

“Like a tender needle through the heart” – distribution and function of detail in Andrzej Stasiuk’s descriptive strategies

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

This reprimand seems to contain the sense of Stasiuk’s story, the source of descriptive imperative, longing for a description that would be an antidote to egoism, a formula offering a chance to escape pathos, naïve emotionality, and escapist sentimentalism. Polish literature is haunted by Miłosz’s spirit, and it proves to be a valuable ally of new descriptive studies. “Love means to learn to look at yourself / The way one looks at distant things / For you are only one thing among many.”² These verses not only lead us to questions about the relationship between ethics and aesthetic transformation, but they also extend the perspective of thinking about delight in the context of description, changing an aesthetic stimulus to a whole strategy of extinguishing “I” and overcoming the power of ego. In his review of Miłosz’s final book of poetry, Andrzej Franaszek identifies delight as the counterweight to self-love, a way to forgetting about self and love³. Here love is a decision rather than a feeling, an attentive attitude supported by emotions rather than dependent on them, understood as longing for unity vol-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵ Bielik-Robson, 17.

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

⁷ Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 75.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁰Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 10.

¹¹Stasiuk, *Grochów*, 63.

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

Interrupted obviousness – considering detail as a way towards presence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Asymptotic description – constellations of details as new fields of eventuality

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

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

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

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

The blue heat faded away a bit in valleys.¹⁶

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁶Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 113.

¹⁷Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 7.

¹⁸Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 8.

¹⁹Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 7.

²⁰Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 186.

The micro perspective (careful observation, focusing on seemingly inconspicuous nuances) and the macro perspective (seeking sources, origins, and rules of experience) converge in Stasiuk's light metaphors. Light gives life and takes it away, becomes weaker, trickles, sometimes it is diluted and motionless, the only thing worth describing, although at the same time it is impossible to describe it – the only thing that can be done is to keep trying to conceptualize it. Inevitability is contrary to its dualistic, corpuscular-wave nature – being an electromagnetic wave and a stream of particles, and as such – constant motion, light exposes the world's movability, changing contours of things, their clarity, intensity. Przemysław Czapliński observes that it is symptomatic for Stasiuk's narrative strategies to transfer eventuality from the sphere of activity to the sphere of phenomena²¹, which disrupts the reader's sense of change via linguistic means, thus forcing to attribute stability and dynamicity to each element of reality in a new way. Epithets in Stasiuk's prose define current states rather than general properties, with process as the main attribute of description – narrators talk about characteristics via activities, making the description of a network of relations dynamic here and now, pointing out relationships between things through modeling the collocations of verbs and adjectives. Mentioning minor activities, such as drinking a morning Albanian coffee brewed in a cup, releases history, a custom, tradition, ritual. Stasiuk collects snapshots from landscapes, facial expressions of people he passes by, what a person sitting next to him in a bar is eating – he collects sentences, simple notes, and observations in order to bind them with a reflective frame of a story.

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

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

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

²¹Zob. Przemysław Czapliński, „Gnostycki traktat opisowy”, *Kresy* nr 1 (1998): 142.

²²Andrzej Stasiuk, *Nie ma ekspresów przy żółtych drogach* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2013), 9.

²³Stasiuk, *Dukla*, 129.

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

translated by Paulina Zagórska

²⁴Stasiuk, *Nie ma ekspresów przy żółtych drogach*, 141.

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KEYWORDS

SPACE

description

detail

ABSTRACT:

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

PRESENCE

descriptive turn

chronotype

TURN TOWARDS THINGS

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