The Dubious Privilege of Irony as a Trace of Despair...: Narrative Strategy in Zyta Oryszyn's Prose

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The title of my article is drawn from Arleta Galant's monograph *Prowincje literatury: Polska proza kobiet po 1956 roku* [Literary Provinces: Polish Women's Prose after 1956]. In the chapter devoted to Zyta Oryszyn, Galant explores the intricate relationship between madness and language. The provincial madwomen who—often unwillingly—become the protagonists of Oryszyn's novels are portrayed as victims of the oppressive system of the Polish People's Republic. Through storytelling and narrative strategy, Oryszyn not only gives voice to these marginalized figures but also exposes the mechanisms of newspeak and propaganda embedded in the regime's discourse.

Galant, however, offers only a brief outline of Oryszyn's writing, noting its perverse character and emphasizing that it functions as a literary reflection of the degraded social languages of the Polish People's Republic.[1] A closer examination of Oryszyn's narrative strategies, which I aim to present in this article, reveals that her use of irony is not merely a trace of despair, as

[1] Arleta Galant, "Wariatki na prowincji: Pisarstwo Zyty Oryszyn" [Provincial Madwomen: Zyta Oryszyn's Prose], in: Arleta Galant, Prowincje literatury: Polska proza kobiet po 1956 roku [Literary Provinces: Polish Women's Prose after 1956] (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2013), 28–52.

Galant suggests. It also operates as a means of resisting censorship and as a commentary on the surrounding reality. As a member of the democratic opposition, Oryszyn herself endured interrogation by the Communist Security Service—an experience that granted her intimate knowledge of the mechanisms of repression and their impact on the individual.

Oryszyn's novels, published by the democratic underground press (the so-called "drugi obieg"), expose the absurdity of propaganda. Her characters, often young and inexperienced, are overwhelmed by the system they cannot fully comprehend. In this article, I focus on the narrative strategies employed in three novels: *Czarna Iluminacja* [Black Illumination] and *Madam Frankensztajn* [Madame Frankenstein], both published by the democratic underground press, as well as *Ocalenie Atlantydy* [Salvation of Atlantis]—the only novel released after the fall of communism, a substantial excerpt of which appeared in 1990 under the title *Historia Choroby, Historia Żałoby* [History of Disease, History of Mourning]. In all these texts, as Galant observes,[2] the young female narrators cannot be saved by knowledge or superiority. What remains is helplessness and irony—devices that not only fail to save the characters but also symbolically "kill" the narrator herself.

The 1970s in Poland found their great master of irony in Mr. Cogito, the figure at the center of Zbigniew Herbert's poems. Yet Herbert's hero is above all a teacher of steadfastness and of a national, oppositional community. Zyta Oryszyn does not aspire to such a role. Her narrator's ironic perspective emerges instead as a distinctly female response to life in the Polish People's Republic—as shaped by fear, despair, and systemic oppression, but also by the need to confront the language of propaganda. If despair was the fate of many under communism, its opposite was silence[3]—and it is precisely this silence that Oryszyn's work strives to overcome.

The chronicle of this growing despair extends beyond the novels published by the democratic underground press. Its autobiographical dimension surfaces in the only interview ever conducted with the author. It must be acknowledged, however, that Oryszyn's responses in such a context may themselves be a form of self-creation—particularly given that she agreed to meet the journalist only after years of unsuccessful requests and refusals. For reasons known only to her, she determined that *Ocalenie Atlantydy* required an explanation, a justification for why it had been written.[4]

When confronted with the question of which character most mirrors her own experience, the author replied that, contrary to appearances, it is not Greta, the activist and writer active in the Solidarity movement. Instead, she identified with a far less representative figure, explaining that she began writing in order to avoid becoming Madam Frankensztajn, a woman who ultimately lost her sanity because an oppressive system tried to control every aspect of her life. Madam Frankensztajn's story is also considerably more complex than Greta's, as the reader first encounters her as a little girl in the novel *Czarna Iluminacja*.

[2] Galant, 28–52.

[3] Galant, 28–52.

[4] Karolina Sulej, "Zyta Oryszyn: Chciałam wytłumaczyć, o czym napisałam swoją ostatnią książkę" [Zyta Oryszyn: I wanted to explain what my latest book is about], Wysokie Obcasy (11 May 2013): 10–15.

At that time, she was captivated by the idea of communism and by the figure of Joseph Stalin, even joining the Pioneer movement. Through her schoolwork, she became increasingly indoctrinated, composing laudatory poems that reflected the official line. A decisive turning point came in 1953, when, after Stalin's death, her father referred to him as a cannibal. Determined to "save" her father from what she perceived as a dangerous misunderstanding, she turned to the medium that had shaped her own convictions—literature. In an effort to persuade him, she wrote a drama entitled *Żałobnicy wszystkich krajów łączcie się* [Mourners of the World, Unite], which depicted the universal despair that followed Stalin's death.

This attempt, however, ends in disaster. Her father not only refuses to embrace communism but also mocks her literary efforts. When he is arrested the following day, the girl is devastated—not because of his arrest, but because she has failed to recognize the American spy living under her roof. In that moment, she also loses faith in the therapeutic power of literature. Abandoning her literary ambitions, the heroine begins a slow transformation into Madam Frankensztajn, the figure from Oryszyn's next novel. Continued indoctrination and deeper involvement in the system drive her toward madness and, ultimately, suicide.

As Oryszyn recalls in the interview, her own path once seemed dangerously similar. Yet it was through writing that she managed to escape the fate of Madam Frankensztajn—despite being investigated by the Communist Security Service, subjected to disciplinary interrogations, and ultimately silenced by a publication ban.

Czarna Iluminacja [Black Illumination]

Zyta Oryszyn's first underground novel is narrated in the third person, frequently shifting into the perspectives of individual characters. This technique grants the reader access to their inner experiences while the narrator formally remains heterodiegetic. Such distance enables the author to employ irony in her depiction of events. Yet the style—emotional, symbolic, and highly expressive—intensifies the characters' sense of alienation. Oryszyn's detailed portrayals of mental states and introspection blur the boundary between external reality and subjective perception. At the same time, the narrative mirrors the condition of language under communism: through short, fragmented, and chaotic sentences, Oryszyn conveys both the crisis of communication and the psychological turmoil of her characters.

In Oryszyn's prose, irony does not serve humorous purposes or attempt to soften the novel's dark psychological and social dimensions. On the contrary, it intensifies them, functioning as a tool of critique, exposing the lived realities of the Polish People's Republic. The author ridicules official language and state institutions, which, despite professing concern for citizens, reveal themselves as soulless and oppressive. The tension between declarations of equality and community on the one hand, and practices that degrade human dignity on the other, becomes a central source of irony.

Irony in the novel is evident in subtle exaggerations and in the dissonance between the narrator's descriptions and lived reality. Family scenes, in particular, are imbued with such contradictions,

their atmosphere steeped in bitter irony. In *Czarna Iluminacja*, Oryszyn uses irony primarily as a means of exposing social realities and the distortions of propaganda. At the same time, she reveals the breakdown of interpersonal relationships and the failure of communication. The central function of irony in the novel, however, is to underscore the alienation and powerlessness of the individual confronted by a system that besieges them on every side. This is not comic irony meant to lighten the grim reality of the Polish People's Republic; it is bitter, revelatory, and tragic, intensifying the characters' sense of existential isolation. Oryszyn thus wields irony as both a vehicle of social critique and a means of psychological analysis.

Linguistic irony in Oryszyn's prose emerges most clearly in the clash between the propaganda platitudes of the Polish People's Republic and lived reality. The contradiction between slogans of social justice, progress, and the "new man" and the actual world of poverty, violence, and control produces a sharp, ironic dissonance. Words lose their meaning and function merely as masks. The characters, though aware of their decline, continue to believe in change and hold on to appearances. The reader, however, perceives the gulf between this fragile hope and the brutal truth, which only deepens the characters' tragedy. A second form of irony manifests itself when the narrator adopts exaggeration or emotional detachment. The cold, impersonal narrative voice, set against the intensity of the characters' drama, generates an emotional contrast that the reader experiences as profound and painful irony.

Madam Frankensztajn [Madame Frankenstein]

This novel continues the themes and character arcs introduced in *Czarna Iluminacja*. While Zyta Oryszyn retains her characteristic dark style, steeped in psychological depth, she introduces a more pronounced sense of distance, grotesque, and irony. This shift likely reflects the differing circumstances of composition: the earlier novel was initially conceived with the hope of being approved by the state censor and published by the state communist press, whereas *Madam Frankensztajn* was from the outset intended for the democratic underground press.

The reader is confronted with a palpable tension between the external—the social and the moral—and the internal—the intimate and the psychological. Inga Iwasiów, reflecting on women's writing during the communist era, captured this dynamic with the phrase "the private is public."[5] In the Polish People's Republic, individuals could not fully separate these two spheres; the oppressive system encroached upon every aspect of life, besieging them on every side.

As in her first novel, the narrative is rendered in the third person, though it frequently aligns with the main character's perspective. The narrator maintains a formal distance from the events, occasionally intervening with ironic or sarcastic commentary, yet simultaneously penetrates the characters' inner worlds, exposing their fears, obsessions, and reflections. Oryszyn's style is vivid and expressionistic, at times evoking the cadence of an internal monologue.

[5] Inga Iwasiów, "Powieść w obiegach: Lata 80. i kontynuacja" [The Novel and the Publisher: The 1980s and the Continuation], in: Prywatne/publiczne: Gatunki pisarstwa kobiecego [Private/Public: The Genres of Women's Writing], ed. Inga Iwasiów (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2011), 133–192.

The novel also functions as a commentary on social reality, particularly the condition of women—their objectification, isolation, and the violence inflicted upon them. Oryszyn's use of metaphor and grotesque exaggeration underscores the chaotic and unsettling nature of the world she depicts. Rooted in the communist era, the tragedy is heightened by systemic oppression that permeates everyday life and shapes the characters' identities. Framed in this way, the narrative becomes an exploration of trauma and alienation, as characters barely interact with one another. They communicate almost exclusively through rigid, predetermined formulas.

This, in turn, makes genuine relationships impossible, leading to psychological disintegration and the erosion of identity. The characters construct their sense of self in isolation, detached from social interaction, and shaped by the bleak, oppressive reality of the Polish People's Republic. Yet the language, the characters, and the world Oryszyn portrays are grotesquely exaggerated. This stylistic choice becomes one of the novel's defining features, setting it apart from the author's other works published by the democratic underground press.

In *Madam Frankensztajn*, irony functions as a crucial artistic device through which Oryszyn intensifies her social and psychological critique. It is not the lighthearted comic irony we all know but rather a profound, bitter, and revelatory form that exposes the fractures of both individual experience and collective reality.

The titular Madam Frankensztajn is a woman scarred by life, who longs to construct a new identity. Her nickname is connected with her appearance— her extremely pale face— though, more importantly, it evokes a powerful monster. Yet the woman who aspires to embody it and its strength is, in reality, fragile, broken, and consumed by fear. Struggling with mental illness, she spends several months in a closed psychiatric facility, only to be released when her case is deemed hopeless, left to confront communist oppression alone. Her "monstrosity" does not arise from rebellion against the regime—despite her acts of defiance, such as scrawling political slogans on the walls—but from her trauma and from her inability to adapt to prescribed social roles.

Through the figure of Madam, Oryszyn confronts the dominant myths of femininity—the woman as mother, lover, and victim. Yet the protagonist embodies none of these roles; her body and relationships are distorted, fragmented, and unconventional. What appears to be freedom is in fact rooted in fear, violence, and social expectations—expectations she cannot meet because of her illness. The image of the "liberated woman" constructed in the novel thus becomes a grotesque caricature of the feminist myth, not because the ideal itself is false, but because society denies her the possibility of realizing it.

At times, the author's language is deliberately artificial, brutal, or theatrical, producing an ironic tension between form and content that recalls the absurdities of communist-era propaganda. Ordinary family conversations and conventional social situations are rendered with such exaggeration that they verge on parody, exposing how meaningless human communication is. These platitudes carry no genuine meaning; they are uttered merely in a linguistic ritual to which the characters have grown accustomed. In this world, everyday speech does not serve the purpose of communication but rather sustains the illusion that order and normalcy prevail.

In *Madam Frankensztajn*, irony serves to expose the falsehood of social roles and to highlight the absurdity of the characters' attempts to live rationally within a world stripped of meaning. Oryszyn uses irony to uncover and critique the distortions of reality produced by the communist regime. The absurdities of propaganda and newspeak infiltrate every aspect of life, corrupting not only language but also social relations. Within such a world, and deprived of any sense of security, the protagonist sinks into loneliness and exclusion—a descent that ultimately culminates in her suicide.

Ocalenie Atlantydy [Salvation of Atlantis]

This is Zyta Oryszyn's final novel and the only one to be published after the fall of communism. Thus, certain political issues could be addressed openly, though extensive fragments of the novel—whose history dates back to the mid-1980s—had already circulated in underground magazines, and one chapter was even released as a standalone novel in 1990. Yet the distinctive narrative style that secured Oryszyn's recognition and the Gdynia Literary Award in 2013 for *Ocalenie Atlantydy* remains intact.

The narrator, though third-person and omniscient, is far from a neutral observer. He not only recounts events but also frequently immerses himself in the characters' thoughts and emotions; his commentary is often tinged with irony or bitter reflection. While the novel is set against the concrete, gritty reality of the Polish People's Republic, this world is continually refracted through the characters' emotions, imaginations, and dreams. The narrative unfolds through time jumps, flashbacks, and recollections, resulting in a non-linear, fragmented structure.

The novel's protagonists hail from the eastern regions of pre–World War II Poland, only to be uprooted and resettled in the so-called "Recovered Territories" in the West. The reader meets them first as children and accompanies them through the turbulent years of adolescence, a period overshadowed by wartime trauma—nights spent in hiding and deaths of family members. Some characters may belong to the Lemko ethnic minority, though this remains uncertain, adding a layer of cultural ambiguity to their identities. In the aftermath of displacement, their first weeks in the new place are marked by tentative acclimation: exploring unfamiliar surroundings, scavenging through ruins, and searching for remnants of German possessions.

The titular Atlantis serves as a metaphor for a lost world—or a world still being lost—that of childhood, innocence, hope, and security that the novel's characters cling to with desperate resolve. This vision of a ruined paradise mirrors not only their inner struggle but also the broader collapse of meaning under communism, where language itself becomes degraded and social bonds erode. Communication falters; words fail to bridge the gaps between individuals. The emptiness of the external world thus becomes a reflection of their inner condition, marked by trauma, isolation, and violence, as they navigate lives haunted by the impossibility of connection.

The only salvation from utter despair is irony. The characters' use of propaganda and newspeak, which blatantly contrasts with their lived experience, creates an effect of ironic exaggeration. The working class—idealized in the narrative as the foundation of society—is in reality despised

and stripped of any agency. Children growing up in Leśny Brzeg are constantly confronted with propaganda slogans, the most serious of which is: "Long live the people's rule."[6] After reading it, Bobo became afraid that perhaps, like his grandmother, he should pretend to be an illiterate peasant. The characters' reality was saturated with the brutality of power and repression, and therefore, its strengthening could have instilled in them genuine terror.

The novel embodies the cruel irony of fate, which ridicules every effort the characters make to resist. Their awkward attempts to preserve a spiritual Atlantis—the fragile remnants of dignity, dissent, values, and meaning—are relentlessly crushed by the world and by the oppressive machinery of the Polish People's Republic. Each act of defiance turns into its opposite: Gwalbert, who longs to rebel, becomes a communist policeman; his life is reduced to being a cog in the system. His wife, scarred by the wartime murder of her family at the hands of Soviet soldiers, likewise follows to the same trajectory. In the end, life itself mocks their youthful ideals, reshaping them into conformists who adapt, however unwillingly, to the suffocating reality of communist Poland.

Conclusion

Zyta Oryszyn's prose functions as both a historical record and a psychological testament. Her characters, ensnared within the oppressive structures of the Polish People's Republic, find themselves incapable of forging authentic relationships; every social interaction is reduced to language games and rigidly imposed patterns. Through this lens, the author lays bare the distortions of language, reality, and identity wrought by the omnipresent machinery of propaganda and newspeak. Irony emerges as the sole remedy she offers the reader—not as a release from tension, but as a force that intensifies it. In Oryszyn's hands, irony becomes an articulation of pain, alienation, and dissent against reality.

Oryszyn offers her readers a literary form of resistance against systemic violence and social hypocrisy. In her work, irony reflects the destructive reality of the Polish People's Republic while simultaneously bearing the imprint of women's lived experience of oppression. Far from being a playful device or a source of humor, it functions as an expression of despair, estrangement, and a fragile defense mechanism against the weight of the communist system. At the same time, Oryszyn deploys irony as a weapon against censorship, exposing the falsehoods embedded in propaganda and official discourse. She embraces "the dubious privilege of irony as a trace of despair"[7]—a stance that, however, cannot shield her characters from their tragic destinies. In this regard, Arleta Galant's observation rings true: "there is no method to this madness," and ultimately, "irony saves no one."

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[6] Zyta Oryszyn, Ocalenie Atlantydy [Salvation of Atlantis] (Warsaw: Świat Książki, 2012), 77.

[7] Galant, 28–52.

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract:
This article examines irony as a central narrative strategy in Zyta Oryszyn's prose. Far from serving merely as an expression of despair, irony functions as a mode of resistance against communist propaganda and censorship. Drawing on the author's personal experience and oppositional activism, the novels *Czarna Iluminacja* [Black Illumination], *Madam Frankensztajn* [Madame Frankenstein], and *Ocalenie Atlantydy* [Salvation of Atlantis] depict trauma, alienation, and the disintegration of the individual under an oppressive regime. In these works, irony demystifies the language of power, discloses the illusion underlying social conventions, and lays bare the absurdities of everyday life in the Polish People's Republic.

narrative strategy

IRONY

censorship

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