

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹²C. Murray, 344.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵Prus, 242.

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁶Prus, 242.

¹⁷Murray, 348.

¹⁸Morris, 20.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁰Prus, 109.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹Prus, 98.

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

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

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

a) Composition solves two types of issues:

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

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

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

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

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

²²Murray, 206.

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

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

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

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

translated by Agnieszka Kocznur

²⁵C. Murray, 206.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

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

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