracht's world, as if in a mirror reflection, the anthropology of Otherness has two faces. The mutual ambivalent axiological inversion – in equal terms marked by fascination and abject distance (the circus is perceived through such complex lenses as well[29]) – forces the reader to question the "standard" emotional relationship between the comedian and the audience:

> Žak loved his craft and hated everything that was not a part of it. And this was something that Fricek had difficulty understanding. It was true that people did not like them, but they were still their audience, and they tossed their coins into a tin bowl on the barrel organ. And what was the point of all of it if no one applauded after the performance they had prepared with so much joy? And wasn't that beautiful: to make your enemies applaud you?[30]

The nature of this relationship, which, as scholars argue, distinguishes the circus from other performative arts,[31] was a common theme in literary representations of the circus. In Karel Poláček's novel *Bylo nás pět* [We were a handful] (1943), a circus troupe which comes to a small town excites the local children and brings back the "lost paradise of childhood" (with children expressing delight at the posters, the cavalcade, and the dazzling performance itself; they also catch a glimpse of the prosaic life behind the scenes). The innocent perspective of a child, who rejoices at the clown's tricks, clashes with the cool assessment of adults, who see in them a thinly veiled deception.

[27] Stephen King writes: "Bradbury's carnival, which creeps inside the town limits and sets up shop in a meadow at three o'clock in the morning […], is a symbol of everything that is abnormal, mutated, monstrous … Dionysian. […] The carnival is chaos, it is the taboo land made magically portable, traveling from place to place even from time to time with tis freight of freaks and its glamours attractions" (Stephen King, Danse Macabre [New York: Everest House, 1981], 351). Jean Starobinski, who sees metaphysical or transgressive potential in the skills of the clown and the acrobat, seems to agree: "Since the clown is the one who comes OUT OF THERE – a smuggler crossing forbidden borders – we understand why his APPEARANCE in the circus and on stage has been considered so important. […] Every real clown comes from a different space, from a different universe: his performance must lend credibility to the fact that he crosses the boundaries of the real: and even in his most joyful debauchery he should appear as a PHANTOM. […] The abyss creates the framework for his appearance and from within it the clown throws himself at us. […] The acrobat also appears thus: the arduous NOWHERE lies under his heel, and he walks the tightrope before our eyes. […] The victorious acrobat reappears there, on the other side, in the new realm" (Starobinski, 135–136).

[28] Cf. Mielczarek, 35.

[29] Cf.: "What is particularly intriguing is the fact that there are many testimonies of ambivalent attitudes towards the circus, stemming from an unusual combination of understanding and rejection. On the one hand, the circus is critically juxtaposed with (a lack of) maturity. On the other hand, it arises a suspicious and ambiguous curiosity; it seduces with its shows, burdened with negative valuations, by provoking extreme situations, transgressions, lack of control, surprise, revealing and flaunting in the bright light the existence of ethical and aesthetic boundaries. These two extreme reactions are glorification and disgust" (Kondrasiuk, 14-15). Monika Sznajderman connects such extreme emotional attitudes with ambivalence with which archaic cultures approached the sacred, arguing that the taboo status of circus performers (primarily clowns) renders them "sacred: as much shameful as they are chosen, as much abject as they are sanctified. In other words – they rank among marginal professions and phenomena, transcending the human cosmos with its order and culture. […] Carnal passions […] or shameless acrobatics of tightrope walkers signify, in religious thought, the world of the other: a world of chaos, nature, and death; a world of darkness which precedes creation" (Sznajderman, 16–17).

[30] Olbracht, 14.

[31] According to Małgorzata Leyko, "the viewer […] lied at the heart of all borrowings from the circus. The creators of the new theatre were primarily interested in changing reception habits, in stimulating criticism, immediate reaction, and sometimes even in activating the audience physically. This can be achieved by changing the rules of communication between the stage and the audience, thanks to the free flow of energy between the performers and the audience. Just like trapeze exercises performed without a safety net take the audience's breath away, so should the new theater" (Małgorzata Leyko, "Dwudziestowieczna awangarda teatralna a cyrk" [Twentieth-century avant-garde theatre and the circus], in: Nie tylko klaun i tygrys. Szkice o sztuce cyrkowej, ed. Małgorzata Leyko, Zofia Snelewska-Stempień [Łódź: Łódź University Press, 2019], 121).

However, the dishonesty or rather the unreliability of the circus profession (contrasted with the reliability of provincial merchants and craftsmen), was rarely described. Usually, (both avant-garde and "sociological") writers placed emphasis on the unique nature of the circus (perceived, to refer to Lotman and Bakhtin, in terms of carnival counterculture[32]), undermined negative stereotypes, and emphasized the role of hard work required to achieve perfection in the execution of tricks and acrobatic feats. The circus was no longer seen as primitive entertainment:[33]

> Perfection can be achieved only through the greatest self-sacrifice. We people of an ancient art must have the strength to forswear everything which takes us away from it. We have forsworn our homes, society, domestic life, peace and comfort, safety and security of life, convention, and the Lord knows what else. We have set ourselves a goal beyond the world. This is a proud thing, but it is also a curse. We have made other laws for ourselves than those which govern ordinary people, and so we have lost our right to private happiness. Every one of us gambles daily with death in one way or another, and probes daily to find to what extreme he may carry his wager. […] Only members of that special order which is called the circus do that. And whoever has dedicated his life has no right to […] violate the social order which binds us together. That is the law of the man who is set apart from the crowd. If it is not kept our art will fall.[34]

The "law" described in Bass's novel shows that the circus was elevated to the ranks of a "special order." All doubts and reservations vanished. They were redefined and the negatives that had traditionally surrounded the circus gained a new meaning. The circus regained its original character, lost because of historical revaluations. It is as much "sacred" as it is a respected form of art.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[32] Although Lotman and Uspensky do not explicitly mention the circus, their take on the enclaves of alternative culture which dynamize the dominant culture, may also refer to it: "As a result of this need for structural variety, every culture singles out special spheres, differently organized, which are valued very highly in an axiological sense although they are outside the general system of organization. Such were the monastery in the medieval world, poetry within the concepts of Romanticism, the world of gypsies, the backstage in the culture of […] the nineteenth century, and many other examples of little islands of 'different' organization in the general body of culture, whose aim was to increase the structural variety and to overcome the entropy of structural automatization. […] And this, as M. M. Bakhtin has shown, was the function of the carnival in the highly normative life of the Middle Ages" (Y. Lotman and B. Uspensky, "On the semiotic mechanism of culture", trans. George Mihaychuk, New Literary History 9.2. (Soviet Semiotics and Criticism: An Anthology), 225-227).

[33] Bogdan Danowicz apologetically writes: "The very atmosphere of the circus gives off childish naïveté and delight in the inimitable truth, authenticity, which appeals not only to our emotions but also to our minds and imagination. This gives rise to a much broader definition of the circus, in which, apart from circus humor and the physicality and formal perfection of art that is sometimes deemed primitive, there is still room for certain arch-human values, indisputable honesty, manifested in selfless risk, and even peculiar bravery. A true circus professional is also quite disciplined, which manifests itself in striving for maximum professional perfection" (Bogdan Danowicz, Był cyrk olimpijski [There was an Olympic circus] [Warsaw: Iskry, 1984], 12).

[34] Eduard Bass, Umberto's Circus trans. William Harkins (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1951), 291.

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract:
In Czech interwar literature, the circus (similarly to other mass culture phenomena, e.g. sports or cinema) became the subject of complex analyses, inspiring axiological questions. At that time, cultural peripheries opened up new fields of thematic exploration for Czech literature. Some authors formulated sociological observations (novels by Ivan Olbracht, Karl Poláček, and Eduard Bass), while others were part of the avant-garde (Karel Teige, Vítězslav Nezval) and looked for the yet undiscovered sources of artistic inspiration. In both cases, the circus functioned as a *topos* – a signal that triggered both curiosity and fear and that was only partially "domesticated." The circus was perceived as a "transgressive" (exotic and / or romantic) space in which the routine laws of everyday life were suspended. It demonstrated that an "alternative" way of life was possible and that the boundaries of the Other could be crossed.

MASS CULTURE

social exclusion

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Solaris – the world of "alien(ated/ing) consciousness"

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"Babylon is nothing else than an infinite game of chance."[1]
Jorge Luis Borges, *Lottery in Babylon*

"I, at any rate, am convinced that He is not playing at dice."[2]
Albert Einstein in a letter to Max Born (1926)

The invisible lottery

The above words uttered by writers and scholars bring to mind the antagonism between chance and the laws of the universe which were discovered accidentally. Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr argued about it at the dawn of quantum mechanics, when reality was becoming less and less obvious. Stanisław Lem, I believe, would have argued with Einstein, because he referred to Borges' concept of the lottery, a certain mythologization of humanity's beginnings, to review the apocryphal text *Das kreative Verrichtungsprinzip. The World as Holocaust*, which comments on the mystery of *silentium universi*, or the silence of the universe. In his re-

[1] Jorge Luis Borges, "Lottery in Babylon", in: Collected Fictions, trans. Andrew Hurle (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 106.

[2] Robert Andrews, The New Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations (London: Penguin Books UK, 2003), 499.

view, Lem tries to universalize Darwinism as a model for calculating and explaining evolution in the biosphere and extrapolate it onto cosmology:

> It turned out, however, that God plays dice with the world not only at the level of atoms but also galaxies, stars, planets, the birth of life, and the existence of intelligent beings. That we owe our existence both to catastrophes that occurred "at the right place and time" as well as to those that did not take place in different eras and places.[3]

A series of probabilistic events which took place in the biosphere, including the emergence of human intelligence, had been preceded by innumerable other events, also governed by probabilistic forces, at the level of celestial bodies, and even prior to that – at the level of subatomic particles. Before mammals took over the Earth, many holocausts had occurred, also accidental ones, as a result of which dinosaurs, among others, became extinct. Human intelligence, considered God's creation, turned out to be one of the highest, almost unimaginable, jackpots. The price that had to be paid for that lottery win involved countless loses, which often took the form of holocausts for those who lost. The chances of the human mind evolving in such random circumstances, according to Lem, are so slim that they seem miraculous. Respectively, what remains incalculable for contemporary computational power is a testimony to the limits of human intelligence and not to the omnipotence of the Creator. Thus, *silentium universi* does not point to the unique nature of humanity or the flora and fauna on Earth. Our chances of winning were so unlikely. And what is even more unlikely is that two equally intelligent forms of life should inhabit the same solar system or the same galaxy. In adopting universal probabilism in his review and other works, such as *The Investigation*, *The Chain of Chance*, and *The Philosophy of Chance*, Lem does not only rationalize the lottery metaphor but also unifies (or rather combines) the microworld and the macroworld.

One of the most famous science fiction scholars, Darko Suvin, argues in his essay "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" (1972) that the form relies on cognitive estrangement.[4] Science does not so much assimilate strangeness and examines the truth as takes on a new form that compels us to reimagine what we know. Lem's *Solaris* is a science fiction text that both extrapolates contemporary scientific knowledge and shows science as alienated from and alienating in the world in which we live. Does living in such a world give us, as readers, a useful theoretical tool for reinterpreting *Solaris*? It is difficult to answer this question. After all, the novel itself is a record of a theory, or rather a warning against theorizing.

Ambiguous reality

In his analysis of the pseudo-detective novel *The Chain of Chance*, Rafał Koschany argues that it relies on chance. He further suggests that in his novel Lem tried to build a model of a fictional world that would correspond to his beliefs about the nature of the real world, and, moreover, that Lem's

[3] Stanisław Lem, Biblioteka XXI wieku [21st Century Library] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2024), 133.

[4] Darko Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre", College English 3 (1972): 372, https://doi.org/10.2307/375141.

interpretations of the achievements of contemporary atomic physics could have influenced his philosophical concept.[5] This is true also for Lem's other literary works, such as *Solaris*. Lem might be considered one of the supporters of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, positioning himself against Einstein. The first supporters of the Copenhagen Interpretation – Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, and Richard Feynman – stated that the probabilistic nature of photons and electrons could undermine classical physics' deterministic framework. Observations and measurements further troubled positivists and realists. It is the c o n s c i o u s observer who determines such properties of microparticles as position, momentum, polarization, and rotation. This conscious process of measurement renders the system definite. The Copenhagen Interpretation was also adopted by, among others, John Clauser, Alain Aspect, and Anton Zeilinger, winners of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics. They have made one of the most disturbing discoveries in the last 50 years, namely that the universe is n o t locally real, and that objects lack definite properties prior to being measured by humans or machines. This discovery marks the end of a long debate. The failure of local realism would not have been accepted by Einstein, a determinist, who once asked a colleague if he really believed that the moon existed only when he looked at it.[6]

In addition to the Copenhagen Interpretation and other neopositivist attempts to explain quantum phenomena, one can notice in the broadly defined scientific community trends which emphasize the role of the conscious observer related to panpsychism, mysticism, or solipsism. One such intriguing figure is the American cognitive psychologist Donald D. Hoffman, professor emeritus in the Department of Cognitive Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, who coined the theory of the so-called Conscious Realism based on verifiable mathematical models and cognitive experiments. Conscious Realism, which relies on consciousness, is a paradox and a step too far, because the superposition of microparticles does not force us to adopt solipsistic ontological views.

Still, I find Hoffman's other theories which helped him formulate the tenets of Conscious Realism more intriguing. These include the Fitness Beats Truth (FBT) Theorem and the Interface Theory of Perception (ITP). Hoffman could embrace Lem's universal probabilism in his reflection, because the FBT theorem is based on natural selection, which, metaphorically speaking, relies on chance. It is a lottery. In contrast to the ideas of the Enlightenment, Hoffman postulates that our reason and senses are not designed to reveal the true nature of reality. In his opinion, the greater the usefulness of a given cognitive apparatus for the survival of a conscious individual in a given environment, the less reliable this apparatus is in describing reality. Our perception of the world is the result of evolution, because such a way of perceiving and knowing the world guarantees us the greatest probability of passing on genes and information. The fact that the world thus transformed does not reflect the real world behind the scenes should not be a concern. This notwithstanding, it is a source of constant worry.

The FBT theorem is the starting point for Hoffman's so-called Interface Theory of Perception, which posits that Darwinism provides us with a certain interface that filters out unnecessary,

[5] Rafał Koschany, Przypadek. Kategoria egzystencjalna i artystyczna w literaturze i filmie [Chance: Existential and Artistic Category in Literature and Film] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2016), 198.

[6] Abraham Pais, "Einstein and the Quantum Theory", Reviews of Modern Physics 4 (1979): 907, https://doi.org/10.1103/RevModPhys.51.863.

worthless, and even survival-threatening interpretations of reality. Thanks to this interface, we see a hammer instead of a cluster of atoms, and thus we can work with the greatest possible efficiency. By analogy, with the help of the computer's operating system we can edit a text without engaging with the algorithms hidden underneath the pixels on the screen. In this analogy, the matter that we register and interact with is merely a set of icons available to every user of that interface. These icons, Hoffman explains, should be taken seriously but not literally.[7] Other beings with varying degrees of consciousness have their own distinct – mutually exclusive – interfaces. Following this line of thought, all entities and conditions, including spacetime, possess their unique features simply because we observe and measure them in a certain way. It should be noted, however, that such a solution to the quantum paradox is not necessary and that, as usual, pursuing the so-called theory of everything is questionable.

The dilemma of emergence, seen in the unexplained transformation of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle into Einstein's determinism, indeterminism into determinism, chance into order, matter into life, an amalgam of thoughtless neurons into a powerful mind, consciousness into intelligence, or algorithms into artificial intelligence, worries many scientists and philosophers, such as Hoffman and Lem, and thus inspires their shared metaphysical musings. Hoffman goes a step further than Lem in finding an answer to this question. Instead of giving primacy to consciousness, Lem suggests that one should respectfully acknowledge its failure, and in fact he does so, as do other proponents of the Copenhagen Interpretation. Unlike Hoffman, Lem is a pessimist. Having given up, he clearly sets the limits of scientific inquiry. It can be seen in the chapter "Chaos and Order" in *Summa Technologiae*, where he uses an erotic metaphor of the cosmos as a kitchen. Astrophysicists-readers observe the behavior of three celestial bodies – namely Mr. Smith, the Puritan aunt, and the lodger – from a distance and try to theorize their actions. Every time the aunt goes to the basement, Mr. Smith and the lodger kiss. The astrophysicists attempt to describe how the three bodies function. We are presented with Ptolemy's theory of sink as the center of the universe, Newton's theory of mutual (sexual) attraction, Einstein's theory of the curvature of space around the gravitating erotic masses. As kitchen telescopes develop, Heisenberg, having noticed the finer elements of bodies, such as arms, legs, and heads, concludes that the kissing or the non-kissing state of Mr. Smith and the young lady is "a consequence of indeterministic regularities coming together,"[8] to say nothing of arms, thighs, calves, and fingers.

Admitting defeat does not mean that Lem was any less of a visionary or a catastrophist or nihilist. He was at best an absurdist who saw endless antagonisms between the human mind and the lack of reason and purpose in the universe. In other words, Lem, like other Polish post-avant-garde writers (e.g. Gombrowicz), seems to embrace the so-called chaosmos in his prose.[9] He also reflected on the frontiers of science, which would continue to trouble many scientists and philosophers. In *Solaris*, he was able to put into words the uncertainty and

[7] Donald D. Hoffman, The Case against Reality. How Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes (London: Penguin Books, 2020), xiii.

[8] Stanisław Lem, Summa technologiae, trans. Joanna Zylinska (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 163.

[9] See Przemysław Czapliński, "Chaosmos: Stanisław Lem's Solaris and Polish Post-Avant-Garde Prose," Polish Review 2 (2023): 46–64, https://doi.org/10.5406/23300841.68.2.05.

anguish that accompanied (often unsuccessful) attempts to perceive and know both alien beings, which possessed their own interfaces, and our own neurons from which a consciousness emerges that cannot even answer such questions as "Who am I?" and "Where am I from?" Lem's prose, so alien to the Star Wars era and at the same time so eccentric from the perspective of contemporary American science fiction, is a firm protest against anthropocentrism and scientism. Still, it is based on scientific reasoning, which renders it as ironic and paradoxical as quantum mechanics. For Lem, the emergence of order from chance or consciousness from matter is and will always be a sword of Damocles hanging over humanity. One of his most famous novels, *Solaris*, is both an apocalypse and an anticipation of the posthumanist condition in the face of "alien(ated/ing) consciousness," a world in which both the consciousness of the alien and one's own consciousness become alien.

Solaris – the world of "alien(ated/ing) consciousness"

Solaris describes the failure of connecting/communicating with "alien(ated/ing) consciousness," and investigates how it exists and operates. Imagining, or rather the impossibility of imagining, a distant living and intelligent planet is a double extrapolation. On the one hand, it offers a seemingly simple, though fictional, answer to the Fermi paradox: "Where are they?" Even such a pessimist as Lem does not consider finding and reaching an alien civilization impossible. He believes in the incredible luck of the one who wins in a game of dice, not in his loneliness. On the other hand, this novel anticipates a future (universe) when contact with alien minds will be common. Such an extrapolation makes sense. After all, since *Solaris* philosophical discussions about mind-body relations and minds trapped in non-human bodies have animated both philosophy, as exemplified by, among others, Hilary Putnam's "brain in a vat" question,[10] and cognitive science, especially studies of the human embodied mind and the animal mind, such as Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch's *The Embodied Mind* (1992),[11] Thomas Nagel's *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* (1974),[12] and Peter Godfrey-Smith's *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness* (2016).[13] Entering alien, although earthly, minds is not easy. We are not able to inhabit a non-human body, and even if we were to succeed, we would not be ourselves in someone else's body, because evolution has shaped the interface we use. So how can we be sure that we are able to get to know such an intelligent being as Solaris? Lem, it seems, is skeptical, writing in one of his final e-mails to Peter Swirski that

> any meaningful form of contact – or, even less, cooperation or confederation – with extraterrestrial intelligences is simply not possible. The reasons for this owe to the almost limitless diversity and distribution of evolutionary paths taken by different forms of life and civilizations.[14]

[10]Hilary Putnam, Reason, Truth and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[11]Francisco J. Varela, Eleanor Rosch, Evan Thompson, The Embodied Mind (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).

[12]Thomas Nagel, "What Is It like to Be a Bat?", The Philosophical Review 4 (1974): 435–450, https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914.

[13]Peter Godfrey-Smith, Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

[14]Peter Swirski, Stanislaw Lem: Philosopher of the Future (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 39.

Considering Lem's musings on the emergence of consciousness from physical matter, and in the case of *homo sapiens*, from a network of neurons, I argue that the planetary organism Solaris is a macro-metaphor of the human brain, a fictional world of alien(ated/ing) consciousness, where both one's own consciousness and alien consciousness is alien(ated/ing). The emergence of consciousness from physical matter is a central question in neuroscience, just as quantum mechanics is a central question in physics. We know more about the moon, which puzzled Einstein, than about our own brain, which only seems to be so close. The macro-metaphor consists of other metaphors, integrated by the narrative, metanarrative (e.g. the history of Solaristics), and terms used to describe the planet's landscape. Topographically, Solaris resembles the human brain, especially in its shape and appearance. Both Solaris and our brain are described in terms of hemispheres, probably because both are globes. Such descriptive expressions as "the slate-colored ripples of the ocean,"[15] the ocean's "oleaginous gleam,"[16] "formless glue,"[17] and "gluey substance"[18] are also associated with the brain, which is covered with ripples and immersed in the cerebrospinal fluid which feels "gluey." One of the adaptations of *Solaris*, directed by Steven Soderbergh in 2002, which Lem heavily criticized, also shows gelatinous sea waves behind the Station. Interestingly, in Chinese, the word *naohai* ("sea of the brain") simply means the mind. Still, the sea-brain analogy is too intuitive and obvious. What's more, the graphic designer of the cover of *Solaris* published by Harcourt Brace in 1987 had the same idea. It is too obvious, and we know that "[i]t did not possess a nervous system (…) or cells, and its structure was not proteiform."[19] This analogy becomes meaningful thanks to a different analogy: that of the human brain as a black box.

The black box analogy opens up Lem's masterpiece. Lem, after all, was a self-taught cyberneticist. In science, computer science, and engineering,[20] a black box is a system viewed in terms of its inputs and outputs. Its internal workings are not visible. The black box metaphor may be applied to many different devices and solutions, such as the transistor, the engine, the algorithm, the government, and, of course, the human brain. As Lem points out in *Summa technologiae*:

> Our own brain is one of the "devices" that is "closest to us" in the whole Universe: we have it in our heads. Yet even today, we do not know how the brain knows exactly.[21]

To better understand how the black box works, let us return to the "Chinese room,"[22] a thought experiment formulated by the American philosopher John Searle in the 1980s to show that even if the computer can appear intelligent, it actually is not intelligent in and of itself. Observers of a black-box-like system have access to the external outputs, but

[15]Stanisław Lem, Solaris, trans. Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox (New York: Faber And Faber Ltd., 2016), 4.

[16]Lem, Solaris, 12.

[17]Lem, Solaris, 19.

[18]Lem, Solaris, 18.

[19]Lem, Solaris, 23.

[20]William Ross Ashby in An Introduction to Cybernetics (1956) was the first to use the term "black box" in this sense. See William Ross Ashby, An Introduction to Cybernetics (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1956).

[21]Lem, Summa technologiae, 121.

[22]John Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs", Behavioral and Brain Sciences 3 (1980): 417–424, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00005756.

the physical cause-and-effect relationships inside the box are as opaque as a black hole in space. Similar metaphysical discussions and arguments are held by methodologists in *Solaris*'s metanarrative:

> Was it possible for thought to exist without consciousness? Could one, in any case, apply the word thought to the processes observed in the ocean?[23]

Umberto Eco is right:[24] due to its opacity and inaccessibility, the human brain is nothing else than magic, which sets the bar incredibly high for contemporary science.

Given the experiences of the characters in the novel, we know that the planet/brain also displays functions and abilities of the human nervous system, such as sleep, memory, and mental imagery.[25] The dreamlike scenes, the so-called Phi-creations, in the Station invite us to question the boundary between reality and sleep. Entering the orbit of an alien planet is like an expedition into one's own brain. Dreaming is a metaphor in which self-awareness reaches an alien, synthesized, and analyzed dimension of reality, which, in turn, is produced by random signals during the regeneration of the cerebral cortex and interpreted as stimuli from the outside world. Thus, Solaris is a superposition of each astronaut's journey into their own brain. In this respect, the dream world is no less alien than the haunted Station above Solaris. Kris Kelvin seems to see his dead wife, Rheya. He is unable to decide whether it is a dream or reality (of course, before he rationalizes his state), whether the person he sees is his dead wife or just looks like her. A couple of factors are at play here. First, dreaming is an important context. The fact that the cerebral cortex interprets random signals as purposeful, motivated, and real images points to the fact that Kelvin and the Station crew interpret these random neutrino patterns as phantoms, as projections of something hidden deep in their memory. The dream images emerging from the brain are both one's own and alien, for the dreamer continues to use the same interface as in real life to interpret himself pretending to be an alien. Kelvin explains:

> [...] Even while dreaming, when we are in perfectly good health, we talk to strangers, put questions to them and hear their replies. Moreover, although our interlocutors are in fact the creations of our own psychic activity, evolved by a pseudo-independent process, until they have spoken to us we do not know what words will emerge from their lips. And yet these words have been formulated by a separate part of our own minds; we should therefore be aware of them at the very moment that we think them up in order to put them into the mouths of imaginary beings.[26]

The paradox of sleep involves alien(ated/ing) consciousness. When we stop anticipating our own actions and responses, even when we know perfectly well that we are dreaming, our consciousness alienates itself.

[23]Lem, Solaris, 24.

[24]Umberto Eco, "El mago y el científico", El País, 14 Dec. 2002, https://elpais.com/diario/2002/12/15/opinion/1039906807_850215.html, date of access 1 Apr. 2024.

[25]Although the cognitive revolution began in the 1950s, research on mental imagery gained momentum only in the 1980s, thanks to such American psychologists as Roger N. Shepard, Lynn A. Cooper, Stephen M. Kosslyn, and Howard Gardner.

[26]Lem, Solaris, 49.

Secondly, the mind or consciousness of imaginary beings or Phi-creatures may be just an anthropocentric interpretation, a product of one's own limited interface, since beings which look or behave like humans (e.g. Rheya or a cloned human) do not necessarily have to have minds. Rheya also has doubts about this: "I felt as if there was no body underneath my skin and there was something else instead: as if I was just an illusion meant to mislead you."[27] The trope of the cloned human brings to mind a famous thought experiment, the "philosophical zombie," which inspires reflection on physicalism and at the same time the possibility creating strong artificial intelligence: the same arrangement of physical matter does not necessarily give rise to the same consciousness. After all, a zombie, by definition, is a being with a human body but without a human psyche. Zombies are not humans, although they feel pain and have reflexes. Indeed, Rhey is also "somehow stylized, reduced to certain characteristic expressions, gestures and movements."[28] She is recognizable in her "habits,"[29] because "the albumen, the cell and the nucleus of the cell are nothing but camouflage. The real structure, which determines the functions of the visitor, remains concealed."[30] Jerzy Jarzębski is right when he says that

> Lem's hero is forever suspended between himself-as-the body and himself-as-consciousness, and the complicated (for both the scientist and the philosopher) relationship between the two is a source of constant amazement and inquiry.[31]

Apart from Kelvin, this puzzle apparently also astonishes Rheya, who is the product of Kelvin's self-reflection. The visitors are both perceived as uncanny[32] and endowed with consciousness. Both are anthropocentric acts. Our way of knowing and perceiving reality is, after all, conditioned by our interface. Consciousness may be just an insignificant by-product of the lottery. Thus, Lem points to the paradox of panpsychism, which is based on anthropocentrism.

After all, Phi-creatures are uncanny because memory works in an uncanny way, as does information processing. As research in cognitive psychology shows, long-term memory and the so-called mental image used for storing a remembered or imagined representation of an object, concept, idea, or situation are a constantly reconstructed *gestalt*[33] with indistinct, blurred details. Rheya's clothing is one such imprecise mental image generated by the planet/brain. She is barefoot like a Negress, Sartorius's visitor. Also, for unknown reasons, her dress has no zips and only decorative buttons running down the middle, so she cannot take it off. The

[27]Lem, Solaris, 143.

[28]Lem, Solaris, 58.

[29]Lem, Solaris, 53.

[30]Lem, Solaris, 101-102.

[31]Jerzy Jarzębski, "Lustro. Posłowie prof. Jerzego Jarzębskiego do Solaris" [The Mirror. Prof. Jerzy Jarzębski's Afterword to Solaris], solaris.lem.pl, https://solaris.lem.pl/ksiazki/beletrystyka/solaris/30-poslowie-solaris, date of access 1 May 2024.

[32]I am referring to the concept of the "uncanny valley" proposed by Masahiro Mori. See Masahiro Mori, Karl MacDorman, Norri Kageki, "The Uncanny Valley [From the Field]", IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine 2 (2012): 98–100, https://doi.org/10.1109/mra.2012.2192811.

[33]In Gestalt theory, the concept of "gestalt" (German for "figure") is a sum that contains more information than its constituent elements.

bare soles of Rheya's and the Black woman's feet are "soft, like that of a newborn child."[34] The visitors are thus mental doppelgangers of the Station's crew. Having set off on the expedition to Solaris, on a metaphorical journey into the depths of their own brain, they incarnate the homunculus of their own consciousness. In addition, the aforementioned mental images, according to cognitive psychology, are stored, processed, and manipulated. So, for example, one can rotate certain letters or geometric figures in the mind, which enhances the process of imagining and visual reasoning. And both mental images and the Phi-creations created by the thinking ocean undergo manipulation. The pilot André Berton[35] thus describes a giant infant he once saw flying over the ocean:

> It opened and closed its mouth, it made various gestures, horrible gestures. [...] if it hadn't been for the movements, the gestures, as though someone was trying ... It was as though someone else was responsible for the gestures. [...] they were methodical movements. They were performed one after another, like a series of exercises; as though someone had wanted to make a study of what this child was capable of doing with its hands, its torso, its mouth. [...] But this face ... a face can't divide itself into two—one half gay, the other sad, one half scowling and the other amiable, one half frightened and the other triumphant.[36]

The child that Berton saw was probably a product of mental manipulation taking place in the planetary brain. It was manipulation on a superhuman scale, because everything – as Berton stated – that he saw took ten seconds. He tried to explain this phenomenon to the suspicious Commission, saying that it involved "the most durable imprints of memory, those which are especially well-defined."[37] He had the missing Fechner in mind.

We should ask at this point: What is it all about? If the planet created by Lem is just a macrometaphor of the human brain, then what does it entail? If we were to replace "just" with "indeed," the textual world would transform into a three-dimensional ironic vision of humanity. First, the crew members only think that they perceive the reality imposed by their cognitive interface. Everything they anthropomorphize may be reduced to a bunch of neutrinos, unaware of their own materiality and the purpose that is bestowed upon them by different methodologists. And yet they "need mirrors. [They] don't know what to do with other worlds."[38] One's own consciousness is the source of alienation. Contact with other civilizations, as Sartorius sarcastically put it, means that "we can observe, through a microscope, as it were, our own monstrous ugliness, our folly, our shame!"[39]

Secondly, it is peculiarly ironic to anticipate that after so many years of scientific and technological development, after having travelled through so many light years, our stellar journey

[34]Lem, Solaris, 57.

[35]Lem often created fictional characters based on real ones (e.g. Baloyne in His Master's Voice is Jan Błoński, Trurl in The Cyberiad is Alan Turing). The pilot's name was probably inspired by the French surrealist André Breton, who initiated and developed the concept of objective chance (French: hasard objectif).

[36]Lem, Solaris, 82-83.

[37]Lem, Solaris, 102.

[38]Lem, Solaris, 72.

[39]Lem, Solaris, 73.

has finally come to an end, and the planet, the civilization, that took so many years to reach, turns out to be nothing more than the human brain. Does this mean that everything has been in vain? That all attempts to establish contact with this colossal cerebral ocean, all experiments and data obtained, are useless? Does this mean that the measurements and observations made by humanity were manipulated? Are we still dealing with a black box, since "[t]he ocean itself took an active part in these operations by remodelling the instruments. All this, however, remained somewhat obscure?"[40] Maybe everything that imprints itself on our perception boils down to chance, to lottery?

> Had the electronic apparatus recorded the cryptic manifestation of the ocean's ancient secrets? Had it revealed its innermost workings to us? Who could tell? No two reactions to the stimuli were the same [...].[41]

Equipped with the human interface, glasses, and headphones, we are like, as Lem writes, deaf listeners to a geometric symphony performed by both aliens and alien(ated/ing) consciousness.

Finally, Kelvin, as a psychologist, talks about Solaris with irony. It resembles contemporary cognitive science, haunted by the specter of failure in exploring the mystery of human consciousness.[42] It is worth noting that the fictional scientific discipline is not mentioned marginally; indeed, the respected psychologist has read all the books on Solaris he could find, including the dubious apocrypha, which endows this novel within the novel with significance. However, I believe that Solaristics is not so much an analogy to cognitive science as a caricature or a caricatured extrapolation of all human knowledge that pretends to explain the sources and the emergence of consciousness. On the one hand, contemporary neopositivists and physicalists are most often optimists, like alchemists in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, they are lost and frightened in the face of a scientific and technological limit that is and probably will never be transcended. For Solarists, the problem of Solaris is like a perpetual motion machine, like squaring the circle for the ancient Greek philosophers – after all, "[t]he existence of the thinking colossus was bound to go on haunting men's minds."[43] Meanwhile, contemporary scientists and philosophers still perceive the network of almost a hundred billion randomly connected neurons as a black box. We can therefore say that the darkest abyss is not the most distant part of the universe, but our own skull. Kelvin was right: "Man has gone out to explore other worlds and other civilizations without having explored his own labyrinth of dark passages and secret chambers, and without finding what lies behind doorways that he himself has sealed."[44] No sophisticated term or neologism, be it "mimoids," "symmetriads," or "asymmetriads," is of any help. Any terminology associated with Solaris, which Lem coined

[40]Lem, Solaris, 21.

[41]Lem, Solaris, 21.

[42]Paweł Grabarczyk, "O czym nam mówi milcząca planeta? Analiza wybranych wątków filozoficznych w Solaris Stanisława Lema" [What is the silent planet telling us? Analysis of selected philosophical themes in Stanisław Lem's Solaris], Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Polonica 4 (2020): 69–80, https://doi.org/10.18778/1505-9057.59.04.

[43]Lem, Solaris, 171-172.

[44]Lem, Solaris, 157.

ironically, is just a kitschy parody of logocentrism and anthropocentrism: "the most abstract achievements of science, the most advanced theories and victories of mathematics represented nothing more than a stumbling, one or two-step progression from our rude, prehistoric, anthropomorphic understanding of the universe around us."[45] "Alien(ated/ing) consciousness," or perhaps more precisely "self-alien(ated/ing) consciousness," like Solaris, will go on haunting men's minds. Ursula K. Le Guin in her introduction to *Solaris* wrote that "the novel is an exhibition of the inability of human understanding to achieve a final stage of knowledge; perhaps it implies also that human understanding at best can understand itself, but nothing outside itself."[46] However, *Solaris*, as I have indicated, perhaps shows that unfortunately we are still not even close to reaching this best-case scenario. What's more, the very attempt at interpreting *Solaris* is a paradox. Lem said that he did not fully understand the novels he wrote and that the language of the book did not "mee[t] with [his] complete approval."[47] It is therefore not surprising that – as the American scholar Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. writes – "Readers of *Solaris* are Solarists, too"[48] – as are its author and protagonist.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[45]Lem, Solaris, 170.

[46]Ursula K. Le Guin, "Stanisław Lem: Solaris: An introduction written in 2002 for a German-language edition of Solaris", in: Ursula K. Le Guin, Words are My Matter: Writings on Life and Books (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2019), 135.

[47]Edward Balcerzan, "Seeking Only Man: Language and Ethics in «Solaris»", trans. Konrad Brodziński, Science Fiction Studies 2 (1975): 155, https://doi.org/10.2307/4238938.

[48]Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., "The Book is the Alien: On Certain and Uncertain Readings of Lem's Solaris", Science Fiction Studies 12 (1985): 12, https://doi.org/10.1525/sfs.12.1.0006.

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KEYWORDS

Solaris

STANISŁAW LEM

Abstract:
The article proposes a new interpretation of Stanisław Lem's *Solaris*. Indeterminism and determinism clash both in Lem's prose and in his understanding of physics. The latter, according to Lem, is governed by a probabilistic force, the propeller of all events, including the emergence of consciousness and perhaps even intelligence. In contrast to neopositivists, Lem could be described as an absurdist for whom the emergence of consciousness and intelligence marks the limits of scientific inquiry, because, as I point out, the planet Solaris is a macro-metaphor for the human brain, and Solaristics is an ironic response to the origins of intelligent life. In the world of "alien(ated/ing) consciousness" found in *Solaris*, one's and the other's consciousness becomes alien, and perhaps being alien is a way to live.

alien(ated/ing) consciousness

MACRO-METAPHOR

chance

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Utopia without irony. Socialist decorative idiom versus the Industrial Revolution (on the example of works by Walter Crane)

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> The decline of art corresponds with its conversion into portable forms of private property, or materia lor commercial speculation. Its aims under such influences become entirely speculation. Its aims under such influences become entirely different. All really great works of art are public works – monumental, collective, generic – expressing the ideas of a race, a community, a united people; not the ideas of a class[1].
>
> Walter Crane, *The Claim of Decorative Art*

The stakes: creative practices in the Victorian era

English artists from the time of the Second Industrial Revolution were faced with a number of dilemmas regarding the ontology of a work of art and the creative process in terms of its relationship with the market. In this text I would like to consider how representatives of the Arts and Crafts movement (on the example of Walter Crane), who did art in the face of radical industrial growth, tried to describe and theorize their vision of art in the context of commodification and alienation. My thesis is that issues raised by Crane and William Morris in many aspects remain even more significant today and therefore worth revisiting, especially that nowadays we are dealing with another revolution in artistic tools offered by generative AI, ac-

[1] Walter Crane, The Claim of Decorative Art (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1886), 16.

companied by renewed theoretical debates regarding the ontology of art and the status of artists[2]. Therefore, the present paper has two aims: to reconstruct Walter Crane's views[3], which are virtually absent from Polish historical, theoretical, and literary research, and to identify areas in which his program may still be relevant and constitute an important benchmark for contemporary debates on the relationships between the market, art, and commodity. Later historical moments which also redefined modernity based on theoretical considerations of the Arts and Crafts movement in search for own answers to twentieth-century capitalism are also worth mentioning[4]. In terms of socialist aesthetic programmes, twentieth-century canons of modernist architecture and avant-garde art striving towards minimising means of expression, which translated into facilitating access to artistic design for the masses, are the most obvious point of reference. The post-WW1 aesthetics – antiornamental, antifigurative, subjugated to functional solutions – resulted from a socialist foundation (especially when we think about Bauhaus, transnational constructivist tendencies or different manifestations of geometrical abstraction)[5, 6]. What may seem paradoxical when we consider solely the aesthetic matrix (antidecorativeness versus decorativeness), modern leftist art was founded on rich, elaborate ornamentation in its preparatory phase.

This is how the Arts and Crafts movement should be perceived. Born in England in late 1880s, it provided foundations for aesthetic movements which would later develop in the first half of the 20th century both in Europe and globally, especially after WW1[7]. In Poland, the works by representatives of the Arts and Crafts movement and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood are typically discussed in the light of a historical fashion or aesthetics – scholars mostly recount postulates to return to craftsmanship or objections to industrialization, rarely discussing

[2] Eva Cetinic, James She, "Understanding and Creating Art with AI: Review and Outlook", ACM Transaction on Multimedia Computing, Communication and Applications (TOMM) 18 (2022).

[3] In terms of Crane's socially responsible art, his prints and engravings adorning the covers and pages of such magazines as "Justice Commonwealth" and "The Clarion", are the most recognizable. According to Morna O'Neill, since he proclaimed himself a socialist, Crane almost single-handedly created the visual culture of English socialism. His version of socialist print represented not only lush life close to nature, which reflected the Pre-Raphaelite, romanticist love for nature. Crane relied on rich ornamentation, creating bordures and covers for his works, in which the language of political commentary was frequently deeply symbolic. He resigned from political grotesque, caricature and satire, which were popular in the contemporary press. His visions of happiness and a unified society reached back to the inventory of Western mythological and Biblical thought. The socialist imagery of the late 19th century is utopian, sentimental, romanticist, often schmaltzy, based on a deep, often explicitly expressed faith in the model of a happy, fulfilled society. As O'Neill concludes – which is not obvious especially compared to Polish works on international art – "His work provides an important, decorative alternative to a realist idiom for socialist art". I would also add that this realist idiom of socialist art concerned not only representations which he published in leftist and anarchist magazines, but went much deeper, to the foundations of his artistic programme, manifesting itself in his postulate to unify the arts. See Morna O'Neill, "On Walter Crane and the Aims of Decorative Art", BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History (2012), date of access 15.02.2025.

[4] Por. Herbert L. Sussman, Victorians and the Machine. The Literary Response to Technology (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

[5] See Agata Szmitkowska, "Filozoficzne tło architektury modernistycznej" [Philosophical background to modernist architecture], Architecturae et Artibus 3 (2016).

[6] See Aleksandra Sumorok, "Socrealizm od środka. Design, sztuka wnętrza i modernizacja" [Socialist realism from the inside. Design, interior design, and modernization], Artium Quaestiones 32 (2021): 187–227. Andrzej Szczerski, Modernizacje. Sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej [Modernizations. Art. and architecture in new Central-Eastern European states] (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2010).

[7] See Katerina Clark K., "Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space", in: The Landscape of Stalinism. The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space, red. Evgeny Dobrenko, Eric Naiman (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 3–18.

the political background of this program[8]. Polish papers are dominated by stressing the artists' fondness of *quattrocento* painting or organization of work in medieval artistic guilds. In *Słownik terminologiczny sztuk pięknych* PWN [Dictionary of fine arts terms] and cross-sectional studies[9], the "Arts and Crafts movement" is typically discussed in terms of its visual aspects and aesthetic inspirations (nature, historical styles), techniques and its groundbreaking function for secession. In this paper, I would like to focus on Crane's views expressed in the 1886 manifesto *The Claim of Decorative Art*, as well as programme elements expressed in numerous articles and public speeches by William Morris[10], who, together with Crane, and following John Ruskin, laid the intellectual foundation for the movement, simultaneously actively engaging himself in leftist, socialist political movements (e.g. Social Democratic Federation and Socialist League)[11].

At first glance Crane's artistic programme may seem to have weak foundations or to defy the actual conditions in which it emerged. It should be stressed that his visions were future-leaning, and that Crane devoted much space to discussing the place modern art s h o u l d h a v e in the (tacitly) post-revolution society[12]. In his essays, the happiness of a man set free from the imperative of hard work, factory alienation, and the necessity to mass produce goods all become the basic and crucial condition for good art. In this sense it was an unironically utopian vision, in which the author analyses the relationship between the working class and the moneyed class, stressing that good art can flourish in society only if the current social relations are abolished.

The insufficient representation of this issue in Polish studies is obviously only one reason for which I would like to discuss this topic; the other, more important one is the question of the ontology of art, which allows to rethink the status of applied and decorative arts.

Against alienation

In his 2017 book *Why Architecture Matters as Art as Never Before: Le Corbusier, Tony Smith and the Problem of Use*, Todd Cronan considered a similar problem in reference to the on-

[8] Maria Rzepińska, author of one of the most important textbooks for students of art history, mentions the movement mostly in the context of Japan-oriented aesthetics and linearism. At one point she writes that the representatives of the Arts and Crafts movement were searching for "a remedy for the ugliness and tackiness of contemporary factory production", but she did not elaborate further, instead moving on to discussing the stylistics of Vienna secessionists. Maria Rzepińska, Siedem wieków malarstwa europejskiego [Seven centuries of European painting] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1979), 411. See Jan Białostocki, Sztuka cenniejsza niż złoto [Art more precious than gold] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2022).

[9] Mieczysław Wallis, Secesja [Secession] (Warszawa: Arkady, 1974).

[10] In 1884 he gave a talk Art and Socialism, which influenced Crane's perception of socialism. The two artists saw a bridge between romanticism promising a unity of nature and products of human labour, and the Marxist vision of revolution.

[11] Morna O'Neill, Walter Crane: The Arts and Crafts, Painting and Politics 1875–1890 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[12] Alan Crawford distinguished three major political ideas of the movement: unity of arts, joy in work, and a reform of design. Behind the "art guilds" which were supposed to be an implementation of the idea of the unity of arts, there was a late Renaissance conviction (when the previous, medieval model was supposedly abandoned), that this was the dominant understanding of creative work based on equating craftsmen with artists. Michele Krugh, "Joy in Labour: The Politicization of Craft from the Arts and Crafts Movement to Etsy", Canadian Review of American Studies 44 (2014): 281–301.

tology of art (on the example of Le Corbusier's architecture). He cited Adolf Loos's opinion that everything that served a practical purpose should by default be excluded from the sphere of art. However, Cronan argues for architecture which takes into consideration both its user and its beholder. The tension between a work of art and a commodity becomes crucial for him, because those works of architecture which highlight the unification of the building and the world (space) through their form can somehow transcend their utility[13]. Such ideas are close to arguments raised by Crane and Morris. Objects which can transcend their utility and simultaneously have a chance to escape conceptualizing the design of social spaces as a process functioning exclusively within the framework of the logics of supply and demand. In *The Claim of Decorative Art*, Crane refers to the common assumption that decorative arts are perceived as a lower category, not only requiring less skill than painting, but also posing a lesser intellectual challenge to the artist. However, he states that looking at those processes from the historical perspective, this view should be inverted altogether[14], thus appreciating decorative arts. According to Morna O'Neill, testing the line between "art" and "decoration" was fundamental for Crane's policy[15]. He thus wanted to transform the idea of "art for art's sake" into egalitarian, socially accessible art. Scholars and biographers typically treat Crane's socially engaged works separately, dismissing them as lower, "propagandist", which seems at odds with Crane's programme. However, O'Neill writes that:

> While it was not unusual for Arts and Crafts artists such as William Morris and Crane to openly declare their political commitments, the dynamic between their politics and their artistic practice was often considered a matter of form rather than content. The movement was inspired by John Ruskin's lament that moden workers had lost the art of their work, defined as the joy of imagination in creative labour inspired by an idealized understanding of medieval craftsmanship. In most accounts, the handcrafted objects produced by the Arts and Crafts movement – tapestries, textiles, wallpapers, ceramics, and the like – are thought to embody their very meaning in their making: beautiful and useful, these objects manifest the ideals of craftsmanship, fitness of purpose, and sensitive use of materials that implicitly, rather than openly, condemn industrial production and resist the capitalist marketplace[16].

As has been stated, according to Crane, a happy society was the foundation for all fields of art (he believed that the beauty of a painting or a sculpture cannot be achieved where there is no beauty in everyday things, no source of harmonious thinking, admiration for the colour and form of everyday objects and surroundings). According to Crane, wherever there is high quality decorative or applied art, supreme painting, architecture or dramatic art will follow on. Putting it this way may seem bold, even daring – Crane equates economic wellbeing and organization of social life with the quality of art. What is more, he claims that under capitalism,

[13]Todd Cronan, "Why Architecture Matters as Art as Never Before: Le Corbusier, Tony Smith and the Problem of Use", Nonsite 21 (2017), https://nonsite.org/why-architecture-matters-as-art-as-never-before/.

[14]Crane, 2.

[15]Morna O'Neill, "Pandora's Box: Walter Crane, «Our Sphinx-Riddle» And The Politics Of Decoration", Victorian Literature and Culture 35 (2007): 309–326.

[16] Morna O'Neill "Cartoons for the Cause? Walter Crane's The Anarchists of Chicago" Art History, 2014 38(1), p. 107.

doing just one field of art is like expecting "flowers to bloom without roots and stems, light, heat, and air" [17], and art "is not something accidental and fanciful, [...] it is an organic thing, having its own laws, [...] logical causes and consequences"[18] (this would implicitly concern the reasons connected to the socio-economic background). He states that artists and decorators bear responsibility towards society, dubbing them "trustees [...] of the common property of beauty"[19]. Therefore, Crane boldly claims that in a happy, free society there is automatically no room for bad art, as all art is conceived from the artist's joy rather than market demands and response to consumers' tastes. In his vision, beauty and richness of form are thus ethical, as they become synonymous with a free, classless society. Asked what beauty is, Crane could likely answer: social responsibility.

In terms of his considerations regarding class, Crane criticized the mechanism of social advancement, according to which advancing from one's social class is the condition for personal growth[20]. He believed that in a classless society, everyone would be provided with both work and leisure, so that their work would bring satisfaction. He wanted works adorning and organizing various aspects of social space and life to be created collectively by guilds of artists with broad creative competences, proficient at specialist techniques, having close contact with the produced matter, applying slow methods which allow artists ultimate precision (in opposition to unnatural, mechanised procedures of mass, factory production)[21]. This is where nonobvious relationships between Pre-Raphaelites and early twentieth-century modernist programmes manifest themselves.

Among others, Walter Gropius drew from the writings and experiences of late 19th century artists while formulating the manifesto of the school in Dessau established soon after WW1. In the 1919 Bauhaus manifesto Gropius writes that:

> Architects, sculptors, painters—we all must return to craftsmanship! So let us therefore create a new guild of craftsmen, free of the divisive class pretensions that endeavoured to raise a prideful barrier between craftsmen and artists! Let us strive for, conceive and create the new building of the future that will unite every discipline, architecture and sculpture and painting, and which will one day rise heavenwards from the million hands of craftsmen as a clear symbol of a new belief to come[22].

[17]Crane, 2.

[18]Crane, 3.

[19]Crane, 3.

[20]Crane, 56. The artist critiques the notion of social advancement as embedded within the existing social structure, while simultaneously calling for respect toward the performance of socially necessary labor: "But why should it be assumed that a man must rise out of his class in order to raise himself? Why should a life of useful productive labour, of labour absolutely indispensable to the community, be despised, and a life of idleness be extolled and desired?

[21]As has been said, for Morris collectivity was the condition for the unity of arts: "This is, I say, the unit of the art, this house [...] built and ornamented by the harmonious efforts of a free people: by no possibility could one man do it, however gifted he might be". William Morris, Art and Its Producers, and The Arts and Crafts of To-day: Two Addresses Delivered Before the National Association for the Advancement of Art (London: Longmans & Co., 1901): [28].

[22]Walter Gropius, Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar 1919, https://bauhausmanifesto.com, date of access 25.02.2025.

Gropius derives the post-war postulate to unify art and craftsmanship directly from the guild model established by Arts and Crafts representatives. As stated by Lauren S. Weingarden in her analysis of the relationships with William Morris and Walter Gropiu's programme:

> we can identify two ways of reading the Arts and Crafts or Bauhaus object: 1) as the image of a collective activity and 2) as a record of the maker's disalienated and, in turn, beneficent social acts.40 Because of their expectations for such readings, functionalist realism was to serve Morris and his Bauhaus followers as a trajectory into a future socialist state. Therefore, what remained constant among these designers was their concern for rendering legible--whether by hand or machine-the process for making an ideal real. Thus when we defer strictly formal analyses of functionalist design, and reconnect unchanging theoretical norms with their conventional forms, apparent sylistic incongruities between Morris' and Bauhaus objects begin to dissolve[23].

The scholar argues that although the views of Victorian artists and theoreticians of Bauhaus realized themselves in extremely different aesthetics, ultimately the stakes of those projects and direction towards which they looked proved similar. Morris, whose writings inspired Gropius, programming a modern outlook on architecture, was famous for paying close attention to the sourcing and processing of materials, and ultimately to each stage of hand-producing a work of art by one (the same) artist. When he designed textile patterns, he followed the imperative of using natural textiles and agents, he taught himself long-forgotten production techniques, perceiving the artist's process from an idea to single-handedly making a work of art as crucial. Morris believed that a work of art should be designed and made by the same artist. Today, he is considered a precursor of modern environmentalism due to his objection to the degradation of natural environment, factory pollution, and dehumanization of industrial processes.

For Morris, the aim of ornament was twofold, as explained in his 1901 *Art and Its Producers, and The Arts and Crafts of To-day*: first, to add beauty to the results of the work of man, which would otherwise be ugly; and secondly, to add pleasure to the work itself, which would otherwise be painful and disgustful[24]. Although twentieth-century artists, following the experience of modernism and the avant-garde, no longer treated elaborate ornamentation as a "beautifying" factor (it had been rejected as a relic of overloaded bourgeoisie aesthetics), they shifted the focus to solid figures, matter, thus redefining ornamentation in art. They derived beautifying elements from geometry or colour, reducing ornamentation to bare minimum dictated by the internal logics of form. We can see here the desire to maintain craftsmanship as a collection of practices which by default would exclude capitalist mass production. In the industrial era, as Morris argued, artists were deprived of their collectiveness. This view directed him towards romanticizing medieval guilds. Morris treated his work as a total

[23]Lauren S. Weingarden, „Aesthetics Politicized: William Morris to the Bauhaus", Journal of Architectural Education 38 (1985): 8–13.

[24]Morris, 21-22: "Now I say without hesitation that the purpose of applying art to articles of utility is twofold: first, to add beauty to the results of the work of man, which would otherwise be ugly; and secondly, to add pleasure to the work itself, which would otherwise be painful and disgustful. If that be the case, we must cease to wonder that man has always striven to ornament the work of his own hands, which he must need see all round about him daily and hourly; or that he should have always striven to turn the pain of his labor into a pleasure wherever it seemed possible to him".

manifesto aimed against commodification and alienation[25]. Crane shared Morris's views in many respects, although looking at his works one could suppose that he would not fully agree with the statements that ornamentation plays only an aesthetic/beautifying function. For Crane, ornamentation was supposed to be first and foremost a medium for meaning, like in poetry, where the form (rhythm, structure) is inseparable from the content of a poem – although he also raised the question of deriving pleasure from work as part of a socially significant strategies. However, out of all those projects emerges a vision of life as an experience which is supposed to be pleasant and filled with beauty (of both romantically understood nature and art being an ontologically special product of human activity)[26].

Beauty and craftsmanship

The stake due to which artists appreciated the idea of craftsmanship so much, therefore, was the struggle against alienation inevitable in the reality of industrial production. What happened later to representations of Pre-Raphaelites and Arts and Crafts artists was mass copying of their work for commercial purposes (which remains popular until today, especially because of sentimental, history-oriented imaging). Such appropriation of works which on many levels stemmed from resisting the system, inherent to capitalist logics, was one of the elements which those artists likely did not yet predict. At some point their craftsmanship and original, vibrant style became appreciated among the upper classes, and subsequent epigons produced works intentionally highlighting their "craftsmanship" and handmade character[27].

In his book, Crane devotes considerable attention to the theory of labour under industrial conditions and to the intentions underlying the effort invested in the work process. In his view, the moment any activity becomes a compulsion or a condition for survival, it ceases to be a source of pleasure. In the writings of Victorian artists, the notion of pleasure derived from work recurs with striking frequency, becoming virtually central to their overall programme. The entire framework of the author's thought emerges from a set of assumptions regarding human nature, which are ultimately formulated from a historical perspective. He perceives the need for beauty as, on the one hand "natural", yet at the same time demonstrably historical. Crane seeks to address this issue by referring to the vividly coloured artifacts of folk art, which he interprets as evidence of a social need for expression. In reflecting on the disappearance of this form of art – which he regards as a natural manifestation of the need to shape life and fulfil a general longing for beauty, particularly as expressed through ornamentation – he writes:

[25]Morris.

[26]The lines between Crane's theoretical, artistic, political and activist work were often blurred. As part of his basic work, he often did work for children. Together with Nellie Dale, he published Steps to reading (1899), a richly illustrated textbook for teaching reading. He also made elaborate illustrations for children's stories.

[27]Madoc Cairns mentions this in his paper "Walter Crane Was a Socialist Visionary Who Illustrated the Triumph of Labor", Jacobin 5.06.2022 https://jacobin.com/2022/05/walter-crane-arts-crafts-victorian-britain-socialism. It is worth noting that nowadays a similar mechanism of commercializing the idea of craftsmanship can be observed, divorced from its original context, for example in the mass production of products styled after those created using the Japanese kintsugi technique. This method involves repairing broken vessels with a golden lacquer that accentuates the fracture lines. Many stores offer items that are deliberately shattered and reassembled, or simply painted with gold to mimic objects created in the spirit of Japanese philosophy, while in an ontological sense, they are its complete antithesis.

> One of those things the disappearance whereof we deplore is the art of the people – the peasant costume with its embroidery and jewellery, always so full of character and colour, relics of long antiquity and tradition, the odds and ends of which are carefully scraped together and served up to the tourist long after they have ceased to be realities in the life of the people. This narrative art, found in all unexploited countries, is highly interesting, as showing how naturally a people collectively express their sense of beauty in colour and form, how naturally, with leisure and fairly easy conditions of live, the art instinct asserts itself[28].

This argument is particularly compelling, as Crane at times slips into romanticist reflections on human nature, only to ground his intuitions moments later with reasoning embedded in anthropological and historical perspectives. He attempts to demonstrate anthropologically that the very idea of writing originates from decorative forms, tied to a commonly accessible pictographic script that was meant to be both ornamental and semantically meaningful. Mass-produced, machine-made objects, however, involve the unreflective replication of these forms and thus, according to Crane, cannot be considered art. Their production lacks meaning: the intention is not to endow a specific object with significance, but rather to manufacture the greatest possible number of identical items with predefined characteristics and parameters. During the Second Industrial Revolution, there was widespread concern about the future of painting in the face of photography's rapid advancement. Crane devoted an entire chapter, *Imitation and Expression in Art*[29], to the problem of pictorial representation. The greatest threat to painting and traditional arts, in his view, lies in the absence of a surplus of meaning, in the lack of an intellectual contribution by the artist, and in the pursuit of literal imitation driven by the market logic of supply and demand. A purely technical attempt to depict nature without reflective transformation results in the creation of objects that simply mimic nature convincingly, thereby becoming desirable commodities. Of course, to some extent – at least still in the 19th century – painting did rely on imitation, a fact of which Crane is fully aware. Yet he regards it only as one component of artistic activity and

> only in so far as imitation contributes to expression, whether of beauty, or thought, or story, or phase of nature, in which it ceases to be merely imitation and becomes an art [...]. Where would be either use or enduring pleasure in art, if it did not express something besides the mere accidents of superficial fact?[30]

If painting becomes intellectually lazy, it falls into an ontological trap in which its sole purpose is the faithful reproduction of nature or moods – and that is precisely the moment when nothing stands in the way of photography, then emerging as a field with its own artistic potential, to displace it as a more effective (and faster) representational medium. According to

[28]Crane, 76-77.

[29]Crane, 158-159 puts it in the following way: "The answer of course depends on our conception of the scope of art; what are its ends and aims? If it is indeed the exclusive pursuit of naturalism or literalism, there is nothing but the prospect of this unequal race with photography, which [...] puts any painting or drawing hopelessly at a distance. On this course it is clear that art is destined to be finally beaten by science [...]. Painting would certainly never have been brought to this pass if she had not been parted from the early companion of her way, but she has severed herself from craftsmanship, from ornamental design – nay, generally speaking, from design and invention, too – and given herself body and soul to literal imitation of nature dominated by commercial sentiment and sensation".

[30]Crane, 159.

Crane, technical skill alone, although valorised on many levels by the Pre-Raphaelites, is not a sufficient argument for calling an object a work of art if it is not accompanied by intellectual processes:

> As well might the poet deal in nothing but description, or the musician limit himself to reproducing the noises of the farmyard, as the painter be content to ignore invention and design, story and poetic suggestion. In these things the human mind comes into play, and it is these qualities that give life and endurance to art. Nor is there any substitute for them. We cannot get our designing done by machinery, or our thinking by photography. The only known mechanism for these processes is that of the brain itself. [...] If that is really the case, painting – pending its final extinction by photography – must be content to take an inferior intellectual position among the arts[31].

In this framework, beauty is achieved through the unity of arts, as well as the abolition of the hierarchy between high and low art. When art begins to cater to simple needs (such as the repetition of nature), it becomes a commodity. It is created in order to pander to market tastes; the artist makes effort to make it "sellable". Commodification and industrial production destroy art by stripping it of the genuine inventiveness the artist possesses when creating solely out of personal necessity. As previously mentioned, this is where the category of happiness enters: joy in the act of creation, followed by the joy experienced by the beholder, becomes a value in itself – an expression against alienation. Yet, as long as the laws of the market persist, society will remain unable to experience everyday beauty. From this book, then, emerges not only an aesthetic program but also, and primarily, a social one, in which art constitutes an integral component of social well-being on multiple levels. Crane concludes the entire discourse with reflections and proposals concerning industry and the arts in the chapter *Art and Industry*, ultimately asserting that only political and tangible change can lead society to a point where the fullness of art becomes possible. Fully aware of the utopian nature of this project, he summarizes in the final paragraphs:

> Hereafter we may be able to meet and gauge our progress. In the meantime I think it is most important to recognise certain facts – to know exactly how and where we stand in this matter of art and industry; which, moreover, cannot be separated from the great economic question of which, indeed, it is but a part. Do not let us deceive ourselves, or expect to gather the grapes of artistic or industrial prosperity from economic thorns, or aesthetic figs from commercial thistles. It is idle to expect artistic sense and refinement to spring from full and sordid surroundings, or a keen sense of beauty amid the conditions of monotonous and mechanical toil. Unless your artist and craftsman has personal freedom, leisure and cultivation, and continued access to the beauty of both art and nature, you will get neither vigorous design nor good craftsmanship[32].

By definition, beauty is for him synonymous with the liberation of the working class. Through its form, it expresses a value that is fundamental for Victorian socialists: the emancipation of the labouring classes and the creation of a world in which producers are no longer subjected to alienation. Art is to be the highest outcome of social and class development, to provide

[31]Crane, 159–160.
[32]Crane, 190.

pleasure to the artist-craftsman in the very act of creation, and, as a shared good, allow people to live surrounded by the beauty of art that is produced in accordance with the artist's vision. In the chapter *Art and Labour*, Crane writes: "society must work out its own salvation"[33] He asserts that in an ideal society, the imperative of profit would not exist, and only then would it be possible to work for the sake of – what he calls "a noble and beautiful human life – a life of useful and pleasurable, but not enforced or excessive labour"[34].

Visions of utopia. Art as an expression of social happiness

When successful trade becomes the sole reason for the production of goods, the producer is guided by the desire to cater to consumer tastes and by the logic of competition; the artist may be involved to a greater or lesser extent, but their vision will never be fully realized – what is being met instead is market demand. As the author writes:

> Now, the man of commerce – the controller of industry – seeks only to make a *saleable* article. He is influenced in his industrial production simply by this object. He takes the opinion of salesmen, of the trade, not of artists, as a rule, and so far as any artistic standard or aim enters into the produce of his manufactory, it is strictly checked by the average of what his rivals are doing, and by the discovery of what the big public can be persuaded to buy[35].

This is precisely why, in Crane's analyses, narrow artistic specialization becomes synonymous with the development of modern capitalism. This is also where his postulate of the unity of the arts and of the artist as a figure capable of executing all forms of artistic work and engaging in various domains of creative activity emerges from. From the perspective of the creative process, Crane considered ornament-making to be a source of pleasure. Yet ornament itself, in his view, constituted a kind of surplus that could imbue utilitarian objects with additional meaning – he literally referred to it as "picture-writing". He invoked the example of ancient and prehistoric functional art: from carved bones to the decorative frieze of the Parthenon, which tells a story and in which ornament becomes a necessary and inherent component of the object. For Crane, the Industrial Revolution is the origin of social ugliness and aesthetic stratification, while the "worker in art" becomes the figure who might elevate society from such ugliness. However, Crane emphasizes that figuration, allegory, and non-literalness, and above all, this decorative surplus within daily life, are of essential social importance. He critiques the industrialization of art as the production of objects devoid of artistic elements – that is, ultimately, of elements i m b u e d w i t h m e a n i n g :

> I am far from wishing to undervalue technical skill; [...] To disparage it would be like an attempt to throw discredit on the faculty of speech and writing; but we should soon tire of language and literature without thought [...]. If we hold, in short, that art is a language, not only for the expression of particular moods [...], but also for the conveyance of the higher thoughts and poetic

[33]Crane, 60.
[34]Crane, 61.
[35]Crane, 174.

> symbolism of the mind – then I think it is no longer possible to rest content merely with the results of industry and facility of hand, [...] [when art] lives to please, it must please to live [...]. Nay, there are people of the persuasion that ornamental art should be content to be ornamental and no more; they are content with figures elegantly employed in doing nothing, if, like the peer in the comic opera, they do it remarkably well. Allegory seems to depress them, and symbolism to put them out; life according to this schools is "a tale of little meaning, though the words are strong". I am far from saying that the exclusive study of line, tone, arrangement, and method is not of great value. But so are grammars and dictionaries. Rhythm, metre, and diction do not make poetry, though they are essential to it; and my contention is that you cannot separate style and matter in art, any more than in literature, without serious loss[36].

The above passage reveals that although the author recognizes the particular reverence with which 19th-century artists regarded craftsmanship, he is equally aware of the risks entailed in exclusively privileging form. Pure technical proficiency, abstracted from the complexity of the creative process, can easily be reduced to a commodified notion of craftsmanship. As Crane observes, this occurs when mere "appeal" becomes the condition for art's existence – when society loses the capacity to create beyond the logic of supply and demand. On an intuitive level, already in the 1880s Crane reaches conclusions concerning the autonomy of art that would, to a large extent, align with the views later articulated by Nicholas Brown in his book *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*. The tension between a work's meaning and its commodity form is defined by Brown as follows:

> It might seem absurd to say the art commodity is uninterpretable, but think for a moment of James Cameron's science-fiction film *Avatar*, still a kind of high-water mark of culture-industrial spectacle. The memory of critics producing a welter of completely incompatible (but also vaguely plausible) interpretations is an amusing one, and the phenomenon did not go unnoticed by the critics themselves. This empirical profusion is insignificant in itself: all of these interpretations (or all but one) could have been wrong. But it is also possible that since the film is concerned only with producing a set of marketable effects, it cannot at the same time be concerned with producing the minimal internal consistency required to produce a meaning[37].

In brief, the author refers to the example of a commercial film, demonstrating that its internal inconsistency (and consequently its lack of coherent meaning) stems from its aim to satisfy consumer expectations. As long as Cameron strives to produce a commercially appealing spectacle, he suspends the pursuit of meaning in favour of the more efficient commodification of his creation. For Brown, the central stake lies in the question of meaning in a work of art, as it is precisely meaning that allows a work to negotiate, however partially, the terms of its own existence – even if it cannot entirely escape commodification. Under capitalism, art is a commodity like any other product of human labour; yet it is meaning that constitutes the surplus, the excess, which enables the preservation of a certain degree of autonomy in the face of inevitable commodification. Brown continues his reflection as follows:

[36]Crane, 20-23.

[37]Nicholas Brown, Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 9.

> The question is whether the work of art is a commodity like any other or whether it can, within itself, suspend the logic of the commodity, legibly assert a moment of autonomy from the market. If the claim to autonomy is today a minimal political claim, it is not for all that a trivial one. A plausible claim to autonomy—to actions ascribable to intention rather than to causal conditions—is in fact the precondition for any politics at all other than the politics of acquiescence to the *status quo*[38].

The risk that Crane identified at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution pertains to the conditions under which art exists within the logic of commodity form. He articulated this concern pointedly: "when [art] lives to please, it must please to live" [39]. This issue may not have felt as timely in the past as it does today. Consider, for instance, the recent protests by artists expressing concern over the perceived threats posed by generative AI – here, we encounter shared anxieties regarding the ontology of art. These models are capable of m i m i c k i n g certain technical features of artistic craftsmanship, yet the specific outputs of AI are ultimately devoid of intention. The meaning of such works will always remain linked to the intention of the subject who designed the algorithm to behave and respond in a specific manner to user prompts. On a visual level, we may recognize these outputs as artworks – images, texts, films – that appear to possess intrinsic meaning. However, their true meaning lies in being products of AI, generated according to predefined commands[40]. If we were to focus exclusively on analyzing structure and formal characteristics – as Crane warns – and placed sole value on craftsmanship, we might indeed recognize such outputs as legitimate and well-formed works of art. Yet, as he continues, "rhythm, metre, and diction do not make poetry, though they are essential to it" [41]. It is precisely this fear of industrialization and mass production that structurally echoes current debates around the replacement of the human artist with an automated, algorithmic model. For this reason, both Crane and Morris argued that in an ideal production context, a work should be executed from beginning to end by a single artist. In their vision, the aim and ethical stake of craftsmanship is to serve life and the universal pleasure of humanity, while the ultimate concern is the very quality of art itself.

One could argue that the entire body of Crane's work consists of an attempt to diagnose and capture the key threats posed by industrialization. The nature of his essays is clearly interventionist: he formulates programmatic aims intended to indicate a direction for the future. Crane does so boldly, repeatedly demonstrating his deep belief in the possibility of enacting social change. However, if we shift the weight of his conclusions from the speculative register to the domain of political diagnosis, we might assert that Crane, assuming the continuation of the labour relations he describes, sees no future for art. As long as human beings are compelled to work out of necessity, society will remain surrounded by low-quality objects that merely "imitate" art, products born solely of the dynamics of supply and demand.

[38]Brown, 34

[39]Crane, 21.

[40]It is worth noting that a frequently raised concern pertains to the question of subjectivity. AI-generated artifacts are ontologically incapable of expressing social or identity-based interests. In this sense, AI models cannot articulate any interests (whether consciously or unconsciously manifested through art),because they possess neither a position within the class structure nor an identity. They are only capable of simulating certain outward signs of such positions.

[41]Crane, 23.

The author is fully aware that he is formulating a program within conditions that preclude the large-scale production of good art. Decorative art, as the highest expression of joy derived from labour, would serve as a kind of manifesto adorning shared public spaces. The utopia in which overwork does not exist – because only a free and rested mind can create beautiful things (and thus socially beneficial things) – was, in Crane's view, not merely a theoretical construct, but a realizable program. He clearly revealed his belief in a vision shared with William Morris: that good art should hold a meaningful place in the everyday lives of working-class people. But for this to fully materialize, the class-based model of society must be dismantled.

In conclusion, Crane wrote that "what is good for humanity is good for art," and that great art will flourish in a society that values individual freedom and the "fraternity of common interest"[42]. Decorative art, in this framework, resists industrial production by expressing joy and creative invention. Simultaneously, it becomes, in a very precise sense, uneconomical – arising from individual need and existing as surplus from the standpoint of market logic and mass production.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

[42]Crane, 82.

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KEYWORDS

ontology fo art

commodification

Abstract:
This paper aims to explore the intersections of art, socialism, and the Industrial Revolution in the theoretical writings of Walter Crane, with particular emphasis on his conception of the ontology of art and its relationship to the commodity form. A central issue for Crane – an artist and theorist affiliated with the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement – is the status of ornamentation, which he regarded as a socially significant art form in decline under industrial conditions. By the late nineteenth century, decorative art in England had become an important idiom for socially engaged artists – among the first in Europe to systematically theorize their opposition to industrialization and its detrimental effects on human creativity. In this paper, I argue that the aspirations of the Arts and Crafts movement, when examined alongside the austere aesthetics of socialist realism in twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the broader anti-ornamental turn of the early twentieth century, illuminate how conceptions of art – and the utopian visions of ideal society they often entailed – have shifted over time. On one hand, this study seeks to familiarize Polish readers with the theoretical underpinnings of the Arts and Crafts movement, which has often been sidelined in favour of more canonical aesthetic programs. On the other, it offers a philosophical inquiry into the ontology of art under conditions of rapid industrialization – an inquiry that continues to inform contemporary debates on the status of the artwork within market-driven cultural economies.

Walter Crane

ARTS AND CRAFTS

Industrial Revolution

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Self-Referential Metaphors in Contemporary Chinese Poetry – Reconnaissance

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Introduction

The functionalities of metaphor as dominants of the style of poetic texts are widely known. Important, of course, are graphic aspects that refer to the spatiality of the poetic text as a parameter influencing meaning (especially) in repeated reading.

One of the aspects of metaphor – in this case in relation to contemporary Chinese poems – is self-referentialism, i.e., a kind of meta-reflection on writing poetry and perceiving the world (preceding metaphor). That is why we decided on this topic - because on the one hand it concerns metaphors as carriers of ways of representing an individual view of the world, and on the other hand, it concerns the strategy of describing and the process of creating poetry. In both cases, we are interested in the peculiarity of the poem, i.e. the structure of the text that interacts semantically (working more or less strongly in the individual analyzed cases).

The article has two main goals. The first is to present the specificity of selected poems by contemporary Chinese poets from a comparative perspective. Thanks to the reference to three language versions (Chinese, Polish and – auxiliary – English), an analytical reading at the meta level is possible – one that encourages reflection on the metaphors organizing this poetry. We are therefore dealing with an attempt to read the poems, but from a superior perspective, i.e. one focused on metaphor. The second goal emerges from this approximation – the analysis of poetic texts (including the structure of these poems) in terms of the ways of exploiting various manifestations of metaphorization.

It should be immediately emphasized that the sketch is a reconnaissance – on the one hand, it disseminates the texts of poets who stand out from the background of contemporary Chinese literature, and on the other hand, it proves the validity of studying this poetry in relation to popular metaphorical phenomena commented on in renowned works of language researchers. The peculiarity of this proposal is, above all, that it is an example of transposing thoughts on metaphors to artistic texts not read through the prism of such methodological tools. This is not only an indication of the linguistic phenomena present in the texts mentioned, but also an approach to them in relation to the structure of the poem, and therefore in connection with poetological reflection.

As mentioned before, the specialty of this article is that, due to the author's special background, the original texts being analyzed are in Chinese, which have been translated into Polish, and English forms a bridge between readers and the author. This article mainly uses Conceptual Metaphor Theory as a tool to analyze the poetry. Since it covers three languages, this further illustrates the core point of conceptual theory: metaphor is a way of thinking rather than just linguistic expression. Next, a brief review of Conceptual Metaphor Theory will be given.

There are many works on metaphor such as *Metaphors We Live By* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980),[1] *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* by George Lakoff and Mark Turner (1989),[2] *Metaphor and Thought* by Andrew Ortony (1993),[3] *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* edited by Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. (2008),[4] and etc., among which *Metaphors we live by* is the most relevant to this article. The book extends the study of metaphor from the linguistic category to the cognitive category and proposes conceptual metaphor which refers to the understanding of one idea in terms of another.[5] In other words, it involves a mapping process from one domain (source domain) onto another domain (target domain). Although there are also some criticisms of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, such as Genter and Bowdle, who suggest novel metaphor and conventional metaphor requires different mental process in their Career of Metaphor Theory,[6] and Glucksberg, who argues that the on-line metaphor comprehension process works by categorization instead of comparison,[7] it is undoubtedly still an important theory in metaphor research.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, conceptual metaphor can be divided into three types: structural metaphor, orientational metaphor and ontological metaphor.

Structural metaphor uses one concept to construct another concept. The cognitive domains of the two concepts are different, but their structures remain unchanged. In other words, there is a regular correspondence between their respective components. Orientation metaphors are self-organized with reference to the spatial orientations within the same conceptual system, such as up and down, inside and outside, front and back, deep and shallow, center and edge. The third is ontological metaphor. Human

[1] Lakoff, George, Mark Johnson. Metaphors we live by. University of Chicago press, 2008.

[2] Lakoff, George, Mark Turner. More than cool reason: A field guide to poetic metaphor, University of Chicago press, 2009.

[3] Ortony, Andrew, ed. Metaphor and thought, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

[4] Gibbs Jr, Raymond W., ed. The Cambridge handbook of metaphor and thought. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

[5] Lakoff, George, The contemporary theory of metaphor, 1993.

[6] Bowdle, Brian F., Dedre Gentner, The career of metaphor, "Psychological review" 112, no. 1 (2005): 193.

[7] Glucksberg, Sam. "How metaphors create categories–quickly." The Cambridge handbook of metaphor and thought (2008): 67-83.

beings' original way of survival was material, so our experience with objects provides a material basis for our understanding of abstract conceptual expressions as entities. Therefore, ontological metaphor means that we can regard abstract and vague thoughts, emotions, psychological activities, events, states and other intangible concepts as concrete, tangible entities, or even the human body itself.

As Gibbs proposes, human being's cognition is basically characterized by figurative processes such as metaphor, metonymy and etc., which helps people to understand their own experience and interaction with the external world.[8] Metaphor is in our thought that we use it automatically with little effort. Great poets use this mode of thought too; that is why they can speak to us. Therefore, in order to comprehend the artistry and creativity of poetry requires us to understand our most ordinary ways of thinking.[9] In other words, in order to comprehend poetic metaphor, we have to understand conventional metaphor. The poetic metaphors call on our daily ways of thinking, dealing with core respective of our conceptual system and forcing us to understand them in new ways. Far from being only embellishment, metaphor is vital for us to understand ourselves, our culture and the world, and via metaphor, poetry can exercise our minds, making us more open-minded when we try to understand the ordinary metaphors we live by. Although great poets use the same tools we use when creating poetry, their talent and skills are quite distinct from us. Their masterful use of metaphor including extension, composition and other fundamental tools helps us appreciate more reality.

The following is the original text of each poem, its corresponding Polish translation[10] and English translation, as well as an analysis of each poem.

写诗是……

写诗是干一件你从来没有干过的活
工具是现成的，你以前都见过
写诗是小儿初见棺木，他不知道
这么笨拙的木头有什么用
女孩子们在大榕树下荡秋千
女人们把毛线缠绕在两膝之间
写诗是你一个人爬上跷跷板
那一端坐着一个看不见的大家伙
写诗是囚犯放风的时间到了
天地一窟窿，烈日当头照
写诗是五岁那年我随我哥哥去抓乌龟
他用一根铁钩从泥洞里掏出了一团蛇
我至今还记得我的尖叫声
写诗是记忆里的尖叫和回忆时的心跳

张执浩

[8] Gibbs, Raymond W. The poetics of mind: Figurative thought, language, and understanding. Cambridge University Press, 1994. p1

[9] Lakoff, George, and Mark Turner. More than cool reason: A field guide to poetic metaphor. University of Chicago press, 2009.

[10] All from the Poetry Collection "Chen, Xianfa, Xie Da, Ya Du, Nan Hai, Yuansheng Li, Yangzhong Tang, An Yan, and Zhihao Zhang. Światła w bursztynie: antologia współczesnej poezji chińskiej. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, 2021."

Pisanie wierszy to…

pisanie wierszy to praca nieużywanymi nigdy narzędziami
narzędziami, które są gotowe i już je widziałeś
pisanie wierszy jest jak dziecko, które po raz pierwszy widzi trumnę i nie wie
do czego służy to pokraczne drewno
dziewczynka huśtająca się na huśtawce pod wielkim figowcem
kobieta nawijająca na kolana włóczkę
pisanie wierszy jest jak kołysanie się na huśtawce
na której na drugim końcu siedzi ktoś niewidzialny
pisanie wierszy to wyjście więźnia na spacerniak
niebo i ziemia jak jaskinie oświetlane palącym słońcem
pisanie wierszy jest jak ja pięcioletni idący ze starszym bratem łapać żółwie
który żelaznym hakiem wygarnął z błotnistej jamy kłębowisko węży
do dziś pamiętam mój przenikliwy krzyk
pisanie wierszy to ostry krzyk w pamięci i łomotanie serca przy wspominaniu

Zhang Zhihao

Writing poetry is ……[11]

Writing poetry is doing something you have never done before
The tools are readily available, you have seen them all before
Writing poetry is a child's first look at a coffin, he does not know
What is the use of such clumsy wood
The girls swing under the banyan tree
The women wrap woolen threads between their knees
Writing poetry is when you climb the seesaw alone
With an invisible big guy sitting on the other end
Writing poetry is the time for prisoners to relax
There is a hole in the sky and the sun is shining brightly
Writing poetry is that I followed my brother to catch turtles when I was five years old
He pulled a snake out of a mud hole with a hook.
I still remember my screams.
Writing poetry is the scream in memory and the heartbeat of recollection

Zhang Zhihao[12]

The title of this poem "Writing poetry is……" is a typical metaphorical strategy. This structure appears six times in the whole poem.

[11]The English version is translated by the author of this article.

[12]A contemporary Chinese poet and writer. He serves as Vice Chairman of the Hubei Writers Association and editor-in-chief of Chinese Poetry (Han Shi). Known for his plain yet profound poetic style, he extracts lyrical depth from everyday life. His acclaimed poetry collection Wildflowers on the Plateau won the 7th Lu Xun Literary Prize (2018). Other notable works include the poetry collection Ancient Kiln and the novel Trying to Reconcile with Life. As an active literary editor, he has significantly influenced modern Chinese poetry through his editorial work at Han Shi.

First, the subject of the poem says "Writing poetry is doing something that you have never done before, the tools are readily available, you have seen them all before". Here shows an ontological metaphor: writing poetry is an activity that can be viewed as a container object in which poets are participants; pens, papers and other stationery are tools. Then we may think the following line would be "you do not know how to use"; however, here the sentence stops, evoking us to think about whether we are able to use these tools or not. Some people may be very talented in writing poetry, and writing poetry is easy for them, while some people may not.

Second, the subject compares writing poetry to a child seeing a coffin for the first time. This sentence ends with "he does not know", which still makes the reader wonder what he does not know? Then the answer is revealed – he does not know "what is the use of such a clumsy piece of wood". In this metaphor, poets are children and poetry is coffin. Writing poetry probably would be useless since it cannot bring much material wealth, but it can bring spiritual comfort, which cannot be understood by a child. Additionally, the wood is personified through the use of the word "clumsy", an adjective commonly used to describe human beings. A coffin is also a mystery, at the same time, it is concerned with irreversibility – a person will stop moving, living, and moreover, he is hidden from the world forever, which is something generally reserved for the world of adults (and wrongly so). Above all, a coffin is an absurd object for a child, because it is extremely hard for a child to understand death. Writing poetry, therefore, can be a mystery, a necessity, the passing of time, a moment, a sign of an inevitable contrast to life. From another perspective, it is yet striving towards a goal, which you may not want to achieve at all.

Next, writing poetry is likened to climbing up on a seesaw – here we may think of the picture of a seesaw being pushed down. But the following line is "with an invisible big guy sitting on the other end", implying that writing poetry is an unknown endeavor and we do not know the results. The seesaw metaphor in the poem can be related to orientational metaphors which are based on the spatial orientation experienced in our physical environment, such as up-down, in-out. The widely known metaphor HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN is hidden here. The seesaw sometimes goes up and sometimes goes down – sometimes we are happy and sometimes we are sad. Our emotion can be reflected in poetry but it is not certain until the poem is finished. In other words, seesaw symbolizes instability since it rarely stops in one place, and writing poetry is a search for stability through instability.

Then, it writes "Writing poetry is the time for prisoners to relax. There is a hole in the sky and the sun is shining brightly." A structural metaphor is included here: Poets are prisoners. The concept of poet is metaphorically structured in terms of the concept of prisoner. Prisoners are imprisoned and have no freedom while poet's heart is also imprisoned, and writing poetry is a way for poets to relax, escaping from imprisonment, and an outlet to release their emotions, just like prisoners leave the prison to relax and see the sun outside, though this kind of freedom is ephemeral. In Chinese culture, the saying "there is a hole in the sky" is usually used to describe abnormal weather or unusual scenes in the sky such as dark clouds, lightning, and thunder, which is related to an ancient Chinese mythology "Nvwa mends the sky".[13] The prisoner remains locked up, but while walking he sees the sun, the sky, he sees a piece of freedom, which

[13]Yang, Lihui, Deming An, Handbook of Chinese mythology, Oxford University Press, USA, 2008, p170

is obviously an absurdity, because freedom cannot be divided and cannot be limited. Therefore, here indicates that writing poetry does not give the poet complete freedom. Nevertheless, writing poetry is like the blazing sun that illuminates and warms up the poet's heart a bit.

Finally, the next metaphor is "writing poetry is that I followed my brother to catch turtles when I was five years old". In addition, the last sentence says "Writing poetry is the scream in memory and the heartbeat of recollection". To be more briefly, these two metaphors both refer to "writing poetry is recollecting memory". China has always been a country dominated by agriculture and most adults today spent their childhood in rural areas. The main place where they played in childhood was in the fields and the activity of catching turtles was a reflection of their childhood. So here the domain of writing poetry is mapped into the domain of recollecting memory. Poetry demonstrates the author's memories. For him, writing poetry is a process of sorting out memory. Moreover, different people have different memories and will write different poems, therefore, memory can be collective, but emotions are mostly hidden in individual, unique memory. Writing poems is an attempt to transpose memory into a poem, which, of course, involves intense emotions that congeal in language.

Overall, this poem contains many metaphors, including structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors to describe the activity of writing poetry via concrete images, however, these repeated attempts to define the act of writing poetry is also a strong signal of a semantic crisis. It is not easy to indicate the best image that encompasses the meaning of the writing process–creating a poem. The characteristic structure of the text (poetic definition), which on the one hand makes it possible to list the features of writing poetry, but on the other hand blurs the boundaries between the individual parts of this description, and the metaphors used to specify the phenomenon become a set of images moving away from each other. Thanks to this, we know that writing is, above all, intimate, but also in no way pragmatic or aimed at a tangible goal. Writing is one activity and an enduring activity at the same time, so it is an enumeration, a stream of words, a set of metaphors, and finally–an attempt to describe what happens to a person in life unannounced. In this way, even readers who have never written poetry are able to experience a little bit of the feeling of writing poetry.

奇怪

多么奇怪的事，我一边做人，一边还在伺候着
自己的文字。多么不可思议
做一个人还要写字。这是糗事
却窃喜暗中藏着一张脸。这也无常，鞋在脚上
脚还在想着另一双鞋。
当我写字，我就是那个多出脚板的人
想起自己就是这人，再读了读
那些被我写下的字，我就偷偷耻笑，铁如何长出了锈
铁反对锈，锈又必然长在铁上
禽与兽是分开的：一个用来飞。另一个必须四脚落地

汤养宗

Dziwne

co za dziwna sprawa, równocześnie jestem człowiekiem i sługą
własnych słów. Jakie to nieprawdopodobne
być człowiekiem i chcieć pisać. To wstyd
ale w głębi duszy lubię chować twarz w mroku. Nieczęsto się zdarza, żeby obuta
stopa marzyła o innej parze butów.
Kiedy piszę, jestem właśnie człowiekiem o wielu podeszwach
myśleć o sobie jestem tym człowiekiem, ponownie odczytuję
zapisane przeze mnie słowa, śmieję się ukradkiem, kiedy żelazo rdzewieje
walczy z rdzą, a rdza musi porastać żelazo
ptaki i zwierzęta to odmienne byty: pierwsze zwykły latać. Drugie muszą czterema nogami stać na ziemi.

Tang Yangzong

Strangeness[14]

What a strange thing, I am being a human being, while still serving
my own words. How incredible
To be a human being, you also need to write. This is an embarrassment
But I secretly rejoice that I have a hidden face. This is also impermanent, the shoes are on my feet
My feet are still thinking about another pair of shoes
When I write, I am the one with the extra feet
Remembering that I am this person, I read it again
I secretly laughed at the words I wrote, how iron has been rusty
Iron opposes rust, and rust will inevitably grows on iron
Birds and beasts are separate: one is to fly. The other must land on four limbs

Tang Yangzong[15]

As a reader, the first time I read the title of this poem *Strangeness,* I cannot help but start to think: What is strange? The first line of the poem is "What a strange thing, I am being a human being, while still serving" – the lack of the object of the verb "serve" provokes readers to ask: Serving what? The second line reveals the answer – Serving his own words[16]. Two lines down, where the verse stops is strange because it is very normal that shoes would be on one's feet. But the next line says "My feet are still thinking about another pair of shoes" which is very unexpected for

[14]The English version is translated by the author of this article.

[15] A contemporary Chinese poet as well. In 1994, he won the second prize of the first "Hundred Flowers Literary Award" of Fujian Province. At the same time, his several works won the "Fujian Province Outstanding Literary Work Award". In August 2018, his work Going to the World (qu renjian) won the Poetry Award of the 7th Lu Xun Literature Award. In 2020, he also won the Achievement Award in the Poetry Category of the 11th Ding Ling Literary Award in China.

[16]There is difference due to translation. In the polish version, the first line of the poem is literally "What a strange thing, I am simultaneously being a human being and a servant", which actually can be a complete sentence and may not trigger readers to think about the following lines.

readers. Then the author writes "When I write, I am the one with the extra feet"[17]. Here includes a metaphor THE POET IS A PERSON WITH EXTRA FEET in the poem. Just like other conceptual metaphors, based on the description of the writer, we can figure out a number of correspondences between the target domain (the poet) and the source domain (a person with extra feet) here:

– The feet are brains.
– The shoes worn on the feet are thoughts.
– The written words are extra feet.

Such correspondences are called "mapping" between two conceptual domains. Therefore, here, for instance, we can speak of the written words (thoughts been expressed) being mapped onto extra feet. The poet deliberately uses this metaphor to indicate that he thinks so much and writing is a way for him to express superfluous thoughts.

In addition, there is also a metonymy in this sentence "But I secretly rejoice that I have a hidden face" which uses "a hidden face" to replace the hidden thoughts. The face can be regarded as a container where expressions and emotions are contained, on the other hand, the face can be seen as the surface on which expressions are shown as well, supported by examples like "He reads Cathy's face".[18] Therefore, the metonymy THE FACE STANDS FOR EMOTIONS is manifested here. Although in fact the person writing the poem would prefer to be even more hidden (his emotion), he still writes the poem to express his feeling to some extent. This also means that writing is a way of camouflage – the expression of the subject is at the same time the hermeticity of the writer.

Then, the author reads the words he wrote and secretly laughed at how iron has been rusty. This verse stops here, making us confused again, what is so funny about iron rusting – Iron opposes rust, and rust will inevitably grow on iron. It is easy to understand it literally, while iron and rust are personified through the use of verbs "oppose" and "grow". There is a paradox: Iron does not want to rust, but rust has to grow on iron. This paradox exists widely in daily life, there are time when we do something that is not our intention, but we have to complete it.

The last line of the poem "Birds and beasts are separate: one is to fly. The other must land on four limbs." This ending seems strange to readers, while echoing the title, but if we look at it from another perspective, it is also related to the above verses: the difference between birds and beasts is also an unchangeable contradiction.

Iron and rust, birds and beasts, these two groups of categories are mapped onto the poet's writing of poems. Iron against rust corresponds to the poet's reluctance to have more feet (not want to think too much), which cannot be controlled and will inevitably happen. Moreover, the poet's thinking and writing must be separated: thinking is like a bird and writing is

[17]In Polish and English there is a similar idiom: "to step into someone else's shoes" and "walking in one's shoes", which means to be in another person's situation, to feel like another person. So maybe this means that the person writing the poem has the ability or need to take on other roles, to see the world as a different person - this is also strange, and certainly not obvious. However, there is no such an expression in Chinese.

[18]Fangfang, Wang. "The metaphorical and metonymical expressions including face and eye in everyday language." (2010).

like a beast. Thoughts can be wild and unconstrained, but writing needs to be realistic, reflecting the orientational metaphor MUNDANE REALITY IS DOWN (as in "down to earth").

In the case of this poem, strangeness is also expressed in the peculiar structure of the poem: we rightly pay attention to the lines whose completion turns out to be non-obvious, we want to complete the thought, and the next line modifies and deforms this thought. In other words, syntagmaticity becomes clear as a way of providing temporary semantic independence of the lines. Infinite (in the syntactic sense) fragments–such as in the first line of the work–require completion from the reader, which in turn exposes the grammatical potential of relational lines. Thanks to this, the topic–writing poetry–gains a textual illustration pointing to the process of non-obvious expression by the subject, which is a multiple creation. From the perspective of content, this poem uses a variety of things (face, shoes, feet, iron, rust, birds and beasts) that may seem unrelated on the surface, but actually writing poem is connected to these images through metaphors. These seemingly strange connections also echo the title of the poem.

不可多得的容器

我书房中的容器
都是空的
几个小钵，以前种过水仙花
有过璀璨片刻
但它们统统被清空了
我在书房不舍昼夜的写作
跟这种空
有什么样关系？
精研眼前事物和那
不可见的恒河水
总是貌似刁钻、晦涩——
难以作答
我的写作和这窗缝中逼过来的
碧云天，有什么样关系？
多数时刻
我一无所系地抵案而眠

陈先发

Rzadko spotykane pojemniki

w moim gabinecie wszystkie pojemniki
są puste
w kilku małych miskach hodowałem kiedyś hiacynty
miały krótki moment splendoru
ale znów wszystkie są puste
w moim gabinecie piszę dniami i nocami
razem z tą pustką
jaki związek istnieje

pomiędzy studiowaniem rzeczy leżących przed oczami i
niewidzialnymi wodami Gangesu
zawsze jakby oszukańczymi i mrocznymi
trudno odpowiedzieć
jaki związek istnieje pomiędzy moim pisaniem a wciskającym się
przez szpary w oknie błękitnym niebem
większość czasu
nie mam nic do roboty i śpię

Chen Xianfa

A Rare Container[19]

The containers in my study
are all empty.
Several small pots, where daffodils have been planted before
They had their glittery moments
But they've all been emptied.
I write around the clock in my study
What does it have to do
with this emptiness?
Focus on what's at hand and
The invisible waters of the Ganges
Always seeming to be tricky, obscure--
Difficult to answer
What does my writing have to do with
that glimpse of blue sky pressing on towards me through the window slit
Most of the time
I have nothing to do with all these things and just lean on the desk to sleep

Chen Xianfa[20]

The title of the poem is Rare Container and the first line of the poem opens with a reference to the container – containers in the study, with the following line revealing the property: they are empty. Next, the containers are more specific – they are several small pots, where daffodils have been planted before. These daffodils "had their glittery moments, but were then all purged". Just like human beings, there are moments of brilliance in life, but eventually we will die. The study itself is also a huge container, which separates the author from outdoor nature. The author writes in the study and ask "How is my relentless writing day

[19]The English version is translated by the author of this article.

[20]A famous contemporary Chinese poet. He is the Chairman of Anhui Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and also the Deputy Director of the Poetry Committee of the Chinese Writers Association. His major works include poetry collections The Heart of Writing a Monument (Xie bei zhi xin), Nine Chapters (Jiu zhang), Selected Poems of Chen Xianfa (Chen Xianfa shixuan), the novel La Hun Tune (La hun qiang), the collection of essays Notes of Heichiba (Heichiba biji) . His works have been translated into English, French, Russian, Spanish, Greek and other languages, and have been selected as literature textbooks in many universities in China and abroad. He has won numerous awards and honors from media and literary research institutions, such as the "October Poetry Award","China's Top Ten Emerging Poets from 1986 to 2006","2008 Chinese Poet of the Year"and etc.

and night related to this emptiness? How is my writing related to that glimpse of blue sky pressing on towards me through the window slit?" Neither the things that are close at hand nor the water of the Ganges River that is far away can answer the author's question. In the end, the author says that he has nothing to do with all these things and just lean on the desk to sleep most of the time.

In the poem, the study room is obviously a container, the small pots are containers, and we are also containers. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), we humans are physical beings – our skin separates us from the outside world, so each human being is a container. There is a clear surface as a boundary that allows us to clearly distinguish between internal and external feelings. Therefore, it is exactly because the metaphor of HUMAN BEINGS ARE CONTAINERS is implanted in our thinking, separating us from the outside world, that the author naturally keeps asking what his relationship is with the outside world.

Moreover, ontological metaphors can be used to understand actions and activities. Writing poem is an activity, which is viewed as a discrete entity and exists in space and time, so it has a well-defined boundary. Therefore, it can be regarded as a container: the participant (the author) is the object, the start and the finish of writing are metaphorical objects. Hence the author can ask the relationship between his writing and the emptiness as well as the blue sky, because he regards his writing as a concrete entity. Containers are also equivalents of categories, i.e. concepts expressed in language by lexical units and later by sentences and texts. Categorizing the world in language is possible thanks to socially agreed meanings that have their own cultural determinants. Poetry is a dynamic attempt at redefinition, such as creating or exploiting unusual containers, which makes it necessary to read the world in a new way and thus to get to know the world. Although here the containers in the office are empty – so maybe writing is not an attempt to describe the world in a new way, but on the contrary - to describe the state of the person who is writing – his unpreparedness, his inability to overcome his own powerlessness.

In the verse "How is my writing related to that glimpse of blue sky pressing on towards me through the window slit?", the use of the verb "press" is metaphorical, to be more specific, it is personification. Personification allows us to comprehend phenomena in human terms that we can understand based on our own experience, and it may be the most obvious ontological metaphors in which we consider something nonhuman as human. Here the blue sky is personified and the metaphor is BLUE SKY IS A PERSON. More precisely, the author thinks of the blue sky as a force trying to squeeze in through the window slit, which can be implied by the use of the verb "press". The blue sky tries to enter the container of the study room through the window, enter the container of the author's writing, and enter the container of the author.

In summary, the activity of writing poetry is seen as a container in this poem, and the poet focus on the relationship between writing and other objects. Besides, multiple containers appear in this poem, some are concrete (the small pots and the study room) and some are metaphorical (the poet himself and his writing). Thus, it can be seen that the Container Metaphor already inherently exists in our cognition.

走得太快的人

走得太快的人
有时会走到自己前面去
他的脸庞会模糊
速度给它掺进了
幻觉和未来的颜色

同样，走得太慢的人
有时会掉到自己身后
他不过是自己的阴影
有裂缝的过去
甚至，是自己一直
试图偷偷扔掉的垃圾

坐在树下的人
也不一定刚好是他自己
有时他坐在自己的左边
有时坐在自己的右边
幸好总的来说
他都坐在自己的附近

李元胜

Człowiek chodzący za szybko

człowiek chodzący za szybko
niekiedy się wyprzedza
jego twarz staje się niewyraźna
prędkość splata w niej
miraże i barwy przyszłości

podobnie człowiek chodzący za wolno
niekiedy zostaje z tyłu
staje się nie tylko swoim cieniem
pękniętą przeszłością
ale nawet śmieciem, którego
zawsze chciał się ukradkiem pozbyć

podobnie siedzący pod drzewem człowiek
również nie zawsze jest sobą
czasami siedzi po swojej lewej
czasami siedzi po swojej prawej
na szczęście zawsze
siedzi blisko siebie

Li Yuansheng

The Man Who Walks Too Fast[21]

The man who walks too fast
Sometimes he goes in front of himself
His face will be blurry
Speed mixed it with
the Color of illusion and the Future

Likewise, the man who walks too slowly
Sometimes falls behind himself
He is just his own shadow
A cracked past
Even, he has been
The trash being tried to throw away secretly

The man sitting beneath a tree
Isn't always exactly himself either
Sometimes he sits to the left of himself
Sometimes he sits to the right of himself
Fortunately, in general
He is always sitting near himself

Li Yuansheng[22]

First, the poem has a fairly regular structure, that is, three stanzas with an almost identical structure. The title is *The Man Who Walks Too Fast,* echoed by the first section –

The man who walks too fast
Sometimes he goes in front of himself

And then as readers, we may wonder what will happen when the man goes in front himself, so here the poet continues writing:

His face will be blurry
Speed mixed it with
the Color of illusion and the Future

There is a similar structure in the second section, on the contrary, the main character is the man who goes too slowly, who sometimes falls behind himself. Moreover, the last section is a person sitting beneath a tree, who sometimes sits to the left of himself, and sometimes sits to the right of himself.

[21]The English version is translated by the author of this article.

[22]A contemporary Chinese poet. He is currently a member of the Poetry Creation Committee of the Chinese Writers Association and vice chairman of Chongqing Writers Association. His poem Scenery (Jing xiang) won the "People's Literature Award" in 2003. In August 2014, his collection of poems Infinite Things (Wu xian shi) won the 6th Lu Xun Literature Award for Poetry.In November 2015, his poem Fate Has Flowers (Ming you fan hua) won the October Literature Award. In addition to poetry, he also writes prose and novels, winning numerous related awards as well.

Here calls upon our implicit knowledge of the structure of the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. In the journey of life, some people walk ahead and some people walk behind. In order to know this metaphor better, knowing a series of correspondence between the two conceptual domains is necessary, such as (in this poem)

– The character (who walks) leading a life is a traveler.
– Progress is the distance traveled.

The traveler in the poem sometimes goes too fast to be in front of himself, which can be understood as that he works very hard and make greater progress than ever expected. And the traveler who goes too slowly could fail to achieve expected progress so he is left behind in the journey of life. A blurred face also means eluding identity – being not oneself.

Additionally, as Lakoff proposes that there is a certain degree of coherence and systematicity in metaphors, the metaphor AHEAD IS GOOD; BEHIND IS BAD is also manifested here. Our eyes usually look forward, and when we want to comfort someone who is sad about something, we always tell them to move forward and forget about that terrible thing behind. Leaving yourself behind also may provoke and encourage you to choose and eliminate "unnecessary", unpleasant memories that do not fit your self-image. On the contrary, we will say "We are looking forward to something" when we want something good. The man who goes too fast are written to be mixed with "the color of illusion and the future" – future is something ahead of us on the journey of life, which is always relevant to good hope.

In contrast, when we read:

He is just his own shadow
A cracked past
Even, he has been
The trash being tried to throw away secretly

Above verses follows the man who walks slowly. As can be seen, all are negative (usually) adjectives and nouns. The metaphor BLACK IS BAD; WHITE IS GOOD is so taken for granted that we instantly regard the "shadow" is not a good description here. "Cracked" is often related to something broken or imperfect, and trash, something nobody wants and to be thrown away, which is also regarded as being bad.

In the last section, another kind of man appears – the man sitting beneath a tree.

Sometimes he sits to the left of himself
Sometimes he sits to the right of himself
Fortunately, in general
He is always sitting near himself

These are interesting verses – he is himself, even though he is sitting next to himself. Maybe it is still a reflection on the phenomenon of the coherence of one's own personality as imagined by the man who is trying to describe this situation. "He is always sitting near himself" can be

comprehended as he is in control of himself. According to the metaphor CONTROL IS UP, which can be indicated in expressions like "He is under my power", and the metaphor UP IS GOOD, we can easily infer CONTROL IS GOOD here. That is why the word "fortunately" is used before.

In a nutshell, a blurred face, leaving oneself behind, getting ahead of events, is consequently a movement that tries to invalidate time. It is someone who becomes his future or past, who does not fit in himself to some extent and does not focus on the present, in other words, he distances himself and therefore as one person, he is not coherent. The last situation is similar, although this time the issue of being next to each other comes to the fore, it is not each other in one category, which reinforces the emphasis placed on individuality.

This whole poem is based on the framework of the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, and orientational metaphors are displayed as well to illustrate the progress on the journey of life. However, words such as "journey" or "life" have never been mentioned from the beginning to the end. it is precisely because of the consistency in our cognitive system that we can understand this poem in a general way. This also confirms that metaphor is not a unique tool only for poets, instead, every ordinary person has universal metaphors in the cognitive system, but the poet expands these metaphors through skillful techniques, giving readers a broader understanding of them.

Summary

Above is the analysis of the four poems. The reason for choosing these four poems is not just that the authors are outstanding, but also because they are connected. The contents of the first three poems all concern with the activity of writing poetry, and all the four poems involve metaphors in everyday use, though not all of them contains evident similes, what they have in common is that there are metaphor-related thoughts hidden under their distinct linguistic expressions. And these metaphors not only show their conventional use in dictionary, but about irregular and novel use in the poems. Structural metaphor, orientational metaphor and ontological metaphor is more or less manifested in each poem.

Another aspect of these four poems in common is that they all more or less involve things related to nature, which is closely relevant to Chinese culture. One of the most important characteristics of Chinese traditional culture is "the unity of nature and man" or "harmony of nature and human being", manifesting in ancient Chinese works such as *Yi Jing* and *Tao Te Ching*.[23] Ancient Chinese philosophers Mengzi and Zhuangzi also had similar views of following nature.[24] It means human activities should conform to the laws of nature which contains rich ecological ethical wisdom. Among the four selected poems, the burning sun in *Writing poem is...*, the birds and beasts in *Strangeness*, the Gangesu river in *A Rare Container*, and the tree in *The man who walks too fast*, although the theme is not about environment protection, all of these natural objects reflect that in the poet's opinion, man and nature cannot be separated.

[23]Li, Dong, and Zhong Hai Qiu. "The Study on Ecological Ethics of "Unity of Man and Nature"." Advanced Materials Research 807 (2013): 906-909.

[24]Perkins, Franklin. "Following nature with mengzi or zhuangzi." International Philosophical Quarterly 45, no. 3 (2005): 327-340.

The analysis of metaphor is not only for these four poems; the same analysis can also be applied to other poems and even other types of texts. Although sometimes different cultures have different understandings of different things as well as different interpretations of different metaphors, human beings, as the same creature, still have some similar thinking patterns, thanks to which this study can proceed smoothly. Moreover, as mentioned before, the analysis involves three different languages, which did not hinder our study. Therefore, this is an effect of this analysis: it proves that metaphor is not only reflected at the linguistic level, but also at the cognitive level.

There are also limitations. First, due to the limitation of the space, although some results can be seen from the analysis of four poems, it will be better if more poems are analyzed in the future, not only Chinese poetry, but also poetry in English, Polish and other languages. Second, this article mainly chooses to use three common metaphor types (structural metaphor, orientational metaphor and ontological metaphor) for analysis, in addition, there are many other metaphor types that can be used for text research and analysis in the future.

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KEYWORDS

conceptual metaphor

self-referential metaphor

Abstract:
This study investigates the use of conceptual metaphors as well as various manifestations of metaphorization in Chinese poetry through a comparative textual analysis of four contemporary Chinese poems and their Polish and English translations. Focusing on self-referential metaphors, where linguistic structures reflect their own metaphorical nature, the paper demonstrates how the structure of the text interacts semantically. Meanwhile, these findings underscore metaphor's role as a cognition-driven phenomenon beyond mere linguistic ornamentation. The study contributes to cognitive poetics by bridging Western metaphor theory (e.g., Conceptual Metaphor Theory) with Chinese literary practices, offering a framework for analyzing self-referentialism in multilingual poetry.

multi-language

CHINESE POETRY

Note on the Author:
Jinlin Li – holds a Master's degree from the University of Sheffield, born in 1996, is currently a doctoral student at the Doctoral School of Languages and Literatures, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. Her research interests and PhD direction focus on metaphor studies in cognitive linguistics and its applications in language teaching, employing textual analysis as the primary methodology. She aims to explore how conceptual metaphors shape linguistic patterns and facilitate second language learning, with potential interdisciplinary connections to cognitive science and pedagogy.

“To reach within oneself as soon as possible”.

A conversation with Grzegorz Wróblewski, an asemic artist

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A conversation about asemic writing, a genre still relatively unknown in Poland, should start with an attempt at defining the phenomenon. What is your understanding of asemic writing as a genre?

Asemic writing is a very popular and diverse field of visual arts, including photography, film (sounds), more traditional forms, works made with ink, acrylics, oil paints, pastels, and so on. I’ve been experimenting with asemic writing for several decades now. When I was very young I became very interested in the Voynich Manuscript. My first paintings, which used to be more figurative, started featuring dashes, symbols… I think this is my way of seeing the world. A kind of perceiving externality and, at the same time, an attempt at reflecting my thoughts in the so-called theory of everything. A struggle to define the physical and mental space around me. Each work is a challenge, a voyage into the unknown.

You repeatedly emphasize the importance of calligraphy in the creation and study of asemic writing, highlighting its Asian variant. Yours is not the sole voice on this issue, because many theorists or artists of the genre also link the foundations of the art of asemic writing with calligraphic writing. How strongly has calligraphy influenced your asemic line?

In one of my essays on asemic writing I wrote the following: "Someone who wanted to take an interest in the subject would have to take up calligraphy immediately. Study its history. Wang Xizhi - the East! But not only that. They would quickly come across specific traces in modern, Western art (Tashism, etc.), they would come across, for example, an artist like Cy Twombly"[1]. Of course, the writing of the East (China, Japan, etc.) was fundamental to me. I made trips to Japan (Tokyo/Kioto/Osaka) to get a closer look at it. I've always been impressed with the ink and the technique of record used there. However, I was concerned with something else; not so much with calligraphic beauty as with deviations from classical rules. Mistakes and slip-ups, deformities, rather than standard technical solutions. For centuries calligraphy stood still - everything was regular, just like word-processed texts of today. Very rarely did classical calligraphy go beyond the information level. Ancient texts were copied in manners which lacked technical originality. That's why classical calligraphy may seem "beautiful" to us nowadays. Meanwhile, we have now reached an era where calligraphic experiments have started mutating, combining with asemic writing, pictograms, etc. Perhaps the fact that calligraphy has become a hybrid discipline is some kind of clue to its salvation and development.

Among the works included in the anthology of asemic works, created by the founding fathers of the genre: Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich (*An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*[2]), one can find a number of aesthetically consistent works. They resemble systematic records created with ink and pen, black or blue being the dominant colours. They are markedly different from your asemics, not only in terms of the manner of record or the type of line, but also in the color used, the degree to which traditional writing has been referenced or in the use of figurative forms. How do you view your work against this background? Where do you see yourself in the pantheon of asemic artists – this difference is, after all, juxtaposed with productivity, accolades and numerous publications.

In 2022, my book of asemic writing *Shanty Town* was published in the US by Post-Asemic Press. I only used waterproof black ink of varying thickness in that publication. And it was not a purely calligraphic thing either; it also featured, for instance, pictographic and geometric elements. The book contains a note by Tim Gaze, who thus discusses my methodology: "*Shanty Town* is an unusual work, full of compositions unlike anything else I've seen. The pages appear to have been made in 2 stages, drawn annotations over handwritten or hand-drawn ideas underneath. The first stage ranges from well-behaved written lines as in a letter, to jerky scribbled fragmentary jottings, to sketchy doodles, young ideas captured at high speed. The second stage uses shapes such as rectangles, circles and lines, which appear to be organizing or explaining the first stage they partly cover. Although rectangles and rectangular frames are widely used, these works are at the loosest end of rectilinearity. Wróblewski uses visual rhetoric in a poetic way".

[1] Grzegorz Wróblewski, Miejsca styku [Places of contact] (Warszawa: Convivo, 2018), 38.

[2] See An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting, ed. by Tim Gaze, Michael Jacobson (New York: Punctum Books, 2013).

In 2022, in Warsaw, I published the book *Polowanie* [*Hunting*] [3]. I will refer to it as "visual poetry". It consists of photos taken with a cellphone camera. One of the parts of this book includes substrates I prepared specifically for the purposes of the publication, and these combine acrylic and ink surfaces, superimposed on one another. I took these photos both in specific daylight and in artificial lighting. Identical motifs will never be repeated (because of the type and intensity of light). They will remain only in *Polowanie*. So here we are dealing with a different technique still, distinct from traditional acrylics or asemic writing made with inks.

You often mention a sense of loneliness, otherness, which is manifested in your prose texts and poetry. You seem to focus on that which is marginalized - both by literature and the literary world – as well as on topics rejected by society, as we can learn from reading *Shanty Town*. Do you feel like the odd man out in your own group?

I don't really belong to any writers' or art group. Many years ago I was a member of the Copenhagen group TOTEM, but this is old history. We used to present art/literature, often in alternative, post-industrial venues. As for my "otherness" among asemic writers, it is expressed by my using a different line, combining it with symbols, some kind of return to times very distant from civilization. I've already mentioned the East or people like Cy Twombly. Among my inspirations were also cave inscriptions/signs, something not entirely explained, an echo of our human past. But the main difference, as far as this great "family" of asemic writing artists is concerned, is certainly my line, calligraphy, and method of recording. I have been working on these for several decades and I think it has become recognizable; I have achieved my own style, different from other artists' projections.

Similarly, in poetry or prose/ essays I am an outlier. In poetry I have moved away from the so-called Mediterranean pseudo-metaphysical poetry. My poems lack fancy metaphors; they are certainly not contemporary poems, encased in ornaments or other lyrical fillers. If anything, they are closer to some variation of Objectivist poetry or minimalism. Polish literary criticism has typically struggled with this. I operate in the literary/artistic underground. Yet another issue is that of geography. For the last forty years I've lived in Copenhagen. I've never decided to create in Dutch, but I wrote my latest book of poetry – *Tatami in Kyoto*[4] – in English.

In your asemic works you rely on figurative forms - this is quite different from the practices of other artists working in this genre. Apart from inscribing asemic text in circles or rectangles, you include in it shapes that resemble, e.g., human heads. This seems to be poignant in the context of concrete and situational titles of your works. Do you use asemic writing as a form of documenting a particular moment?

The majority of my asemics are cycles/series, which include *Short Poem, Asemic note, Kumite, Asemic objects*. Some of my works, though rarely, are unrelated to these cycles. For example, there are no figurative traces in *Short Poem*. Figurativeness is almost non-existent in the remaining cycles too, except for profiles of human faces or geometric forms. Rather, I think that

[3] See Grzegorz Wróblewski, Polowanie, afterword by Dawid Kujawa (Warszawa: Convivo, 2022).

[4] See Grzegorz Wróblewski, Tatami in Kyoto (London: Literary Waves Publishing, 2024).

for a great majority of my asemic works they are a record of moments. Or rather, sequences I had been pondering, but waited for the right time to execute them. This applies both to "purely" calligraphic works, as well as those where the symbol dominates – as a complement or a filler in specific sequences of asemic writing.

The rejection of the word as a unit of expression carries endless potential. Asemic writing seems to offer a respite from constant transmission and acquisition of information. It appears to be the answer to incessant overstimulation. The broken communication here offers a kind of relief. Do you acknowledge the therapeutic potential of this genre?

This is an interesting point because, as I've alreadt mentioned, I make different asemic cycles, so the ways/possibilities of interpreting them may also be different. They can also serve a meditative function, as objects that are not entirely interpretable. Some of these works are regular, so to speak, "calmed down", while others are very expressive, dense. So a lot here depends on the psychological/aesthetic predisposition of the viewer. They can be meditative or disturbing, causing a more violent reaction. Interestingly, we are circling back to the issue of the isolation of my asemic writings - they appear in very different geographical locations, for example, in the US, Italy, and Australia. In Poland, too. Often editors combine them compositionally with my "regular" poetry.

Although you constantly publish in Poland, one gets the impression that your work, especially its asemic part, is not received without problems by Polish critics. You consider the state of Polish criticism and academia not only in this interview but also in your essays. What is your take on the research community in Poland today? And, in the context of current socio-political changes in Poland, do you think there is a hope for a more open and innovative approach in Polish literary and academic circles towards non-obvious works which exceed traditional norms?

Before I turn to asemic writing, let me mention *Nowa Kolonia* [*The New Cologne*[5]] - I wrote the book in Copenhagen in 2002, and in 2003 its Danish translation was published. The publishers here wrote about it, among other things: "*Nowa Kolonia* (Den Ny Koloni) is the latest book by Grzegorz Wróblewski, a Polish writer living in Denmark. It can be described as an experimental novel in the form of a dialogue. Wróblewski is undoubtedly an heir to the dark, existential work of Beckett and Kafka. Yet the book is unlike anything we may have encountered so far." Niels Henrik Svarre Nielsen, the late influential Danish writer and critic, pointed out something peculiar: "If Beckett, Ionesco or Karen Blixen had not written in the major European languages and debuted here in Denmark, probably no one would have noticed. Their books, without a "proper" discussion, which mainly consisted of genre classification, and establishing their traditional and generational context, would have remained "closed books." A current example of such a book may be Gregory Wroblewski's *Nowa Kolonia*. The book represents a hitherto unprecedented phenomenon." It was published in Poland as late as 2007. I called it a treatise on identity. Polish publishers were baffled, no one wanted to print it. In fact, it was not really a subject of discussions in the country. One of the few pronouncements about it was Henryk

[5] See Grzegorz Wróblewski, Nowa Kolonia, afterword by Paweł Stangret (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Forma, 2007).

Bereza's text in "Pogranicza" ["Borderlands"] [6]. It also had a great theatrical potential, since it was written in dialogue form. Paradoxically, the book was first published in a Danish translation, which made its way to libraries, but I had to wait so long for the original (Polish) version...

And here comes a segue to my activities with asemic registers. If I painted in the style of, for example, Duda-Gracz, Maśluszczak or Beksiński, my work would be known to a wider audience and exhibited in contemporary art museums. My works have been shown in Poland in various interesting places, including the Museum of Literature in Warsaw, BWA in Katowice, Günter Grass Gallery in Gdansk, etc. So there was some visual activity there. Of course, a lot has changed in Poland, but tradition has remained tradition, so I have decided that any "struggle" is pointless. Sometimes my asemic writing works do appear in Polish magazines, both printed and online. This is probably because the editors try to prove that their publication is original or progressive, etc.

It is hard for me to talk about Polish academic community in the context of my literary or artistic activities. That community has rarely commented on my works and my books/exhibitions have generally been ignored. There are probably several reasons for this. I left Poland permanently in 1985 and have lived in Copenhagen for almost forty years (with streaks in New York, London, etc.). So, I have become someone foreign and exotic. In addition, asemics, which I have been working on for years may, in its calligraphic variety, be too hermetic, too different for most audiences. Too mysterious or cave-like. The critics/academia are not equipped for this, they do not have the appropriate research tools, foundations. I don't know if current political changes will make any difference here. Importantly, my work has always been interdisciplinary. Visual arts, collaboration with musicians, poetry, drama, essays. So, it wasn't easy to grasp all of it, to see the entirety, the idea and connections. Poetry experts had no idea what to do with my asemics or mixed media compositions, and visual art experts were non-responsive to literary creations. The result was the proverbial black hole. Isolation. Of course, there have also been interesting reviews, for example by Anna Kałuża; there are also interesting impressions-afterwords in some of my books, for example by Dawid Kujawa, but these are exceptions. Surely, nowadays internet connectivity does away with boundaries; many progressive magazines are published online and offer unlimited access. This is always a huge opportunity for innovative research ideas to emerge. And one must believe that this is exactly what will happen.

What, then, is the significance of the category of space for your work? Asemic writing seems to be a genre that could not exist without it - asemic records are in constant interaction with it, influencing each other. You live outside Poland, you publish in various places around the world, and draw inspiration from different spaces - how do these experiences influence your writing and perception of the world? Are they as central to your creativity as they are to your everyday life?

This is an interesting issue, bordering on psychology or anthropology. The study of the possibility for a separate consciousness-self-soul, the existence of something beyond the neural connections, and our bioreceptors. This is a question about the possibility of the existence of some-

[6] Henryk Bereza, „Potencjalność", Pogranicza 6 (2007): 85–87.

thing non-proteinous within us. A search for oneself. I will try to explain this on the example of a number of my asemic writing works. In the case of traditional activities (it doesn't matter whether we mean abstract, avant-garde solutions or figurative, more formally traditional ones) one selects an appropriate technique, surface, paints (acrylics, oils, pastels, watercolors, inks, etc.); there is a so-called idea, a plan of action. Even if it is the technique of automatic creation (action painting), a collage, or a sketch. The idea/vision/feeling/uncertainty is transferred either quickly or in a prolonged action to paper, canvas, wood, etc. It always happens in a time-sensitive episodes of sorts. Our brain, brushstrokes (or any other way of applying material), revisions, corrections or deliberately unfinished motifs. It takes seconds, minutes, hours or years. The original idea undergoes bigger or smaller changes. There is a "falsification" of the idea. In asemic writing I tried to reach within myself as quickly as possible. To grasp the effect of pure thought. A human wave. To shorten the time in which a particular record is created In a manner of speaking, to x-ray consciousness, if such phenomenon exists at all. This is particularly visible in the series of works entitled *Short Poem*, but also in my other asemic series.

Of course, the surrounding space must affect the expression, the proportions of the symbols, their intensity or subtlety, the disappearance of density. This is the mystery of life, that famous existentialism of ours. Although I've been involved in art/literature for several decades, I'm still in the experimental phase, in search for myself. Externality is always essential. The human (or non-human) beings surrounding us, their radiation, the way they communicate. Colours, type of food, physical and mental condition. Islanders communicate differently from those living on the mainland. Earth's temperature, topography. Nature and urban solutions. The noise and melody of the world. The sun, the moon, the stars, the fog. The register in art and literature is dependent on all of these. The influence of externality on our interiors. We don't know how they are shaped, but we study these relationships all the time. We dream of some common code. My asemic writing, mixed media works, and poetry are an attempt to find the mystery of human existence. To confirm the absurdity or some sense of life unfamiliar to me. The diversity of space, learning about other cultures, varieties of art, and literature can be extremely helpful in this search process, or can confirm the assumption that we are not a very special variety of a destructive mammal, creatures lost somewhere in the back alley of the Milky Way. We are something random and unnecessary, and religious schools, the dream of the soul and its immortality are a mere misunderstanding and hallucination. I was helped a lot by visits to places like Kyoto. I am close to some of the Eastern schools of thought. To its calligraphy and aesthetics in general. But I remain in the research phase; I don't know what my next work of asemic writing will look like.

Asemic creativity could become a bridge for people who have difficulty expressing their emotions verbally, allowing them to communicate with the outside world. For you, on the other hand, it is a form of deepening contact with your own self. Does this mean that in the seemingly chaotic asemic forms you find a certain rhythm that not only soothes emotions, but also allows you to express them more deeply?

These are psychological situations. Our genre is both simplicity and great mystery. I was fortunate to leave Poland at a young age. I was able to see the visual works of people like Alechinsky and Jorn in Denmark. I found them very relatable. I met great Danish artists. They quickly enrolled me in their various activities. As I mentioned, I participated in the enterprises of the

art group TOTEM, which included Viktor Hall, Flemming Gebauer, Torben Dalhoff, among others - most of them have already passed away. My activities, poetic/visual effects were natural, developmental for them; something that would never have been possible in Poland at the time. Here, a different cultural space proved to be, in a sense, my deliverance. But it also had its consequences. I was suddenly someone from nowhere, a free and independent citizen of planet Earth. I don't like pomposity, but I felt like an entirely uprooted individual.

My asemic works were created on a regular basis, for example as paintings on canvases, but mostly "in action", on scraps of paper, in notebooks, and so on. It always seemed to me that they were not quite asemic in nature. After years, I developed my line, my own manner of record. Sometimes it was ascetic, often pictographic. I knew what I wanted to say specifically and who my audiences were. Let me point out that I am not a huge fan or a supporter of asemic writing. Most of the artists in this movement (type?) use writing/symbols as a mere ornament and I have nothing to do with that. You can easily spot it, all those round letters, additions. Like they serve the purpose of loosening surreal "flaming giraffes" by adding a few childish letters or other incomprehensible triangles/squares.

Yet again, psychological stories, the search for the so-called self, artifacts, anthropology. Our perception of self and externality. The distant past and reality. Biology. Zen. Individual obsessions, convictions. A personal history of each human individual in turn. My asemic writing has been published for years in many parts of the world, including Polish magazines. It would be good if hundreds of these asemic objects were better described and, above all, shown at some major exhibition. This is a big challenge, however. You would need specialists on the very format of such an exhibit, bookbinders, researchers, mentors, and curators. I work on the fringes of the periphery. For some, these are meditative, soothing registers. Quite a few followers of figurative art do not accept it at all. So, we are dealing with multiple receptions. With the understanding and nature of concentration or expressive intellectual "pacing". It is some kind of a niche in the ocean of art and human thinking. I never meant to imply anything. Just like in objectivist poetry. These are my signals to my sisters and brothers on our lonely Earth. I was interested in Andrzej Bursa, and a little less, or maybe not at all, in Herbert. It is necessary to search, to try to survive. At least for a few seasons. For how many years is a person active? Fifty? Eighty? Ninety? If counted in "seasons," dozens at best. So, I've managed to survive here for a while and record my earthly sojourn through the asemic signal, among other things.

As a visual artist and writer who explores a variety of literary forms and genres, do you see among them any one in which you feel most at home? What are the challenges and limitations of expressing yourself in so many fields? Your art seems very coherent, but perhaps this is just a matter of our perception. What do you make of this coherence in the context of your diverse oeuvre?

I think this is a good recognition. I was not able to explain everything through visual arts, or through so-called regular records. Among other things, I published two books of sketches/essays – *Miejsca styku* [*Places of Contact*][7], and, more recently, *Spartakus* [*Spartacus*]. Maybe

[7] See Wróblewski, Miejsca styku.

they have some explanatory power. It was also important for me to work with a whole range of artists from all over the globe. This was also greatly stimulating and inspirational. I think this is definitely the entirety of my research life on Earth. I wanted the literary and visual elements to complement each other. I haven't created a so-called theory of everything, I've always tried to get to the mystery of the matter and perhaps something beyond it. To that end I needed a formal extension. That is why this is broken up, so to speak, into formally diverse statements, actions. One needs to study my training ground more carefully, and it may suddenly turn out to be a consistent and coherent projection.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

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KEYWORDS

Abstract:
A conversation about asemic writing with the leading Polish artist of this genre, Grzegorz Wróblewski. Wróblewski discusses his inspirations and motivations that led him to choose asemic writing as his form of expression. The artist, who has developed his own recognizable style, muses on the genre's reception, its growing international popularity and the problem of discussing and researching this underdeveloped genre in Poland. He does so against the background of his own experiences with publication and reception. His thoughts on asemic writing and art in general allow for a better understanding of the work of this multidisciplinary artist.

asemic writing

AVANT-GARDE

Note on the Author:
Grzegorz Wróblewski (born 1962) - Polish multidisciplinary émigré artist (from Copenhagen). He creates both poetry (volumes such as Ra [2023], Cukinie [Zucchini] [2021], Kosmonauci [Cosmonauts] [2015]), and prose (e.g., Copenhagen [2000], Gender [2013]), including essays (e.g., Miejsca styku [2018], Spartakus [2024]), dramas (e.g., Lodówka [The Fridge] [2010], Przesilenie [Solstice] [2001]). He is also an active painter and musician. He has been creating asemic writing for years, and is one of the leading founders of this genre. He has published in Poland, the United States, Germany, the Czech Republic, Nepal, Norway, the United Kingdom, and India.

Asemic writing

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Defining a genre as open and unrestricted as asemic writing is indeed difficult. Asemic writing does not employ conventional semantics or grammar, which means that a clear meaning or function cannot be assigned to it. It is an art form that relies on places of indeterminacy, creating a space that extends beyond the known and the familiar – beyond the system of conventions and cultural symbols. It is a type of writing that merges visual art and literature, and as such, as a hybrid form, eludes both literary and artistic categorizations. It rejects the logocentric form of writing, focusing on the exploration of what lies beyond words. It explores space, focusing on movement and gesture and not on communication.

The beginning and sources – An independent response to a crisis

In the 1990s, it became clear that a crisis of handwriting was imminent. At this time of impending crisis, many artists noticed that the potential of the "typed" was limited and discovered the potential of the handwritten. The connection between the writing subject and the text weakened or at least became more mediated. Maria Konnikova speaks of an intimate bond that is forged during handwriting: the artist is focused and thus more present in the moment.[1] Writing, Konnikova explains, is an extension of human thought, its materialized version. For the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser, "writing is about setting ideas in lines, for un-

[1] Maria Konnikova, "What's Lost as Handwriting Fades", The New York Times, 2014.

written ideas, left to their own devices, run in circles."[2] Writing, according to Flusser, begins when thoughts begin to overlap, churn, and therefore need to be organized and released. The resulting form is for him a translation of chaos – the deformed shape of thought – into a line. The process which begins with racing thoughts and ends with systematic notation should bring relief. At the same time, Flusser's theory indicates that there is so much more to handwriting. It is a record of the writer's cognitive process, character, movement, and behavior. Small factors such as the size of the letters, their arrangement on the page, the characters, the presence of errors, accidental ink marks, or deletions – all these minor features of handwriting influence reception. Handwritten texts seem natural, alive, and imperfect, and therefore human. In contrast, typed texts appear to be cleansed of all human interference. They are too perfect, too uniform – the relationship between the writer and the text is blurred. They thus seem neutral.

In response to the lost potential of handwriting, a new genre has emerged that combines visual art and poetry. This unusual art form significantly expanded both categories, allowing for the creation of new textual and visual structures and the reexamination of the creation process and the creator. In 1997, the visual poets Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich coined the term asemic writing, defined as the art of quasi-calligraphic gestures. The genre did not develop as a formal movement, preceded by a manifesto and the formation of an artistic group. Many artists worked independently, inspiring each other with their works along the way. Early asemic works drew from well-known avant-garde traditions, which also combined word and image, such as Dadaism, Lettrism, and concrete poetry. The editors of the first anthology of asemic works also identified another source of inspiration – Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Arabic calligraphy – explaining that "Western people are often unfamiliar with the fact that the term calligraphy, which literally means 'beautiful writing,' can also be applied to wild, noisy examples of handwriting."[3] The Polish asemic poet Grzegorz Wróblewski also points out that calligraphy is the most important source of inspiration for asemic writing: "Anyone who would like to take an interest in the subject would have to immediately take up calligraphy. Research its history. Wang Xizhi… The East! But not only that […]."[4] Wróblewski explains that one cannot study asemic writing without examining the sources and meanings of calligraphy. The inspirations and sources that this art form draws on have one thing in common – they all use letters. Combined with a meaningful arrangement, they create a unique artistic effect.

Between signs and gestures: The ontology and aesthetics of asemic writing

The innovative potential of this genre lies in the relations between the sign and the space. Asemic works of art also question the word as a carrier of meaning and reject the established cultural understandings of reading and interpretation. Asemic writing is literally "meaning-

[2] Vilém Flusser, Does Writing Have a Future?, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 6.

[3] An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting, ed. Tim Gaze, Michael Jacobson (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 5–6.

[4] Grzegorz Wróblewski, "Asemic writing?", Biblioteka. Magazyn Literacki, 8 Dec. 2014, online: https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/cykle/asemic-writing/.

less writing." It does not use culturally established symbols, such as letters or numbers. Signs which appear in an asemic work of art differ from the conventional letters of the alphabet. They often have little to do with reading, understood as searching for and interpreting information. Jacques Derrida used the adjective "asemic" to refer to blanks between words. The term "asemic" also refers to the medical condition of asemia, which describes patients who are unable to use or understand signs or symbols. In one of his letters to Gaze, Leftwich states, "an asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning."[5] An asemic work of art gives rise to a unique, ephemeral, system of signs, or more broadly, gestures, which is idiosyncratic of a given piece and artist. These unique systems usually do not contain decipherable letters, words, or sentences. The meaning of an asemic work of art remains unclear, shrouded in mystery. The recipient thus feels as if they were entering the artist's intimate writing space – this strengthens the sense of an immanent bond between the author and the text.

Handwriting allows the artist to play with the form. The author feels free; they are not limited by any rules. Handwriting endows texts with lightness and flexibility. It is seen as the embodiment of thought and also marks the author's position in the world in an innovative manner. This genre of visual poetry also seems to embody the concepts of new materialism. The return to matter, the study of its agency, resonates with how the materiality of writing is explored in asemic writing. Writing is no longer meticulous, purposeful, aimed at revealing or conveying some truth or information. Many literary scholars who were not directly involved with asemic writing had noted that writing is a form of drawing human thoughts. Roman Ingarden in his phenomenological theory of art argued that when the reader first engages with a text, they must find a way to make sense of it. When the reader tries to make sense of the written page which at first seems to be covered with incomprehensible drawings, they enter into cognition of a work, Ingarden writes, and then make their way through the structures of the text:

> At the beginning of our reading, we find ourselves confronted with a book, a volume in the real world consisting of a collection of pages covered with written or printed signs. Thus the first thing we experience is the visual perception of these "signs." However, as soon as we "see" printed signs and not drawings, we perform something more than, or rather something different from, a mere visual perception.[6]

This approach significantly expands the boundaries of handwriting – drawing is an art, not a form of recording information. Tim Ingold also commented on drawn signs and the differences he noticed between the drawn and the written:

> First, writing is a notation; drawing is not. Secondly, drawing is an art; writing is not. Thirdly, writing is a technology; drawing is not. Fourthly, writing is linear; drawing is not. None of these distinctions, as it turns out, is entirely trustworthy. Writing is still drawing. But it is the special case of drawing in which what is drawn comprises the elements of a notation.[7]

[5] Peter Schwenger, Asemic. The Art of Writing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 108.

[6] Roman Ingarden, The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art, trans. R. A. Crowley & K. R. Olson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 19.

[7] Tim Ingold, Lines: A Brief History (New York: Routledge, 2007), 120–122.

Asemic writing as drawing signs, and not notation, evokes associations with a child's attempts to imitate adult writing. Gaze, speaking of writing, refers to childhood memories – a child who is learning to write almost always begins by drawing "pretend" letters. Children's pseudo-writing is a record of their uncoordinated hand movements and corrections. It is extremely important to also notice movement in asemic texts, to look at the work as a living organism co-existing with the author at the moment of its creation, and not to limit it only to the final version, because the entire creative process is asemic. Steven Skaggs in his article "The highly semic processes of asemic writing"[8] points out how important all that extends beyond the finished product is. He believes that "[w]riting is never truly asemic, but the increasing popularity of artworks labeled as asemic writing help us to become aware of the semiotic functions of the non-verbal aspects of scripts, typography, calligraphy and other graphical written forms."[9] To bring handwriting to life, the mind must be slowed down so that it focuses on finding specific information as quickly as possible. In contact with the text, the reader should focus on their sensory reactions, sensually following the trace of the author's hand. Although this movement often makes the work overwhelming to the recipient, that is the intended effect. It is like Borges' Library of Babel where chaos, confusion, and excess are used deliberately, and overstimulation is intentional.

The discussion of handwriting in the context of asemic works emphasizes that the work is inseparable from the artist. A field of psychology called graphology posits the same. Similarly to the graphologist, the artist sees the handwritten as a personal "signature," an expression of their individual features. In both cases, the focus is on the act of handwriting, on the contact between the "I," individual expression, and corporeality. Thus, in asemic works one can see what has been erased in the schematic alphabet, that is, the expressiveness of the act of writing itself. Expression allows for the release of emotions; it distracts attention from rules and patterns. All this makes asemic writing more and more popular among psychologists. Christine N. Winston, Hemali Maher, and Nazneen Mogrelia, scholars at the Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College, Chennai, India, tested the therapeutic dimension of asemic writing among alexithymic-schizophrenic adults who have problems with communication, expressing emotions, and identifying their emotional states. The scientists formulated the following conclusion: "Asemic writing, similar to other expressive strategies, can be a beneficial technique in facilitating emotional expression because, unlike semantic writing, it does not place cognitive demands on the writer or warrant language skills."[10] Expressing oneself through asemic writing helped the subjects understand their affective experiences.

Although it uses abstract language, asemic art aims to communicate without boundaries. Every asemic reader can freely react to asemic art and is not limited in their interpretations. Still, this does not mean that engaging with asemic art is easy. Asemic works of art, despite their open and fluid form, require the recipient to be attentive and open-minded. At the same time, one must maintain distance and be sensitive to what is small and what is big. Perhaps, to penetrate through the successive layers of these works, one should, as Ingarden argued,

[8] Steven Skaggs, "The highly semic processes of asemic writing", Cognitio 2 (2020): 335–349.

[9] Skaggs, 348.

[10] Christine N. Winston, Nazneen Mogrelia, "The Therapeutic Value of Asemic Writing: A Qualitative Exploration", Journal of Creativity in Mental Health 11 (2016).

find a place in the text that will allow one to enter into cognition. In the process of understanding or engaging with such asemic works one should not look for familiar symbols. The point is not to decipher, read, or identify a referent: "reading asemic texts means resisting the power of words, the voices in our heads that constantly translate what we experience into words."[11] There is no code with which the reader can decipher the content. In *Asemic: The art of writing*, Peter Schwenger argues that not having that code with which one can decipher the text is a source of joy. He quotes the American visual artist Timothy Ely, for whom the symbols he draws/writes stand in a direct reaction to his cognitive process:

> Language doesn't have to be verbal or visual. It can be a sensation, it can be in the form of signals. My marks depart from meaning but they're not meaningless. They just have a different internal matrix. They don't necessarily correspond to a sound or a picture. Sometimes the marks are assigned to an emotional color or to a musical note. They are navigational. There is certainly a lot of background noise in these marks [...].[12]

Asemic writing gives rise to almost or openly anarchist works, which negate the power of language and writing. Asemic writing redirects the attention of the recipient from the laborious process of decoding to other ways of engaging with the work, such as movement or that which is visible at first glance. The recipient should engage with the entire complex creative process. Asemic writing is an infinite genre. As the horizons of the authors and recipients broaden so does asemic writing. It constantly explores new forms of expression.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[11]Schwenger, 146.

[12]Timothy C. Ely, "Access to a Book That Won't Open. Interview by Steve Clay", in: Timothy C. Ely, The Flight into Egypt: Binding the Book (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995).

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KEYWORDS

visual poetry

CALLIGRAPHY

materiality of writing

Abstract:
Asemic writing is an art form that combines visual and poetic elements to create new textual and visual structures. The genre has been developed independently by many artists, drawing inspiration from the avant-garde, Dadaism, Lettrism, concrete poetry, and calligraphy. It challenges the traditional understanding of writing as a carrier of meaning, rejecting culturally established symbols such as letters and numbers. Instead, artists create unique systems of signs and gestures that are specific to a given work and individual. This art form is independent of content, emphasizing the role of the creative process, expression, and the materiality of writing. Asemic works embrace randomness, errors, and unique features of handwriting. Asemic writing is constantly growing as a genre. It continues to explore new forms of expression, ways of interacting with the recipient, and emotional development. Asemic writing experiments with form and content, crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries.

handwriting

asemic writing

DECONSTRUCTION OF WRITING

Note on the Author:
Olga Wyszyńska – student of Polish Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, majoring in curating literature. Her research interest includes contemporary literary theory and literature. Recently, she has focused on ecocritical research. She is an avid reader of Polish literature devoted to the broadly defined margins, social marginalization, and exclusion. President of the Engaged Literary Circle "Dialog" [Dialogue]. She is a beneficiary of the ID-UB 128 grant and the PI of the ID-UB 134 grant where she examines asemic writing, among others, in the works of Grzegorz Wróblewski.

Polemika Krytycznoliteracka w Polsce series. Between case study and history of literature

Agata Stankowska

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The history of the art of the written word unfolds across various layers and dimensions – this much is evident. One of the most vital domains within the historical-literary process, and more broadly, within the continuous renewal of artistic writing and cultural traditions, is the field of (critical) literary polemics. It is therefore surprising that many debates concerning the form and development of literaturę – despite their crucial role in shaping aesthetic sensibilities and the worldview of successive eras – have not been thoroughly documented or meticulously reconstructed. National literary histories often remain silent on these disputes or mention only the most renowned ones. The traces of other (no less important) polemics are frequently scattered across periodicals, many of which are now difficult to access. On occasion, polemical essays by particular authors are reprinted in collected editions of their works. Yet in such cases, these texts often persist outside of their original context, detached from the critical-literary constellation in which they first appeared, and are stripped of their dialogical and intertextual nature.

In 2008, Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk [Poznań Society of Friends of Learning Publishing House] launched a monograph series titled *Polemika Krytycznoliteracka w Polsce* [Critical Literary Polemics in Poland], conceived and academically edited by Sylwia Panek. The aim of the series is to present the disputes that have animated Polish literary life from the Enlightenment (when the phenomenon of critical literary polemics first emerged in Poland), up to the present day, including the most recent confrontations over representations of the Holocaust as both the culmination and distortion of modern ideals. The project was designed to collect, edit, and critically process primary sources, resulting in the publication of a series of monographic volumes dedicated to individual polemics. The outcome is a unique collection of corpora, never before reconstructed in this form, comprising the texts involved in these debates, offering readers the opportunity to trace the dialogical nature of the contributions that constitute each controversy.

Each of the monographs (of which thirty-six have been published to date) opens with an extensive introductory essay, in which scholars describe and contextualize the (critical) literary dispute that is being reconstructed, situating it within a broader cultural framework. The second part of each volume consists of an anthology of primary texts that illustrate the course and dramatic structure of the debate, accompanied by detailed bibliographic footnotes as well as textual and cultural commentary. Significantly, the monographs collectively form a hypothetical "grand narrative" (which may, of course, be further specified through additional case studies of individual disputes or constellations thereof) charting the history of critical literary polemics in Poland. As such, they contribute to a broader account of one of the key dimensions of Polish literary and cultural life. This narrative includes links reaching back to the eighteenth century and spans the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries, thus encompassing a substantial portion of the history of Polish literature.

The diverse concepts, aesthetic and social issues, poetics, and cultural institutions that have been the subject of contention at various moments in the history of artistic writing, together shape the conceptual vocabulary of Polish literature and literary life. This vocabulary finds its primary site of evocation, hermeneutic meaning, and gloss in literary texts, but also (particularly in the sphere of constructing literary consciousness) in critical writings: manifestos, reviews, and various forms of paratextual artistic commentary. It is worthwhile to examine these latter texts through the lens of historical variability, uncovering in individual statements traces of active participation in a broader cultural dialogue. A dialogue that, while initially unfolding in a locally defined space, reveals itself – through successive polemics that revisit old disputes in new historical, social, political, and aesthetic contexts – as part of a longue durée, in the sense articulated by Fernand Braudel[1].

The history of literature is not merely the history of literary texts; it is also the history of critical and literary disputes and debates, in which – following Dilthey – meanings and interpretations of literary works are forged, and where evolving aesthetics, poetological projects, stylistic developments, and tensions crystallize. It can be confidently asserted that literary polemics constitute one of the most vital arenas for articulating and shaping literary consciousness and, more broadly, cultural awareness. They represent a key domain in the enduring intellectual engagement with the form and function of literature and national culture. Without a thorough understanding of these debates, any portrait of the literary and artistic traditions of individual nations and imagined communities remains inevitably incomplete.

Even a cursory review of the thematic scope of the individual volumes in the presented series reveals the richness of issues that have shaped literary life in Poland from the eighteenth century through the twenty-first. The subjects of the respective volumes (listed here in chronological order, reflecting the historical and literary sequence) simultaneously serve to introduce the titles of successive monographs: *Polemika wokół* Pułtawy i Jagiellonidy, *czyli oświeceniowy spór o kształt eposu*" [**The Polemic around** Jagiellonida **and** Pułtawa**: Enlightenment Controversy on The Nature of The Epic Genre**], *Spory o sonet we wczesnoromantycznej krytyce literackiej* [**The Polemic Over the Sonnet in Polish Early Romantic Literary Criticism**], *Romantyczne zmagania z przeszłością. Brodziński – Śniadecki – Mochnacki* [**The Romantics and Their Polemic with the**

[1] See Fernand Braudel, Historia i trwanie [History and the Longue Durée], translated into Polish by Bronisław Geremek (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1971), 288 pp.

Past. Brodziński – Śniadecki – Mochnacki], *Spory wokół* Romantyzmu i jego skutków *Franciszka Krupińskiego* [**The Polemic over Franciszek Krupiński's** Romanticism and Its Consequences], *Pozytywistyczny spór o „estetykę «zdrowego rozsądku»* [**The Aesthetics of "Common Sense"?**], Pan Tadeusz *po angielsku. Spory wokół wydania i przekładu*" [**Sir Thaddeus in English. The Polemic around Publication and Translation**], *Spór o* Wyzwolenie *w roku 1903*" [**The Polemic over Wyspiański's** Wyzwolenie **in 1903**], *Spór o przyszłość literatury polskiej, czyli polemiki ze Stefanem Żeromskim po jego odczycie pt.* Literatura a życie polskie [**A dispute over the future of Polish literature, that is, polemics with Stefan Żeromski after his article** Literatura a życie polskie**]**, *Spór o nowy «dramat narodowy». Jeden wątek dyskusji o* Rachunkach *J.I. Kraszewskiego* [**The Polemic Over a New 'National Drama'. One Thread of Discussion on J.I. Kraszewski's** Rachunki], *Artysta, sztuka i społeczeństwo. Spory i polemiki wokół* Confiteor *Stanisława Przybyszewskiego* [**Artist, Art and Society: The Brouhaha around Przybyszewski's** Confiteor], *Brzozowski* contra *Miriam. Spór jednostronny* [**Brzozowski** Versus **Miriam. A One-Sided Polemic]**, *Między idealizmem i naturalizmem. Jana Gnatowskiego i Józefa Kotarbińskiego dyskusja o modelu literatury i krytyki nowoczesnej* [**Between Idealism and Naturalism. Jan Gnatowski and Józef Kotarbiński – a Polemic On the Model of Literature and Contemporary Literary Criticism**], *Młodopolski spór o Sienkiewicza. Kampania oskarżycielska Stanisława Brzozowskiego oraz reakcje adherentów Litwosa* [**The Młodopolska Polemic Over Sienkiewicz. The** Głos **Campaign of Accusations and Reaction of Those Championing Litwos**], *Spór o Polską Akademię Literatury* [**The Polemic Over the Polish Academy of Literature**], *Wpływologia. Międzywojenne dyskusje wokół* Pana Tadeusza *i futuryzmu jako elementy sporu o wpływy, zależności i plagiaty* [**Literary Swayness. Interwar Discussions on** Sir Thaddeus **and Futurism – a Polemic Over Imitaton, Reliance and Plagiarism**], *Irzykowski wobec futurystów* [**Irzykowski contra the Futurists**], *Spór o «niezrozumialstwo» w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*" [**The Interbellum Polemic Over "Dysunderstandableness"**], *Wacław Borowy* versus *Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki. Spór o racje rozwoju literatury polskiej*" [**Wacław Borowy and Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki. The Polemic Over Polish Literature**], *Spór o* Granicę *Zofii Nałkowskiej* [**The Polemic Over Zofia Nałkowska's** Granica], *Między «blaskiem duchowej prawdy» a «sprawami państwa współczesnego». Spór o «czystą poezję»* [**Between 'The Aureola of Spiritual Truth' and 'Matters of a Contemporary State': The Polemic Over 'Unsullied Poetry' (1938/1939)**], *Światopogląd metafory. Spory o przenośnię w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym* [**The Worldview of Metaphor. The Polemic on the Figurative in the Interwar Period**], *Spór o Conrada w Polsce (1945–48)* [**The Polemic Over Conrad: 1945–1948**], *Spór o realizm 1945–1948* [**The Polemic over Realism, 1945–1948**], *Uchwały Związku Pisarzy Polskich na Obczyźnie – stosunek emigracji do kraju* [**Resolutions of the Polish Writers Association in Exile – Emigre's Attitudes to Poland**], *«Powinna być nieufnością». Nowofalowy spór o poezję* [**'Distrust Should Be Its Mission'. The New Wave Polemic Over Poetry**], *My i Wy? Spór o kształt poezji pomiędzy pokoleniem 68 i pokoleniami wcześniejszymi* [**Us and Them? The Polemic Over the Nature of Poetry Between the Generation of '68 and Earlier Generations**], *Spory o powieść w dyskusjach krytycznoliterackich drugiej emigracji niepodległościowej* [**Literary Polemics On the Novel – Second Migration Over Independence**], *Spór o Borowskiego* [**The Polemic Over Borowski**], *Relacja i reakcja, czyli spór o* Kamienie na szaniec *Aleksandra Kamińskiego* [**The Polemic Over Aleksander Kamiński's** Kamienie na szaniec], *Powieściowe obrachunki. Spory wokół rewolucji artystycznej w prozie lat 70. i 80. XX wieku* [**The Thrusts of the Pen. The Polemic over the Artistic Revolution in 1970s and 1980s Polish Prose**], *Barbarzyńcy, klasycyści i inni. Spory o młodą poezję w latach 90.* [**Barbarians, Classicists and Others. Polemics on New Generation Poets in the 1990's**].

Much could be written about each of these polemics. I do not have the space here to discuss them in detail – the authors of the individual monographs have provided extensive scholarly introductions to the anthologized sections in which they do just that. I would merely like to emphasize that the debates listed constitute a series of (incomplete yet representative) "peaks" of cultural dialogue conducted by participants in literary life across different eras – dialogue concerning not only the aesthetic shape of Polish literature, but also its role in socio-political life and the historical condition of both the nation and the individual. These literary-critical disputes naturally varied in scope and significance. Yet both the major and already partly examined debates – such as the classic conflict between the Romantics and the Classicists, whose echoes resonate in twentieth-century discussions of "incomprehensibility" and "poetry of liberated vision" – and the seemingly marginal or insufficiently explored ones, such as questions concerning the sonnet, "common sense," or "the future of Polish literature", together constitute a polyphonic discourse that defines one of the most important dimensions of the history of literary communication. The reconstructions of numerous polemics published within this monograph series allow us to grasp the richness of aesthetic and ideological positions engaged in dialogue, positions which maintain multiple relationships with one another, sometimes overt, sometimes hidden, direct or indirect. The overarching and unifying theme of this polyphony is the shaping, stabilization, and at times rebellious questioning of the significance of literature and the role it is assigned within culture (both national culture in general and the culture of specific historical epochs in particular). The literary history presented in the *Polemika Krytycznoliteracka w Polsce* series, seen through the prism of successive polemics, unfolds simultaneously across various registers. As we might say, echoing Fernand Braudel and Polish literary theorist Jerzy Ziomek[2], it exhibits three interwoven oscillations, each operating on a distinct level and unevenly layered upon the others. First, there is the longue durée, which reveals the connection of specific literary phenomena to their foundational cultural contexts – in this case, the relationship between Polish literature and the Mediterranean heritage. Second, we observe the medium-term oscillation, which refines and reorients the longue durée in accordance with the historical, political, and social transformations of a given time-space. Lastly, we encounter the short-term or event-based oscillation, the most resistant to systematization, yet at the same time indispensable, for without a detailed understanding of specific events, no meaningful attempt at theoretical synthesis would be possible. This pattern applies to the history of literary debates just as much as it defines the relationship between an individual literary masterpiece and the tradition of Polish literature, itself a component of the broader tradition of Mediterranean culture. It also highlights the necessity of observing individual polemics in the strict sense (their reconstructions are the subject of individual volumes in the series) within intersecting and paradoxical frameworks – those of singular events and historical processes, isolated contributions and overarching projects, critical source editions and interpretative endeavors. Individual works and cultural texts (including, without doubt, literary-critical polemics) contribute indirectly to medium-term developments, while also revealing how the longue durée operates and is continually reactivated. As a result, readers of subsequent volumes in the *Polemika Krytycznoliteracka w Polsce* series are offered the opportunity to follow a hypothetical (as I fully acknowledge) "grand narrative" co-constructed by successive polemics, with simultaneous emphasis on the two remaining oscillatory dimensions of aesthetic and ideological disputes concerning Polish literature and culture.

[2] See Jerzy Ziomek, "Epoki i formacje w dziejach literatury polskiej" [Epochs and formations in the history of Polish literaturę], in: Prace ostatnie. Literatura i nauka o literaturze [Final works. Literature and science on literature] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1994), 35–36.

The authors of the individual monographs deliberately emphasized all the aforementioned dimensions of the tensions under investigation and their modes of expression. They made every effort to present, with the greatest possible precision, both the specific polemic sensu stricto – typically initiated by a text in the form of a literary-critical manifesto and followed by a series of direct rebuttals and commentaries – and the broader dispute sensu largo, which often comprises seemingly inconspicuous references, allusions, and paraphrases found not only in literary texts of various genres but also in artistic works more generally. This dual approach serves to safeguard critical-literary sources while also enabling the (re)construction of an intertextual space of relations and interactions – between criticism and art on one level, and between systemic frameworks (of -isms, movements, and styles) and idiolectal registers (individual artistic dictions and languages) on another.

There is little need to argue that critical-literary polemic, much like intertextuality, constitutes one of the most significant arenas for the manifestation and construction of the historical-literary process. It generates a meaning-producing space of aesthetic, cultural, and ideological dialogue. Such polemics not only place the key concepts at the centre of reflection, but also characteristically sharpen the most important ideological notions and poetological categories of particular periods and epochs. The reconstruction of successive, and at times intersecting disputes allows for a clearer perception of the qualities shaping an evolving literary tradition, in its evident entanglements with historical moments, as well as philosophical and anthropological contexts. The monographic series in question here serves as an excellent means of advancing critical reflection on the Polish literary tradition. It also contributes to disseminating knowledge about one of the most vital domains in the formation of Polish poetological thought, as cultivated by participants in the literary field.

The findings established across successive volumes of the series largely serve to illustrate and confirm Jerzy Ziomek's thesis that, in the history of literature (and culture), the law of accumulation proves more decisive than the law of renovation[3]. The revolutionary and revelatory projects of the initiators of each polemic – the poetics and discourses that become both their subject and medium – frequently reveal their repetitive character in relation to earlier disputes. The reader of the published results of research on Polish (critical-)literary polemic will thus have the opportunity to confront two dimensions of literature's cognitive function, which is always realized "in between history and philosophy: it presents – as history does – individual characters and events, yet – like philosophy – produces generalizations"[4]. They will also gain access to a wealth of critically edited source texts, central to the development of Polish poetological thought, and be invited to pursue their own investigations into a range of issues vital to both Polish and European literary-cultural heritage.

Finally, it is worth noting that the majority of the monographs published as part of the presented series are the result of the project *Critical(-Literary) Polemic in Poland—Between Case Study and Literary History* (NPRH 11H 16 0131 84). All volumes in the series are freely accessible to readers, as they have been made available both in the AMUR Repository of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, within a dedicated collection (*Series: Critical-Literary Polemic in Poland*: https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/handle/10593/14504), and have been deposited in the National Digital

[3] Ziomek, 41.

[4] Henryk Markiewicz, "Fikcja w dziele literackim a jego zawartość poznawcza" [Fiction in a literary work and its cognitive contents], in Markiewicz: Główne problemy wiedzy o literaturze [Main issues in studies on literature], 4th edition (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976), 123.

Library POLONA. Thanks to this broad dissemination, the series can be used as a resource in courses on the history of Polish literature, as well as in other literary and cultural studies classes. Its greatest value lies in the reminder – and, in some cases, the reintroduction to a wider readership – of an extensive corpus of source texts presented in carefully prepared critical editions.

Through the collective effort of scholars from numerous academic centres across Poland, a significant gap in the historiographical account of Polish literary history, spanning more than three centuries of literature and its related cultural life, has been successfully addressed. The reconstructed polemics shed new light on the sources of contemporary literary consciousness. They not only allow us to recall, but more importantly to contextualize – through parallels with kindred, often historically distant debates – topics and issues fundamental to Polish literature. The presented series is, in the spirit of Umberto Eco, a collective "open work"[5], both in its potential and its necessity for continuation. Some topics still awaiting scholarly inquiry include the polemic surrounding Henryk Sienkiewicz's *With Fire and Sword*, which stirred critics in the second half of the nineteenth century; the successive iterations of the debate on "incomprehensible poetry", initiated in the interwar period and continued through the final decades of the twentieth century and into the first decade of the twenty-first by successive generations of poets. One might also cite the controversy dividing proponents of the "death of the novel" thesis from its staunch opponents, or the ongoing discourse on linguistic formalism, its scope, and its function. Further areas ripe for exploration include polemics concerning "settlement literature" and "reservational" or politically engaged writing, among many others. These themes still await their dedicated researchers, but future volumes of the *Polish Literary Criticism* series will undoubtedly, sooner or later, find their way into the hands of readers.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

[5] See Umberto Eco, Dzieło otwarte: Forma i nieokreśloność w poetykach współczesnych [Open text. Form and ambiguity in contemporary poetics], translated into Polish by Alina Kreisberg i in. (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2008.

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KEYWORDS

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POLISH LITERATURE

Abstract:
The history of literature is not only the history of literary texts, but also the history of critical-literary disputes and discussions, in which – following Dilthey's conception – the meanings and interpretations of literary works are forged, and sequences of evolving aesthetics, poetological projects, and stylistic tensions take shape. This article presents the aims and outcomes of the research project *Critical Literary Polemics in Poland: Between Case Study and Literary History. Critical Editions*, conducted by a nationwide group of scholars at the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology in Poznań between 2017 and 2024. The project involved collecting, editing, and critically studying primary sources and publishing a series of monographic volumes devoted to individual polemics. As a result, unique corpora of texts – never before reconstructed in this form – were assembled, offering readers the opportunity to trace the dialogic nature of the exchanges that constitute each dispute. The monographs gathered in the series (thirty-six volumes to date) form a hypothetical "grand narrative" of the history of critical literary polemics in Poland. In doing so, they contribute to the broader story of one of the key dimensions of Polish literary and cultural life. This narrative includes episodes reaching back to the eighteenth century and continues through the nineteenth, twentieth, and into the early decades of the twenty-first century, thus encompassing a significant portion of the history of Polish literature.

CRITICAL-LITERARY POLEMIC

Polish Literary Criticism series

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Świrszczyńska according to Góra

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Selecting and organizing poems which are to be published in an anthology, much like working on any authorial publication, should follow a specific concept. Most editors usually decide to include in their selections poems from different years and devoted to different topics, so as to give a "true and fair" view of the poet's *oeuvre*. Sometimes, the arrangement is "biographical," and it reflects the evolution of the poet from youth until old age. Often, these two designs intertwine and complement one another. The editor presents the readers with their own way of reading, composing their story from other people's words.

Published by Biuro Literackie in 2013 as the eleventh volume in the series "44. Poezja Polska Od Nowa" [44. Polish Poetry Anew], the selection of poems by Anna Świrszczyńska was arranged and provided with an afterword by the Silesian poet Konrad Góra. As the name of the series suggests, exactly 44 poems should be featured across 72 pages, but Góra decided to include in the selection, as one work, the cycle *Miłość Antoniny (Jestem baba)* [Antonina's love (I'm a woman)], consisting of 19 poems. In the afterword, Góra provocatively writes that he does not feel obliged to explain his decision.[1] He takes advantage of his rights as the "creator;" he is aware of the fact that he is not only editing the collection but also telling his own story, using Świrszczyńska's poems. Góra has explored such dualities before: guided by his anarchist beliefs, his anthology is what Jesse Cohn calls a dialogue between what is written and what is rendered contemporary in reception.[2] In an anarchist reading, the text must be constantly in flux: the written does not

[1] See Konrad Góra, "Najgorszy jest język" [Language is the worst], in: Anna Świrszczyńska, Kona ostatni człowiek [The last man is dying], selected and with an afterword by Konrad Góra (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2013), 67.

[2] See Jesse Cohn, Underground passages: Anarchist resistance culture, 1848–2011 (Oakland, Edinburgh, Baltimore: AK Press, 2014).

petrify meanings, it is only a folding of reality that allows the reader to connect with it; it never recreates the moment of its creation – it constantly processes it. Góra is aware of the fact that one cannot ignore one's influence on the work one is working with. Instead of trying to (somewhat artificially) limit it, Góra devises a narrative based on dialogue. He treats Świrszczyńska's poems as a living element of reality, full of agency and strength; he traces their meanings as far as he can and reinforces shared themes. Treating literature as a living and causative element of reality, its immanent part, is close to Dawid Kujawa's approach. Kujawa argues that poetry should be read and studied in a social context.[3] According to Świrszczyńska, the poet "should be like a room which consists only of windows that are wide open onto the world."[4] Windows themselves are a void through which one looks at and interacts with reality – but they can also be closed to control the exchange between the outside and the inside. This is what Góra does.

Unlike many earlier authorial anthologies of Świrszczyńska's poems,[5] Góra chooses not to include her pre-war works in the collection. Neither does he place Świrszczyńska's final poem at the very end. These two strong gestures of omission show that Góra opposes a cliché reconstruction of the poet's biography that usually starts with the debut and ends with the last poem. The collection is not organized around a specific subject matter, although such an interpretation is suggested by the title, which refers to the *topos* of the last man or mortality in general. *Vanitas* motifs are clearly present, but they do not govern the collection.

Góra's arrangement is chronological: the poems appear in the same order in which Świrszczyńska's poetry collections were published – starting with *Czarne słowa* [Black words] and ending with *Cierpienie i radość* [Suffering and joy] which was published posthumously. The arrangement of the poems within these collections remained unaltered. The number of poems from individual poetry collections – depending on whether, as Góra argues, we treat *Miłość Antoniny* as one work or count each poem individually – differs accordingly.[6]

War poems dominate in Góra's selection, and other poems resound against their background. *Budowałam barykadę* [I was building a barricade] is Świrszczyńska's most important formal experiment, the result of a long struggle with the memory of events that could not be described using conventional literary language. Such an experience cannot be ignored; it defines the poetess's *oeuvre*, and the attempt to process this experience, even if unfinished, is also noticeable in the collections published before *Budowałam barykadę*.

[3] See Dawid Kujawa, Pocałunki ludu. Poezja i krytyka po roku 2000 [Kisses of the people: Poetry and criticism after 2000] (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2021).

[4] Anna Świrszczyńska, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: Anna Świrszczyńska, Poezje wybrane [Selected poems] (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1973), 13.

[5] The original selections of Świrszczyńska's poems were made before Góra by Tadeusz Żukowski, Krzysztof Lisowski, Czesław Miłosz, Anna Janko, Bartosz Małczyński, Eliza Kącka and Barbara Gruszka-Zych. In 2023, Adam Pluszka published a complete collection of Świrszczyńska's poems.

[6] In the first case, poems from Budowałam barykadę [I was building a barricade] (10) dominate, followed by poems from Jestem baba [I'm a woman] (8), then Cierpienie i radość [Suffering and joy] (7), and finally, ex aequo, Czarne słowa [Black words], Wiatr [Wind], and Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon [Happy as a dog's tail] (6 poems each). In the second case, poems from Jestem baba constitute almost half of the collection (26 poems), and Budowałam barykadę drops from first to second place. Jestem baba is the most extensive of Świrszczyńska's poetry collections used by Góra. In terms of the ratio of the number of poems in the original collection to the corresponding number of poems in the selection, Budowałam barykadę dominates, and second place goes to Wiatr. Czarne słowa, Cierpienie i radość, Jestem baba and Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon follow.

Czarne słowa

After the end of WW2, Świrszczyńska lived in Kraków. Between 1944 and 1968, she got married, gave birth to a daughter, her mother died, and she also separated from her husband. A year before her final separation from Jan Adamski, Świrszczyńska used the voice of the people of Africa in her poems:

> It [the poetry collection *Czarne słowa*] consists of two parts. The first part features African stylizations, poems in which Świrszczyńska used the conventions of African songs. She does not imitate them. Instead, she produces moving poems which are an expression of bitter and sarcastic knowledge of life.[7]

Świrszczyńska's "Black language" was a guise underneath which the poetess addressed themes that were important to her, mainly issues concerning femininity (childbirth, motherhood, the duties of a wife). Góra calls these poems "the first successful transpositions from non-European sources,"[8] drawing attention to the "pure, almost pre-human primordiality of this poetry."[9] For Świrszczyńska, this stylized language was a disguise which allowed her to maintain distance and discretion, so praised by her pre-war critics.[10] According to Agnieszka Stapkiewicz, *Czarne słowa* differs significantly from Świrszczyńska's early poems. They were written by a mother and a wife, an adult, an experienced "archetypical" woman. Góra writes in the afterword: "This is the language of prophetesses immersed in our animal past; we expect metaphysics, and we get African songs [...]."[11]

This provocative sentence refers to the opposition between Miłosz's metaphysics and the pre-human animal nature of African songs. Wiesław Paweł Szymański writes:

> Świrszczyńska has carefully observed that in the world of primitive beliefs and cultures, man is equal to the world which surrounds him, and he is even, as it were, below that world, because the reality of matter is at the same time a magical reality.[12]

Both Góra and Szymański point to the important role of the material in these stylizations. The language reflects animistic beliefs, which locate the spiritual in tangible corporeality. This realization – anchoring the I in a living Black body which is experiencing hunger, pain, and aging – matured over time, giving rise to Świrszczyńska's idiosyncratic poetical language. In *Budowałam barykadę*, it expresses the trauma of the uprising.

The poems that Góra selected from *Czarne słowa* focus on the experience of hunger, emphasizing the material nature of (living in) reality and the limitations of the individual. *Kołysanka* [Lullaby] is the first poem. It establishes Świrszczyńska as the midwife of the last man's agony – the lyrical I says: "Umrzyj, mój mały synku. [...] umrzyj cichutko, / mały synku" [Die, my baby son. [...] die quietly, / my baby son]. This image returns in the last poem selected from *Czarne*

[7] Jadwiga Bandrowska-Wróblewska, "Nota biograficzna" [Biographical note], in: Świrszczyńska, Poezje wybrane, 152.
[8] Góra, 66.
[9] Góra.
[10] Świrszczyńska, "Wstęp", 10.
[11] Góra, 65.
[12] Quote after: Bandrowska-Wróblewska, 152.

słowa, namely *Głód* [Hunger], where the lyrical I simply recounts her "makabryczne zamiary" [macabre intentions]: "Urodziłam dziecko w porze suszy, / kiedy nie ma mleka w piersiach kobiety" [I gave birth to a child in the time of drought, / when there is no milk in woman's breasts].

Wiatr

The collection *Wiatr* [Wind], consisting of the cycles *Cierpienie* [Suffering], *Matka i córka* [Mother and daughter], *Groteski* [Grotesque], *Migawki włoskie* [Italian vistas], and *Ekstazy* [Ecstasies], does not focus on a specific subject, although some themes are repeated throughout. *Wiatr* shows Świrszczyńska slowly coming to terms with post-WW2 world and her own personal tragedies which followed. She connects life before the war, the wartime, post-war married life, and the present using free associations, reciting a monologue in her head. *Wiatr* is an excellent title, by the way: it refers to an element whose most constant feature is change. Water, earth, and fire are forever changed for the lyrical I after she lost her loved ones. This realization is also informed by the memories of the war: the lack of water in occupied Warsaw; the soil in which the insurgents were buried; the fire which consumed the capital. And only the wind is the same, constantly blowing and moving, taking with it only what it can carry: such as people who, still alive, left Warsaw after the fall of the uprising.

Wiatr consists of 83 poems in total and Góra chose 6 for his collection. The title of the first poem is the title of the whole. *Kona ostatni człowiek* [The last man is dying] completes the narrative about a body given over to the elements which began with the poems from *Czarne słowa*. The next poem, however, is completely different: full of communist pathos, featuring a communist Legend with a capital L. In the afterword, Góra emphasizes:

> including *Pamięci Che Guevary* [In memory of Che Guevara] in the collection is conceptualized as a counterpoint, as a binary. Through this poem the collective endeavor is juxtaposed with the impulses of one silly heart.[13]

Góra described the role played by this poem perversely. The poems with which he juxtaposed it concern individual experiences (with the exception of *Idziemy w pętach* [We walk in chains] from *Czarne słowa*) and in *Pamięci Che Guevary* the legions of the dead and the living are united by the Legend which transcends death. Still, everyone can relate to the personal experiences from the previous poems; they are rooted in materiality. The Legend's "ciężki trzewik patetyczny" [heavy shoe of pathos],[14] mercifully, does not concern everyone. Perhaps only some, those with "ogłupiałe serca" [stupid hearts], dream of it.

The poems from *Wiatr* reflect the changing and inconsistent nature of this collection – they enter the narrative which appears to center on *vanitas* and create – however small – deviations which open the door to change: the influx of new contexts which expand the story,

[13]Góra, 67.

[14]Anna Świrszczyńska, "Pamięci «Che» Guevary" [In memory of Che Guevara], in: Anna Świrszczyńska, Kona ostatni człowiek, 12–13.

adding new dimensions to it. *Siedemdziesiąt lat* [Seventy years], *Pies* [Dog], and *Prawo do zabójstwa* [The right to kill] still revolve around the motif of death, but they address it differently: either by focusing on the universality of the theme, its characteristic tenderness, or the role of women. Death evokes life, but the most important, though unnamed, concern of these poems seems to be reproductive work. The poems selected by Góra create a story about a woman who is constantly engaged in recreating the world around which men only "przebiegają przebrani za jakichś Indian, naruszają tło" [run dressed as Indians, disturbing the background].[15] The feminist scholar Katarzyna Szopa also reads Świrszczyńska in this critical framework:

> My reading of Świrszczyńska's poetry is guided by a thesis; it is based on the assumption that Świrszczyńska's poetry is a radical emancipatory project, inspired by the tradition of left-wing feminism, at the heart of which lies the fight for the conditions of social reproduction. This project [...] is characterized by an ecstatic gesture, which not only goes beyond specific historical conditions but also goes beyond the material reality in which Świrczyńska's work was embedded.[16]

The last two poems chosen from *Wiatr* are part of the cycle *Ekstazy*. The history behind the first poem is indeed interesting. It opens with the line "W kościach zamiast szpiku – krzyk" [In the bones instead of marrow – scream] and Świrszczyńska titled the poem *Krzyk* [Scream]. In Góra's selection the poem is entitled *Natchnienie* [Inspiration]. I do not know what prompted this change, but I must mention that it took place. Since the next, last, poem from *Wiatr* is *Śpiew szalonego* [The madman's song], leaving the original title would have strengthened the important connotations related to suffering. However, something must have motivated the change of the title.

Szopa writes that according to Świrszczyńska poetry is born from the disagreement with the existing order of the world. It reveals the entire complexity of the present, whose tangled threads carry within themselves the germ of the new.[17] In this sense, what matters for Góra's selection – also in the context of the amended title – is a poem which is not included in *Kona ostatni człowiek*. Still, Góra refers to it in the afterword. The poem in question consists of four lines divided into two stanzas, two sentences:

Moje cierpienie	My suffering
jest dla mnie pożyteczne.	is useful to me.
Moje cierpienie	My suffering
to ołówek, którym piszę.‹?›	is the pencil with which I write.

This simple poetic credo echoes in a slightly longer form in the introduction to *Poezje wybrane* [Selected poems]:

[15]Góra, 65.

[16]See Katarzyna Szopa, Wybuch wyobraźni. Poezja Anny Świrszczyńskiej wobec reprodukcji życia społecznego [Explosion of imagination: Anna Świrszczyńska's poetry and the reproduction of social life] (Katowice: University of Silesia Press, 2022), 25.

[17]Szopa, 15.

> I am an advocate for emotional poetry and I myself write such poetry. I believe that without emotion and passion there is no art. […] The proper and most important area of study for the poet is their inner life.[18]

The possessive pronoun, used twice in the quoted poem to describe suffering ("**My** suffering / is useful to **me**. / **My** suffering is the pencil / with which **I** write") [emphasis JZ]), is a testament to the above.

> The most difficult aspect of the poetic profession is that when one looks inside [one] they need to see there over three billion people against the background of an infinite number of galaxies. […] In my theory, the poet has great ambitions. He dreams of a career comparable to that of Orpheus, Socrates, Buddha, Prometheus, and Lenin. […] A constant fire burns within him, a rebellion against human suffering and human injustice screams within him.[19]

Świrszczyńska writes with the pencil of her suffering, rebelling against generalized suffering, and at the same time urges the reader to react in some way. In *Poezje zebrane* [Collected poems], these four lines are broken up by an additional couplet: "Daje mi prawo pisać / o cierpieniu innych" [It gives me the right to write / about the suffering of others].[20] The structure of the poem changes slightly, which affects the message: in the original version, the pencil – the poet's tool – is considered useful. The poem is set in the lyrical I's most intimate world: in the "world of pencil and suffering." The additional couplet breaks the connection between usefulness and the pencil, and usefulness is now attributed to a more abstract right to write. In a way, it opens suffering to the presence of a third party, and it opens the present to a possible future.

Although Świrszczyńska, as characterized by Czesław Miłosz, could be an icon of suffering (in her youth she suffered hunger, poverty, and shame; she went through hell during the uprising; her marriage was not happy, and motherhood was for her a source of ambivalent feelings; then came old age with its illnesses and misfortunes[21]), the ideals related to building a just society remained alive for her. Góra writes in the afterword:

> This woman – this woman! – is stubborn and will not let go: she will describe our world using our own language; the language of statements and resolutions, the language which we use to complain to our mother: and then our mother raises our cries to her lips and we can go play again […].[22]

Góra points out how groundless patriarchal requirements are – in his narrative, Świrszczyńska is not the addressee of grievances and sufferings, she does not raise them to her lips and does not take it upon herself to comfort those who suffer. Instead, she amplifies the message uttered by the disadvantaged. She becomes a medium through which the wrongs reach the right people, whose duty is to put an end to them. Thus, suffering becomes an inspiration, and the erroneous title of the poem becomes a signpost for the reader.

[18]Świrszczyńska, "Wstęp", 15.

[19]Świrszczyńska, "Wstęp", 16.

[20]Świrszczyńska, Poezje zebrane, 78.

[21]See Czesław Miłosz, Jakiegoż to gościa mieliśmy. O Annie Świrszczyńskiej [What a guest we had. About Anna Świrszczyńska] (Kraków: Znak, 1996).

[22]Góra, 65.

Jestem baba

Jestem baba [I am a woman], published in 1972, focuses on the female experience of the body, a theme first introduced in *Czarne słowa*, with all the accompanying joys and sufferings. This time, however, Świrszczyńska defends women who do not fit the female bodily ideal (the old, the overworked, the beaten, the fat, the dirty, and the sick). She wants to speak on behalf of those whose voices are not heard.[23]

Jestem baba marks the first important move towards taming, reclaiming, reality after the war – it focuses on being embedded in the present, on experiencing the world through the body. This bodily focus is political. According to Katarzyna Szopa, Świrszczyńska examines

> the exploitation of women in patriarchal economies, both in colonial-capitalist economies and in state socialism, which was made possible by maintaining the division into the private and the public with clear gender divisions of labor.[24]

Świrszczyńska writes about women because she opposes the suffering associated with biopower; she opposes the objectification of women and the fact that they are reduced to mothers and caregivers.[25]

Góra included eight poems from *Jestem baba* in his selection. Most of them are portraits of women from lower classes – poorly "taken care of" by the state – they live and work in the countryside (they are defined by, on the one hand, poverty and, on the other hand, a multi-generational background that does not fit into an economy based on profit), they are old and sick (they are abandoned because they can no longer reproduce but they can thus at least reclaim their exhausted bodies), or they are young and still unaware of how the biopolitical machine works.

The poems selected by Góra speak about the experience of female materiality, the body consumed within the framework of the "patriarchal-capitalist economy of dispossession, exploitation, and social alienation."[26]

Jeż z żelaza [The iron hedgehog], the last poem selected from *Jestem baba*, reprises the poems *Kołysanka* [Lullaby] and *Głód* [Hunger] with which Góra opened his selection. The emotional charge is the most powerful in *Kołysanka*: the fantasies about the death of an infant contrast with the convention of a lullaby. It resonates somewhat more gently in *Głód*, in which murder is a desperate act of mercy. In *Jeż z żelaza*, death gives way to its brother – sleep – as the lyrical I explains why it is reluctant to confront the world. Góra skillfully follows the path of Aristotelian rhetoric: *Kołysanka* moves the reader emotionally (*pathos*), *Głód* presents the world from the perspective of the I as a radically inhospitable place (*éthos*), and in *Jeż z żelaza* factual argumentation (*lógos*) resonates most strongly. The cleverly introduced and gradually reinforced image of the unlivable world prepares the ground for the much-needed change.

[23]Anna Świrszczyńska, Jestem baba [I am a woman] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972), 13.
[24]Szopa, 15.
[25]Szopa, 16.
[26]Szopa, 15.

Budowałam barykadę

Suffering is also the language of Anna Świrszczyńska's poems devoted to the Warsaw Uprising in *Budowałam barykadę*. Hardly any glorious moments are documented in these poems. Instead, we are confronted with human misery. In Góra's afterword, Świrszczyńska's poems are contrasted with a different language, "which does not insult us with its factuality, it is the language of a wrongdoing that continues to exist and does not bring about change: tears will be wiped from our eyes, so that we can return to axes, cameras, and keyboards, making the world worth describing."[27] Thus, conversely, the language of *Budowałam barykadę* "insults us with its reality" and in its light, the wrong is unjustified: no one will wipe our tears, and we will not continue to live as before. Świrszczyńska speaks both of the "tragedy of the Warsaw Uprising" and the intoxicating intensity of this experience.[28]

Góra includes ten poems from *Budowałam barykadę* in his selection. All of them share the same emotional tone; the failed uprising triggers disappointment and pain, a sense of being wronged by the decisions made by someone high in the ranks and also pride associated with being a nurse in the uprising – being the one who not only survived, taking with her only lice, but also actively helped others survive this terrible time.

The people who appear in these poems are defined by the roles they play in the community – the soldier, the barber, the jeweler's lover, the hairdresser, the maid, the caretaker, the stallholder, the pensioner, the chemist, the smuggler, the seamstress, the tram driver, the boy from the reform school, the hunchbacked sisters, the drunk hero, the general, the scout girl, the nurse, and the writer. As members of the uprising, they are no longer referred to with their proper names. The roles they play define their "usefulness" within this new community; a community whose goal is survival. After all, life could be reproduced during the uprising only if everyone worked for the sake of others in solidarity. The individual should realize their own deficiency. This was perversely proved by the last line of the poem *Żuje surowe żyto* [He chews raw rye], in which the sole isolated character – the writer – prepares to die.

Although *Budowałam barykadę* focuses on the observations of the nurse, only three out of the ten poems selected by Góra adopt such a perspective (*Dwie garbuski* [The hunchbacked girls], *Harcerka* [The scout], and *Czternastoletnia sanitariuszka myśli zasypiając* [The thoughts of a fourteen-year-old nurse as she falls asleep]). In two other poems, the lyrical I is a soldier (*Mówi żołnierz* [Soldier speaks], *Żołnierz mówi do generała* [Soldier speaks to the general]), and in the next two poems we find the collective lyrical subject. The poem that best illustrates the importance of solidarity in this community is entitled *Po pijanemu* [Drunk]. Its protagonist is shot dead while singing the Polish national anthem on a barricade. Four other people risk their lives to retrieve his body from under fire, only to later tell the mother of the deceased that he died a hero.

The cuts made by Góra emphasize the universality of care (and reproductive) work and its fundamental role in the community. During the uprising, the traditionally "female" roles were

[27]Góra, 66.

[28]Letter to Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, quoted after: Anna Kowalska, "Przypomnienie. W dziesięciolecie śmierci Anny Świrszczyńskiej" [Reminder. On the tenth anniversary of Anna Świrszczyńska's death], Twórczość 11 (1994): 126.

performed by both men and women. The war was to men what patriarchy was to women (they were reduced to caregivers). In this context, Katarzyna Szopa speaks of "robbing women of their subjectivity, bodily experiences, and knowledge passed down from generation to generation; it destroys women's genealogies, deepens women's alienation in the public sphere, and uproots them from the local environment."[29] People reduced to the roles they play in the community, whose bodily experiences are now subordinated to a common goal, are also robbed of their subjectivity. Generational knowledge or genealogy also lose their significance among the people fighting in the uprising. In such a context, it is not surprising that *Budowałam barykadę* was preceded by *Jestem baba* – after all, it was in this collection that Świrszczyńska most comprehensively critiqued reality and called for a revolution.

Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon

In 1978, Wydawnictwo Literackie published *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* [Happy as a dog's tail]. According to Agnieszka Stapkiewicz, Świrszczyńska praises insignificance in this collection, emphasizing "freedom, independence, and distance to oneself."[30] She celebrates animalistic, unconditional, and essential joy. Stapkiewicz finds in the collection "joy that is ordinary and at the same time profound, all-encompassing"[31] and argues that screams resound in it alongside laughter and fun. Until now, screams were associated with danger, but in *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* we find "a scream that can be shouted out."[32] It is not surprising, then, that there are many "dog metaphors" in this collection. They refer to experiencing emotions to the fullest. The struggles with life take the form of joyful wrestling, grappling. One delights in this possibility.

The poems from *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* are preceded by the poem *Moje wszy* [My lice] – the only poem which Góra selected from *Budowałam barykadę* in which a non-human species appears. Poverty brings humans and dogs together, as both are attacked by lice. It is thus not surprising that this poem announces the poems from *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* that follow.

The first two represent the cycle *Bieg po zdrowie* [Pursuing health]. *Stoję na czworakach* [Standing on all fours], which appears right next to *Moje wszy*, brings to mind African incantations from *Czarne słowa*. Still, the last line progresses towards the yogic teachings of the East. In this poem, the source of vital forces is the connection with the Earth – it is slowly regained through exercise. Cultivating and celebrating one's physicality – pursuing health – is possible as a result of rejecting the burden that Świrszczyńska diagnosed in *Jestem baba*.

The decision behind including *Miłość Antoniny* in the selection is thus explained – the ways of breaking patriarchal patterns described in it directly announce Świrszczyńska's "dog-like" joy. After all, she perhaps felt best on all fours (and not, as Miłosz would have it, standing on her head). Exercising – and work, also the work of mourning, and thus of reconciling with the

[29]Szopa, 16.

[30]Agnieszka Stapkiewicz, Ciało, kobiecość i śmiech w poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej [Body, femininity and laughter in the poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska] (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), 207.

[31]Stapkiewicz, 208.

[32]Anna Świrszczyńska, Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon [Happy as a dog's tail] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978), 7.

world – requires air and space, which Góra includes in his selection with the poem *Oddycham* [I breathe]. In this poem, we find another version of a room made up only of windows, which represents the poet, as well as a figure of vastness, saturation, and excess, which the interpreters of *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* have found so fascinating.

The selection of poems from *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* resembles playing with a dog – a metamorphic spinning, as in a kaleidoscope: Świrszczyńska is on all fours, panting, snorting, and making joyful sounds; Świrszczyńska is angrily struggling with/in her body, and a moment later she joyfully accepts the inferiority of her species. When dogs play, they are not aggressive. They train and practice – and Świrszczyńska believed that the body should be trained, prepared for the trials that the future may bring. So that the delighted reader does not forget that she is reading revolutionary poetry, poetry born of discord which aims to transform crisis into change, the last poem from *Szczęśliwa jak psi ogon* chosen by Góra is *Zabiję ciebie* [I will kill you] from the cycle *Walka na śmierć i życie* [A fight to the death].

Cierpienie i radość

Anna Świrszczyńska's last poetry collection – *Cierpienie i radość* [Suffering and joy] – was published posthumously, in 1985.[33] It included previously unpublished poems about her father and mother, admired by Czesław Miłosz, who said that "*Piórę koszulę* [I'm washing the shirt] is one of the great farewell poems of world literature."[34]

Never have Świrszczyńska's poems revealed so many intimate details. In a sense, *Cierpienie i radość* is an autobiography: the collection opens with a series of poems about Świrszczyńska's parents and closes with poems about a friend, Świrszczyńska's last love interest. Interestingly, her last poem, *Jutro będą mnie krajać* [Tomorrow they will cut me up], does not appear in this collection. It was included in Miłosz's anthology, who, referring to the opening apostrophe, determined many subsequent interpretations of this poem:

> I was not surprised by your last poem, written in the hospital before your operation, which summed up so well your constant readiness to accept both happiness and pain, if necessary. [...] this act, I think, embodies *amor fati*, that is submission to God's will and a feeling of gratitude.[35]

Konrad Góra does not include *Jutro będą mnie krajać* in his collection. Likewise, he does not include other very personal poems within the narrative he creates. He only features four poems from the cycle *Wiersze o ojcu i matce* [Poems about father and mother], two from *Wiersze różne* [Miscellaneous poems], and one from *Wiersze jasne* [Bright poems].

Białe ślubne pantofle [The white wedding shoes] render Świrszczyńska part of a longer female family history, the significance of which for one's sense of self was emphasized by Katarzyna

[33]Anna Świrszczyńska, Cierpienie i radość [Suffering and joy] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985).
[34]Miłosz, 33.
[35]Miłosz, 106.

Szopa – the resourcefulness and the willingness to sacrifice herself for the sake of others that characterize the protagonist of the poem, the lyrical I's mother, bring to mind generational wisdom. Wealth which is the result of reproductive work eludes descriptions based on the patriarchal-capitalist economy.

The poems about Świrszczyńska's father are the most personal poems in *Kona ostatni człowiek*. In *Uspokój się* [Calm down], the lyrical I's relationship with her father is mirrored in her relationship with her daughter: the firstborn's rough, reserved tenderness contrasts with her own emotional reaction. A similar contrast appears in *Film o ojcu* [Film about father], where the emotional lyrical I is criticized by art critics. The first poem takes place at home, in the domestic sphere; the second poem takes place at a cultured *salon*. In both cases, the lyrical I is criticized: both the daughter and the critics consider her too emotional – just as in the case of the literary world's reaction to *Jestem baba*. By including these two poems in the selection, Góra presents Świrszczyńska as an honest poet, one who openly speaks her mind. She exists in the world on her own terms, regardless of the consequences.

The next two poems, *Dwieście osiemdziesiąt stopni mrozu* [Minus two hundred and eighty degrees] and *Jestem potężna* [I am mighty], once again evoke images of excess, reminding us that less is more:

Kiedy jestem sama,	When I am alone,
rozkwitają we mnie raje	the paradises of all the world's religions
wszystkich religii świata<?>.	bloom within me.

Świrszczyńska's materialistic metaphysics makes us believe in the possibility of paradise on earth:

> It would be a world in which the practices of maintaining and reproducing social life are not enslaved by the modes of the patriarchal-capitalist economy that dispossesses so many of access to the means of subsistence; and where the richness of human life is not related to an economy of wealth that produces human misery.[36]

It can be achieved if, first of all, we imagine the world anew. The goal is not a revolution but a gradual, persistent, transformation of ways of thinking through the cultivation of language and the use of poetic tools in the service of the best possible future that can be imagined at a given moment.

The last poem in *Kona ostatni człowiek* presents us with Świrszczyńska who is happy, busy, on all fours. It is the Nietzschean "bridge towards the *Übermensch*;" the best metamorphosis, the potential path to paradise.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[36]Szopa, 26.

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KEYWORDS

Anna Świrszczyńska

SUFFERING

Abstract:
The article reconstructs the story of Anna Świrszczyńska as constructed in the selection of her poems *Kona ostatni człowiek* [The last man is dying] by the Wrocław poet Konrad Góra. The selection is personal in nature: the leftist ethos that unites both poets allows Góra to enter into a dialogue with Świrszczyńska's works, emphasizing those aspects of her writing that are particularly important to him. The story constructed by Góra is similar to the one conceived by Katarzyna Szopa in her book on Świrszczyńska published nine years later: the poet examines the injustice and suffering associated with women's reproductive work, which is often ignored or taken for granted regardless of the political system in force.

reproductive work

Konrad Góra

FEMINISM

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Jadwiga Zając (b. 1988) – M.A., University of Silesia. As part of the Preludium grant financed by National Science Center [Narodowe Centrum Nauki], she researches the anarchist conditions of contemporary literature (including Konrad Góra's poetry), trying to create/reconstruct a model of anarchist reading. She has published in, among others, *Teksty Drugie* [Second texts] and *Przegląd Rusycystyczny* [Russian Studies Review].