

Detail and reading

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹ Cf. <http://genezanazwisk.pl/content/szwander>

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

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

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

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

Certainly, Kuśniewicz can be considered a writer of details, similarly to Bruno Schulz, while artists such as Witold Gombrowicz prefer particulars. The vertical particular¹⁴ dominates in *Cosmos*; a sugar cube is an existential particular in *Pornografia*. And yet even in the works of such writers, advocates of the "intentional," we do find details. Inspired by Jan Gondowicz,

¹⁰<https://blogi.kukushka.eu/totutotam/2017/10/30/skole-palac-groedlow/>

¹¹Kuśniewicz, 7.

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

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

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

who studies the particular in Gombrowicz's prose,¹⁵ I examined¹⁶ the following passage from *Ferdydurke*:

Mrs. Filidor, totally defiled, tried with waning strength to pull on her gloves but – it's simply unbelievable! – the doctor from Colombo made a spot analysis of her urine and roared victoriously: "H₂O₄, TPS, a few leukocytes, and albumin!"¹⁷

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

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

I remember being embarrassed to buy toilet paper at the corner store unless there were several other things to buy too.

I remember taking my I.Q. test and coming out below average. (I've never told anybody that before).

I remember that Betty Grable's legs were insured for a million dollars.¹⁹

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

I remember that Robespierre's jaw was broken by a gendarme named Merda, who later became a colonel.

I remember that knitted silk ties were fashionable.

I remember the Russian clown Popov and the Swiss clown Grock.²⁰

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Schulz described it more poetically:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

²⁷Mukařovský, 98.

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

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KEYWORDS

DETAILED READING

detail in literature

ABSTRACT:

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

INTERPRETATION

particular in literature

slow reading

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

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