The Experience of Evil:

Reading Andrzej Łuczeńczyk's Works through the Lens of Jean Nabert's Philosophy

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The reception of Andrzej Łuczeńczyk's prose in literary criticism

For many years, Andrzej Łuczeńczyk remained a marginalized figure, overlooked by both the general reading public and literary scholarship. This situation began to change in 2018, when Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy [State Publishing Institute] released a complete edition of his *Dzieła Zebrane* [Collected Works].[1] Despite decades of relative obscurity, Łuczeńczyk had enjoyed notable critical recognition in the late 1970s and the 1980s. His rise was significantly aided by the influential Polish critic and literary scholar Henryk Bereza, a leading promoter of contemporary literature, who championed his work in the monthly *Twórczość* [Creativity]. However, Bereza's initiative proved to be a double-edged sword for the young author. The difficulty lay in Bereza's distinctive mode of popularization, marked by hyperbolic—and often questionable—judgments, coupled with an authoritarian style of criticism and his notion of an "artistic revolution," within which Łuczeńczyk's works were situated. This approach gave

[1] Andrzej Łuczeńczyk, Dzieła Zebrane [Collected Works] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2018).

rise to pejorative labels such as "Bereza's stable," "Bereza's boys," and "Bereza's writers," terms used to describe the circle of young prose writers he promoted, who, in the view of other critics, were overrated by Bereza. Although Łuczeńczyk's prose ultimately emerged largely unscathed from such battles of literary criticism—the writer's body of work being valued across diverse critical circles—the history of reception shaped by Bereza left a lasting mark. This Bereza-dominated framework contributed to Łuczeńczyk's subsequent marginalization: he is now rarely discussed and seldom read. Bereza's analyses, distinguished by their insightful and innovative character, effectively established the dominant interpretative lens through which Łuczeńczyk's *oeuvre* was later approached, especially his major works *Gwiezdny Książę* [The Star Prince] and *Źródło* [The Fountainhead].

For one, Bereza observed that in *Gwiezdny Książę* the titular figure, devoid of psychological and moral motivations, comes to embody the very mechanics of evil. He kills not out of hatred, revenge, or political calculation, but because evil itself becomes for him the expression of absolute freedom. His deeds are "crimes for crime's sake," and cannot be explained rationally. In this respect, Bereza suggests, the prince embodies André Gide's conception of gratuitous evil—evil which exists beyond all moral or social constraint. Yet Bereza crucially shifts the focus: what matters most is not the prince himself but the witnesses and victims of his actions. Their passivity, indifference, and acquiescence are truly immoral and scandalous. In the absence of a response to evil, Bereza sees the real tragedy: a world in which crime meets no resistance, where the murdered yield to the sword without struggle, and violence triumphs. The prince thus emerges as more than human: he is a divine executor, a metaphysical judge who metes out justice through crime, yet remains bound to the law of chaos, ultimately committing suicide. Bereza thereby exposes a tragic paradox: justice may be reached only through violence, yet violence simultaneously undermines it. In this interpretation, *Gwiezdny Książę* becomes not merely a tale of power and death, but above all a vision of a world that has forfeited its capacity for resistance—a world in which crime is absorbed into the very order of things, and the triumph of evil appears to be part and parcel of life.[2]

In his essay on *Źródło*, Bereza emphasizes that Łuczeńczyk's micro-novel departs from the narrative clarity and linearity of *Gwiezdny Książę*, instead plunging into a labyrinth of temporal dislocations, fractured identities, and perpetual enigmas. He interprets *Źródło* as a radically transformed version of the myth of Cain and Abel—not a mere retelling of the biblical story, but its dramatic reconfiguration, employed to explore the themes of loneliness, fear, and the search for meaning. Cain and Abel are no longer kin; they symbolize the fundamental tension of human life: Abel needs Cain in order to exist, while Cain, through the act of murder, reveals the void he must confront. The characters—designated only by initials or nicknames—are stripped of individuality, reduced to near-anonymous markers of fractured existence and the drama of solitude. Bereza observes that in *Źródło*, death functions not merely as a narrative thread but as an organizing principle: it effectively dismantles traditional categories of good and evil. It is death that collapses time, blurs space, and makes characters almost disappear behind the masks they wear and the roles they play. The characters' repetitive, mechanical,

[2] Henryk Bereza, "Sprawiedliwość. Czytane w maszynopisie" [Justice: Read in Typescript], Twórczość [Creativity] 5 (1984): 154–155.

and emotionless actions reveal a world in which classical values have disintegrated, and life itself is reduced to the stark rhythm of necessity.[3]

Although Bereza was the first to articulate most fully the interpretive framework for Łuczeńczyk's works, subsequent critical voices, emerging from the mid-1980s onward, have offered both confirmation of his insights and polemical counterpoints. Critics typically adopt an analytical tone—at times admiringly, at times disappointedly—yet nearly all confront the same defining feature of Łuczeńczyk's prose: its silent, lethal precision and its unemotional philosophy of crime. From the very beginning, Łuczeńczyk's writing provoked strong reactions, eliciting both fascination and deep distrust. His works stirred strong reactions, resisting easy classifications as they balanced existential drama with formal experimentation.

Leszek Bugajski, in his analysis of contemporary Polish literature, regarded Łuczeńczyk as a radical writer probing the very limits of narrative form. He emphasized the author's obsessive preoccupation with death, from questioning the human obligation to save life to exposing the mechanical dimension of killing. Bugajski interpreted *Gwiezdny Książę* as an almost theological parable of guilt and suicide, ranking it among the most significant works of new Polish prose.[4] Ewa Starosta, aligning herself with Henryk Bereza, underscored Łuczeńczyk's exceptional talent, which she believed merited comparison with foreign writers. She depicted him as a master at evoking darkness and unraveling the mystery of mortality. Indeed, she interpreted his prose as a radical extension of Heidegger's concept of *being-towards-death*: in Łuczeńczyk's world, life is reduced to preparation for death, even the dialogues themselves are stripped of meaning, reduced to mere fragments.[5] By contrast, Lidia Wójcik adopted a more ambivalent stance. In her reading of *Kiedy Otwierają się Drzwi* [When the Door Opens], she emphasized the "banality of murder," underscoring the banality and randomness of death. Łuczeńczyk's characters, stripped of identity and history, inhabit the vacuum of everyday life; their actions appear absurd precisely because they are severed from transcendence. For Wójcik, it was this banality of death and evil that proved most terrifying—not pathos but the ordinary indifference.[6]

Stanisław Zieliński, in contrast to the more enthusiastic voices, criticized Łuczeńczyk's prose for its formalism. He regarded it as a perfect structure devoid of depth and authentic experience. In his view, characters emptied of emotion and motivation are reduced to mere symbols, depriving literature of its vitality and leaving it sterile.[7] Tomasz Miłkowski likewise observed that Łuczeńczyk's prose, though marked by brilliant passages, could at times appear tedious. For him, *Źródło* embodied the writer's style—a constellation of obsessive tropes and

[3] Henryk Bereza, "Lucyferyczność. Czytane w maszynopisie" [Luciferianism: Read in Typescript], Twórczość 6 (1985): 136–137.

[4] Leszek Bugajski, "Poprzez siebie" [Through Oneself], Pismo Literacko-Artystyczne [Literary and Artistic Magazine] 11/12 (1986): 78–87.

[5] Ewa Starosta, "Wspólnota śmierci" [Community of Death], Fakty [Facts] 32 (1986): 10.

[6] Lidia Wójcik, "Przerażająca zwyczajność zabijania" [The Terrifying Banality of Murder], Kamena [Camenae] 2 (1986): 7.

[7] Stanisław Zieliński, "Aż brak tchu: Wycieczki balonem" [Breathless: Hot Air Balloon Ride], Nowe Książki [New Books] 1 (1986): 14–17.

recurring motifs that yielded it at once solidly constructed and impersonal.[8] Krzysztof Mętrak was even more merciless. In his column "Ze Stajni Berezy" [Bereza's Stable],[9] he dismissed *Gwiezdny Książę* as a display of mere technical prowess, lacking emotional depth. To him, it was nothing more than a stylistic exercise, devoid of genuine artistic value. Jerzy Łukosz, by contrast, discerned a paradox in Łuczeńczyk's prose: when addressing fundamental questions of evil and death, the writer employed a restrained, precise, almost emotionless language. Yet Łukosz saw strength in this very austerity—it enabled Łuczeńczyk to domesticate horror and render the extraordinary banal.[10] Małgorzata Cebo, in her review of *W Kręgu Zła* [In the Circle of Evil], emphasized the objectification of evil in Łuczeńczyk's prose. Without psychological depth or personal motives, evil emerged as metaphysical—rooted in action alone, devoid of intention, and ultimately insurmountable. For Cebo, it was precisely this calm, detached technique that proved most impactful.[11]

In sum, Polish literary critics remained sharply divided over Łuczeńczyk. For some—Bugajski, Starosta, and Wójcik—he was a literary revivalist and an existentialist capable of rendering the ultimate experience of death in startlingly new ways. Others—Zieliński, Mętrak, and, to some extent, Miłkowski—accused him of formalism, emotional sterility, and excessive stylization. Łuczeńczyk endured as an author whose strength lay precisely in his refusal to be easily categorized: poised between visionary intensity and architectural unemotionality, between metaphysical inquiry and the banality of the everyday, he remained a writer who continually provoked debate.

Łuczeńczyk, through his emotionless, almost ascetic prose, depicts a man imprisoned within everyday life—immersed in repetitive gestures yet incapable of affirming either himself or others. It is precisely this moment of suspension, powerlessness, and emptiness that invites a reading of his works through Nabert's notion of the *unjustifiable*. The evil in Łuczeńczyk's prose is not the manifestation of demonic force or psychological aberration but rather that which resists justification—a wound left forever open. By adopting Jean Nabert as my philosophical point of reference, I aimed to sidestep reductive interpretive frameworks—whether sociological realism, psychologizing tendencies, or moralizing views of evil. Nabert enables us to approach Łuczeńczyk from a deeper perspective: not as a mere chronicler of life, but as an existential writer who probed the very structure of consciousness. His prose thus emerges not as a record but as testimony to spiritual failure—it exposes the discontents of the *self* in relation to itself. My study is therefore conceived as a dialogue: Nabert, on the one hand, defines evil as the incapacity to affirm the higher self, a negation inscribed within human experience; Łuczeńczyk, on the other hand, renders this negativity in literary form, portraying man's encounter with emptiness, death, and the impossibility of being himself. In this meeting of philosophy and literature, a meaning emerges that resists reduction to either theory or plot—existential, spiritual, and yet painfully real.

[8] Tomasz Miłkowski, "Dwuznaczne źródło" [Ambiguous Fountainhead], Kultura [Culture] 50 (1986): 11.

[9] Krzysztof Mętrak, "Ze stajni Berezy: Ze słuchu" [Bereza's Stables: By Ear], Express Wieczorny [Evening Express] 202 (1986): 5.

[10] Jerzy Łukosz, "Jedyny kształt śmierci" [The Only Shape of Death], Odra [Oder] 7/8 (1987): 103.

[11] Małgorzata Cebo, "W kręgu zła: Książki" [In the Circle of Evil: Books], Tygodnik Kulturalny [Cultural Weekly] 9 (1987): 12.

Jean Nabert's Philosophy of Evil

Jean Nabert does not equate evil with freedom, nor with the absurdity of existence. Instead, he conceives of it as a spiritual wound—an irreducible rupture that resists meaning and can only be borne witness to. It is for this reason that his philosophy is, for me, the very foundation of interpretation: it enables us to speak of an experience that cannot be tamed yet must be described. Rooted in neo-Kantianism and phenomenology, Nabert develops philosophy as an effort to grasp this spiritual fracture—something that eludes incorporation into the moral order yet discloses itself as a fundamental spiritual event. For Nabert, consciousness is never fully reconciled; stretched between the *transcendental self* and the *empirical self*, it is in a constant tension. Reflection, then, is the act of reading oneself in decisions, works, and errors—in all that testifies to the *self*. The *empirical self* strives ceaselessly to return to the *pure self*—a destination that is never fully attainable. Decisive along this path are *negative experiences*: failure, guilt, suffering, loneliness, and the sense of meaninglessness. Nabert interprets these not as obstacles but as indispensable conditions of spiritual growth, for it is in being wounded—rather than in being in harmony—that the human thrives as a spiritual entity.

The experiences of liminality and fracture recorded in deeds and failures reveal the fundamental complexity of the *self*. Failure, loneliness, and guilt expose the finitude of the human being and the impossibility of fully realizing the ideal of the *pure self*. They trigger a sense of *alienation* that discloses an inner contradiction—one that obstructs the complete *affirmation of the self*, even when the subject strives to affirm its existence. For Nabert, human spirituality is thus characterized by a ceaseless aspiration toward unity: a longing for goodness, for moral integrity, for the transcendence of evil, and for a return to God—understood not in a religious sense, but as a transcendent horizon of meaning. For Nabert, evil as the *unjustifiable* is an experience that *consciousness*—the *self*—can neither accept nor explain. It is this impossibility that gives rise to rebellion and a profound spiritual fracture. Liminal experiences—suffering, death, failure, and ugliness which exceed both aesthetics and meaning—provoke in humanity a fundamental opposition to reality itself. The world thus appears as an empirical inefficiency, a domain where spiritual imperatives cannot be fulfilled. In this condition, the only source of legitimate judgments about evil remains pure consciousness, which discloses a rupture that defies ontology. Crucially, the *unjustifiable* is not a substance or an entity but a relation—a relation in which human search for meaning remains futile.

Nabert draws a distinction between evil and *evil itself*: the unjustifiable reveals the structural negativity of the will—its fracture—which renders the pursuit of good neither self-evident nor natural. In doing so, Nabert breaks with the tradition that defined the will as an innate drive toward the good, showing instead that the source of evil lies at the very core of the will, in its internal opacity. This observation is existential and metaphysical: evil emerges not merely as an ethical experience but as a structural condition shaping the (im)possibility of affirmation. Nabert's method thus enables us to apprehend evil not as an absence of good, nor as moral culpability, but as a spiritual event—a fracture of bonds, an alienation, an impossibility of returning to oneself. In this sense, the unjustifiable resists all rationalization and demands attestation rather than explanation.

For Nabert, the defining trait of impure agency is self-love—that primordial inclination of the *self* toward itself, which encloses consciousness within its own limits and severs it from transcendence. Nabert reinterprets sin not as a moral or religious category, but as a phenomenon of archaic consciousness that precedes rational reflection. Sin, in this sense, manifests the self's primal struggle with irrational fears, shame, prejudice, and self-love—experiences rooted in the transcendental opacity of action. It is not a judgment but an intimate recognition: the *self* perceives its agency as entangled in impurity, even when this entanglement does not culminate in an overtly "evil" act.

Nabert links sin to the primordial error of the will: the choice of the incomplete self, preferring the autonomy of separation over the completeness of community. It is at this juncture that *the evil of secession* arises—a severing of bonds, an absolute disconnection and self-separation that annihilates the possibility of return and even the very awareness of sin. This fracture is not merely a form of psychological isolation but an ontological break in relationality, whereby the self cuts itself off from its source, encloses itself, and denies its constitutive openness to others, transforming them into enemies, adversaries, or others—ultimately reducing them to objects. *The evil of secession* mistakes separateness for freedom, fabricating an illusion of autonomy that corrodes connection and communication. For this reason, Nabert insists that reflection on evil must always unfold on the terrain of broken bonds, where alienation assumes its most dramatic form.[12]

Because Nabert's philosophy of evil centers on the *self*—consciousness, will, and agency—I adopt a reading strategy that examines characters through their existential immersion in evil. Rather than indulging in excessive psychologizing or sociologizing, I aim to reveal the existential condition of the subject: the self lost within itself, blind to evil yet acting upon it. I highlight moments when characters appear internally fractured, stripped of emotion, bereft of empathy, and incapable of achieving Unity—either with themselves (resulting in split identity and its negation) or with others (manifested in the inability to communicate or to perceive the other as a subject rather than an object).

This failure—the inability to understand both oneself and the other—produces a spiritual fracture that opens the space for unjustifiable evil, evil that requires no justification precisely because it is not recognized as evil. There is no transition from reflection to action, for reflection itself has vanished. Evil does not need to be expressed, announced, or named; it suffices that it occurs, involuntarily, in silence, in the void. Understood in this way, evil does not scream—it acts when the subject is cut off from its spirituality.

Źródło [The Fountainhead]

Źródło is a novel in which unjustifiable evil—evil that resists justification, defies explanation, and arises from a profound spiritual fracture—emerges in its purest form. This evil is rooted

[12]Cf. Ewa Mukoid, Filozofia zła: Nabert, Marcel, Ricoeur [Philosophy of Evil: Nabert, Marcel, Ricœur] (Cracow: Universitas, 1993).

not only in the actions of the characters but also in the very architecture of the world they inhabit, a world structured by ritual, precision, silence, and repetition. The titular "fountainhead" is thus not the narrative's point of origin, but an inner, spiritual source from which flows the existential condition of man whose own evil actions he neither comprehends nor controls. Yet, he does evil. In *Źródło*, Andrzej Łuczeńczyk's poetics is at its most condensed and hermetic. Gestures, glances, silences, and brief exchanges all signify. Communication among the characters is fractured—at times even non-existent. It becomes unclear who is speaking. Fragmented sentences trailing into ellipses, conversations without a discernible subject, and exchanges devoid of purpose give rise to a disorienting dialogue.

Time is disrupted from its linear course: although the characters meticulously count the passing days, hours, and minutes, the rhythm of the narrative is suspended—as if the action unfolded in the gaps between events, between choices, between acts. Of particular significance is the presence of the two central figures—S. and Karwat—whose relationship is defined not by communication but by presence, reflection, and misidentification. S. and Karwat may be read as two distinct characters or as two identities within the self, within a fractured existence which strives to reaffirm itself through action. This fracture resonates with Nabert's conception of evil, wherein the *self*, by renouncing the pursuit of affirmation of the pure self, not only embraces a diminished self but sinks deeper into itself. This leads to spiritual and internal alienation. Consciousness is ultimately negated. In the end, it is divided into two identities. This fracture functions as a conduit for the emergence of evil.

The temporal chaos in *Źródło* is not merely a narrative device; it reflects the suspension of existence itself: a consciousness that endures yet remains unfulfilled, performing tasks mechanically under the illusion of control within a fractured temporality. *Źródło* is not simply the story of a killer. It is the story of a man who continues to act even when he no longer believes his actions have any sense—a man who prepares not for a narrative ending but for a spiritual one. Evil exists, as if, beyond outcry, passion, and spectacle. It is a silence already sealed; it is unjustifiable—it cannot be expressed otherwise.

We recognize that the characters'/character's identity is split because, from the outset, a parallel is established. *Źródło* opens with two extended scenes that, at first glance, seem to concern separate individuals. Yet the mirror-like symmetry of their experiences—getting ready in the morning, eating breakfast, and even talking to a woman—draws them to the same place: a parking lot where they meet. This space lies somewhere in between—not a home, yet not a road; it is a transitional "entry/exit" zone. In existential terms, it is a limbo suspended between departure and destination. The fragmented dialogue reveals the characters as unsettled, surprised, and uncertain. They somehow agree on a shared destination. At first, however, they are identified only as "the man in the windbreaker" and "the man in the gray jacket," nameless figures despite their eventual acknowledgment of one another. They seem to know each other yet remain strangers. The meeting scene is not one of reconciliation but of fracture. The two men do not become one but instead embody the impossibility of a unifying affirmation. To draw on Nabert, this encounter shows a fundamental alienation—an internal fracture that is impossible to overcome, doubled as/into two selves, stripped of reciprocity and depth.

> "One more thing… My name is Karwat…" He extended his hand to the man in the gray jacket.
> "Jerzy Karwat…"
> "And my…"
> "It is not necessary…" the man in the windbreaker cut in.
> "But…" The man in the gray jacket still felt the grip of the man in the windbreaker—loose yet assured—lingering in his hand, now unconsciously resting on the dashboard.
> "At least …" He traced a small but distinct "S" across the window. "And Adam…"
> The man in the windbreaker was about to say something, but only gave a slight nod before accelerating, almost lifting off from the small parking lot.[13]

Although the characters seem to have recognized one another, they nevertheless proceed to introduce themselves. The ritual of naming appears purely formal; individualization or personification is not the goal. The man in the windbreaker says it is not necessary, which defeats the purpose. Adam S., for his part, withholds his surname. Both men want to reach the same destination—they cooperate—yet not through words but through gestures, silences, and understatements. Silence is their mode of communication. We never learn where they are going or why they are going there; such matters belong to the conscious sphere. Viewed through the prism of the fractured subject, this encounter reveals the self unable to communicate with itself, unable to achieve internal affirmation, and thus condemned to alienation. *Źródło* does not depict an encounter that culminates in unification. There is no reconciliation, no recognition of oneself in the other. Instead, there is only a multiplication of fractures—a shift from silence to action that ultimately changes nothing. In this sense, the characters do not embark on a journey; they merely continue one, unaware of who is leading and who is following. Along the way, the men stop at a parking lot near a forest. The man in the grey jacket walks toward the trees, then returns to sit beside the man in the windbreaker, who is reading a newspaper. As he reads, he comes across a photograph of his companion. Slowly, he begins to recognize his face:

> He sat down beside him, keeping an arm's length of distance—just enough to look, to observe, to see. The man in the windbreaker was reading the opposite page. He reached for his cigarettes, lit one, and after a moment's hesitation, kept both the cigarette and the matches in his hand. The sudden thought of a gaze lingering on his hand as it disappeared into his pocket struck him as oddly playful. The man in the windbreaker finished reading, his eyes flickering for what seemed the last time over the photograph before drifting upward—only to halt, suddenly, abruptly, and then return to the image once more. Staring calmly toward the forest across the way, he registered astonishment, then a quick sideways glance at his own face, and finally the merging of the features in the photograph with his own, until disbelief became absolute certainty.[14]

We witness a central, unmistakable fracture in identity. Karwat recognizes S. in the newspaper, but when he glances to the side—toward his companion—he sees his own face. The phrase "a quick sideways glance at his own face" suggests that the gaze is spontaneous, much like "the merging of the features in the photograph […]." This moment leads to a denial of

[13]Łuczeńczyk, 285.
[14]Łuczeńczyk, 283.

identity, captured in the oxymoronic "until disbelief became absolute certainty"—a moment of fundamental alienation. It is a paralysis in which truth reveals itself yet remains unspoken. One recognizes oneself in the other: in the photograph and in inner consciousness, but there is no return to the self. Absolute affirmation never takes place; the characters, the identities, remain divided. The man in the gray jacket, S., says that he owes Karwat an explanation, yet he does not provide one—or at least, the reader is not aware of it. All events unfold in the domain of uncertainty.

> "Anyway, I owe you an explanation," the man in the gray jacket went on.
> "Please don't think I was unsure of what to do next."
> "There?"
> "Yes. Your proposal…"
> The man in the windbreaker finally turned to him, and their eyes met.
> "Technically, nothing was resolved. And now," the man in the gray jacket smiled, "it only made things more complicated…"[15]

We do not know what the newspaper said about Adam S. One might surmise that the article talked about a murder he committed or a warrant. In this reading, Karwat's reaction is a form of denial—a repression of his criminal side, a refusal to acknowledge the crime as "his," as determining who he is. Karwat does not accept this image as part of himself; instead, he presses on with his actions, thereby intensifying the fracture within the self. This is not a moment of transformation, but a reaffirmation of alienation. The subject who commits evil must negate itself. Such a subject cannot act as a true self—as a spiritually centered, self-affirming consciousness. To perform an act that violates the self, one must undergo internal negation—the negation of oneself as a pure subject, as the origin of intention, as a bearer of responsibility. In this sense, evil requires a double: a figure who assumes the burden of the deed while simultaneously disburdening consciousness from the consequences. The double functions as a mechanism of repression, ritually present yet ontologically void.

Thanks to the double, the subject can remain silent, suspended, while an external force acts in his stead. Evil is neutralized through the division of responsibility: it is not I who kill, but he; it is not I who decides , but something outside of me. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the murder scene, where Karwat assumes the role of a passive, silent observer as S. shoots an elderly man. The man in the gray jacket carries out the killing with a simple, decisive gesture, mechanically pronouncing the words "You must die…" Adam S. kills without motive or passion; he is a mere executor of death. The man does not "choose" murder—he reenacts it, inscribing it into the repetitive gestures that had already annulled his existence. The rhythm of footsteps, lights, murmurs, the briefcase, and the act itself—all combine to evoke the impression of a liturgy of violence that unfolds autonomously. Within Karwat, emotions swelled, and it was he who struggled to master his feelings. Karwat emerges as a figure of consciousness that can no longer act—not out of refusal, but because he has been stripped of agency. His presence is that of a witness to a spiritual catastrophe. He knows yet does not intervene. He feels, yet does not move. What remains is a fractured, powerless consciousness, weighed down by spiritual inertia:

[15]Łuczeńczyk, 284.

> Slow, quiet, rhythmic music; through a haze of misunderstanding, he clenched his hands against the armrest of the chair, fixing his gaze entirely on S. Karwat tried, at the very least, not to surrender more of himself—here, now, at all.[16]

The protagonist of *Źródło*, S., embodies the notion of unjustifiable evil. He is neither a sadist nor one who derives pleasure from violence, nor does he act out of hatred. His actions are quiet, precise, and measured. Everything unfolds according to an internal schedule, rhythm, and plan. The evil he does is technical in nature, stripped of passion and motive. Karwat, by contrast, exemplifies the triumph of evil through silence, passivity, and acquiescence. Karwat does not kill, yet he helps choose the victim; he does not question, does not doubt, does not leave. He allows evil to take place:

> Two soft yet distinct as if knocks resounded again—this time a little faster, suddenly his legs gave way, collapsing to his knees first, the older man fell heavily to his side, strangely, almost enigmatically, without completing the fall by lying down. S., meanwhile, was closing his briefcase as if nothing had happened; they exchanged glances, and though they did not communicate much, he shifted sideways first, almost instinctively. He knew that once he was at the door—or better, once he left the room and stood in the hallway—he would pause and look again at the old man. One might even say that S. had been waiting for him at the door. Silence, an extraordinary silence of existence, unlike anything he had ever imagined, filled the apartment [...].[17]

In this passage, the murder is displaced beyond its climax—its dramatic intensity is overshadowed by the heavy, silent, and delayed collapse of the body. Karwat and S. exchange glances, but nothing comes of it; even the gesture itself does not communicate anything. In his nonchalance, neither the criminal assumes the role of a perpetrator nor the witness that of a judge—by refusing their roles, both are exempt from responsibility. The "extraordinary silence of existence," reverberating through the apartment after the murder, articulates the paradoxical, ontological meaninglessness of life. After the murder, there is neither *catharsis*, nor significance, nor shock. There remains only an inhuman silence that obstructs comprehension of what has transpired, for nothing has been accepted or acknowledged. This silence becomes a symbol of the world's spiritual decay—the crime has been committed, yet no one cares, no one objects, no one responds. Thus, the silence reveals the void of existence: there is no longer any meaning that might be salvaged. Nabert's unjustifiable evil assumes its purest form here—unprocessed, no longer in need of justification. In this novel, evil is neither named nor commented upon, neither expressed nor even clearly signaled. It simply is, leaving behind a heavy, unexplained void.

Gwiezdny Książę [The Star Prince]

Gwiezdny Książę transcends the realism of modernity. It takes place in the vaguely defined Middle Ages—an epoch left deliberately unspecified, without exact dates or historical

[16]Łuczeńczyk, 335.
[17]Łuczeńczyk, 336.

markers. This micro-novel, which at first reads like a political intrigue, the story of a coup, soon reveals a deeper, existential dimension. Its title and thematic structure unmistakably evoke Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, a classic treatise on the exercise of power and the mechanisms of political success. As in Machiavelli's work, the central figure is the prince, compelled to make strategic and often immoral decisions. Yet, unlike Machiavelli's cynical rationalism, Łuczeńczyk's *Gwiezdny Książę* presents the prince as a dramatic figure—he is lonely and torn. The prince is not an instrument of political calculation, but a figure marked by alienation, isolation, and irredeemability. Łuczeńczyk fashions him as an autonomous individual—unique, one of a kind, and therefore alienated, spiritually empty, and burdened with radical responsibility for both himself and the world.

Characters do not have names. We meet the prince, his confessor, Czarny [the black man]—the prince's advisor and right-hand man—the woman with whom the prince has an affair, and numerous other less important figures, each confined to their courtly function. Łuczeńczyk's style is steeped in rhythm and repetition, not for poetic effect, but as a means of intensifying silence, decision, and solitude. It is a form of existential minimalism: it does not parade emotion, but instead foregrounds decision, voice, and gaze. Silence is more meaningful than words.

The prince embodies the most radical form of loneliness: the solitude of a sovereign individual who wields power, yet not only does not need other people but actively eliminates them. The killings he commits, or commands, are not dictated by the logic of political necessity. They do not arise from calculated strategy or as responses to threat, though the novel's opening might suggest otherwise. The prince kills simply because he can. He kills because no one—neither man nor God—stands above him. His power is not a means of making the world a better place; it does not invoke ideals of goodness, justice, religion, or even political success. It is a pure manifestation of will, unrestrained by any external agency. It is a pure manifestation of will, unrestrained by any external agency. The assassination of the king, the slaughter of prisoners of war, executions—these are unnecessary and unjustifiable acts of evil. The prince is no Machiavelli: he does not kill because political logic compels him. He rules simply because he possesses the capacity to rule. In this way, the novel approaches Jean Nabert's notion of unjustifiable evil. Although it may appear that the prince's corruption begins with his first ruthless political act, the origin of his destruction lies deeper and precedes that moment. The decisive moment of spiritual regression is not the act of murder, but the conscious and overt denial of God—a higher authority. The prince confesses that he no longer prays, that he no longer makes the sign of the cross. He thus abandons his faith, inaugurating not only the process of spiritual disintegration but also signaling a radical rupture with transcendence, with the higher *self*. It is a rare instance in Łuczeńczyk's *oeuvre* where the problem of faith—and its loss—is addressed directly.

Power here is not conceived of as a relationship with others, but as the expression of an inner, silent decision made by the alienated individual. Czarny, the confessor, the woman, all appear merely as pawns. Every bond is broken or dissolved by the prince: he takes no sides, professes no faith, justifies no decision, and stands with no one. The culminating moment in this regression of individual consciousness is suicide. The prince, having attained absolute

domination over the world, chooses to kill himself, though nothing anticipates it—no defeat, no lost war, no betrayal. It is a pure act; the final gesture of sovereignty over oneself, in which the man chooses self-annihilation:

> They swam side by side, at times loosening his hold on the saddle, the prince soon felt the weight of his chainmail, belt, and sword pressing upon him. This pleased him; he tightened his grasp on the pommel and swept the water wide with his free hand. At last, they reached the middle. With a few powerful strokes, the prince suddenly veered away.
> "To the shore!" he called to the horse.
> The horse snorted and began swimming toward him.
> "To the shore!" the prince cried again, but the horse did not draw nearer. "Let's go home! Let's go home…" he repeated.
> The horse neighed and turned back toward the shore. From time to time, a distant neigh echoed across the water. His arms faltered, straining with the last of his strength against the downward pull. Then, the prince heard the faint sound of hooves in the shallows, followed by hoofbeats receding into the distance, punctuated by the occasional fading neigh. Relief and a soothing peace flooded his body. He lifted his gaze to the stars, which seemed to descend, scattering around him. His weary arms no longer moved and instead rose toward them, as if hoping for a joyful reunion, soon.[18]

Suicide—committed without apparent reason, without dramatic cause, in a state of seeming peace. This gesture—immersion in dark water beneath the night sky—is striking in its existential absurdity. The prince does not die in battle, does not suffer defeat; he simply chooses to die, as though he had reached the limit of his existential possibilities. This death is a final gesture of self-sovereignty, yet also an attempt to touch something beyond. The last upward gaze toward the starry sky—a Kantian symbol of moral order, divinity, and infinity—may be read as a desire for transgression, an effort to reach beyond the boundaries of existence he himself has set. The water in which he drowns *is* nothingness, ultimate annihilation, the very end of existence. Significantly, the event unfolds at night—within a world enveloped in darkness, a motif that permeates the entire novel as a metaphor for spiritual desolation, divine silence, and meaninglessness. *Gwiezdny Książę* is thus not merely the story of a cruel ruler, but also a poignant meditation on loneliness and existential boundaries, which can be crossed only through annihilation.

Ciemna Woda [Dark Water]

Evil in *Ciemna Woda* does not manifest itself as a distinct metaphysical force or antagonistic figure; rather, it seeps into the narrative through the protagonist's everyday decisions and attitudes—his behavior, gaze, inaction, and unresponsiveness. Tomasz [Thomas], the protagonist, is not overtly evil; he harbors no conscious intention to commit evil. Instead, he lets evil take place—through tacit consent, indifference, and failure to react. In this sense, Andrzej Łuczeńczyk presents evil as something incited by inaction, the inability of affirmation,

[18]Łuczeńczyk, 265–266.

isolation from the world, from others, and from relationships—rather than as something related to morality and intention.[19] Tomasz, as a "cold-blooded man," takes no existential risks and remains in a state of spiritual secession. Interpersonal relationships in the story are depicted as shallow, thoughtless, and instrumental. Tomasz attaches little importance to friendship; he disregards the feelings of his friend Jula, with whom Ewa was also involved, and who was at the same party.

Contrary to the social code of loyalty and "male solidarity," Tomasz spends the night with Ewa, without remorse. What is significant, however, is that he does not so much break the rules as simply disregards them. He is devoid of emotions, incapable of experiencing empathy or engaging in moral reflection. The evil disclosed in this act thus arises not from a deliberate decision to defy ethics, but from the absence of a moral stance. This evil is neutral, cold, unspectacular—and for that very reason, profoundly unsettling.

A similar disposition emerges in a scene where he talks with his boss about JK. Tomasz calls his colleague "a pig" in his head. He knows that his behavior is objectionable, yet he refrains from expressing his opinion directly. He remains silent—unwilling to take a stand. These gestures, however, are themselves acts of will, arising from selfishness. In Jean Nabert's terms, his attitude derives from "self-love," a "love for the lesser self" (the *empirical self*, rather than the *pure self*). Shortly thereafter, the protagonist goes to the train station, where he encounters two colleagues—Witek and Leon—as well as a woman. The point of view employed in this scene is both formally intriguing and semantically significant: the narrative slips into the first-person; the representation of reality is entirely subordinated to the protagonist's perception.

Male colleagues are mentioned by name (even though Tomasz shows little interest in engaging with them), but the woman is not. It suggests that her identity is, in his eyes, not that important. The context makes it clear that the woman is Ewa—she is the one with whom Tomasz had spent the night. The protagonist is driven by sheer desire, a fact underscored by the description of a sexual act that follows—portrayed in a brutal manner, stripped of intimacy.

The characters do not communicate: no words are spoken—the woman does not have a voice. After intercourse, she vanishes, as though her presence had been exhausted and was no longer required in the narrative. She is depicted solely as an object of desire, her role reduced to the release of sexual tension. Her body does not resist, yet it does not convey consent. Tomasz reads her silence and stillness as consent, interpreting the sexual act as one of domination. The scene is stripped of affect, intimacy, and communication; it is a cold, calculated act of will, devoid of reflection. The absence of communication—the silence, the unspoken thoughts, and above all, the silencing of the woman's voice—can be understood as a manifestation of the subject's spiritual fracture. Tomasz cannot recognize the Other, who exists only as a source of physical gratification, reduced to a purely corporeal experience.

[19]Łuczeńczyk's depiction of evil as a result of passivity and the atrophy of will engages in a dialogue with Nabert's philosophy. For Nabert, free will—even in its negation—is crucial. This suggests that literature surpasses philosophy, generating a semantic surplus.

The most complete depiction of the unjustifiable emerges at the story's climax, when the protagonist arrives at a lakeside beach. Despite his protests, he is coerced by two chance acquaintances—Nik and Robert—into joining them for a drunken binge. After some time, unable to get rid of them, Tomasz decides to swim in the lake. His two intoxicated companions follow him into the water. It is in the water that Tomasz sees both men drown, yet he chooses not to intervene:

> I was still. I didn't move. My gaze shifted from Nik to Robert, back and forth. Later, when I recalled the moment, I wondered how I had managed to stay afloat. I do not remember if I moved my arms or legs. A few strokes would have been enough to reach either of them, yet I remained motionless. I was still… The water grew calm, its turbulence fading. I cannot say how long I lingered. I don't know if it was brief or endless, very brief or an eternity. And then, at last, I turned and began swimming back.[20]

Tomasz chooses to be still. He chooses not to save anyone, despite being able to. In the spirit of Nabert's philosophy, this moment reveals evil not as a criminal deed but as a spiritual void: the impossibility of affirmation, the incapacity to act in the name of human relationships. Evil arises not because Tomasz made the wrong choice, but because he was incapable of choosing at all. Following this event, the protagonist is taken into custody and interrogated by the authorities—a corporal, a captain, and finally a prosecutor. He is then admitted for observation to a psychiatric hospital, which ultimately confirms that he is entirely sane and fully capable of bearing responsibility. Ultimately, he stands before the judge. When asked why he did not save anyone, Tomasz stubbornly replies: "But which one? Which one was I supposed to save?"

This story presents an extreme situation, one reminiscent of the classic trolley problem but radically inverted. The protagonist can save two drowning individuals, each equally close to him, whom he neither likes nor dislikes. From an ethical standpoint, the choice appears straightforward: he can act, he can decide. Yet the protagonist chooses not to act—he saves no one. In the spirit of Nabert's philosophy, the issue lies not in the choice between X or Y but in whether consciousness succeeds in uniting with its own will to perform an act of affirmation—an attempt to exist authentically in the presence of the other. The protagonist remains in a state of spiritual secession—estranged from himself, from his will, from the world, and from human relationships. Not because he made a wrong choice, but because he was incapable of choosing at all. In this sense, *Ciemna Woda* is a story of spiritual regression: a man who gradually loses the capacity to acknowledge others is ultimately unable to save anyone, even when a single life might have been spared. Tomasz is not evil because he consciously inflicts harm, but because he allows evil to take place—he is indifferent, hollow, devoid of emotions. In Łuczeńczyk's prose, evil does not erupt in a grand or spectacular gesture; it manifests itself instead in the quiet aversion of the gaze, in the refusal to decide, in silence.

Conclusion

Andrzej Łuczeńczyk remains a singular figure—an author who never entered the mainstream of Polish literature, yet whose prose confronts what is darkest and most difficult to articulate. His style is emotionless, ascetic, stripped of emotional ornamentation. In his works, silence

[20]Łuczeńczyk, 35.

carries more weight than words, and gesture speaks more profoundly than the character's psychological profile. Łuczeńczyk offers no *catharsis*; instead, he confronts the reader with the silence that follows death, crime, and indecision. It is this silence that embodies evil.

In this context, Jean Nabert's philosophy emerges not as an external framework imposed upon the text but as an organic context. Writing about the unjustifiable—evil that resists justification or rationalization—Nabert opens an interpretive space in which Łuczeńczyk's prose acquires a new dimension, becoming less a description of events than a testimony to a wound. For Nabert, evil is not a moral category but a spiritual event: an experience of severed bonds, of the *self*'s estrangement from itself and from the other. This is precisely what we encounter in *Źródło*, where the protagonist's fractured identity leads to the annihilation of responsibility, and in *Gwiezdny Książę*, where absolute power leads to suicide—a pure act of self-annihilation. In *Ciemna Woda*, evil takes shape in inertia, in indecision, in the passive gaze that sees friends drown.

The reception of Łuczeńczyk's works has always been marked by tensions. Henryk Bereza regarded him as one of the most important young prose writers, a priest of the existential mystery of death, while other critics—Bugajski, Starosta, Wójcik—highlighted his ability to depict the banality of evil. Yet there were also critics, for example Zieliński and Mętrak, who accused the writer of formalism and emotional sterility. This notwithstanding, no one remained indifferent to his prose. Why, then, read Łuczeńczyk alongside Nabert? Because both converge at the same point: a wound that cannot be healed or named. Łuczeńczyk clothes this wound in literary form—silence, lack of emotions, repetitive gestures. Nabert offers the conceptual tool for recognizing it: the unjustifiable, evil that cannot be justified, taking place in silence. The encounter between literature and philosophy here yields no consolation. It only gives rise to testimony: that evil exists, that it takes place, that it leaves behind a void which can neither be explained nor filled.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract:
This article examines the neglected Polish writer of the 1980s, Andrzej Łuczeńczyk, and the representation of evil in his work, interpreted through the phenomenological–existentialist philosophy of Jean Nabert. Seeking to portray the darkest dimensions of human existence, Łuczeńczyk exposes its manifestations in death, murder, the breakdown of communication, loneliness, and the brutality of human actions. Nabert's reflective philosophy—particularly his concept of unjustifiable evil, that is, evil as inexplicable, irreducible, and incapable of justification—provides a framework for comprehending how evil emerges in Łuczeńczyk's fictional world: as a spiritual event, inscribed as a wound in human consciousness and will. Łuczeńczyk's austere, minimalist style divided critics of his time: some, following Henryk Bereza, praised his uncompromising engagement with deadly themes, while others dismissed him as a mere formalist. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the ways in which evil is articulated in Łuczeńczyk's prose, to reintroduce his work to contemporary readers, and to renew scholarly interest in his works within Polish literary circles.

Andrzej Łuczeńczyk

unjustifiable

JEAN NABERT

Hanryk Bereza

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