To the Springs, to the Mountains: Proto-Ecocritical Eeadings of H.D. Thoreau's *Walden* and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Na przełęczy*

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From American Transcendentalism to Ecocriticism

Although (in the UK and the US) ecocriticism became a mature academic trend only in the 1990s, its origins date back to the second half of the 19th century (as it also did in Polish literary studies). The humanities began to separate from the natural sciences, looking for their own autonomy, conceptual apparatus, and answers to fundamentally pragmatic questions about the dependence of literature on empirical reality. Consequently, the focus on the relationship between man and the environment has brought the divided disciplines together: it was of interest to both human and natural scientists.

In his 1996 canonical ecocritical work, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, Lawrence Buell made it clear: the ecological crisis is, above all, a crisis of the imagination. Such an approach to the problem, further developed by Julia Fiedorczuk in Polish contemporary ecocritical research, gives rise to a humanistic discourse which focuses on the relations between human and more-than-human nature.

Apart from examining the notion of the subject, contemporary ecocriticism also reflects on a number of important problems related to the practice of inhabiting the world. Therefore, it examines the principles of functioning in a community, as well as the exploitation of the natural environment, focusing on the economy, often in relation to ethics and the choice of means of production.[1]

If we want to talk about contemporary ecocriticism (and refute the accusations of employing this rather "fashionable" theory in an anachronistic or liberal manner), we should look at different ways of thinking and writing about the natural environment. The starting point, therefore, is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: a fundamental proto-ecocritical and nature writing text.[2]

Ecocriticism also attempts to reinterpret the 19th century theme of nature from a completely different perspective: not as a distant and close-ended literary motif, and thus an aesthetic way of organizing a text, but rather in a way that shows a continuity of thought, and looks for answers to fundamental questions about our place in the world. Such a methodology, or rather a critical reading practice, requires additional justification: while I wish to present new and inspiring conclusions about the researched works and the natural imagination, I am aware of the fact that a novel approach to literature also needs to be grounded in theory. Drawing on Ryszard Koziołek, I argue that one has to believe in the adopted methodology and ensure that the adoption of a specific approach does not result from its fashionable status. Koziołek thus comments on this question: "If this is the third semester - I am an ecocritic."[3] He further observes that he is sarcastic because he does not "agree that theories are a set that can be used freely by any researcher and applied to any object."[4]

How should new methodologies be used correctly? How can one avoid the over-zealousness of a neophyte? An important factor in using a relatively new (or fashionable) methodology is finding reliable resources and respecting their adopted approach. If we use theory in such a way, we can evaluate it, notice transformations within the discipline, and thus avoid a situation in which we simply "follow certain trends." When deciding to use a certain methodology, it is important, first of all, to get acquainted with the counterarguments against it so that this choice is justified, careful, and free from ideological and cognitive naivety.

American Nature Writing as an Ethical Gesture

Ecocritical reading is a revisionist reading. As noted by Lawrence Buell, the crisis of Western metaphysics and ethics has brought to light a serious, complex, and fundamental problem:

[1] See: Julia Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie: wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* [Cyborg in the Garden: An Introduction to Ecocriticism] (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2015) 21; Julia Fiedorczuk, Gerardo Beltran, *Ekopoetyka: ekologiczna obrona poezji* [Ecopoetics: An Ecological Defense of Poetry] (Varsovia: Museo de Historia del Movimiento Popular Polaco: Instituto de Estudios Ibéricos e Iberoamericanos de la Universidad de Varsovia, 2015).

[2] See: Lawrence Buell, *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture* (Cambridge, Mass. Belknap Press of Harvard University. Press, 1996), 6-9; Julia Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie: wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2015) 21; Joanna Durczak, *Rozmowy z ziemią: tradycja przyrodopisarska w literaturze amerykańskiej* [Conversations with the Land: The Tradition of Nature Writing in American Literature] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2010) 26.

[3] Ryszard Koziołek, *Znakowanie trawy albo praktyki filologii* [Marking grass or philological practices] (Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2011), 23.

[4] Koziołek 23-24.

the crisis of the imagination and the crisis of understanding nature and humanity's relation to it. Interestingly, the American scholar emphasized the importance of metaphors which determine our view of reality. Buell argues that metaphors imply a certain view and evaluation of the world, which is not noticeable at first glance. How does it work? Scholars focused on deconstructing the concept of progress, which appears to be associated with positive connotations. However, the opposite of progress, e.g., the destruction of ecosystems related to forest clearing or the exploitation of natural resources, is marginalized:

> (...) we live our lives by metaphors that have come to seem deceptively transparent through long usage. Take for instance "progress", literally a process or transit, which the democratic and industrial revolutions of the nineteenth century taught us to equate with "improvement", first with political liberalization and then with technological development. Whenever we use this word, unless we put it in quotation marks, we reinforce the assumption of a link between "technology" and "good" and the assumption that continuous technological proliferation is inevitable and proper. To state this point is not to argue the reverse, merely to call attention to the power of language[5].

The "power of language" refers to its susceptibility to indirect manipulations, such as blurring the boundaries of the metaphor, when two figurative elements compared with each other are not seen as similar but identical. Ecocriticism tracks such linguistic constructions (and consequently also symbolic, imaginary, and ethical constructs and choices) to show how they pretend to be neutral, although they have been appropriated in the name of specific goals or particular interests. Indeed, the question of language is crucial in analyzing the transformations of the natural imagination and for the methodology itself: language must be investigated, challenged, and analyzed in the context of the anthropocentric point of view it imposes on nature. The investigation of the language of progress is the first step in the search for new ways of expression.

Buell also emphasized the pastoral tradition, which was fundamental for the American literary revival of the mid-nineteenth century (as well as for the understanding of American culture by Americans). He contrasted it with three tendencies: the image of old (European) world desire, the image of American cultural nationalism, and the discourse of American exceptionalism. In the context of the pastoral tradition, the most important figure was not so much (or not only) the leading transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, but his student, considered to be the precursor of nature writing: Henry David Thoreau.

In America, Thoreau's *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* is considered an iconic book. Charles Darwin was not as successful even in British literary studies.[6] Therefore, the collection of Thoreau's essays became, in a way, a starting point for Buell. The American scholar developed a typology of "environmental" texts – this typology is general (though still accurate) enough to shed new light on environmental issues in a number of works, showing the critical potential of ecocriticism. Environmentally oriented texts present the non-human environment not only as a framing device (an object) but as a certain continuum which suggests that human history is part of natural history; recognize the fact that human interest is not the only legitimate

[5] Buell, *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*, 2-3.

[6] Buell, *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*, 6-7,9.

interest; recognize that human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; and see the environment as a variable in time, a process rather than a constant.[7]

In this terminological confusion, two interconnected concepts deserve further attention: nature writing and ecocriticism. The former is part of the latter. As Joanna Durczak points out in her historical definition of nature writing, this category has somewhat blurred the boundaries of poetics, but its features are distinct:

> The biggest problem for the majority of scholars who study nature writing is the vagueness of the term. In the United States, it is customary to define nature writing as non-fiction prose (it is most often an essay), devoted to broadly understood nature, but, in accordance with the nature of the essay, treated in a subjective, often emotional way. (...) Despite all the vagueness, critics dealing with nature writing emphasize that there is a certain set of components characteristic of texts traditionally included in this category. Two elementary features are a natural fact and a human being contemplating their relationship with it. It is very important that both components appear in the text together.[8]

The main generic determinant (of the nature essay) is the focus on the relationship between the environment and the human subject immersed in it. However, the subject finds themselves in a difficult situation; they must stop, or at best limit, classifying the world with the help of their human dictionary. They should only describe it. How is this achieved? By limiting the hegemonic, human, and hierarchic perspective and relying on a description that is able to express the unique aspects of the environment. The perceiving subject has to acknowledge the "ontological and axiological primacy of nature over man,"[9] which does not necessarily deny the existence of a higher power. That is also why nature writing was favored by 19th-century thinkers, as it "expressed different forms of spirituality, from Christianity, through Buddhism, deism, pantheism and atheism to materialistic mysticism and sacralism."[10]

Contemporary ecocriticism is not only a theoretical but also a social trend. The interest in social engagement dates to early nature writing. Thoreau's *Walden* is, in fact, a philippic delivered to condemn the destruction of nature in the name of progress. It is a unique text indeed; the essay documents the experiment of moving from the city to Walden Pond to live there for two years. Indeed, Thoreau does not simply juxtapose the countryside and the city but uses this opposition to criticize social and economic relations. Thoreau's text would therefore be a model example of a literary approach to anti-urbanism, although understood in a rather specific and non-intuitive way. According to Buell:

> "Anti-urbanism", as [Leo, A.B.] Marx puts it, "is better understood as an expression of something else: a far more inclusive, if indirect and often equivocal, attitude toward the transformation of society and of culture of which the emerging industrial city is but one manifestation".[11]

[7] Buell, 7-8.

[8] Joanna Durczak, *Rozmowy z ziemią. Tradycja przyrodopisarska w literaturze amerykańskiej*[Conversations with the land: Nature writing in American literature] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2010), 22-23.

[9] Durczak, 23.

[10] Durczak.

[11] Buell, *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*, 13-14.

Such an understanding of anti-urbanism explains why Buell sees Thoreau as not interested in nature as such but in nature as a conceptualization of something else – Thoreau appears to perceive nature through social and cultural changes resulting from the rapid economic growth in the early 19th century.[12] Thoreau also opposes Puritan morality and capitalism. It is also worth noting that in his monumental work on the history of American thought, Vernon L. Parrington, a historian living at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, titled the chapter devoted to the author of *Walden* "Transcendental Economist."[13] Parrington thus recognized that *Walden* should also be studied by historians of economic thought:

The single business of Henry Thoreau, during forty-odd years of eager activity, was to discover an economy calculated to provide a satisfying life. (...) *Walden* is the handbook of an economy that endeavors to refute Adam Smith and transform the round of daily life into something nobler than a mean gospel of plus and minus.[14]

Thoreau's project is not only an experiment and an expression of rebellion, but a gesture that calls into question the monolithic nature of reality. Building a house and a farm from scratch and living in accordance with nature's laws revealed the shortcomings of civilization, and thus the whole idea of progress, which, according to the author of *Walden*, corrupts human morality because people tend to focus on economic profit. When Thoreau leaves the city he symbolically and literally leaves such corrupted order. Thoreau demonstrates to his critics that a different way of life (living close to nature) is possible; he presents an alternative vision of a sustainable economy, which also triggers spiritual renewal and happiness. The experiment paradoxically demonstrates that people should adjust to the environment and not *vice versa*, which was by no means obvious considering the accelerating capitalist relations of the second half of the 19th century. The laws of symbiosis, that is, coexistence with surrounding nature, govern life in the woods. The writer first reduces human needs, which in fact do not differ from those of animals. He builds a simple house and grows his own food:

> To many creatures there is in this sense but one necessary of life, Food. To the bison of the prairie it is a few inches of palatable grass, with water to drink; unless he seeks the Shelter of the forest or the mountain's shadow. None of the brute creation requires more than Food and Shelter. The necessaries of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success.[15]

The similarity between different beings, and even more broadly between human and more-than-human nature, does not lead to banal conclusions – the belief that man is, in fact, also an animal. Thanks to careful observation and acute senses, Thoreau began to build poetic metaphors that led him to notice that the world in general was created according to the same principles:

[12]Durczak, *Rozmowy z ziemią. Tradycja przyrodopisarska w literaturze amerykańskiej*, 17.

[13]Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: The Romantic Revolution in America* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 400.

[14]Parrington, 400.

[15]Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or life in the Woods* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 10.

> I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body. You find thus in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf. (...) The atoms have already learned this law and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. (...) Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. (...) It is wonderful how rapidly yet perfectly the sand organizes itself as it flows, using the best material its mass affords to form the sharp edges of its channel. Such are the sources of rivers. In the silicious matter which the water deposits is perhaps the bony system, and in the still finer soil and organic matter the fleshy fibre or cellular tissue. What is man but a mass of thawing clay? The ball of the human finger is but a drop congealed. The fingers and toes flow to their extent from the thawing mass of the body. Who knows what the human body would expand and flow out to under a more genial heaven? Is not the hand a spreading palm leaf with its lobes and veins? (...) Each rounded lobe of the vegetable leaf, too, is a thick and now loitering drop, larger or smaller; the lobes are the fingers of the leaf; and as many lobes as it has, in so many directions it tends to flow, and more heat or other genial influences would have caused it to flow yet farther. Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature.[16]

Although such a vision of the world may seem naive, it demonstrates a fundamental problem – a linguistic aporia – the fact that human language fails to accurately describe the, not only human, reality and the fact that the language of nature differs from human language. The description of the world thus relies on an imperfect metaphor, which often leads to anthropomorphism. As Joanna Durczak points out, the metaphors used by English-speaking nature writers to appeal to the imagination of their readers were fundamentally positive: they emphasized mutual connection, cooperation, and symbiosis. Later, relations between man and nature were burdened with a different emotional baggage. As Darwinism gained popularity, the notions of interspecies competition and "the survival of the fittest" dominated the way in which the environment and its internal hierarchies were portrayed.[17]

Respectively, in accordance with Thoreau's pro-ecological approach, nature and man develop according to the same law (like communicating vessels). As such, Thoreau's anger, clearly visible in the opening essays of *Walden*, is all the more understandable. Thoreau strongly criticizes the developing capitalist economy ruled by greed rather than mutual benefit. Subsequent essays in the collection have a clear ethical orientation.

One day, quite unexpectedly, at the beginning of the essay "The Pond in Winter," Thoreau arrives at a very important, if not the most important, conclusion of the entire collection, discovering that language is not able to express more-than-human reality. Nature communicates with a different system of signs, one that is inaccessible to humans. It uses light (or, as Joanna Durczak notes, non-grammatical nature-oriented nouns, such as pine, hill or snow[18]). Nature also has its call to action: "Forward!:"

[16]Thoreau, 286.

[17]Joanna Durczak, *Rozmowy z ziemią. Tradycja przyrodopisarska w literaturze amerykańskiej*, 31.

[18]Durczak, 78.

> After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what—how—when—where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on *her* lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! Nature puts no question and answers none which we mortals ask. She has long ago taken her resolution.[19]

The anthropocentric view was no longer sufficient for Thoreau, nor was it comprehensive. Nature is not an aesthetic construct that may be used to conceptualize the mental states of people living outside urban areas: in *Walden*, it becomes an autonomous entity, and this autonomy is respected by the writer. Thus, Thoreau moves away from narratives based on exploitation and submission to human will that objectify nature, becoming one of the first spokesmen for nature and its autonomy. The alleged silence of nature, and, consequently, human misunderstanding of it, in turn, result from the fact that we ask nature the wrong questions. Nature cannot answer them, if only because of the major differences in codes used by the sender and the receiver of the message. Any attempt to present the phenomena of the natural world in terms of standard human language is a dangerous overinterpretation - we produce meanings that are not really there.

In the history of ecocriticism, Henry David Thoreau's experiment is referred to as one of the first attempts to proto-ecocritically look at the text and the reality beyond it.[20] The reflection of the American writer, one of the apostles of transcendentalism, from which the tradition of nature writing stems (*Walden* has become an iconic example of the genre), contributed to the creation of a critical revisionist contemporary methodology, which has been developed since the publication of *Walden* in 1854. *Walden* attempted to dismantle mental and linguistic constructs in order to overcome the crisis of the imagination. Thoreau critically examined economy, social relations, and the exploitation of natural resources, and reflected on the limited category of the human subject.

From literature to legal solutions: Stanisław Witkiewicz and Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, ecological reflection begins to define itself in normative and systemic terms, proposing certain changes in legislation, not only in the Anglo-American cultures but also in Poland. The debate about the environment and the need to protect it, for fear of irreversible damage caused by technological development, increased urbanization, and high natural population growth, is important in Poland as well. Contemporary environmental research is largely based on the conclusions drawn from the transformations of the imagination at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Natural sciences, which developed greatly in the 19th century but never in isolation from the humanities, played an important role in this process. Ecocriticism seems to bring these two distinct traditions together and is also part of posthumanism.

[19]Thoreau, *Walden*, 265.

[20]Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg w ogrodzie: wprowadzenie do ekokrytyki*, 21, 207-208.

In an introduction to one of the editions of *Na przełęczy* [On the Mountain Pass] (1891) by Stanisław Witkiewicz, Czesław Kozioł describes the writer as one of the first artists to reflect on the dark side of the myth of progress:

> Witkiewicz belongs to a dying generation that still participates in the last stage of bourgeois positivism, but is no longer enthusiastic about technical and economic development, engineers, inventors, merchants and organizers. [...] This feeling of disappointment was the result of the social bankruptcy of the slogans of positivists who believed that technical and economic development could be a remedy for all social problems. It turned out that positivists [...] made a terrible mistake. Contrary to what they believed, economic and technological growth did not make everyone happy: only merchants and capitalists and their direct associates became more affluent [...] Witkiewicz's generation, in its prime, is Młoda Polska [Young Poland] and ridicules the philistine culture of the bourgeoisie, condemning the egoistic philosophy of the victorious bourgeoisie. Instead, it looks for different, higher goals [...].[21]

Kozioł was right. He points to the ideological affinities between Thoreau and Witkiewicz. *Na Przełęczy* is an autobiographical essay in which the artist describes his trip from Krakow to Zakopane. In addition to extensive and impressionistic descriptions of nature, the fauna and flora of the Tatra Mountains, *Na Przełęczy* is also a sociological study: a participant observation, an examination of the area and its popularity in contemporary society, and a critical look at tourists and their love of folk culture. Witkiewicz criticizes capitalism, capitalist trends, and the resulting destruction of the natural environment, including adaptation strategies of the people of Podhale who wished to make the most of tourism. Some Gorals decided to play this capitalist game: they "Orientalized" themselves; they presented themselves to tourists as they would be stereotypically perceived in the collective consciousness, thus making money. Zakopane appeared to be a kind of performance, a philistine mecca for wealthy townspeople who were eager to fall in love with nature, focusing on over-aestheticizing their feelings and experiences. The Tatra mountains were therefore perceived through the prism of their function: located near Krakow, the region satisfied the needs of communing with beautiful nature and became a symbol of material status. With irony, Witkiewicz describes the dilemmas of a tourist who had just found himself in a mountain town:

> The quiet philistine, who visited the Tatra Mountains because everyone else did, initially tries to adapt but it is a painful and difficult process. He is used to falling asleep while listening to a samovar in the evening, to seeing pale, clean buns in a wire basket next to a plate with the slices of pink ham. He is used to waiting for the paperboy, to visitors, and to sitting on his couch, while the maid puts in his empty and idle hand the most recent denial of yesterday's news. This man did everything he could to turn his life into a series of infinitely small but repeatable pleasures. The newspapers think for him. Everything makes life easier for him. He buys wit, humor, comfort, and pleasure for his three cents. And here, he finds himself in a vacuum – in the desert.[22]

Witkiewicz bitterly exposes the fact that society is focused on money, thus isolating itself from the real experience of more-than-human nature. As such, we are reminded of a similar

[21]Czesław Kozioł, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy* [On the Mountain Pass], ed. Czesław Kozioł, (Warsaw: Książka, 1948), V.

[22]Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy* [On the Mountain Pass], in: *Pisma tatrzańskie* [The Tatra writings] Vol.1, ed. Roman Hennel, (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1963), 40-41. All excerpts from the texts were translated by M.O.

situation described by H.D. Thoreau in *Walden*. Both authors share the same beliefs, although Witkiewicz criticizes both the philistines and the ascetics:

> Only the people who did not have time to get used to the comforts and who, above all, look for something in the world, who look and see, know how to listen, want to explore and get to know things, only they can be happy. They are maniacs for whom simple food and simple furniture is enough. It is enough for them – they can then focus on the beauty of nature, some ethnographic differences or natural peculiarities. If they were tortured, they would still look for color, admire the hilt of the executioner's sword, or study the chemical composition of a deadly viper venom.[23]

For Witkiewicz, nature was neither idyllic nor aesthetic. It was a dangerous and unpredictable force that only the natives, Gorals living in symbiosis with nature, seemed to understand. They were able to read its signs and adapt to its changes:

> At night, in complete darkness, we were awakened by a sudden whistle, the rattling of windows, the crackling of the roof and the howling of stoves. It seemed that the wings of a huge bird, with feathers like great mast pines, were hitting the walls of the cottage, sweeping the tops of the spruce trees and dying somewhere in the darkness of the black night. Then everything went quiet for a moment – only to explode suddenly with a new force of madness and rage.[24]

Therefore, Witkiewicz openly mocked rich tourists, their mannerisms, and their fixation on literary or, more broadly, social conventions. Apart from making ironic remarks about the tourism industry, Witkiewicz also demonstrated how nature is deprived of its autonomy – it is relegated to the role of a reserve. Mindless tourists see it from horse-drawn carriages on their way to the Kościeliska Valley:

> The poetic philistine was worried about his own situation. He constantly expressed his admiration and enthusiasm, played among the rocks and jumped clumsily, and cherished and glorified the uncomfortable lodgings, his guide, and even his walking stick. In the Tatra literature, this elegiac tone prevails: everyone thanks the Creator, who built such miracles for them, for tourists.
>
> Today, everything is changing. Trips to the Tatra Mountains have become something ordinary and common. Enthusiasts, having lost a lot of money, are tight with their money; For Gorals, civilized, stamped and normalized in their payments, guests are a source of income, on which taxes have to be paid.
>
> The moment the gentlemen begin to count their money, Gorals scrupulously calculate the value of their services and merits. Egoisms collide: disappointment and the source of all these tales about the greed of Gorals and the exploitation of guests. Of course, Gorals are not always to blame, and you can often see a distressed Jasiek or Maciek who suffer, since their guests threatened that they would describe them in the newspapers because they had been overcharged for something. The guest who does not want to pay does not see that he is the same as the Goral who wants to overcharge for everything.[25]

[23]Witkiewicz, 41.
[24]Witkiewicz, 49-50.
[25]Witkiewicz, 41.

Witkiewicz comments on how the mountain ecosystem is constantly violated and also makes a few remarks on the status of animals and humans in natural surroundings. He focuses on climbing, which becomes a meditation that opens one up to nature and transcends the aesthetic dimension. He also points out similarities in human and animal behavior:

> *Climbing,* this selfless struggle with nature, allows one to use excess strength and health, leaving no disgust, no real disappointments, because there are no real interests or benefits to gain. [...] The climber obtains a lot of overwhelming impressions from a wonderful and powerful nature: nature is easy to comprehend, because it presents itself in expressed, defined, firm, clear and convincing shapes.[26]

> Alas, despite what really makes him different from animals, despite his hats, tailcoats, pointed-nosed shoes, Amsterdam liqueur and Virginia, man has so much in common with them! Are these two voices talking over the desert not the same as the singing of birds or the roar of predators meeting in the darkness of the forest?[27]

> [Hunting] it is a pure struggle for existence between two different creatures who are equals. (...) [A bear has] his own sayings and ways, just like humans.[28]

Witkiewicz criticizes the instrumentalization of nature by wealthy tourists. He argues that they only visited the Tatra Mountains because it was fashionable and because they wished to satisfy their aesthetic needs. However, the most important issue that occupied the writer's mind is the way of perceiving reality. This issue, in turn, translates almost directly into acknowledging the limitations of language: the written fails to fully express the seen. Witkiewicz, as an art critic, points out that even photography is not able to convey the essence of the seen, falsifying almost everything from color to texture. Only an impressionistic description, which accounts for the position of the sun, the changing colors and the relations between individual elements, may be credible. As Witkiewicz writes in one of his critical essays:

> Not only does photography produce a false image of an impressionist image, photography is also false by nature. The coating is to a varying degree sensitive to the effects of various colors. As a result, even a very dark blue spot in the photograph looks brighter than the brightest yellow or red spot, than the brightest orange tone. Photography therefore often gives an almost completely different impression of different colors and the relations of local color fields than the one seen in nature. For example, when the sun illuminates snow, it looks so dazzling and so contrasting in nature, but it is completely lost in photography because the shadows, tinged with the reflection of the blue sky, are not captured in all their complexity.[29]

For Witkiewicz, impressionism was not so much an aesthetic way of organizing a text, but an epistemological issue. It was an extension of naturalism, since both engaged with the subject

[26]Witkiewicz, 63.

[27]Witkiewicz, 136.

[28]Witkiewicz, 148.

[29]Stanisław Witkiewicz, "Impresjonizm" [Impressionism], in: *Sztuka i krytyka u nas* [Polish art and criticism], ed. Jan Jakubowski, Marta Olszaniecka, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971), 149.

who perceives the world only in fragments. Since it was impossible to be objective, the artist was trying to convey the complexity of the world through detail, which, in a way, contained the whole. Such an understanding of impressionism, as well as the category of cognition in general, is particularly helpful in noticing the level of complexity of more-than-human nature, including the flora and fauna in the Tatra mountains. It is also worth noting that Witkiewicz's extremely graphic natural imagination is rooted in Romantic literature. As Maria Olszaniecka observes:

> The enthusiasm for Mickiewicz's descriptions of nature could be explained if we take into consideration Witkiewicz's personal love for creating pictures-descriptions. Witkiewicz loved *Pan Tadeusz* (quotations from the poem may be found not only in books but also in Witkiewicz's letters) and it shaped him as an impressionist writer. We could even argue that Mickiewicz had a direct original influence on Witkiewicz's descriptive language.[30]

Focusing on a detail was an epiphany-like experience. Especially when a group of climbers looked at a monumental landscape for the first time:

> What looked like golden gravel from above, with the eye of a peacock's feather on top, is a great valley, full of rocks from the surrounding mountain tops, boulders that we climb onto, roll off, jump over, minding the narrows spaces between them. Climbers climb onto them using their hands, working with their legs, arms, backs. They are focused – they do not want to break their legs, twist their arms. If anything, they can be bruised and tear their shins. It is chaos, a labyrinth, a puzzle made of small rooms, narrow corridors, narrow passages, steep walls; however, in the face of the majestic mountains, the hardships and the dangers of rock formations, it is nothing. Alas, it does not resemble the comfortable roads we are used to. The hardship makes it impossible to observe nature and the surroundings. Man is busy with, engrossed in, walking.[31]

Witkiewicz's poetics in *Na Przełęczy* is focused on what is important at a given moment – when one is actually looking at something. Fragmentation, i.e., paying attention to a certain fragment of a larger image, modulates sensitivity in the sense that it allows one to perceive the autonomous, the strange and the specific in nature. Witkiewicz pays attention to landscape because he wishes to see the world anew; he wishes to include more-than-human nature (previously relegated to the role of decorations or background) in the act of looking.

> Through the streaks of light, trembling in a slight mist, the even walls of Rysy rise up high – foggy, airy; the sun falls into the valley of a black lake and shines there as if, beyond the rocky, dark threshold, an electric lamp burned, throwing reflections on the rocks, whose each bend and projection is clear and sharp. [...] Rock rubble is scattered everywhere, large, white chippings of granite are piled up. In the sunlight you can see this world in ruins – you can see that the mighty mountain tops crumble, fall apart and turn into lumps and dust that the wind blows away; you can see how spruces die, you can see their whole generations, pale, wretched, dwarfed, dying or already dead.

[30]Marta Olszaniecka, "Wstęp" [Introduction], in: Stanisław Witkiewicz, *Sztuka i krytyka u nas*. ed. J. Jakubowski, M. Olszaniecka, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971), s. XLII.

[31]Witkiewicz, *Na przełęczy*, 135.

> [...] Ferns turn yellow, the grass withers. Everything shows traces of decay, death, transformation and rebirth – of constant change and impermanence. Only water, dark, shiny, uniform, so different from what surrounds it, seems to be as permanent as eternity.[32]

Moreover, Witkiewicz's impressionistic consciousness also influenced the form of this autobiographical essay: he reversed its narrative order. It was not so much the desire to describe reality that resulted in the description of the detail as the experiences triggered by noticing what had previously remained invisible. The latter motivates the text, rendering it fragmentary and digressive.

Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski had similar concerns to Witkiewicz. He criticized the rapidly changing Tatra Mountains and rampant tourism, which translated into the degradation of the natural environment and the unique mountain ecosystem. In the essay *Kultura a natura* (1913) [Culture and nature], which was extremely important for environmental protection in Poland, Gwalbert Pawlikowski expresses his concerns about the lack of official regulations that could protect the Tatra Mountains from the brutal exploitation by tourists and its irreversible consequences (the construction of cableways, converting mountain shelters into hotels, and turning paths into roads).

In relation to more-than-human nature, Gwalbert Pawlikowski also opposed anthropomorphism, which deprived nature of its autonomy and distanced it from man:

> For the moods triggered by nature seem to have no reason, and their nature is undefined; indeed, we tend to ascribe to nature those feelings that come to us, and explain them, undefined as they are, as feeling the same thing as nature. It is the age-old, apparently insoluble, problem of anthropomorphism. It only takes on a different, supposedly higher, or in fact very vague and indistinct, form, as if it were destined to die someday by dissolving into the fog. Instead of the naive animism animating each creation of nature individually, we should recognize the unity of the universal spirit with which the human spirit is connected.[33]

Such an approach is connected to Gwalbert Pawlikowski's developed environmental awareness and his concern for environmental protection: starting in 1912, he was the president of the Tatra Mountains Protection Committee of the Tatra Mountains Society. He wished to establish the Tatra Mountains national park, similar to the first American national park Yellowstone. [34] He was an ardent advocate of this idea and helped introduce official environmental protection regulations (Radecki 2014, 59-80). National parks could protect the environment: an environmental refugium would be established. The national park was supposed to be an autonomous space; it would be managed and regulated only by its own laws. Humans were to study them and learn about the laws of nature. The creation of a national park would also mean that nature would be recognized as a valuable cultural object and become part of Polish

[32] Witkiewicz, 207.

[33] Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski, *Kultura a natura i inne manifesty ekologiczne* [Culture and nature and other ecological manifestos], ed. Remigiusz Okraska, (Łódź: Obywatel-Stowarzyszenie "Obywatele-Obywatelom", 2010), 45.

[34] Jacek Kolbuszewski, *Ochrona przyrody a kultura* [Environmental protection and culture], (Wrocław: Towarszystwo Przyjaciół Polonistyki Wrocławskiej), 143.

national heritage. Therefore, any decisions or regulations that could significantly affect the way the park operated should be based on morality, ethics, and sound judgment.

The representations of nature in nineteenth-century literature make us reflect on their origins. We also need to reflect on and reformulate such basic categories as subject and nature, since, as concepts, they promote exclusion and (gender, ethnic and species) inequalities. As such, humanistic thought could no longer ignore animals and the development of economy based on the exploitation of natural resources. Ecocriticism, as an approach that is fundamentally revisionist, began to examine the relationships between human and more-than-human nature, trying to create an inclusive world, based on mutual coexistence and cooperation.

The roots of this reading practice are, in turn, found in American nature writing of the second half of the 19th century, as exemplified by H.D. Thoreau's *Walden, or life in the woods*. The text was a manifesto: it questioned and opposed the exploitation of the environment for profit. Capitalism, which additionally significantly violated social relations, was also a source of, among other things, economic exclusions. There is no such distinct tradition of environmentally-oriented texts in Poland. This has to do with, among other things, historical context: the subordination of Polish literature to politics. Nature was (indirectly) used to fight for Polish independence, and was not treated as an autonomous, self-regulating, and self-governed sphere.

However, interesting transformations of environmental imagination may be noticed in Polish literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In a comparative analysis, the works of Witkiewcz and Gwalbert Pawlikowski engage in an original dialogue with the tradition of nature writing, and even express some contemporary ecocritical concerns.

Journalism and literature played a significant role in shaping social awareness as regards environmental protection (and at the turn of the century, as exemplified by Gwalbert Pawlikowski, personal involvement and activism also played an important role). They may be described as a collective exercise in empathy and responsibility.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract:
In the article, I focus on the comparative approach to the images of nature in literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. I analyse H.D. Thoreau's *Walden, or life in the woods* and Stanisław Witkiewicz's *Na przełęczy* [On the mountain pass]. The starting point for examining the origins of nature writing is a close reading of Henry David Thoreau's essay, which marks the beginning of ecocriticism: it combines an activist and revisionist approach towards the relationship between human and more-than-human nature. Although nature writing has not developed as a distinct tradition in Polish literary studies, in my analysis I demonstrate that Stanisław Witkiewicz's *Na Przełęczy* (1891) is essentially an example of this genre, as discussed by Lawrence Buell in reference to H.D. Thoreau's essay.

environmental awerness

American trancendentalism

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