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From Irony to Autobiography

The convergence of irony and autobiography in contemporary writing, and in literary scholarship itself, may shape the trajectory of literature and literary studies for years to come.

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From irony to autobiography

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Did irony truly vanish from literature after postmodernism, or has it merely resurfaced in new forms and contexts? Alexandre Gefen has recently put forward a compelling thesis about a fundamental transformation in contemporary writing, which now turns more decisively toward therapeutic and autobiographical reflection. In this returning to the essential necessity of writing, literature diminishes the authority of its high-art ideologies yet regains existential and social relevance. Within this renewed framework, we can observe fresh deployments of irony and novel ironic sensibilities among writers. Postmodern pan-irony fades and the critical and engaged ironist returns—employing irony as a vital self-therapeutic instrument, while redefining its functions and boundaries. This transformation is mirrored in the reader, who revisits texts assumed to be ironic and uncovers the author's subtle strategies for calibrating irony's impact. The convergence of irony and autobiography in contemporary writing, and in literary scholarship itself, thus emerges as one of the defining phenomena of our time. Its evolving formulas may shape the trajectory of literature and literary studies for years to come.

In this issue, irony and autobiography intersect in multiple ways, each becoming a framework for the other's scholarly and creative explorations. Estera Żyrek-Horodyska highlights the significance of autobiographical spaces in a reportage about Detroit—a city reclaimed by the writer with striking sincerity. Krzysztof Gajda examines the reception of the autobiographical work by Jacek Kaczmarski's daughter, whose confessional narrative was subjected to intense media scrutiny that imposed an unintended layer of irony. Natalia Teklik investigates Polish women's autobiographical writing, demonstrating how it, unironically, reclaims subjectivity. In Tomasz Gruszczyk's article, the autobiographical dimensions of Urszula Zajączkowska's ecocritical writing are interpreted as part of a biosemiotic project, where nature—treated as a serious and equal partner—emerges as a vital context for her work. Bartosz Kowalczyk presents a daring reinterpretation of Bruno Schulz's short stories, revealing strategies for curbing irony and even constructing a deliberate model of post-ironic literature. Adrian Kaleta revisits Zyta Oryszyn's writing, showing how she both constrained and harnessed irony to articulate the despair of life under a totalitarian regime and to forge forms of resistance against oppression.

Several articles in this issue do not directly engage with its central themes, yet they provide valuable contextual insights. Monika Kowalik revisits the work of Andrzej Łuczeńczyk, a nearly forgotten writer once championed by the critic Henryk Bereza. Irony in his writing functions less as playful detachment than as a means of initiation into existential horror. To illuminate this dimension, Kowalik draws on Jean Nabert's philosophy of the unjustifiable—an essential framework for grasping the fundamental condition of human existence. Piotr Kubiński traces the unexpected evolution of contemporary video games. Rather than overwhelming players with sensory excess or ironizing every theme, recent productions cultivate serenity, temper their effects, and invite patient, contemplative engagement. They encourage not only calm but also a deeper, more serious mode of reflection. Complementing this discussion, Yixiang Chen writes about the remarkable reception of Roman Ingarden's literary thought in China, further enriching the thematic scope of this issue.

The research on irony and autobiography presented in this issue of Forum of Poetics *traces the current shift from irony toward the new literary forms of therapeutic and autobiographical writing and points to the emergence of distinct modes of autobiographical irony and ironic autobiography—modalities that may shape future paradigms of literature and literary studies. They demand urgent critical attention*

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

Egopolis in a State of Crisis: On the Role of Autobiographical Places in Reportage Prose – Charlie LeDuff's *Detroit: An American Autopsy*

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In his 1936 paper *Autobiografizm* [Autobiographism], Karol Irzykowski introduced the notion of crypto-autobiographism, a term he used to describe the covert embedding of an author's biographical experiences into artistic work, an impulse driven by writers' fear of being accused of excessive exhibitionism.[1] This mode of thinking was later decisively disrupted in the era of late capitalism, dominated by a phenomenon that Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska vividly called "the invasion of autobiographism." [2] The expansive nature of this form is evidenced by the fact that today it reaches far beyond literary practice, becoming one of the central, trans-

[1] Karol Irzykowski, "Autobiografizm" [Autobiographism], Rocznik Literacki (1936): 36–39.

[2] Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, Między autobiografią a literaturą [Between autobiography and literature] (Warszawa: PWN, 1993), 9.

generic categories present also in media discourse[3]. Autobiography is no longer associated solely with a separate, monumental work explicitly bearing that subtitle, in which – as Artur Hellich writes – the author "[...] turns inward, converses with themselves, because their aim is to understand and describe how they became who they are." [4] In an age of blurred genre boundaries, of "blurred genres,"[5] and even diagnoses of their death,[6] fragments of autobiographical motifs emerge with increasing clarity also within journalistic texts – texts that, by definition, are oriented not toward exploring the author's inner life but toward, to quote Hanna Krall, "writing down the world."[7]

One journalistic form clearly marked by autobiographical intent is reportage, which – as an important component of the culture industry[8] – has, in the "age of the document,"[9] successfully adapted to the logic and expectations of the market, coherently combining cognitive and affective elements into factographic stories about the world enriched with numerous autobiographical traces.[10] In the universe of non-fiction prose, the "autobiographical element" spans a wide spectrum: from extensive references to one's own biography woven into journalistic texts[11] (see, for example, *Trębacz z Tembisy* [The Trumpeter from Tembisa] by Wojciech Jagielski or *Nie ma* [There Is Not] by Mariusz Szczygieł); through a distinct subgenre known as the self-reportage (e.g., *Świadek* [The Witness] by Robert Rient); through reportage sagas that document an author's family history[12] (Monika Sznajderman's *Fałszerze pieprzu* [The Pepper Forgers] or Maciej Zaremba Bielawski's *Dom z dwiema wieżami* [The House with Two Towers]); all the way to forms created by reporters that are par excellence autobiographical[13] (Hunter S. Thompson's *Królestwo lęku* [Kingdom of Fear]) or reportage-autobiographical (Andrzej Muszyński's *Dom ojców* [The House of Fathers]).

[3] See Monika Wiszniowska, "Autobiograficzne reportaże książkowe. Kategoria genologiczna i jej odmiany" [Autobiographical book-length reportage: a genological category and its variations], Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich 2 (2022): 101–117.

[4] Artur Hellich, "Niechęć do wyznawania. O kulturze autobiografii w Polsce" [Reluctance to confess: on the culture of autobiography in Poland], Autobiografia 2 (2016): 22.

[5] Clifford Geertz, "O gatunkach zmąconych. Nowe konfiguracje myśli społecznej" [Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought], translated into Polish by. Zdzisław Łapiński, Teksty Drugie 2 (1990): 113–130.

[6] Stanisław Balbus, "Zagłada gatunków" [The extinction of genres], Teksty Drugie 6 (1999): 25–39.

[7] See Jacek Antczak, Reporterka. Rozmowy z Hanną Krall [Reporter. Interviews with Hanna Krall] (Warszawa: Agora, 2015), 85.

[8] See Dominik Antonik, "Czy prawda może być medialna? O wątpliwej autonomii reportażu i potrzebie małych kryzysów" [Can truth be attractive for media? On the questionable autonomy of reportage and the need for small crises], Teksty Drugie 6 (2019): 223–239.

[9] Zygmunt Ziątek, Wiek dokumentu. Inspiracje dokumentarne w polskiej prozie współczesnej [The age of the document: documentary inspirations in contemporary Polish prose] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 1999).

[10] See Joanna Jeziorska-Haładyj, Tekstowe wykładniki fikcji na przykładzie reportażu i powieści autobiograficznej [Textual indicators of fiction: the case of reportage and the autobiographical novel] (Warszawa: Fundacja Akademia Humanistyczna, Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2013), 61.

[11] See Katarzyna Frukacz, "Autor (w) reportażu. Personalizacja tekstu reporterskiego w dobie mediamorfozy" [The author in/of reportage: personalization of the journalistic text in the age of mediamorphosis], in: Trzydzieści. Polska w reportażu, reportaż w Polsce po 1989 roku [Thirty: Poland in reportage, reportage in Poland after 1989], edited by Elżbieta Pawlak-Hejno, Magdalena Piechota (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2020), 15–30.

[12] See Edyta Żyrek-Horodyska, "Reportażowa saga rodzinna. Fuzja gatunków i dziennikarska archiwistyka" [A family reportage saga: the fusion of genres and journalistic archiving], Zeszyty Naukowe KUL 4 (2019): 133–148.

[13] See Edyta Żyrek-Horodyska, "Reporterska gonzo(auto)biografia. O «Królestwie lęku» Huntera S. Thompsona" [A gonzo (auto)biographical reportage: On Hunter S. Thompson's Kingdom of Fear], Pamiętnik Literacki 4 (2023): 139–153.

In light of Paul de Man's theory, virtually every text has an autobiographical dimension to some degree[14], even if it is effectively camouflaged by its author. One manifestation of the personalization of reportage discourse is the mapping, within a journalistic text, of autobiographical places which, on the one hand, may serve as a starting point for the reporter to construct a narrative often of an interventionist character, and on the other, as an important tool enabling the author's presence within the space of the reportage volume. The aim of this paper is to reconstruct, with the aid of geopoetic tools, the most important roles that autobiographical places may play in the work of contemporary reporters, as well as to analyse in detail, within this context, the volume *Detroit: An American Autopsy* by the American reporter and Pulitzer Prize winner Charlie LeDuff.[15] My concern will be to examine how this reportage activates the discourse of autobiographism as a consequence of the reporter's return to his native metropolis. The mediated Detroit – as I initially assume – acquires in this volume the status of an egopolis: a city abandoned and reclaimed, whose biography becomes tightly interwoven with the reporter's autobiography, thereby influencing the identity of the subject who reconstructs it.

Autobiographical places and their reportage realizations

In his 1999 essay *Zagłada gatunków* [The Extinction of Genres], Stanisław Balbus drew attention to the advancing blurring of precise boundaries between literary and non-literary forms of expression – a development he traced to "[...] the settling, within artistic literature, of such forms of practical communication as reportage, biography, and autobiography [...]"[16]. Book-length reportage, virtually from the moment of its emergence, was shaped by an autobiographical diction – evident, for instance, in the distinctly personal tone of the works of Egon Erwin Kisch or Melchior Wańkowicz. In late modernity, the genre's autobiographical dispositions acquired yet another important dimension, one stemming from the deepening marketization of reportage prose. The intimization of journalistic discourse and the self-presentational techniques employed by reporters have now become a crucial element of communicative practice and an important component of marketing strategy – key, from the perspective of the contemporary culture industry. In an era of global interest in autobiography, autofiction, and self-reportage, the figure of the creator becomes the primary instance that "binds together" the individual components of the reportage project, which reaches its audience with the status of a brand[17]. Ryszard Kapuściński had already written about the author as the central binding force of a reportage narrative:

> In all these books, I write about myself, about what has happened to me and about what I have seen. And I do not take a single step beyond that – beyond personal, direct experience. There is

[14]See Paul de Man, "Autobiografia jako od-twarzanie" [Autobiography as De-facement], translated by Maria Bożenna Fedewicz, Pamiętnik Literacki 2 (1986): 310.

[15]See Charlie LeDuff, Detroit. An American Autopsy (New York: The Penguin Press, 2013). All the cited fragments in English come from this edition [PZ].

[16]Balbus, 31.

[17]See Dominik Antonik, Autor jako marka. Literatura w kulturze audiowizualnej społeczeństwa informacyjnego [Author as brand: literature in the audiovisual culture of the information society] (Kraków: Universitas, 2014).

> not a single text there that is not a description of a personal experience, an adventure [...]. Once someone asked me: well, fine, but who actually is the protagonist of *Imperium* [Imperium]? As if there were no protagonist. How can there be no protagonist? *I* am the protagonist. Who is the protagonist of *Heban* [The Shadow of the Sun]? *I* am the protagonist of *Heban*; I write about myself – this is my story[18].

Drawing attention to the geobiographical dimension of reportage writing seems justified for at least two reasons. First, such a perspective is encouraged by the contemporary "crisis of grand narratives", observed also within reportage prose, the consequence of which is a strong intimization and personalization of the genre. Without laying claim to a panoramic view of reality, it is often reduced to a private micro-narrative. It evolves into forms described as self-reportage or intimate reportage[19], whose thematic dominant is the foregrounded interdependence of space and autobiography. Second, the topocentric–autobiographical dimension of reportage prose appears to be a result of the changing expectations of the contemporary media audience, who increasingly display voyeuristic expectations toward reportage – expectations manifested in a desire for closer insight into the private life of the reporter.

Tomasz Olczyk, analysing the process by which people in positions of power become celebrities, identified as its components "[...] particular ways of attracting attention, the privatization of one's image, [and] the construction of intimate bonds at a distance [...]"[20]. Similar mechanisms can be observed today among many reporters who, to quote Olczyk once again, adapt "[...] those media behaviours of celebrities that they consider effective in the game for attention and the emotional engagement of audiences"[21]. Introducing autobiographical places into journalistic texts thus becomes an important element in the privatization of the author's image and, consequently, a significant step toward acquiring the attention capital of the contemporary media audience. The effects of this process on reportage prose are, of course, multifaceted. The overrepresentation of the reporter within the text – vividly described by Katarzyna Frukacz as "contamination by the reporter" – for the poetics of the genre signifies both "a manifestation of a subjective point of view" and "a violation of the objectivized convention of reportage"[22].

Under the term "autobiographical place", Małgorzata Czermińska understands a specific territory known to the reader from the given author's biography – one that exists not only as

[18]"Od historii do antropologii spotkania. Z Ryszardem Kapuścińskim rozmawia Gabriela Łęcka" [From history to the anthropology of encounter. An interview with Ryszard Kapuściński by Gabriela Łęcka], Opcje 2 (1999): 36.

[19]See Beata Nowacka, "Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego reportaż intymny" [Ryszard Kapuściński's intimate reportage], in: "Życie jest z przenikania...". Szkice o twórczości Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego ["Life is made of interpenetration...": essays on the work of Ryszard Kapuściński], edited by Bogusław Wróblewski (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2008), 121–128.

[20]Tomasz Olczyk, "Celebrytyzacja polityki w opiniach wyborców" [The celebrity-ization of politics in voters' opinions], Preferencje Polityczne. Postawy, Identyfikacje, Zachowania 8 (2014): 163.

[21]Olczyk, 163.

[22]Katarzyna Frukacz, "Między literackością a podmiotowością: nowy wymiar «skażenia» polskiego reportażu (Na przykładzie «Zapisków na biletach» Michała Olszewskiego)" [Between literariness and subjectivity: the new dimension of the Polish reportage "contamination" (on the example of Zapiski na biletach by Michał Olszewski)], Postscriptum Polonistyczne 1 (2013): 154.

a textual representation but also as a concrete geographical space[23], prompting the reader to seek extratextual references. Although this category was originally intended for the analysis of literary texts, the scholar noted that it may also be extended to other forms of creative activity, such as film, painting, or photography[24]. Czermińska wrote:

> More precisely, what is at stake is the point of contact between a writer's biography and his or her creative work, understood broadly – as the totality of all preserved utterances by a given author. This includes works traditionally classified as literature, together with journalistic pieces, private notes, statements recorded on audio or film media, as well as works in other arts, if the author practiced them[25].

According to Czermińska's suggestions, "the condition for a given writer to create an autobiographical place is [...] both his or her inclination to adopt an autobiographical stance and the possession of a well-developed topographic imagination"[26]. This characterizes creators "[...] endowed with a strong sensory sensitivity, interested in the richness of the concrete, attuned to the significance of material detail"[27]. In non-fiction writing, the space foregrounded in this way becomes not merely a background but – alongside characters and events – one of the most important components of the journalistic text.

Autobiographical places, according to Czermińska, have an individual, singular character[28]. This is the case even when the textual representations concern spaces already well known, such as Paris, Rome, or New York. "In the case of places that already possess a distinct cultural symbolism, the image of an autobiographical place belonging to a particular writer grows in part out of the existing tradition, and in part alters and enriches the inherited image with a new, personal tone"[29]. Czermińska emphasizes that many authors have succeeded in creating a "myth of a place". This is the principle on which Schulz's Drohobych operates, but also – if we attempt to apply this category to reportage prose – the Prague portrayed by the already-mentioned Kisch, which in the self-reportage volume *Jarmark sensacji* [The Sensation Fair] is presented as the territory where the reporter matures into journalism and gets his first editorial experience.

Returns to spaces remembered from childhood or early youth undergo – Czermińska writes – a process of archetypization. Evoking this period activates in the author a work of memory grounded in strategies that either idealize the past or attempt to find a key to its interpretation through the prism of the chronotope. Kapuściński depicts the land of his childhood—Pińsk—on the pages of *Imperium* [Imperium]. As we read in *Lapidaria* [Lapidaria], the reporter even intended to devote a separate publication to this place. In an entry dated 26 September 2004,

[23]Małgorzata Czermińska, "Miejsca autobiograficzne. Propozycja w ramach geopoetyki" [Autobiographical places: a proposal within geopoetics], Teksty Drugie 5 (2011): 183–200.

[24]Czermińska, 186.

[25]Czermińska, 183.

[26]Czermińska, 190.

[27]Czermińska, 188.

[28]Czermińska, 186.

[29]Czermińska, 186.

he noted: "Other ideas: a book about Malinowski's stay on the Trobriand Islands and his concept of fieldwork. A book about Pińsk. A book about photography"[30]. The postponement of these plans was forced upon the reporter by his deteriorating health, and ultimately, their realization was cut short by his death. A space remembered from childhood also inspired the creation of Magdalena Grzebałkowska's book *1945. Wojna i pokój* [1945: War and Peace], in which the reporter recalls her childhood spent in the Recovered Territories:

> I was born in the Recovered Territories 27 years after the war. The houses in my town were German, as were the armchairs in my grandmother's room, the landscape painting above her table, the crystal decanter. The taps in our Sopot apartment were marked *kalt* and *warm*[31].

Another strategy for creating autobiographical places is the act of domesticating them – transforming a foreign space into one that is close and significant from the perspective of the reporter's life trajectory. An example is the image of Africa in Kapuściński's work, discussed by Czermińska[32]. Jarosław Mikołajewski captured this attitude in his book *Sentymentalny portret Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego* [A Sentimental Portrait of Ryszard Kapuściński], written after Kapuściński's death. He recalled: "Rysiek often said that in Africa he had found his hometown, and in African poverty the poverty of Pińsk – pre-war, from his childhood"[33].

Czermińska observes that, in the case of autobiographical places, a space may be evoked either through the introduction of specific toponyms or through their omission while nonetheless leaving the reader various textual hints that allow the identification of a particular location. Thus, considering the title of the reportage volume alone, LeDuff's concrete *Detroit…*, discussed in this paper, may be assigned to the first of these categories. Zbigniew Rokita's indeterminate *Kajś* [Somewhere], a reportage articulating the author's Silesian identity, saturated with personal passages, in which autobiographical places play an important role, belongs to the second category. Let us add that situated somewhat between these two poles are the spaces evoked through pseudonymization. This strategy can be observed in Rokita's *Odrzania* [Odrzania], whose title, on the one hand, conjures a concrete territory of the Recovered Territories, and on the other allows one to think of that terrain as a land delineated by the reporter's imagination.

Czermińska identifies several types of autobiographical places. The first is defined by the opposition between the place of movement (a chosen place – one that comes into being through being on the road and arriving at a point where one stops; reportage travel writing is certainly a rich reservoir of such places) and the fixed place (the place in which one exists. These are primordial, inherited spaces, often mapped, for example, in self-reportage)[34]. Czermińska also lists a number of more detailed categories. She mentions observed places –

[30]Ryszard Kapuściński, Lapidaria IV-VI (Warszawa: Agora, 2008), 291.

[31]Magdalena Grzebałkowska, 1945. Wojna i pokój [1945. War and peace] (Warszawa: Agora, 2015), 72.

[32]Czermińska, 191.

[33]Jarosław Mikołajewski, Sentymentalny portret Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego [A sentimental portrait of Ryszard Kapuściński] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2008), 10.

[34]Czermińska, 192.

spaces that give a sense of rootedness, with which the creator is strongly connected[35]. Such is the character of the Łódź described by Wojciech Górecki, to which the journalist, born in that city, returns repeatedly in his reportage books (*Łódź przeżyła katharsis* [Łódź Survived a Catharsis], 1998, and *Łódź. Miasto po przejściach* [Łódź: A City Weathered by Hardship], 2020). A reporter employing this strategy of presenting an autobiographical place – being a person raised in a given environment – appears as someone who knows the problems of that place intimately and views it from a perspective shaped by the emotional involvement of the writer. Another category consists of remembered places – once fixed, but lost as a result of escape, growing up, exile, and so on[36]. An example here may be the Żoliborz *Domeczek* ("Little House"), described with tenderness by Melchior Wańkowicz on the pages of *Ziele na kraterze* [Herbs on a Crater], which was destroyed during the Second World War. In the introduction to the volume, the reporter noted:

> I wrote through the prism that is for me the most distinct – my own home. […]
> So I would only like the reader, through its story, to glimpse the stories of their own homes and their own families, and for the recollection thus awakened to tear, for a moment, the unbearable sediment of life[37].

Another category consists of imagined places – locations not personally known to the author but evoked through family stories[38]. Such is the character of the descriptions of places based on the architecture of memory, reconstructed from recollections, photographs, and documents in Monika Sznajderman's *Fałszerze pieprzu* [The Pepper Forgers]. Another category comprises shifted places, that is, so-called second homelands, consciously chosen by the reporter[39]. Within these categories, one may consider, for example, Spitsbergen, where Ilona Wiśniewska—the author of *Białe* [White] – settled after leaving Poland. Czermińska also mentions chosen places, which one does not inhabit permanently but only visits[40]. An example of such a space is the Czech lands of Mariusz Szczygieł, described in his reportage volumes *Gottland* [Gottland] and *Zrób sobie raj* [Make Yourself a Paradise], as well as in the form of *Osobisty przewodnik po Pradze* [A Personal Guide to Prague], promoted with a blurb that foregrounds the reporter's exceptionally emotional relationship to the Czech capital:

> PRAGUE without the Charles Bridge and without Hradčany? Yes! Mariusz Szczygieł will guide you only through his favourite places. If something isn't here, it means it didn't seduce me", he says. "This book is not only a guide; it is a record of my affection for the city and for Czech culture[41].

The last of the categories mentioned by Czermińska consists of touched places – locations encountered most often while travelling, in passing, yet regarded by the author as important

[35]Czermińska, 193.

[36]Czermińska, 194.

[37]Melchior Wańkowicz, Ziele na kraterze [Herbs on a Crater] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Literatura, 2007), 9.

[38]Czermińska, 195.

[39]Czermińska, 195.

[40]Czermińska, 197.

[41]Mariusz Szczygieł, Osobisty przewodnik po Pradze [A personal guide to Prague] (Warszawa: Dowody, 2020), tylna okładka.

for various reasons[42]. An example here may be Ziemowit Szczerek's reportage volume *Wymyślone miasto Lwów* [The Imagined City of Lviv], which documents the tension emerging between the geographically real city (one of the many, we may add, that the reporter visits in Ukraine) and its cultural imagination.

Czermińska notes that, in the process of mapping autobiographical places, creators do not have to limit themselves to activating only a single model[43]. In liquid modernity, where the stability of a settled existence is often replaced by the figure of the nomad, constant movement, so typical of a reporter's work, determines the ever-changing forms of how they situate themselves in the world. "Within a single body of work and a single biography, there usually emerges a hierarchy: one model dominates, others are subordinated to it and complement it or compete with it. There are no rules here anymore, only individual writerly decisions."[44] This fluidity of categories is perfectly revealed in the topographically oriented prose of Szczerek, the author of, among others, *Paczka radomskich* [A Pack of Radom Boys] and *Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian* [Mordor Will Come and Eat Us, or The Secret History of the Slavs], who, in order to better understand his native Radom, decided to look at it from the distance provided by Ukraine:

> Radom [...] is eastern, and perhaps that's precisely what never quite sat right with me. Because I never felt particularly good in Radom, I always felt good in the south, in the pro-Austrian little Galicia. It always seemed warmer to me, more pleasantly nestled into all those little valleys, with its small towns with their squares and town halls. And perhaps that is why I began to feel drawn eastward – to see what this whole business with my native Radom was about. Where this eastern quality of it came from, and what it means in its, let's say, original version. And since Ukraine was relatively the closest and, as it seemed to me then, the most interesting, I started travelling precisely there[45].

The examples gathered here of the functioning of autobiographical places in reportage prose indicate the possibility of situating it within the framework of the auto/bio/geo/graphy discussed by Elżbieta Rybicka. The connections forming within the genre between autobiography and space make it possible to position the journalist's account of their own life within the context of contemporary issues. As Rybicka states, "this neologism is intended, on the one hand, to refer back to the tradition of autobiographical and biographical writing, and, on the other, to indicate that there exists a kind of personal-document literature in which the history of a human being is understood through geographical places" [46]. This mode of narrating the world may be regarded as an important perspective from the point of view of reportage discourse, allowing the individual to be portrayed on a broader plane—as someone

[42]Czermińska, 198.

[43]Czermińska, 199.

[44]Czermińska, 199.

[45]Ewelina Mokrzecka, "Ziemowit Szczerek: Polska czerpie perwersyjną przyjemność, że ktoś jest gorszy" [Ziemowit Szczerek: Poland derives a perverse pleasure from the fact that someone is worse off], https://zw.lt/kultura-historia/ziemowit-szczerek-polska-czerpie-perwersyjna-przyjemnosc-ze-ktos-jest-gorszy/, date of access: 11.02.2024.

[46]Elżbieta Rybicka, "Auto/bio/geo/grafie" [Auto/bio/geo/graphies], Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze 4 (2013): 11.

who remains in interaction with a specific geographical location and subsequently transposes it creatively into the fabric of the journalistic text.

Detroit as an Autobiographical Place in Charlie LeDuff's *Detroit*…

Published in 2013[47], the reportage volume *Detroit: An American Autopsy* is a narrative enriched with numerous autobiographical traces, whose titular protagonist is LeDuff's hometown – sinking ever deeper into chaos as a result of rising crime, growing unemployment, pervasive corruption, and disastrously mismanaged politics. In this text, the journalist activates the motif of returning to one's family home. Yet in his descriptions of the city, he is far from invoking conventionalized images of an idyllic land of happy childhood. In 2007, having decided to leave *The New York Times* (after ten years of working for the paper), LeDuff takes a job at the *Detroit News*. He explains this decision in detail in the book:

> It was time to go home.
> Part of it was for my daughter. Back in Detroit, there were grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins. There was a culture. A family.
> Part of it was for me […].
> Circling back to Detroit was instinct. […] Detroit might be the epicenter, a funhouse mirror and future projection of America. An incredibly depressed city in its death swoon.
> But it could also be a Candy Land from a reporter's perspective. Decay. Mile after mile of rotten buildings, murder, leftover people. One fucking depressing, dysfunctional big glowing ball of color. Une unbelievable story after another[48].

By admitting to the half-private, half-professional motivations behind his return to Detroit, LeDuff appears simultaneously to mark out two main narrative axes of the reportage. The first will centre on autobiographical references, while the second will adopt a strictly reportage-oriented perspective, dominated in turn by two thematic areas: politics (which the journalist discusses by invoking the actions of the city's corrupt authorities) and society (the fates of Detroit's residents: victims of crime and their relatives, factory workers, firefighters, the unhoused). The element binding these two areas together is the author's hometown – presented both from a contemporary perspective (that is, corresponding to the period when LeDuff and his family decided to live there again) and from a retrospective one (activated in the numerous recollective passages of the reportage, in which the journalist returns in thought to his childhood spent near Joy Road, but also to the period of the city's founding).

The image of LeDuff's Detroit mapped in the reportage is a territory I refer to as an *egopolis* – an autobiographical reportage city that activates, within the space of the journalistic text, two discourses at once: the personal and the geographical. In Detroit, as if through a lens, the gravest afflictions of America in the early twenty-first century converge, but also the most powerful traumas that the writer must confront upon returning home. Owing to the book's

[47]The Polish translation was published in 2015.
[48]LeDuff, 24.

enrichment with autobiographical references, the volume discussed here presents itself as an example of clear generic dispersion. By combining within it two overlapping thematic forces—the autobiographical and the reportorial—LeDuff signals this already in the prologue, where he reconstructs the main motivations behind the creation of the book and identifies the key components of his auto/bio/geo/graphic stance:

> It is a book of reportage. A memoire of a reporter returning home – only he cannot find the home he once knew. This is a book about living people getting on with the business of surviving in a place that has little use for anyone anymore except those left here. It is about waking up one morning and being told you are obsolete and not wanting to believe it, but knowing it's true. It is a book about a rough town and tough people during arguably some of the most historic and cataclysmic years in the American experience[49].

The first of the perspectives mentioned above, described as the reportage perspective, is grounded in a detailed presentation of a post-apocalyptic vision of the urban space. The second – memoiristic and autobiographical – arises from the sense of nostalgia accompanying the author. The reportorial image of the "Motor City" thus stretches between the poles of fear and fascination. The notions of the city that were supposed to provide LeDuff with familial stability, rootedness, and a sense of home are continually confronted with the vision of collapsing factories, depopulating neighbourhoods, and the disintegration of all moral principles.

On the pages of the reportage – which scholars and critics often discuss in the context of gonzo journalism – an important, inherently "gonzoid" component consists of the first-person, highly expressive narration; numerous self-referential digressions written in a forceful style laced with vulgarities; and the abrupt collision of low and high linguistic registers. These tendencies are perfectly illustrated in those passages where LeDuff reflects on matters of craft, on the role of contemporary media, or on the aims guiding him in his professional work. Detroit – the city-as-metaphor – produces in the reporter the identity of a fervent activist. It is worth pointing to at least one fragment in which the lofty image of a reporter seeking to bring justice to Detroit is confronted with the "real" challenges of everyday life, captured in a satirical punchline:

> I was going to become a real reporter. Someone had to answer for this shit. […] The people of Greater Detroit deserved better than to be robbed by their leader and forgotten by their neighbors. I threw my cigarette butt into the sewer grate. I looked up into the rain. That's when a bird shit on my face[50].

Such a mode of storytelling – in which a nostalgic, elevating narrative is repeatedly interrupted by colloquialised passages – may, according to Justyna E. Dąbrowska, be appealing to readers: "its digressive nature makes it possible to situate events within a broader context, which in

[49]LeDuff, 15.
[50]LeDuff, 131

turn enables a deeper and more vivid commentary"[51]. The saturation of the reportage with self-referential remarks becomes a technique that enhances the credibility of the stories presented, whose authenticity is guaranteed by the clearly outlined perspective of a witness or participant visible throughout the volume. LeDuff openly reveals to the reader the backstage of his craft, repeatedly returning to the thought of how profoundly his hometown has marked his life.

The strong degree of subjectivisation in LeDuff's discourse should be viewed as the result of the author's recourse to colloquial and vulgar language combined with an emotional, highly metaphorical style. In the self-referential passages, the writer uses factual detail sparingly, but readily turns to personal impressions that evoke a quasi-somatic experience of the *egopolis*:

> Detroit was beginning to wear my ass out. I didn't have the usual reportorial detachment anymore. This was my home. This was where I lived. This was where I was raising my kid [...].
> I looked out of the window, realizing that Detroit was doing something to me that a story's never done to me before. It was hurting [...].
> Before, when I was in the rough places of desperation, I had a plane ticket out. Now I was living in it, a captive, native son[52].

> I felt bad, hollow. A middle-aged fuckup crumbling under the bulk of a dying city. It had infected my private life, which was no longer separate from my public one. [...] I thought about my little girl and wondered what I had done bringing her back to this shit hole[53].

The setting of the book is shaped by a personalised vision of a city coming apart – one that evokes an authentic heart of darkness. It is a place that, on the one hand, "hurts", "crushes", and "infects" the reporter, yet on the other – tinged with a certain tenderness – is described as "home", of which LeDuff remains a "captive, native son".

LeDuff's attitude toward this autobiographical place takes essentially two forms: that of ambitious interventionism and that of gonzo-style commercialism. On the one hand, the journalist wants his reportage to attain the status of a text that can "change the world," dreaming of a reactive publication capable of exerting real influence: "And I made myself a promise. I'd build a castle of words so high on the banks of the Detroit River that they couldn't help but see it from Times Square."[54] On the other hand, LeDuff bluntly calls Detroit a "big glowing ball of color" for a reporter, confessing—with the openness characteristic of a gonzo journalist: "Why not admit it? I am a reporter. A leech. A merchant of misery. Bad things are good for us reporters. We are body collectors of sorts."[55]

[51]Justyna E. Dąbrowska, "Obraz państwa postapokaliptycznego w prozie Ziemowita Szczerka" [The image of a post-apocalyptic state in the prose of Ziemowit Szczerek], Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska 2 (2016): 188–189.

[52]LeDuff, 99.

[53]LeDuff, 133-134.

[54]LeDuff, 25.

[55]LeDuff, 24.

The autobiographical places woven into the reportage function as an affective component – certain kinds of memory generators that trigger in the writer recollections from his early youth. On the reportorial map of LeDuff's Detroit, a prominent place is occupied by the area in the city's east side along East Jefferson Avenue, where the reporter's mother once ran a flower shop. Frequently recalled as well are the Brightmoor neighbourhood, where his beloved sister died, and Joy Road, the street on which the LeDuff family home once stood. It is these locations that seem to delineate most fully the geobiographical framework of the journalist's memory:

> My sister, my three brothers and I grew up on Joy Road, the dividing line between Livonia and Westland – two working-class suburbs about three miles west of the Detroit city limits. Our house was an equal distance from the shopping mall and the Ford plant, somewhere between the Jeffries Freeway and the dead Rouge River[56].

> But Joy Road wasn't always so joyful. Sometimes, even with all the love and the best intentions in the world, things get balled up. What happened in the 1970s and early '80s had never happened before in American life[57].

Paul Ricœur, writing on the processes of emplotting one's life, emphasised the importance of childhood memories – often indistinct and imprecise, yet crucial in the formation of identity[58]. In the case of *Detroit*..., this identity is shaped both by concrete, precisely located points on the city's map and by the deeply rooted individual memories attached to them. Real and imagined autobiographical places become a bridge between the past and the present. It was from these places that LeDuff once set out to travel the world, and to them – full of apprehension and hope – he returned years later. The buildings and streets he observes while working on the reportage serve as effective indices of the past:

> We drove past the hulking wreck of the Packard plant – a square mile of dead factory. After a half-century of rot, it still stood as a disgraceful reminder of our great past and sordid present. Its founding president was Henry B. Joy [...].
> Now all that was left of his empire was a ruin that burned at least once a month, usually from the torches of scrappers[59].

Through the metaphorical and personified optics applied to the urban space, a certain degree of subjectivity is granted to it. The journalist undoubtedly restores to the places he describes the ability to bear witness to the past. Referring to the terminology of Stanisław Rosiek, LeDuff's depictions of contemporary Detroit may be described as an urban *necrography* – a posthumous biography documenting the fate of the ruins left after the former glory of the "Motor City," evoking its proud past while also foreshadowing its vanitative future.

[56]LeDuff, 33.

[57]LeDuff, 33-34.

[58]See Paul Ricœur, O sobie samym jako innym [Oneself as Another], translated by Bogdan Chełstowski (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2003), 190.

[59]LeDuff, 93.

Contemporary Detroit is presented as a post-apocalyptic space – a territory plunged into darkness after a catastrophe, over which hangs an aura of imminent death. Such a vision of a reclaimed yet simultaneously lost autobiographical place triggers in the journalist a series of negative reactions, stripping him of the distance typically associated with the reportorial discourse. The journalist's "affective condition" – to use Michał Paweł Markowski's term[60] – boils down to an almost somatically experienced sense of loss:

> The collapse came on, and it came on quickly. Like a tsunami. I don't know if it was drugs that ruined the neighborhood or civic neglect. Was it the disappearance of the car jobs or the raping of the middle class by Wall Street? Had people just given up? I didn't know. But it hurt to look at it. Vanity. In the end, it was all vanity[61].

LeDuff offers an extensive reconstruction of the "life story" of his hometown. He recounts its eighteenth-century origins while deliberately forgoing a strictly factographic narrative in favour of a historical reconstruction written in a gonzo spirit. For example, when describing Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, who founded the city in the strait (Fr. *détroit*) connecting Lakes Erie and Huron, LeDuff portrays him in the following manner:

> Cadillac also illegally trafficked in liquor and furs with the natives and was, for a short time, thrown in prison. That would also make Cadillac Detroit's first dope dealer[62].

Against this backdrop – and with comparable detail – LeDuff reconstructs his own family's history, tightly interwoven with the fate of the city. It is worth noting that at this point, the generic boundaries of the reportage become blurred once again. He incorporates into the book extensive fragments of a journalistic family saga. Inserted as digressions, the personal, retrospective narrative is meant to show how, for many generations, the wild stories of the gonzo reporter's relatives have been bound to Detroit's turbulent past:

> And thus Detroit was born in July 1701.
> My family was here from the earliest days. It began with my ancestor Joseph Chevalier, a Frenchman from Normandy who came to Montreal to carve a life out of the wilderness.[63]

Let us add that the reporter's effort to reconstruct Detroit's biography takes on an almost detective-like quality. Moving through a thicket of details, the journalist becomes a meticulous investigator of his autobiographical place, revealing to the reader the backstage of his material-gathering process and assessing the reliability of his sources.

In the reportage volume under discussion, all three autobiographical stances identified by

[60]Michał Paweł Markowski, "Emocje. Hasło encyklopedyczne w trzech częściach i dwudziestu trzech rozdziałach (nie licząc motta)" [Emotions: an encyclopedic entry in three parts and twenty-three chapters (not counting the motto)], in: Pamięć i afekty [Memory and affects], edited by Zofia Budrewicz, Roma Sendyka, Ryszard Nycz (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2014), 350.

[61]LeDuff, 291.

[62]LeDuff, 137.

[63]LeDuff, 137.

Czermińska coexist[64]. The strategy of testimony, focused on documenting the city's current and historical circumstances, dominates the passages that are reportage *par excellence*. The stance of confession, approaching the mode of intimacy, is clearly visible in the numerous autobiographical fragments in which the reporter speaks of the emotions and sensations accompanying his return to his hometown:

> I've been most everywhere on the planet: war zones, deserts, the Arctic Circle, campaign buses, opium dens, even Albuquerque, but I've never returned to that section of Detroit called Brightmoor. I was afraid of it and would drive miles to avoid it. The memories are too hard[65].

Brightmoor – treated until now as an "empty" place, erased from family narratives – re-materializes on the pages of the reportage. What helps the reporter recover the memory of his sister's death is a trip to the Detroit neighborhood where the woman spent the last moments of her life (the Flame bar, the abandoned lot). In doing so, LeDuff shares with readers an abundance of intimate details from her turbulent biography (prostitution, drug abuse, and the abandonment of her daughter are only some of the topics he discusses with meticulous attention). At this point, a kind of gonzo-reportorial exhibitionism becomes apparent. The intimist discourse he activates makes it possible to view his autobiographical stance also as a tool designed to affect the reader's attention, offering numerous points of access to the difficult, shameful, and often shocking stories from the reporter's life.

The third narrative strategy – also strongly marked throughout *Detroit*... – is the "challenge" described by Czermińska. In LeDuff's book, this challenge is tied to the gonzo convention he adopts, which sanctions acts of self-creation while also drawing the reader into the narrative frame through the many direct addresses woven into the text, introducing elements of interactivity into the otherwise linear narration:

> If a suburban prosecutor and a suburban reporter fear for their lives, imagine what it's like to live in the rough Detroit neighborhoods.[66]

> Come to Detroit. Drive the empty, shattered boulevards, and the decrepitude of the place all Rolls out in a numb, continuous fact. After enough hours staring into it, it starts to appear normal. Average. Everyday.[67]

The complex image of the city presented in the reportage makes any attempt at neatly classifying LeDuff's Detroit within one of Czermińska's types of autobiographical places highly problematic. The city functions for the reporter as a place of permanence (where he grew up and where his roots lie), but also as a place of movement (LeDuff left Detroit and later chose to return). It is an observed place, where the journalist currently lives and with which he remains emotionally entangled, but also a remembered place (the author frequently

[64]See Małgorzata Czermińska, Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie [The autobiographical triangle: testimony, confession, challenge] (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

[65]LeDuff, 113.

[66]LeDuff, 254.

[67]LeDuff, 14-15.

reaches back to childhood memories from Joy Road). By reconstructing the history of his family against the backdrop of Detroit's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century past, he simultaneously activates the notion of an imagined place, summoned into being through the work of memory and the family stories passed down from generation to generation. At the same time, he incorporates into this auto/bio/geo/graphic universe his own vision of the future when, in the final sentence of the book, he addresses his daughter – the representative of the next generation of LeDuffs – urging her not to forget that rootedness fosters a sense of belonging: "Claudette: remember where you come from, girl. Sometime in her life a bird needs to circle home."[68]

Conclusions

To conclude, it should be emphasized that contemporary reportage prose is permeated with autobiographical undertones. The genre analyzed here, shaped by the author's biogeographical dominant, gravitates far more clearly toward subjective narration than toward an impersonal journalistic discourse. As Bernadetta Darska writes, adopting such an optic may require confronting numerous limitations: "there arises the possibility of censoring certain experiences, failing to activate processes of memory, and selecting recollections according to a personal hierarchy of significance"[69]. The world depicted from the vantage point of personal experience is often fragmented, grounded in the repetition of the reporter's individual memories, with the writer becoming, de facto, the protagonist of his own story. As the analyses presented in this article have shown, this tendency manifests itself with particular intensity in the gonzo variant of the genre, which by its very nature remains especially susceptible to the workings of the autobiographical impulse.

In the book *Detroit: An American Autopsy*, two overarching categories come to the fore: autobiographicality and reportoriality. Their interweaving demonstrates clearly that, in contemporary reportage, the space of the big city – marked by the authorial signature of *egopolis* – no longer serves merely as a backdrop but becomes a fully fledged protagonist of the narrative: foregrounded in the very title of the reportage volume, presented in the text through personifying techniques, and endowed with its own "biography," which the author painstakingly reconstructs. This space, constituting the core of the reporter's private world, emerges as a powerful generator of memories. In the case of *Detroit…*, the story of the reporter's hometown is inextricably entwined with LeDuff's family history, delineating the two main thematic axes of the work.

As Dominik Antonik observes, in autobiographical writing "the point is not merely the act of writing but, above all, the act of self-reflection that accompanies it – the transformation

[68]LeDuff, 10.

[69]Bernadetta Darska, Czas reportażu. O tym, co działo się wokół gatunku po 2010 roku [Time of reportage. On what happened around the genre after 2010] (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, 2023), 230.

of one's own being into a communicable text."[70] In reportage as well, autobiographization may – of which LeDuff's book is an excellent example – be bound up with the journalist's deployment of various self-fashioning strategies. Their presence in non-fiction can be read as an attempt to reach the contemporary reader who, as Kamila Augustyn notes, has grown weary of "the repetitive structure of reportage and its uniform accounts, [...] craving, from time to time, a measure of variation, novelty and extraordinariness, even a certain eccentricity."[71] Journalists who successfully navigate today's celebrity culture, mapping autobiographical places in their texts and freely sharing details of their private lives, offer the reader a story crafted not by a detached observer but by an engaged witness and participant. With his distinctive personality, recognizable writing style, and boots in the colors of the American flag, LeDuff is undoubtedly a perfect embodiment of these tendencies.

translated by Paulina Zagórska

[70]Dominik Antonik, "Przemysł autobiografii. Ghostwriting, kultura sławy i utowarowienie tożsamości" [The autobiography industry: ghostwriting, celebrity culture, and the commodification of identity], Teksty Drugie 1 (2019): 83.

[71]Augustyn, 109.

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KEYWORDS

autobiographical places

Charlie LeDuff

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Abstract:
The aim of this article is to reconstruct – using a geopoetic analytical framework – the key functions that autobiographical places may perform in reportage prose. The study examines *Detroit: An American Autopsy* (2013), by the American reporter and Pulitzer Prize winner Charlie LeDuff's. The analysis shows that the mediated image of LeDuff's Detroit in this book emerges as an egopolis: a city abandoned and later reclaimed by the journalist, whose "biography" is tightly interwoven with the author's own life story, shaping his identity in the process.

autoreportage

reportage

Detroit

Note on the Author:
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Jacek Kaczmarski's life – after death – turned upside down, or the media discourse surrounding Patrycja Volny's book *Niewygodna. Autobiografia* [Inconvenient. An Autobiography]

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The announcement that by the end of November 2024, Agora publishing house would release Patrycja Volny's autobiography entitled *Niewygodna* [*Inconvenient*] generated considerable interest. For several winter weeks, the media was abuzz with talk about the publication and its author, with each press release also mentioning her father, Jacek Kaczmarski. Patrycja Volny, born in February 1988, was not yet 37 years old when her autobiography was published. Her acting career, which includes only a few supporting roles[1] at most, clearly indicates that it was not her artistic achievements that drew media attention to this relatively young person and her book. The genre label of the subtitle "autobiography" suggests a focus on her own life.

[1] Her Wikipedia bio contains four sentences concerning her acting career, e.g. her theatrical debut at the age of eight, performing in student etudes, or co-founding a theatrical group in the North of France. Her first meaningful role was that of the Good Tidings in Agnieszka Holland's Pokot [Spoor]. This was a supporting role, like others in, e.g. Mr. Jones, Stulecie winnych [Our century], episodes of the series 1983 or Ojciec Mateusz [Father Mateusz].

The circumstances of the publication, the promotional campaign, and the media and social reactions reveal a lot about the current state of the "personal document" genre.

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Autobiographical writing as a subject of research has already become the subject of extensive literature[2], developing in many directions and taking into account the latest trends in the humanities. With the development of said humanities, research on autobiography also covers gender issues, drawing attention to women's creativity and the relationship between the rules of the genre and the creation and image of the subject's identity[3].

In her article „The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers", Mary G. Mason examines four autobiographical texts written by English female authors from the 15th to 20th centuries. She highlights an important pattern shared by all the authors discussed – the tendency to „combine one's own image with another, equal image." These images are often of husbands but can also include other women, children, or communities. A notable variation of this pattern of otherness and equality appears in narratives where the other is neither a life partner nor an equal, such as a spouse or a literary creation, but rather an overwhelming model or ideal—someone the author must confront to define her identity[4]". Simultaneously,

[2] As recently as 1992, Andrzej Cieński noted (not entirely correctly) that historical and theoretical literature on this subject is very scarce in Polish, but well-developed in Western countries (Andrzej Cieński, Pamiętniki i autobiografie światowe [Memoirs and autobiographies in the world] [Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1992], 5). Since then, a lot has happened in Poland, to name but the 2001 publication in of translations of the works of the world's most famous researcher on this subject, Philippe Lejeune, Variations on a Certain Pact. On Autobiography, ed. by Regina Lubas-Bartoszyńska, transl. by Wincenty Grajewski et al. [Kraków: Universitas, 2001]). It includes texts from 1975–1999, among them the most famous one on the autobiographical pact and later authorial commentaries. In Polish literary studies, Małgorzata Czermińska is an undisputed authority on autobiography, so it is no surprise that she edited a selection of translations of canonical Western texts, Autobiografia [Autobiography], ed. by Małgorzata Czermińska [Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2009]). It should be noted, however, that most of the articles included in the collection had already been made available to Polish readers much earlier, in issue LXX of Pamiętnik Literacki from 1979. The researcher herself published a number of works, including her best-known Autobiograficzny trójkąt: świadectwo, wyznanie i wyzwanie [The autobiographical triangle: witness, confession, challenge, Second edition, revised [Kraków: Universitas, 2020]), where she also refers to earlier publications on this subject. The development of the humanities, including interdisciplinarity, is also evident in autobiography research. In 1991, Anna Giza's book Życie jako opowieść [Life as a Story] was published (Anna Giza, Życie jako opowieść. Analiza materiałów autobiograficznych w perspektywie socjologii wiedzy [Life as a Story: An analysis of Autobiographical Materials from the Perspective of the Sociology of Knowledge] [Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1991]). In 2000, the book Autobiografia. Terapeutyczny wymiar pisania o sobie [Autobiography: The Therapeutic Dimension of Writing About Oneself] by the Italian andragogist (adult educator) Duccio Demetrio was published in Polish (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, 2000). There are also journal issues devoted to autobiographical topics; in 2012, the cultural quarterly Opcje published a special issue entitled Autobiografia [Autobiography], and in 2018, the title Autobiografie [Autobiographies] was a special issue of Teksty Drugie. In the latter one can find, among other things, an article by Aleksandra Grzemska, which is of interest in the context of family relationships (Aleksandra Grzemska, "Matki i córki w polu autobiograficznym" [„Mothers and Daughters in the Autobiographical Field"], Teksty Drugie 6 [2018]: 77–91). In 2020, an issue of the scientific and literary quarterly Tekstualia entitled Autobiografia w kulturze [Autobiography in culture] was published. The importance and need for research on autobiography in contemporary cultural reality is most clearly demonstrated by the establishment of Polish Autobiographical Society in Szczecin in 2013 (its president is Prof. Inga Iwasiów). The Society supports the publication of scholarly semi-annual Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media.] This, of course, is but a cursory overview of the relevant literature.

[3] In 2014, women's personal documentary literature became the subject of the semi-annual journal „Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media". The issue opened with an article by Inga Iwasiów (Inga Iwasiów, „Tożsamość, performatywność, komunikacja – genderowe aspekty autobiografizmu" ["Identity, performativity, communication – gender-related aspects of autobiography"] Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media 1 [2014]: 7–11).

[4] Mary G. Mason, „The other voice. Autobiographies of women writers", in: Autobiografia, 202–203.

the researcher recognizes the paradox of being caught in such relationships, where "one is prevented from finding one's self by being too close to the other or others[5]". Just looking at the table of contents of the book *Niewygodna* makes these comparisons clear. Individual chapters are titled: *On/ Oni/ My/ Ja* [*He / They / We / I*]. Each chapter explores a different relationship, ultimately leading to an attempt at defining oneself.

Anna Pekaniec highlights similar features in her work *Literatura dokumentu osobistego kobiet. Ewolucja teorii, zmiany praktyk lekturowych* [*The literature of women's personal documents: The evolution of theory, changes in reading practices*], noting that this type of autobiographical writing is called *specular autobiography*. The researcher also stresses that "reflecting themselves as if in a (distorted?) mirror in stories about close or distant friends, family members, loved ones or hated ones, autobiographers do not necessarily arrive at an adequate image of themselves[6]." Pekaniec also cites the autobiographical concept of Susan Stanford Friedman, "who emphasizes the tensions in female autobiographical identity - connoted by the authors' vacillation between individuality and community[7]."

In *Encyklopedia gender* [*Encyclopedia of gender*], the entry "Autobiography" concludes with a reflection on new trends in personal documentary literature of women, who uniquely reveal themselves or violate social taboos. Katarzyna Nadana-Sokołowska includes here Halszka Opfer's *Kato-tata* [*Torture-dad*] and Danuta Wałęsa's autobiography *Marzenia i tajemnice* [*Dreams and Secrets*].

The author of *Niewygodna* is clear about her disruptive intentions in her press comments: "I'm hoping to send a message to women that they don't have to remain silent[8]" – this turn of phrase is recurrent in her interviews. The declared and narratively realized universalization of experience is both the strength and weakness of the message. Its strength lies in arousing a sense of solidarity, speaking on behalf of women who are being harmed and see a reflection of their own traumatic experiences in this story. Yet this is also a source of its weakness, manifested in its susceptibility to ideological trends, similarity to other analogous narratives, all of which reduce the narrative's credibility, even if the atmosphere of media hype suggests otherwise.

Biographies of women often emphasize their unique qualities that allowed them to lead courageous lives despite the limitations imposed by the patriarchal order. This image is shaped, for example, by Jerzy Chociłowski's book *Niezwykłe kobiety drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* [*Extraordinary women of the Second Polish Republic*] or Buntowniczki. *Niezwykłe Polki, które robiły, co chciały* [*Rebels: Extraordinary Polish women who did what they wanted*] by Andrzej Fedorowicz. Volna's autobiography is part of the tradition of women rebelling against the patriarchal world, for whom mis andry is a defensive stance developed during the years of suffering. Although the poet's daughter has been heard and even cherished by the media since her first revelations in 2007, her self-creation as a victim builds the legend of an "inconvenient" woman ("For years, Patrycja Volny, Jacek Kaczmarski's daughter,

[5] Mason, 206.

[6] Anna Pekaniec, „Literatura dokumentu osobistego kobiet. Ewolucja teorii, zmiany praktyk lekturowych" [„The literature of women's personal document. Evolution of theory, changes in reading practices"], Autobiografia. Literatura. Kultura. Media 1 (2014): 20.

[7] Pekaniec, „Literatura dokumentu osobistego kobiet", 20.

[8] „«Nie pisz książki o ojcu». Ale Patrycja Volny napisała: o Jacku Kaczmarskim, przemocy i molestowaniu", Natalia Waloch rozmawia z Patrycją Volny, ["Don't write a book about your father". But Patrycja Wolny did write: about Jacek Kaczmarski, violence and abuse", Natalia Waloch in conversation with Patrycja Volny"], Wysokie Obcasy, listopad 2024.

has faced unprecedented attacks for telling the truth about the legendary bard[9]"). Her confessions about the multigenerational relay of male violence against women, presented as the backdrop to her mother's family history and failed relationships with men, are meant to justify the confession that comes at some point: "I tried not to think about men. I stopped trusting them quite early on."[10] For some, this bitter truth will be a fully justified attitude of a person hurt by members of a violent gender; for others, it may be a red flag, a warning against a dangerous ideologization of discourse.

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For some time (after her father's death in 2004), Patrycja Volny was better known in Poland as Patrycja Kaczmarska. She was born in Munich, where her parents, Ewa Volny and Jacek Kaczmarski[11] lived and worked at the time. In the 1980s, her father was a legendary artist, the bard of the Solidarity movement, and author of *Mury, Obława, Nasza klasa, Zbroja*, and many other anthems of his generation. In the mid-1990s, after Radio Free Europe was shut down, her family moved to Australia.

As part of his "extra-curricular activities," the former singer translated several classic fairy tales for Disney drawings, which probably inspired him to try his hand at children's literature. The theme and inspiration came - as was often the case with Kaczmarski - from real life. His family's move (in 1995) and their first months in Australia served as the basis for a story entitled *Życie do góry nogami* (*Living upside-down*). The book blurb stated that Kaczmarski is known to everyone as the bard of the martial law generation and that "[after he had done several translations] he wrote his own [children's] book about the incredible adventure that was moving to Australia":

> The co-author and narrator is eight-year-old Patrycja, whose fairy tales create the unique atmosphere of "*Życie do góry nogami*." Father and daughter have a wealth of imagination and a sense of humor that shines through on every page of the book. Comic realism? That seems to be the perfect description for this story - full of warmth, truth, love, and fascination with the exotic nature of the Antipodes[12].

The 80-page book, containing 14 neat, witty stories, was Patrycja Volna's only literary work until the publication of her autobiography. Large excerpts from these stories are quoted in *Niewygodna*, serving as counterpoints to bitter confessions about childhood, youth, and life. In the description

[9] Natalia Waloch, „Alkohol, przemoc, trauma. Patrycja Volny napisała autobiografię o życiu z ojcem Jackiem Kaczmarskim" [„Alcohol, violence, trauma. Patrycja Volny wrote an autobiogaphy about life with her father Jacek Kaczmarski"], Wysokie Obcasy, 7.11.2024.

[10] Patrycja Volny, Niewygodna. Autobiografia (Warszawa: Agora, 2024, ebook MOBI), 35.

[11] Volny is her mother's surname, after her second husband, a Czech. The parents decided to give their daughter a more „international" last name, because „Kaczmarski" is difficult to pronounce outside Poland, which is where Patrycja was born and spent most of her life. In Poland, her father's surname would have been a burden, even though the daughter claims that she hadn't realised it for a long time. His mythology was reinforced by his political migration, when only his voice was reaching the isolated country via Radio Free Europe and cassette recordings produced in the underground. Kaczmarski boasts the largest discography in Poland: so far 62 CD records have been released (and a five-part DVD set) – these contain studio and concert recordings of almost five hundred songs. Anthologies of more than 650 of his texts have been reprinted (including music-less poems). As demonstrated in a number of scholarly works, Kaczmarski raised song lyrics to the status of poetry. He authored lyrics to a „blues-opera", wrote numerous essays, gave hundreds of interviews, featured in a few documentaries. In the 1990s he published four novels, all of which include autobigraphical elements. The most important one, Autoportret z kanalią [Self-portrait with a scumbag], is an ironic pamphlet against himself and the environment of the opposition and political emigration.

[12] Jacek Kaczmarski, Patrycja Volny, Życie do góry nogami [Living upside-down] (Warszawa: Egmont, 1997).

of collaborating with her father on *Życie do góry nogami,* Volny provides a glimpse of her relationship with her father, her worldview, and, above all, her enigmatic way of presenting events in language:

> My dad enjoyed my writing. When I was eight, he came up with the idea of publishing my work - creating something together, daughter and father. He tried to follow in the footsteps of his mother, who was fascinated by the idea of education through art. He was interested in it too – in the concept. In practice, he didn't have the patience to fully participate in the writing process with me. I brought him stories about our lives and some made-up fairy tales, and he edited them, sometimes adding something or inserting commas. I liked that he liked what I was doing - the pride with which he talked about me. When „Życie do góry nogami" came out, I felt proud too. We were already living on the other side of the equator at the time and decided that „Living u upside-down" was the perfect title for our joint book. There was a koala on the cover. My father was very upset about this cover. His name was written in a slightly larger font than his daughter's name. After his death, in the 2004 edition, the font used for my father's name was so large that I almost disappeared[13].

The above excerpt clearly indicates that the eight-year-old girl was the true author of the described book. The father, who only "edited, added something, inserted commas," seems to be someone who ultimately gained unfairly from his daughter's remarkable literary talent. The sense of (at least) equity in this relationship is reflected in the phrase "we decided" in the assessment of the title given (by whom - remains unknown) to the book. The paragraph, starting with expressions of positive emotions, begins with the word "dad." What follows are mainly impersonal forms or coolly neutral pronouns, confirming the distance, lack of educational skill, and impatience of the parent. The pride shown by the antagonist in this story appears to be nothing more than a game, an illusion, a form of emotional trap into which the girl, craving affection, falls. Everything builds toward a dramatic conclusion. The father – this much more formal word appears twice at the end, and in negative contexts – "got terribly upset" about the book cover. But was the reason for his anger the koala mentioned in the previous sentence (the cover, like all the illustrations, was designed by the outstanding poster artist Waldemar Świerzy), or perhaps the fact that "his name was written in a slightly larger font than his daughter's name"? However, if – as is quite likely – this "terrible upset" was indeed about the font size used for the authors' names, was it because his name was written too small in relation to his daughter's name? Or perhaps the opposite: a father proud of his daughter (who had, after all, achieved a great deal artistically) was disappointed that his name had been unnecessarily enlarged instead of highlighting that of his talented daughter? The situation described in the last sentence would suggest precisely this motivation. When Kaczmarski died, there was no one left to look after the matter, and the publisher naturally highlighted the name of the famous artist. Another question is whether the artist was really upset or whether it was just a game, a pretense of indignation, which the hypersensitive child still perceives with dramatic seriousness, even now, years later. Throughout this passage, written by the 37-year-old author-narrator, the reader is struck by the intermingling of the emotional experiences of an eight-year-old girl with the objectified story of an adult. It is as if the author were unable or unwilling to interpret the events presented from a distance, or as if she deliberately created a context of danger in relation to herself. The infantilization of experience goes hand in hand

[13]Volny, 21.

with stylistic ineptitude, which, on the one hand, causes the reader to feel a sense of ambiguity, and on the other hand, a striking aversion to the character described.

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Patrycja Volny has been attracting media attention since her interview for TVN's *Rozmowy w toku* talk show, less than three years after her father's death (March 2, 2007). In her autobiography, she recalls that interview:

> "You smashed it," said Weronika Ciechowska when we went out to eat after recording the program with Ewa Drzyzga.
> Well, I did.
> I wasn't really planning to say all of that. But I arrived at the TV studio emotional, all caught up in Michał. A resentful teenager. I sat on the couch in the studio as if it were a therapist's couch.
> I remember it vaguely. Drzyzga interviewed the children of famous fathers. Kuroń, Ciechowski, and me. I answered honestly. That was that "smashing it".
> After the recording, the production team came up to me and asked if I wanted them to cut something out of the conversation about my perpetually drunk father. I was tired, surprised at myself, at what I had said. If someone smarter than me had been with me at the time, they would probably have asked for it to be edited out. But I went there alone. I said: leave it as it is.
> It snowballed.
> Kaczmarski would never lay a hand on a woman. He did drink, like everyone else, but a drunkard? Patrycja this, Patrycja that, what an ungrateful girl, a brat, a hysterical woman, and worse. Some of the comments claimed that I wanted to make money off my father, even though I was already living off royalties. I would have little interest in slandering him[14].

"To smash it" means to do something exceptional, to impress someone. These words can be uttered by a rock star after an energetic concert, an actress after a dazzling performance, or anyone who has done something spectacular. Sometimes, as is often the case with language, these words can indicate criticism of someone's behavior, but here, more advanced communication techniques come into play, such as irony or sarcasm. "Couch" is usually associated with a doctor's office, typically a psychotherapist's, and that is precisely the function it serves here. First, it is worth noting the passage: "I answered honestly. That was that 'smashing it'." Honesty does not necessarily mean truth. It is a concept that refers to emotions, which the author emphasises years later. It is also worth noting the phrase "emotional, all caught up in Michał." On the one hand, this is a reference to a different (previously described) story of a toxic relationship (ending with a broken engagement just before the wedding, a dispute over the reimbursement of abortion costs, etc.) with a man who, according to many people familiar with the relationship, had a huge influence on shaping Volna's opinion of her father[15]. It is also a preliminary admission that external emotional factors were at play, rather than objective truth.

[14]Volny, 69.

[15]This was described in detail by Krzysztof Nowak in an entry published on 7.12.2024 on the webpage of Jacek Kaczmarski Foundation (https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1CvbeQ6Sgu/). His opinion was confirmed by Grzegorz Długi, Patrycja Volny's lawyer, representing her in property dispute after Kaczmarski's death. In my conversation with him on 13.02.2025, he claimed that he broke off with Volna because of communicative difficulties.

The ensuing discussion about editing can be understood in many ways. Someone who wants to understand the author's words as truth will interpret the sentence "I was tired, surprised at myself, at what I had said" as her own surprise at her honesty, openness, courage, and fortitude. But logically, these words can also be understood as surprise at the unexpected message created ad hoc, in the speaker's head, in the course of a recording for a TV show, "on the couch in the studio, as if it were a psychoterapist's couch." Today, the meaning of the words "if someone smarter than me had been with me then" must also be inferred by the viewer, and everyone will understand this content according to their own, often preconceived ideas. On the one hand, one can read here an expressed desire to undo the consequences created by this statement, to ease the tone of the unfortunate interview. On the other hand, there is no actual modification of the content spoken at the time. Why would someone who allowed editing, or - as it should probably be understood - cutting and falsifying this supposedly sincere statement, be "smarter"? Why would something like that be written by someone who promotes her autobiography "to encourage women who are being harmed not to remain silent"?

That is not all. We finally reach the paragraph where the author describes the critical reactions of those around her, referring to them as an avalanche (this is also an emotional hyperbole, emphasized by its form as a short clause in a separate paragraph—a common feature in this narrative). To keep the story engaging, the author uses seemingly informal speech and colloquial style: "Kaczmarski would lay a hand on a woman" and so on. What do the words "lay a hand on a woman" mean to the narrator? What were the people who knew and did not know Kaczmarski protesting against?

Let us take a look at how a journalist from Gazeta Wyborcza treated this phrase when interviewing the author about the book published by Agora. Both the form of the question asked and the answer given by the author say a lot:

> Natalia Waloch: When you first spoke about your father's violence many years ago, there were voices saying that Kaczmarski would never lay a hand on a woman. Unfortunately, he did.
> Patrycja Volny: My father was capable of being an incredibly warm, gentle, and charming person, and I believe that some people just weren't able to accept the truth. I'm grateful that there are people who got to see that side of him. I knew him that way, too. It's not like he was always a tormentor; he was also cool, interesting, and, you know, he was my father. In my view, there's something inside us that makes it nearly impossible to hate our own parents; love is always somewhere there. And that's a good thing because it shows our ability to love. I say this even though my love for my father makes my life very difficult. Luckily, as I get older, it's getting better and better[16].

Referring to the relevant passage in the book, the journalist clearly tried to elicit more details from Volna. Characteristically, she used the same phrase as the narrator of *Niewygodna*, referring to "laying a hand on a woman." As it turns out, her statement hangs in a vacuum, even though in communication, it is supposed to create meaning. The interviewee responds in a completely different tone and direction, steering clear of the topic initiated by the question.

However, what remains most important in the above thread is the phraseological connection "to lay a hand on," or more precisely, the entire expression "to lay a hand on a woman." In

[16] „«Nie pisz książki o ojcu»".

everyday understanding, this obviously means beating, and readers are supposed to interpret it that way. The point is that in Patrycja's story, this suggestion of beating, or even hitting, implies a blow or slap, or… let's read it anyway.

> Mom said, "Pacia, go out into the street and scream."
> At first, I thought my parents were fooling around. They sometimes did that. Pretend scuffles, pretend teasing. This time, they were standing in the kitchen, Mom with her nightgown torn, Dad with his hand raised.
> He was pushing her with all his strength into the corner so she couldn't escape. It was late at night. "Don't hit her, don't hit her!" I screamed, and then I went out into the street to scream, just as she had asked.
> I also remember that when she went to get dressed, he sat down next to me on the bed. He hugged me, and I think he said, "I'm sorry." I was afraid he wouldn't let me go. I could see that my mother was afraid too[17].

So, a hand is raised. There is also a mother who speaks - she does not shout. Then she also asks. The understatement, confirmed by the fact that the child left, and later the child's emotionality, outweigh the facts. With this description, Patrycja Volny admits that she did not witness any beating or hitting. Beating, of which Kaczmarski has been accused for years by a whole crowd of internet judges, moralists, and media workers. Questioned more thoroughly by Małgorzata Serafin in the „Zwierciadło" podcast, she says:

> I know that my mother was always combative and also came from a violent home, and – we've talked about this recently - she told me that my father knew she wouldn't be fine with it, so when he swung at her like that, well… it was more than just aggres… so decisive, it must have been calculated, because he knew that she would not accept it in the long run[18].

So, this is not only an interpretation of the event but also an admission that "laying a hand on a woman" is not just a euphemism but a literal gesture of raising a hand, intended to frighten and provoke a negative reaction. This is a far cry from the image of a female boxer and tormentor of women that has been created online based on earlier, often modified confessions by his daughter.

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In the September 2007 issue, six months after Ewa Drzyzga's program, the magazine *Charaktery* published a letter from a reader in the section "Adult Children of Alcoholics"[19], in which she detailed her childhood experiences with her alcoholic father, an artist beloved in Poland but violent at home. For those familiar with the biography of the bard and his daughter, it was clear that the antagonist in the story was Jacek Kaczmarski. Listing numerous signs of youthful rebellion against her relationship with her father, the letter writer casually states: "I was getting really paranoid." She mentions, among other things, theft, driving without

[17] Volny, 37.

[18] „«My father told me I was stupid, fat and self-serving». Patrycja Volny with an «inconvenient» story about Jacek Kaczmarski", Małgorzata Serafin in conversation with Patrycja Volny, W czułym zwierciadle (podcast), 6.12.2024.

[19] „Dorosłe Dzieci Alkoholików" [list czytelniczki], Charaktery 9 (2007): p. 70, https://imgur.com/a/zHfom.

a license, and skipping classes. She also admits to lying, talks about the first symptoms of serious illnesses (bulimia, anorexia), but also about making things up ("I lied, I said I had cancer, diabetes"), which is related to "treating life like a theatrical performance" since her father died in 2004. The author - signed as Patrycja - confesses to numerous behaviors that suggest a tendency to manipulate those around her: "I made up roles for myself. Between the ages of 15 and 17, I tried to commit suicide maybe four times, but a friend always saved me." After describing her current behavior, betrayals, failed relationships, and hurting others and herself, the author concludes: "I took revenge on everyone around me, and I hurt myself the most, because I guess I got used to it. Now I have my own addiction: hurting people."[20]

Thanks to focusing on her pathological relationship with her father, the author's internal problems are relegated to the background, even though she often mentions them in her long autobiographical narrative (covering not only the publication of her latest book, but also interviews and self-presentation on social media). The author herself sometimes asks questions that reveal her anxiety: "Is this schizophrenia? I feel guilty that I didn't get closer to my grandmother, that I was afraid of her. Today, I see how similar I am to her: a complete void in my head."[21]

The therapeutic dimension of writing about oneself is a frequent theme in autobiographical reflection. In a chapter devoted to maturity and intimacy, Duccio Demetrio writes, among other things, about illuminating the dark sides of human existence:

> Suffering and torment stem from the awareness that our life is a shapeless creation, a failed work of art. The harm and wounds experienced in the past give rise to torment. The desire to thoroughly investigate one's autobiography, to reach every point without exception, brings the desired effect, at least in some respects[22].

The Italian andragogist, listing several procedural conditions, notes that "the diagnosis of an illness and its effects usually make it impossible to draw vital strength from the past[23]." Psychologist Urszula Struzikowska-Marynicz sheds more light on the failure of Volna's therapeutic treatments: "Blaming others gives us the illusory belief that we are relieved of responsibility for ourselves. We

[20]It is hard to guess why a letter containing such intimate details, which allowed an easy identification of its author, was published in a psychological journal. It is difficult to understand the psychologist in charge's motifs but Patrycja Volny herself admitted - in the course of a discussion on an Internet forum – that she wrote that letter asking for help, although hadn't realised her words would be published. She said she had been hoping to receive a private answer.

[21]Patrycja Volny's grandmother, Jacek Kaczmarski's mother, Anna Trojanowska-Kaczmarska, undertook numerous suidide attempts, at least from the 1960s right until her death in 2007. She was suffering from schizophrenia, living in a sense of her own grandeur but also experiencing an incessant sense of external danger and prosecution from closer and more distant milieu. She would provoke extremely dangerous situations, including alcohol and drug abuse, marital infidelity and the resulting excesses, she also physically harmed herself. Experiencing excessive existential pain, she caused suffering to herself and her loved ones. This information comes from a letter that Janusz Kaczmarski wrote to his wife in 2006, and from medical records obtained for the biography of Jacek Kaczmarski, To moja droga [This is my way] (Wrocław 2009). Kaczmarski dedicated the first typescript versions of the song Krzyk [Scream], an ekphrasis interpreting Edvard Munch's painting, written in 1978, to his mother; he removed this dedication in the official publications of the text.

[22]Duccio Demetrio, Autobiografia. Terapeutyczny wymiar pisania o sobie [Autobigraphy. A therapeutic dimension of writing about oneself] (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, 2000), 33.

[23]Demetrio, 33. Duccio Demetrio invokes here Paul Fraisse, using an indirect quotation from an Italian-language publication.: Pietro Rizzi, I percorsi del tempo. Sulla psicogenesi della temporalità (Milano: Unicopli, 1988), 92.

cannot rest on it".[24] An interview with Struzikowska-Marynicz in „Gazeta Wyborcza" preceded the premiere of her book *Wszystkiemu winni są twoi starzy* [*It's all your parents' fault*] almost six months to the day after the premiere and promotional campaign for *Niewygodna*.

* * *

The publication of Patrycja Volny's autobiography caused quite a stir because it implied behaviors that, initially unnamed, were eventually described in the media as sexual harassment. The book contains three passages that refer to these initially vague memories[25]. Obviously, the veracity of the accusations cannot be confirmed. I also respect contemporary ethical standards, which state that "the point of view of the perpetrator of harassment, who does not see anything wrong with their behavior, is […] irrelevant when assessing such cases – the key issue here (like in contemporary legal definitions of domestic violence) is the individual assessment of the victim"[26]. Out of respect for the victims of many crimes of a similar nature, one should also refrain from commenting in detail on even the narrative itself. For the above-mentioned reasons, I will not subject this topic to linguistic analysis, referring instead to the relevant excerpts in the source text[27]. I will only note that here, too, the poetics characteristic of many other fragments applies, making the testimony susceptible to open interpretation.

In his text *Ołowiany sarkofag Kaczmarskiego* [*Kaczmarski's lead sarcophagus*], Wojciech Stanisławski uses far-reaching metaphors (such as "depth charge," "arsenic from a crime novel," and "radioactive dust") to illustrate the delayed mechanism associated with the publication and its accompanying promotional campaign. He also illustrates the dramatic effect of the situation:

> And what is worse – perhaps the comparison to the dust from Chernobyl, which fell on the fields near Białystok and Brno, turns out to be the best – we are helpless in the face of this threat: we cannot cover the world with plastic sheeting, we cannot vacuum the forest. We will never know whether Jacek Kaczmarski, the author of stories about the Polish fate, committed one of the most heinous crimes – or whether this crime exists only in the weary, traumatized imagination of his daughter. And this ignorance will accumulate in us, settling like a gray shroud of lead[28].

[24] „Zdrowy dorosły wie, czego mu zabrakło w relacji z rodzicem. Ale go za to nie punktuje" [„A healthy adult knows what was missing in their relations with a parent. But they don't blame the parent"], Paula Szewczyk rozmawia z Urszulą Struzikowską-Marynicz, Wysokie Obcasy, 22.05.2025, https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/zycie piej/7,181615,31955497,zdrowy-dorosly-wie-czego-mu-zabraklo-w-relacji-z-rodzicem.html.

[25] In the first of these memories, which date back to when she was five years old, her father, according to the narrator, allegedly pushed his tongue into her mouth for fun while saying goodbye at the train station, which the protagonist of these memories recalls unpleasantly as an act against her will. Other suggestions cast an unpleasant shadow on the mother, who sent the father to check her daughter's panties before bedtime. The third concerns a situation in which the father cuddled up to his (8-year-old) daughter as she lay down, and she perceived the subsequent caressing and kissing on the neck as unpleasant and today interprets this behavior as sexual. The probability of situations described in the latter case is questioned, among others, by Alicja Delgas, who claims that Jacek Kaczmarski – if only out of fear of a possible relapse into alcoholism – would never have been alone with his daughter in such circumstances (a solo trip by the father away from civilization with two children, including a son from his first marriage).

[26] „Molestowanie seksualne" (hasło) [„Sexual harassment" (entry), in: Encyklopedia Gender. Płeć w kulturze (Warszawa: Czarna Owca, 2014), 325.

[27] Volny, 36, 58, 136.

[28] Wojciech Stanisławski, Ołowiany sarkofag Kaczmarskiego [Kaczmarski's lead sarcophagus], Facebook post, 18.01.2025.

Will the name of Kaczmarski, covered with the radioactive dust of infamy, be condemned to non-existence? Will his work survive under the conditions of "cancel culture"? For some, these are issues of national importance, for others, a loss of a secondary order, less important than social benefits from raising awareness among the masses subjected to various forms of violence.

* * *

Exaggerated headlines and publications appear on internet portals („Shocking confession of Jacek Kaczmarski's daughter. "My father was my tormentor": "Abuse, violence, neglect – the daughter's disturbing memories"[29]; "Patrycja Volny: how Jacek Kaczmarski beat, drank, and abused"[30]). Excessive "horrorization" of language, the presentation of incidental events, hearsay stories ("smearing potatoes on her face" allegedly happened when the girl was two years old), and casual levelling of accusations (of abuse) fuel a spiral of emotions, leaving no room for rational reflection.

It is also important to observe how the ideologization of discourse comes to the forefront. The reviewer for „Krytyka Polityczna"[31] identifies several weak points in the book. For example, he notes that the author describes her own suffering extensively but fails to consider the extent of the harm she has caused others. However, when he reflects on "a revelation that will shake the world so much that it will topple the monument that was previously knocked off its pedestal," the previously critical reviewer unequivocally labels Kaczmarski as a sex offender. These words are not nullified by his earlier doubts or his mistrust in the author expressed in the conclusion. This contradictory judgment is concealed by a notably poetic phrase: "The father drank, and when he drank, he beat." Ultimately, the entire text not only calls for but insists that, in line with the spirit of cancel culture, Kaczmarski's name, persona, and legacy be erased, discredited, and condemned to oblivion.

* * *

The high-profile dispute between Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak and the publishing house in the spring of 2025, which quickly escalated into a conflict among different groups – authors, publishers, and distributors – not to mention readers – demonstrates that the book market is a battleground for real disputes over material capital, which holds significant value. There is no reason to exclude the autobiography genre from these dynamics.

As Dominik Antonik notes in his article „Przemysł autobiografii. „Ghostwriting", kultura sławy i utowarowienie tożsamości" ["The autobiography industry: Ghostwriting, celebrity culture, and the

[29] Katarzyna Pajączek, „Szokujące wyznanie córki Jacka Kaczmarskiego. «Mój ojciec był moim oprawcą»", [„Kaczmarski's daughter's shocking revelations: My father was my abuser"] rmf.fm, 21.11.2024, https://www.rmf.fm/rozrywka/plotki/news,72813,szokujace-wyznanie-corki-jacka-kaczmarskiego-moj-ojciec-byl-moim-oprawca.html.

[30] Jacek Cieślak, „Patrycja Volny: jak bił, pił i molestował Jacek Kaczmarski" [„Patrycja Volny: how Jacek Kaczmarski drank, beat and abused"], Rzeczpospolita, 23.11.2024, https://www.rp.pl/literatura/art41488741-patrycja-volny-jak-bil-pil-i-molestowal-jacek-kaczmarski.

[31] Jakub Szafrański, „Skrzywdzona i harda, ale czy szczera? [o książce «Niewygodna» Patrycji Volny]" [„Hurt and bold: is she honest, though? [on Patrycja Volny's Niewygodna"], Krytyka Polityczna, 21.12.2024, https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/czytaj-dalej/skrzywdzona-i-harda-ale-czy-szczera-o-ksiazce-niewygodna-patrycji-volny/.

commodification of identity"], "stories about oneself are inseparable from the complex system of contemporary culture, and the subject of an autobiography is nowadays also the subject of economy."[32] Antonik, the author of *Autor jako marka* [*The author as a brand*], analyzes the relationship between literature, culture, and the marketplace in late capitalism, along with the media and the broader social sphere. In his analyses, he focuses on the author as the primary agent of literary production. This language is quite different from traditional tools of literary studies, but it reflects a reality that many in the literary community intuitively understand. It is in reference to these values that the publisher and the author are accused of exploiting the bard's memory and his undeniable fame.

Rather than offering judgment on the intentions of any of the parties involved in this communication, let us consider their argumentation in the logic proposed by a literary anthropologist who studies the relationship between the autobiographical genre and market mechanisms. Antonik, discussing a range of contemporary practices, highlights the inadequacy of Lejeune's "autobiographical pact's" idealistic assumptions when juxtaposed with the current situation on the book market:

> Lejeune wrote that "autobiographies are not objects of aesthetic consumption, but social means of interpersonal communication. This communication has several dimensions: ethical, emotional, and referential." In other words, reading an autobiography is an encounter with another person who wants to reveal the whole truth about themselves to the reader, which makes "the heart always beat faster when opening the first page." Faced with the modern autobiographical industry, this somewhat lofty and caring language seems inadequate, also stylistically. Using this language to describe modern autobiographical work would be something of a joke and a provocation […]. This is not because contemporary autobiographies are trivial or uninteresting from a research perspective. Rather, traditional theory expects answers to questions that do not target the core of recent phenomena. For this reason, I propose that, contrary to Lejeune's claims, autobiography is an object of consumption, not only in the aesthetic sense - it is at the very center of the economic practices of late capitalism[33].

This statement, which seems obvious in our increasingly cynical and disillusioned society, does not seem to apply to journalists and media workers, who use words such as "truth" and "honesty" and make accusations with the confidence of an eyewitness. It is therefore not surprising that much of the public accepts this abridged message as their own, creating an atmosphere not so much of suspicion or doubt, but of certainty about the guilt of the accused.

As evidenced by numerous findings of market entanglements, "[i]n contemporary conditions, autobiography does not allow for sincere confession and is rarely an expression of such a need, because its basic function is to increase attention capital,"[34] and "the vast majority of authors of contemporary autobiographies are prominent figures in the attention market, capitalists in a new economy in which the value of individuals and goods is determined by the scale of their visibility and recognizability, as well as the level of consumer interest."[35] In the case of

[32]Dominik Antonik, „Przemysł autobiografii. Ghostwriting, kultura sławy i utowarowienie tożsamości", Teksty Drugie 1 (2019): 81.

[33]Antonik, 86.

[34]Antonik, 95.

[35]Antonik, 90.

Patrycja Volny's autobiography, the opposite is true: only after the publication does its author become a prominent figure, thanks to her connection with her father, who is a real magnet for the public. Following this, we read that "presence in contemporary society and the market depends solely on the attention of others, which is in constant short supply.[36]" The word "attention" is repeated a number of times in the text in question. "Attention is increasingly becoming the supreme currency because it is infinitely exchangeable, from money to prestige[37]." As Davenport and Beck write, "[i]n this new economy [...] capital, labour, information, and knowledge are in abundant supply. [...] What is lacking is human attention."[38]

By capitalizing on her brand through the publication of her autobiography, Volny enters a higher communication threshold, appearing briefly in mainstream media (today, this mainstream is divided into traditional media – television and radio – with their sense of prestige, and online media, which sometimes bring about much greater viewership and reach). Nowadays, both forms coexist, thanks to the publication of traditional media content on the internet. In this way, Volny joins the ranks of "celebrities" (which, as David Marshall writes, is a privileged group of individuals who "have a greater presence and a wider range of activity and influence than those who make up the rest of the population[39]").

Regardless of the category of truth, which, as we have pointed out above, is a highly devalued concept in the contemporary autobiography market, it cannot be denied that the sensational nature of the confessions and the atmosphere of breaking taboos increase interest in the publication and in the author herself, which is in line with the strategy of maximizing visibility, highly beneficial for the publisher. The intense promotional campaign for the book and its author earned Volny a nomination in the "Superheroines 2024" poll organized by the editors of „Wysokie Obcasy". The nominee's profile reads: „Patrycja Volny. Author of the book *Niewygodna*. For breaking taboos, for speaking out against violence[40]". As we can see, according to the model, "autobiography can occupy such an important place in the economy of attention and the system of fame because it is the best tool for a celebrity to negotiate their public identity.[41]" Such recognition of related entities is difficult to isolate from the following observation: "It is a mutual interest – the star increases their visibility, and the publisher benefits from the attention capital they have accumulated, thereby increasing their own capital (not only the economic one)[42]". Antonik is writing about ghostwriting, but his comments also pertain to more general market relations.

Patrycja Volny is open about the fact that she wants to use the attention she has gained through her autobiography to exert influence and embolden other women who are being harmed. Although it

[36]Antonik, 91.

[37]Antonik, 91.

[38]Antonik, 91.

[39]P. David Marshall, Celebrity and Power. Fame in Contemporary Culture (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), IX (as quoted in: Antonik, 92).

[40]„Twój głos ma moc! To już ostatnia chwila na wybór Superbohaterki 2024 [GŁOSOWANIE]" [„Your voice is powerful! This is the last moment to vote for the Superheroine of 2024 [POLL]", Wysokie Obcasy, 31.01.2025, https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/akcje-specjalne/7,156847,31645947,12-historii-14-wspanialych-kobiet-lista-nominowanych-do-superbohaterki.html.

[41]Antonik, 97.

[42]Antonik, 94.

would be easy to generalise, there are no other women in a situation similar to hers - none of them will ever be the daughter of this particular Jacek Kaczmarski, and suggestions like hers reduce that human being (not to mention - an artist), with all his psychological complexity – which his daughter herself mentions repeatedly – only to the negative traits that one wants to stigmatize socially.

Dariusz Rosiak calls the contemporary political reality of the West a media-emotional democracy. This term applies not only to the world of politics, but also reflects the broader chaos of communication in highly polarized societies:

> Nowadays, words are subject to the highest law of the media world of the internet, namely "optimization." Its point of reference is not reality, but the audience's feelings. They are grouped into "bubbles" – political, aesthetic, racial, and gender – and sold as a package of political or business products, which amounts to the same thing. For those who trade in our attention, the ideal world is one in which we argue with each other to the bitter end on any topic – not to arrive at the truth, because there is no truth, but to continue the wars that generate specific profits[43].

The image of Kaczmarski created in the media today is subject to the same rules as the language of politics and other emotionally charged discourses. The reduced bard becomes a useful example to illustrate many of the ills of the modern world, which „Gazeta Wyborcza" often writes about. One does not have to be critical of the content presented by the editorial staff to notice recurrent topics: domestic violence, alcoholism in the family, ACoA syndrome, social inequalities, sexual violence, anachronistic parenting methods, and generational trauma caused by violence – all of these are issues that require in-depth debate. In addition to its obvious financial interests, the publishing house also pursues ideological capital, but in the case of Patrycja Volny's *Niewygodna*, all these issues become entangled in communicative noise, generating a highly simplified and distorted image.

Autobiography, as a genre on the borderline between literature and documentary, is often perceived as sincere, based on truthful confessions. Although Philippe Lejeune has already modified the idealistic assumptions of his "autobiographical pact" by writing: "An autobiographer is not someone who tells the truth about their life, but someone who says they tell it," there is still a tendency to perceive autobiographical messages as if they were not acts of self-creation. People have a profound need to search for their identity and redefine their position in relation to others, and this has been recognized for centuries, but these are only part of the complex system of motivations behind autobiographical efforts. A combination of market, media, and ideological circumstances overlaps with the original intentions, turning the confessional genre into an object of market games, on a par with other products of the culture industry. The media situation surrounding the publication of *Niewygodna*. *Autobiografia* shows that both the book itself and the entire autobiographical message built up over the years are not free from these problems.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

[43] Dariusz Rosiak, „Co się dzieje z demokratycznym światem? Idzie fala większa od Trumpa" [„What is happening to the democratic world? A wave larger than Trump is coming"], Tygodnik Powszechny 5 (2025), https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/co-sie-dzieje-z-demokratycznym-swiatem-idzie-fala-wieksza-od-trumpa-189555, 28.01.2025.

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KEYWORDS

Jacek Kaczmarski

Patrycja Volny

autobiography

personal document

Abstract:
This article reflects on the current status of autobiographical writing, on the example of Patrycja Volna's book *Niewygodna. Autobiografia*. Publications in traditional media and social media reactions have shown that works bearing the emblem of autobiography are treated unreflectively as confessions of truth, inciting greater emotions the more sensational their content. Patrycja Volny arouses particular interest as the daughter of a well-known and respected artist, and her confessions attract attention, positioning the author in relation to other participants in the media discourse. A combination of market, media, and ideological circumstances overlap with the original intentions, turning the confessional genre into an object of market games, on a par with other products of the culture industry.

WOMEN'S BIOGRAPHIES

ATTENTION CAPITAL

publishing market

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

Note on the Author:
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The Autobiographical in Women's Writing: Redefinitions

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In contemporary scholarship, autobiography continues to be a subject of intense scrutiny, yet its contours have become increasingly blurred. The central challenge lies in delineating its boundaries and scope. Efforts to establish a conceptual framework depend not only on the methodological lens employed but also on whether one accepts, following Philippe Lejeune's influential argument, that an autobiographical reading is contingent upon the author's signature.[1]

The aim of this paper is to examine the presence and function of the autobiographical in selected novels by Maria Ukniewska,[2] a largely forgotten writer of the interwar period; Zyta Oryszyn,[3] a writer of the communist era; and two representatives of Polish contemporary literature, Magdalena Tulli and Joanna Bator. The analysis will address not only the autobiographical dimensions of these texts but also the genre-specific, aesthetic, and formal features that shape the broader landscape of Polish women's writing.

[1] Philippe Lejeune, On Autobiography, ed. John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3–30.

[2] Maria Kuśniewiczowa, née Brejnakowska, "was born on May 2, 1907, in Warsaw, the daughter of Roman Brejnakowski, a tailor, and Aleksandra, née Kopeć, a seamstress. After completing trade school, she continued her education at the Jadwiga Hryniewiecka Drama School. She later performed as a dancer in the Morskie Oko cabaret and occasionally appeared as an extra at the Polish Theatre and other variety theaters in Warsaw. In 1938, she launched her literary career under the pseudonym Maria Ukniewska. Fragments of her debut novel about the lives of variety dancers, Niedziela Teresy i przygody Dubenki [Teresa's Sunday and the Adventures of Dubenka], were published in Wiadomości Literackie [Literary News] (No. 8). The complete novel was subsequently released under the title Strachy [Fears]." All biographical information about the author is drawn from the digital bio-bibliographic dictionary Polscy pisarze i badacze literatury XX i XXI wieku [Polish Writers and Literary Scholars of the 20th and 21st Centuries], https://pisarzeibadacze.ibl.edu.pl/haslo/4277/ukniewska-maria, date of access 30 Aug. 2025.

[3] Anna Kaczyńska, née Bartkowska, was a writer, journalist, and translator. She made her literary debut in 1956 with short stories published in the daily Trybuna Wałbrzyska [Wałbrzych Tribune], and in 1970 released her first novel, Najada [Naiad]. During the 1980s, she was active in the Komitet Kultury Niezależnej [Independent Culture Committee], an underground cultural organization in communist Poland that supported independent writers, artists. She also collaborated with the Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza [Independent Publishing House], and from 1996 worked for the daily Rzeczpospolita. A member of the Polish PEN Club, she also contributed to underground magazines such as Tygodnik Wojenny [War Weekly], Wezwania [Calls], and Kultura Niezależna [Independent Culture]. She was also a translator. Between 1962 and 1972, she was married to the writer and poet Edward Stachura. All biographical information about the author is drawn from Instytut Książki []: https://instytutksiazki.pl/literatura,8,indeks-autorow-i-autorek,26,zyta-oryszyn,153.html?filter=, date of access 30 Aug. 2025.

The writers discussed in this article represent three distinct literary periods, which makes it impossible to analyze their novels within a single methodological framework. The central task, therefore, concerns drafting a new definition of the autobiographical and approaching it as a mode of reading that operates independently of the author's signature.

The Autobiographical and Women's Writing: A Theoretical Reflection

A methodological reflection on women's writing is, at its core, a reflection on the history of emancipation. Its theoretical basis draws not only on scholarly research but also on the metaphors and values that shape the text.[4] Within this framework, the concepts of arachnology—and, respectively, somatopoetics[5]—inform the examined novels. Nancy Miller[6] defines arachnology as "a critical positioning which reads against the weave of in-differentiation to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity; to recover within representation the emblem of its construction."[7] Explaining the unique nature of women's writing through the myth of Arachne and Athena is in itself a metaphorical construct. In this perspective, the woman writer becomes a weaver, producing the story from within herself, with the work intrinsically bound to her physicality.

Polish literary scholars, as Monika Świerkosz emphasizes,[8] have often read Nancy Miller's concept through a somatic lens. The scholar draws an analogy between writing and "spinning a web,"[9] suggesting that the writer resembles a spider "imprisoned forever in its web."[10] Such a reading of the myth of Arachne and Athena thus becomes a meditation on the autobiographical in women's writing.[11] Within the autobiographical community, the reader—the addressee—may explore and weave the text together with the writer. The result is irregular, fluid. It resembles a wave.

I propose that arachnology, as a mode of reading, and the theory of feminist waves, as a framework for tracing the evolution of feminist movements, can be complementary tools for examining women's writing and its autobiographical dimensions. In this perspective, autobiographical writing may be envisioned both as a spider's web—woven together by

[4] In Polish literary studies, Ewa Kraskowska has discussed methodologies of women's writing. See, for example, Ewa Kraskowska, "Powieść kobieca w czasach PRL" [The Women's Novel in the Polish People's Republic], in: Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX: procesy i gatunki, sytuacje i tematy [Polish Women's Writing in the 20th Century: Processes and Genres, Situations and Themes], ed. Ewa Kraskowska, Bogumiła Kaniewska (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2015).

[5] See: Anna Łebkowska, "Jak ucieleśnić ciało: o jednym z dylematów somatopoetyki" [How to embody the body: The dilemmas of somatopoetics], Teksty Drugie 4 (2011): 11–27.

[6] See Nancy K. Miller, "Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic," in: Nancy K. Miller, Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 77–101.

[7] Miller, 80.

[8] Monika Świerkosz, "Atena i Arachne. W stronę innej poetyki pisarstwa kobiecego" [Athena and Arachne: Towards a Different Poetics of Women's Writing], in: Monika Świerkosz, Arachne i Atena. Literatura, polityka i kobiecy klasycyzm [Arachne and Athena: Literature, Politics, and Female Classicism] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2017), 18.

[9] Świerkosz, 18.

[10] Świerkosz, 18.

[11] See also: Grażyna Borkowska, Cudzoziemki. Studia o polskiej prozie kobiecej [Strangers: Studies in Polish Women's Fiction] (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 1996), 13. Quote after: Świerkosz, 18–19.

both the reader and the writer—and as a wave, which can reshape and transform the text, generating an autobiographical community of shared experiences.

"This Is Not My Diary:"[12] Maria Ukniewska's *Strachy* [Fears]

Maria Ukniewska, in her novel *Strachy*,[13] portrays the lives of young women working as variety dancers—a career she herself pursued in her youth. But are the experiences of her protagonists truly identical to those of the author? In a brief preface to the novel, Ukniewska appears to address this very question:

> Between the ages of eleven and thirteen, I was consumed by a passion for organizing amateur performances. And I was not alone. In the vast tenement building where I grew up, at least a hundred other children shared the same obsession. [...] My longing for the theater eventually turned into writing. Drawing on those early theatrical memories, I wrote the novel *Strachy*, which was published in 1938. [*Strachy* 10]

The novel, born of her "love for theater," is firmly rooted in Ukniewska's own experiences. The prefatory note explicitly underscores the writer's fascination with the stage. This raises the question: can *Strachy* be read as an autobiographical novel, in which the author herself enters into the autobiographical pact with the reader?[14] Philippe Lejeune, the French literary theorist who developed this concept, argued that a text qualifies as autobiographical if it bears the author's signature—it functions as a kind of contract with the reader. Teresa Sikorzanka, the protagonist of *Strachy*, should not be conflated with Maria Ukniewska, however, as her life is poorly documented, with little research and no biography to illuminate it. While modern autobiographical theory rightly builds upon the work of renowned scholars such as Philippe Lejeune, it must also recognize that each literary text articulates its own distinct theoretical framework.

Ukniewska did not write a novel that can be interpreted solely in autobiographical terms. Equally compelling is a reading of *Strachy* as an exploration of a collective female experience—of women who realized that emancipation has its contradictions. The heroines of Ukniewska's novel demonstrate how emancipatory slogans, championed, among others, in the magazine *Bluszcz* [Ivy], play out in practice. In *Strachy*, femininity and independence are paradoxical: every career path ultimately leads to men—immoral individuals, as it turns out—who reduce the heroines to objects, even attempting to regulate their most intimate bodily functions, such as their menstrual cycles.

[12]Maria Ukniewska said this in an interview for Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny [Illustrated Daily Courier]. She further emphasized that the situations portrayed in the novel are fictional and that its heroines should not be equated with actual figures from the theatrical world. Agnieszka Baranowska comments on Ukniewska's statement, situating it within the broader reception of Strachy. She observes that reviews of the novel appeared in several prominent periodicals, including Kurier Literacko-Naukowy [Literary and Scientific Courier], Wiadomości Literackie [Literary News], and Sygnały [Signals]. See: Agnieszka Baranowska, "To nie mój pamiętnik" [This Is Not My Diary], in: Agnieszka Baranowska, Perły i potwory. Szkice o literaturze międzywojennej [Pearls and Monsters: Essays on Interwar Literature] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1986), 236–248.

[13]Maria Ukniewska, Strachy, 7th ed. (Warsaw: Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal, 2016). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[14]See: Lejeune.

One of the central themes of *Strachy*, apart from the struggles of variety dancers, lies in the representation of women's relationship to their own bodies. In Ukniewska's novel, the somatic dimension is inseparably bound to trauma and fear. This becomes evident in the fate of Linka, Teresa's friend, who experiences it firsthand when she becomes pregnant and chooses to undergo an abortion:

> The next hour unfolded like a grotesque, nightmarish vision. Behind the screen, water boiled on the stove. A sheet was spread across the table, soon drenched in blood. Linka lay exposed, her body bound with a belt, her arms and legs immobilized. For an instant, their eyes met—Linka's, wild with pain; Teresa's, wild with horror at the scene before her. [*Strachy* 112]

Abortion—perhaps the titular "fear"—is depicted in the novel as a profoundly somatic and terrifying experience. Teresa, too, is haunted by these "fears;" witnessing Linka's suffering, she dreads that she might one day face a similar fate. In time, Teresa herself becomes pregnant, having earlier entered into a relationship with Modecki, a theater director. Yet neither the relationship nor the prospect of starting a family fills her with happiness. As Magdalena Bednarek observes:

> In *Strachy*, Linka's fate serves as a dark mirror to Teresa's story. The two girls share a passion for dance, endure the hardships of cabaret life together, fall madly in love, and jointly confront the most socially, psychologically, and legally stigmatizing ordeal: Linka's pregnancy and abortion. Although Linka's suicide separates them, a sense of community persists—Linka continues to haunt Teresa, embodying her possible alternative destiny and becoming one of the novel's titular fears. [...].[15]

Bednarek captures the essence of the relationship between Linka and Teresa, who create a shared community of experiences and mutual support. Yet their story offers no hopeful resolution. Linka takes her own life, while Teresa, in choosing to pursue a relationship with Modecki, soon recognizes the gravity of her mistake.

Teresa's relationship with Modecki—marked by repeated abuse—embodies the bleak inversion of emancipation. What begins as an attempt at self-determination ultimately culminates in misery:

> You don't care about me. I miss the stage—I miss dancing, the makeup, my friends, the dressing room!... I'm suffocating. You bore me. You only ever talk about yourself, warning me again and again that you're finished. You received excellent reviews, but even that isn't enough for you. [...] You're selfish, that's what you are. You wanted a child, and now I'm the one who must give birth. I don't want this child! I'm terrified of childbirth. I'll die giving birth. Not a moment passes when I don't regret being with you. I never wanted this—you forced me. I'm young, I want to live. I hate you! And you hate me too. [*Strachy* 284]

The fulfillment of Teresa's deepest fears comes first with pregnancy and then with childbirth—a profoundly psychosomatic experience. Childbirth reverberates through her body while simultaneously wounding her psyche,[16] for in that moment Teresa recognizes that her life has been

[15]Magdalena Bednarek, "Powieść o kobiecym dojrzewaniu" [Female coming-of-age story], in: Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX, 60.

[16]Magdalena Bednarek argues that Teresa's birth is a liminal experience, a rite of passage, the consequence of which is the woman's "social death" – she gives up her career, her own life. See: Bednarek, 59.

irreversibly altered, perhaps even ended. In *Strachy*, the experience of femininity is generational. Autobiographical writing expands into auto-socio-biography—a mode of life writing that establishes a communal narrative of women's experiences, fostering wider identification.

Madness and Transgression: On Community and Individual Experiences in Zyta Oryszyn's *Madam Frankensztajn* [Madame Frankenstein]

Reconstructing the autobiographical in Zyta Oryszyn's writing proves, as in the case of Maria Ukniewska, a challenging endeavor. Although Oryszyn's work has not been neglected in recent scholarship—Arleta Galant's studies are particularly noteworthy[17]—the autobiographical within her *oeuvre* remains less thoroughly examined. Oryszyn does not explicitly ground her novel in her own life; nevertheless, the experiences of her characters, and especially the heroines of *Madam Frankensztajn* [Madame Frankenstein],[18] may be seen as paralleling those of the author herself, who came of age and lived under the communist regime.[19]

Madam Frankensztajn may be described as a political—indeed an anti-communist—novel, one that dismantles the utopian vision theoretically grounded in egalitarianism. Madness becomes a lens for understanding the protagonists' disillusioned behavior. The women in Oryszyn's prose form a kind of community, which is often regarded as one of the defining generic characteristics of women's writing. Yet this community is not limited to generational experiences such as war, trauma, or life under an oppressive system. Oryszyn also binds the destinies of her heroines through acts of transgression, which can be understood in two ways: first, her novels interconnect, transcending textual boundaries not only through recurring themes but, more importantly, through how her female characters act.[20] Secondly, the protagonists continually transgress the boundaries of the "self," dissolving into one another through madness and confronting an otherness that ultimately proves to be nothing more than an untamed aspect of themselves. The experience of otherness thus forms the very foundation of *Madam Frankensztajn*, which revolves around its ontological status. The figure of the mysterious woman, discovered at a garbage dump, activates different cultural associations. The scar on her face earns her the nickname "Madame Frankenstein." If one assumes that this woman is a "monster," positioned as the radical "other," it might be inferred that such a status grants her unique understanding and sensitivity—though it certainly does not bring her happiness. Such an interpretation would

[17]See: 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, 2014), 28–52; Arleta Galant, "Dywersje Zyty Oryszyn" [Zyta Oryszyn's Diversions], in: Pisarstwo kobiet pomiędzy dwoma dwudziestoleciami [Women's Writing between the Interwar Period and the Fall of Communism], ed. Inga Iwasiów, Arleta Galant (Cracow: Universitas, 2011), 329–342.

[18]Zyta Oryszyn, Madam Frankensztajn. Czarna iluminacja [Madam Frankenstein. Black Illumination] (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, 2009). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[19]Galant argues that that women's "private narratives" can be seen as "an attempt to translate personal experience into a public language." See: Galant, "Dywersje Zyty Oryszyn," 334.

[20]Galant notes the connection between Madam Frankensztajn and Czarna iluminacja [Black Illumination]. See: Galant, "Wariatki na prowincji," 42.

be thoroughly Romantic.[21] Yet Romantic notions of transgression and fascination with the ontological status of ghosts, apparitions, and monsters cannot fully account for the behavior—or, more broadly, the very existence—of the titular Madame.

Indeed, the strange woman found at a garbage dump provokes not only fear but also curiosity. Yet this Madame is not portrayed in a genuinely Romantic fashion—one that would demand we interpret her through the prism of the "third eye," her superhuman cognitive and imaginative powers. In Oryszyn's novel, every element, including the protagonists' lives, is subordinated to a rigid ideal. The system, which once promised equality and social justice, ultimately revealed itself as an unattainable utopia in theory and, in practice, a bloody and ruthless totalitarian regime. Madame Frankenstein is described by Galant as "a child of the system, and at the same time its error."[22] Galant points to her affinity with the heroine of *Czarna iluminacja* [Black Illumination],[23] who, seduced by the allure of communism, became its devoted adherent and fervent advocate. Oryszyn's heroines are often women marked by devastation—scarred by war, uprooted through displacement, and crushed beneath the weight of a system whose very essence eludes comprehension. This inability to grasp its logic breeds alienation, a condition that leads to madness. Maria, the novel's protagonist, declares:

> The word communism meant nothing to me: it was a political party, a hand with a million fingers, a poem one had to memorize to get a good grade. It remained a slogan—painted on walls, printed in textbooks, echoed in newspapers. I could see it every day, yet it was the everydayness of the sun: sometimes startling me with its feverish blaze, sometimes with its absence, and at other times with its relentless, unyielding presence. [*Madam Frankensztajn* 20]

Communism emerges as a poem, a slogan that resists comprehension. Oryszyn's novel makes it clear: women seduced by communist ideals become estranged, consumed by madness that borders on being possessed. The limited autobiographical traces in Oryszyn's work make it impossible to fully identify her lived experience, yet one may suspect that the author—playing a subtle game—threads fragments of her own life into the fabric of her fiction.[24] A similar strategy can be observed in the prose of Magdalena Tulli.

Autobiography as Play and Creation: The Prose of Magdalena Tulli and Joanna Bator

Magdalena Tulli's *oeuvre*, though inaugurated with *Dreams and Stones*[25]—a cosmogenic narrative rich in metaphorical potential—is not confined to the construction of undefined,

[21] See also: Maria Janion, "Upiór z Upity. Wobec milczenia trupa" [The Phantom of Upita: The Silence of the Corpse], in: Maria Janion, Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury [Uncanny Slavdom: Phantasms of Literature] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), 125–161.

[22] Galant, "Dywersje Zyty Oryszyn," 335.

[23] Oryszyn.

[24] Agnieszka Czyżak, "Przepisywanie siebie, przepisywanie obcości – przypadek Zyty Oryszyn" [Rewriting oneself, rewriting otherness – The case of Zyta Oryszyn], Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich [Questions of Literary Genres] 2 (2014): 104.

[25] Magdalena Tulli, Dreams and Stones, trans. Bill Johnson (New York: Archipelago Books, 2004).

ostensibly universal worlds. In several of her novels, the writer remains anchored in tangible, named, and at times even autobiographical realities.

Szum [Noise][26] and *Włoskie szpilki* [Italian High Heels][27] appear to mark a new phase in Tulli's literary trajectory.[28] While they continue to employ metaphorical and spatially inventive modes of narration, they simultaneously introduce fresh contexts, among them autobiographical dimensions. The autobiographical in Tulli's work remains an elusive category: despite numerous hints suggesting a strong affinity between the authorial self and the novelistic self, it is difficult to draw a clear boundary between them.

The central figure in both *Szum* and *Włoskie szpilki* is an unnamed girl who vies for the attention of her absent, emotionally distant mother. At the same time, she must make her way through a world that resembles a dark forest, hostile and disorienting. Her mother, a concentration camp survivor, is unable to navigate the fractured postwar reality and, consequently, cannot provide the support her daughter so desperately seeks:

> The mother's reality is a world stripped of emotions and affects. Even before her illness, there was no space for a child, least of all an infant whose very existence depends on the simplest affective exchanges. A negative stimulus triggers a reaction, demanding the caregiver's response. Yet the mother spent her entire postwar life attempting to interrupt and dismantle this sequence: stimulus followed by affective response, experience followed by emotional reaction. The Holocaust, as a defining "event," irreversibly altered the structure of her affects. It deprived her of the capacity to experience them in the present, in the real, rather than one perpetually overshadowed by trauma.[29]

The unnamed girl, the narrator of the novel, is caught between two worlds: her father's Italian life, from which she is largely excluded, and postwar Poland, where she lives with her emotionally unavailable mother. A biographical reading of both *Szum* and *Włoskie szpilki* may therefore be grounded, among other factors, in the complexities of strained family relationships. In conversation with Justyna Dąbrowska,[30] Magdalena Tulli confesses that she remembers vividly what it was like to be a little girl, which is why, as a mother, she always cared for her children's feelings.[31] This interview also reveals numerous details from Tulli's life that inform *Szum* and *Włoskie szpilki*. Tulli acknowledges that her relationship with her mother was difficult, reflects

[26]Magdalena Tulli, Szum [Noise] (Cracow: Znak, 2014). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[27]Magdalena Tulli, Włoskie szpilki [Italian High Heels], 3th ed. (Warsaw: Nisza, 2014). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[28]This observation is made, among others, by Ewa Wiegandt, who highlights the autobiographical "I" in Włoskie szpilki and thereby invites readers to search for similar autobiographical traces throughout Tulli's other novels. See: Ewa Wiegandt, "«To» Magdaleny Tulli" [Magdaleny Tulli's "It"], Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka [Poznań Polish Studies. Literary Series] 22 (2013).

[29]Justyna Tabaszewska, "Zatarte tryby teraźniejszości. Afektywne struktury czasowe w twórczości Magdaleny Tulli" [Blurred Modes of the Present: Affective Temporal Structures in the Works of Magdalena Tulli], Teksty Drugie [Second Texts] 5 (2020): 96–120.

[30]Magdalena Tulli w rozmowie z Justyną Dąbrowską. Jaka piękna iluzja [Magdalena Tulli in conversation with Justyna Dąbrowska: What a Beautiful Illusion] (Cracow: Znak, 2017).

[31]Magdalena Tulli w rozmowie z Justyną Dąbrowską. Jaka piękna iluzja, p. 27.

on her mother's experiences in the concentration camp and subsequent emotional withdrawal, and recalls her Italian heritage, as well as struggles at school and conflicts with peers:

> [...] After the war, my mother was unprepared for the closeness that children instinctively expect from their mothers. Something had been taken from her—something she no longer possessed—and so she could not give it. Yet she was still compelled to respond to that expectation in some way.
>
> My behavior seemed strange and unsettling to others, and as a result, strangers kept their distance. Their distance denied me the chance to learn, and without that chance, they continued to keep away. I did make progress, but only slowly, and so I fell further and further behind. [...] The sadness lingered for years; in time, one could grow accustomed to it and simply live with it.[32]

The author's signature is not, of course, the sole determinant of an autobiographical reading. Yet in Tulli's case, it enables a deeper understanding of the girl's behavior—she, like the author, belongs to the postmemory generation.[33] Tulli writes her life into the novel, though in a deliberately subversive manner. She plays a game with the reader: on the one hand, she oscillates between biography and literary fiction, offering no guarantee of truth and refusing to enter into Lejeune's autobiographical pact. On the other hand, she provides a form of testimony that exceeds the boundaries of autobiography or autofiction, one that assumes a generational dimension and breaks the cycle of silence.[34]

Joanna Bator, like Magdalena Tulli, does not want the reader to identify the narrator/main character with the author herself. Significantly, Bator often advocates for an anti-biographical reading of her novels, thereby establishing firm boundaries between literary fiction and authorial identity. This approach is particularly evident in *Ciemno, prawie noc* [Dark, Almost Night].[35] An autobiographical interpretation of the novel may appear impossible at first glance. Yet when Alicja's narrative reaches its conclusion, the author directly addresses the reader, writing:

> Wałbrzych and Książ Castle—whose last mistress was Princess Daisy—are real. Everything else is a product of my imagination. Do not search for these places or people beyond the text; you will not find them there.[36]

A biographical reading is possible despite the (anti-)autobiographical pact—for such a reading need not function as a pact but rather as a mode of interpretation. Bator herself acknowledges this in the collection *Wyspa Łza od nowa. Esej intymny* [Tear Island Reborn: An Intimate Essay],[37]

[32]Magdalena Tulli w rozmowie z Justyną Dąbrowską. Jaka piękna iluzja, pp. 151, 152.

[33]See: Wiegandt.

[34]Dorota Głowacka, among others, has written about the inexpressibility of the Holocaust, emphasizing the need to search for a language capable of conveying its traumatic reality. See: Dorota Głowacka, "Wsłuchując się w ciszę. Estetyka pamięci o Zagładzie według Jean-François Lyotarda" [Listening to Silence: The Aesthetics of Holocaust Memory According to Jean-François Lyotard], Teksty Drugie 1-2 (2007): 41–59.

[35]Joanna Bator, Ciemno, prawie noc [Dark, Almost Night], 6th ed. (Warsaw: Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal, 2019). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

[36]Joanna Bator, "Od autorki" [Author's Afterword], in: Joanna Bator, Ciemno, prawie noc, p. 491.

[37]Joanna Bator, Wyspa Łza od nowa. Esej intymny [Tear Island Reborn: An Intimate Essay] (Cracow: Znak, 2020). All quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited directly in the main text following the format: title, page number. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the original Polish-language version are translated by M.O.

a self-referential, meta-literary meditation on travel and place. Within this framework, the metaphor of "zahaczka" [hook] informs the reading of *Ciemno, prawie noc*. As Bator writes:

> "Zahaczka" is the feminine form of the word "haczyk" [hook], associated with expressions such as "by hook or by crook" or "to be on the hook." Meanwhile, "zahaczka" is used to catch a thread and weave it into a story [...]. In this sense, "zahaczka" functions as a bio-grapheme: fragments of a body once touched—birthmarks, scars, smells, tastes—living sites of memory where the experience of real life, often fragmented, unclear, and strange, insists on being acknowledged, even demands that "something must be done with it." [*Wyspa Łza od nowa. Esej intymny* 125–126]

"Zahaczka" thus serves as the foundation for weaving a narrative that embraces subjectivity, remains grounded in lived experience, and resists the neutrality of reportage. Instead, it transforms reality into a creative source—one that is continually reshaped and concretized by imagination. From these observations, several conclusions emerge: Bator employs "zahaczka" as a means of filtering personal experience through the lens of literary fiction. Biographical detail informs the narrative, yet it is never subsumed by it. Through the mechanism of "zahaczka," individual experience finds expression in relation to a specific space, forging a connection between person and place:

> Travel inscribes itself on the body with scars and stains—sunburn, insect bites, the sting of poisonous weeds. It splinters our nails, erodes our teeth, and unsettles our stomachs. It invites viruses, bacteria, and fungi to take root within us, until the true traveler becomes a living hybrid: part botanical garden, part zoo. [*Wyspa Łza od nowa. Esej intymny* 197]

Particularly significant in the context of Alicja Tabor's relationship with Wałbrzych is the recognition that the past does not unfold as a purely logical or linear sequence of events. The fabric of life and the fabric of narrative are not identical but remain in constant interplay. The autobiographical in Bator's work is best approached through the lens of autofiction—an ever-evolving form that resists closure and expands across multiple spaces. Alicja and the author share a nomadic sensibility; they keep searching for the right place. Yet the best one is ultimately the one already inscribed within the story.

Space as a Source of Oppression and Fear: Ukniewska and Oryszyn

Autobiographical places,[38] as sites of individual memory, shed their objective status and are transformed into imaginary constructs that exist solely in the consciousness of the experiencing subject. In women's writing, place serves not only as a literary marker but as a means of examining how space is inhabited through personal and intimate experience. Polish women's literature shows many places tied to personal and autobiographical experience. In Maria Ukniewska's *Strachy* and Zyta Oryszyn's *Madam Frankensztajn*, space is tied to oppression and the struggle against patriarchal violence.

The concept of space in Ukniewska's novel is closely tied to the discourse of interwar emancipation. Central to this context is the figure of the *New Woman*, emblematic of emancipation circles at the

[38]Małgorzata Czermińska, "Miejsca autobiograficzne. Propozycja w ramach geopoetyki" [Autobiographical Places: Towards a Geopoetic Framework], Teksty Drugie 5 (2011): 183–200.

time, who embodied economic and sexual independence and the freedom to shape her own life and career. Yet space in Ukniewska's narrative reveals a less glamorous dimension of emancipation: for women who pursued professional paths, space was marked not only by opportunity but also by social oppression and harsh living conditions. Teresa, the novel's protagonist, comes to embody this tension, confronting the costs of emancipation alongside its promises:

> They live on the third floor, confined to a long, narrow room. Yet climbing those stairs in darkness is unbearable—pale shapes flicker in the corners by the windows, and dreadful memories resurface! Only last year, a musician ended his life here with a revolver. The reason why does not matter. What lingers is the place—these very stairs! [*Strachy* 25]

The space inhabited by Teresa and her family conjures the titular fears that haunt the staircase. It is marked by the memory of a suicide, which further affects how Teresa and her family live in their cramped, ill-adapted apartment. Ukniewska depicts this living space with stark realism, reflecting the social conditions of the time:[39] large families, unable to secure adequate housing, were often forced to share a single, overcrowded room. The novel captures this intimacy and constraint with striking detail. When Teresa goes to bed, her sisters Weronika and Klara are already there, sleeping: "They were cramped in that bed, but warm" (*Strachy* 27).

Teresa's life is shaped by the hardships of everyday existence—poverty, inadequate housing, and the relentless demands of theater work. In the novel, the theater emerges as an even more oppressive space than her home. It is there that Teresa painfully discovers that self-determination and professional ambition are inseparable from constant struggles: the fight for recognition, the demand for fair wages, and the need to resist intrusive male advances. The world of *Strachy* is marked by oppression, not only in its spaces but also in the behaviors of certain characters—particularly the men who attempt to reduce the variety dancer's profession to that of a "lady of the night." Teresa's body, once an asset and a means of livelihood, becomes emptied of promise, deprived both of her aspirations and even of sustenance. For Ukniewska, the body itself becomes a site of evil, abuse, and, ultimately, of "fears."

In *Madam Frankensztajn*, we encounter a similar—though not identical—attempt to show social oppression through space. The novel opens with the depiction of a queue waiting in front of a grocery shop, a common scene from the communist era, one that immediately situates the reader in a world of scarcity and constraint. For the protagonist, the store's space is not merely physical but symbolic: stifling, uncomfortable, and saturated with the sense of inevitable failure:

> The arrival of the goods struck me like a blow to the ribs, sharp and cracking. Before I could brace myself, the woman in a red beret—standing in the spot that should have been mine—thrust her hip and shoulder with such force that I was expelled from the queue like a knocked-out tooth. I checked my buttons. *I can't get back in*, I thought. *I won't buy carp*, I thought. A tear slid across my cheek. *I'm not going home*, I thought. *There's a razor blade in my purse—too bad I'm not a man*, I thought. [*Madam Frankensztajn* 11]

[39]Polish interwar prose frequently engaged with the theme of precarious housing, highlighting its direct impact on the protagonists' well-being and daily existence. A notable example is Zbigniew Uniłowski's social novel Wspólny Pokój [A Common Room], which portrays the everyday struggles of artists. See: Zbigniew Uniłowski: Wspólny pokój [A Common Room] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Współczesne, 1932).

For Maria, the brutal expulsion from the queue becomes a catalyst for reflection on her place within both family and society. To be a man, she realizes, would mean the freedom to respond to the aggression of the woman in the red beret. Her social position, shaped as much by gender as by class, dictates a prescribed mode of behavior. The store's space emerges as a prison—not due to its physical constraints or the impossibility of movement, but because of systemic limitations. Communist ideology, the centrally planned economy, endless queues, and pervasive "shortages"—not only of goods but of opportunities—define the oppressive architecture of everyday life:

> I went to the bathroom as if it were an office. I sat on the toilet seat, hooked the door, and closed my burning eyes. The stench did not bother me—I had spent nearly my entire life in small, foul-smelling rooms. During the war: night after night in a squalid, clay-dark shelter carved beneath a barn, deep in the Bieszczady Mountains. Thirteen years here, in a kitchen in Leśny Brzeg, on a couch shoved beneath the sink. Now I sleep in the same place, on the same couch, greasy slops gurgling in the same sink. Five years at a university in Warsaw, confined to a servant's room without a window. Five years with Emeryk in a rented bathroom with a single window in Saska Kępa. […] If a murderer had entered any of my rooms, there would have been nowhere to retreat […]. [*Madam Frankensztajn* 13]

The protagonist's quarters are cramped, unsuited to her needs, ugly, and uninviting. It is hardly surprising, then, that the titular Madame is discovered at a garbage dump. In Oryszyn's novel, space itself becomes a vehicle for alienation and otherness. For Maria, life under the communist regime serves as a continual reminder of her exclusion, forcing her to exist in the shadow of family and wartime traumas.

The Autobiographical Potential of Geopoetics: The Creation of Space in the Prose of Magdalena Tulli and Joanna Bator

For many years, contemporary Polish literature has demonstrated a sustained engagement with literary topographies, the spatial turn, and geopoetics. This conceptual framework owes much to the work of Elżbieta Rybicka,[40] whose scholarship, in the Polish context, has significantly deepened reflection on the spatial dimensions of literature. It is worth emphasizing, however, that geopoetics—according to the most recent developments—is no longer confined to defining the relationship between literary texts and place. Rather, it has evolved into an interdisciplinary interpretive method. As such, it allows one to integrate the perspectives of memory studies, the autobiographical, and space.

The autobiographical in Magdalena Tulli's novels is frequently interpreted through the lens of family trauma, her fraught relationship with her mother, and the experience of growing up in an environment marked by a lack of support and acceptance. Yet in *Szum* and *Włoskie Szpilki* these interpretive categories may be enriched by spatial contexts. In *Szum*, the forest emerges as a particularly significant space. It functions as a refuge for the emotionally wounded girl, offering her a new—open, liberating—space, free from both mental and material constraints. By

[40]See: Elżbieta Rybicka, Geopoetyka. Przestrzeń i miejsce we współczesnych teoriach i praktykach literackich [Geopoetics: Space and Place in Contemporary Literary Theories and Practices] (Cracow: Universitas, 2014).

contrast, *Włoskie Szpilki* foregrounds the contrast between Milan and Warsaw. This binary invites an autobiographical reading, fully justified by the author's Polish and Italian family background, and highlights the tension between cultural belonging and displacement. The protagonist's father does not reside permanently in Poland, and the Italian reality becomes woven into the memories and history of growing up in Warsaw. Italy appears as a space of leisure and vacation, while Warsaw embodies mundane everyday life:

> It seemed that of the two worlds—one beautiful, the other ugly; one kind, the other hostile—only one could be real. And we were told it was the ugly, hostile one. At every turn, we were persuaded that this world was better, more honest, and, paradoxically, more beautiful precisely because of its ugliness. [*Włoskie szpilki* 97]

Both spaces are grounded in the protagonist's individual experience, though—as one quickly notices—in markedly different ways. Postwar Poland is depicted as a country governed by trauma and anxiety about the future. Milan, by contrast, is rendered in lighter tones; the unnamed narrator remarks that "the trees and buildings looked strange without the familiar veneer of gray" [*Włoskie szpilki* 96].

This trauma and anxiety extend beyond Warsaw, encompassing her mother's memories of the concentration camp. In Tulli's prose, the concentration camp becomes an autobiographical place—a site of memory inscribed into family history. Małgorzata Czermińska's typology identifies several forms of autobiographical places; within the structure of Tulli's novel, it can be understood as an imagined place, one that exists at the intersection of personal memory and collective history:

> In the construction of autobiographical imagined places—that is, spaces associated with geographical spaces the writer has never personally accessed—family tradition assumes a central role. Genealogy, while significant for places directly remembered, becomes the very foundation of imagined places. This phenomenon is particularly evident among second-generation migrants. For them, the past is not accessible through lived memory but through imaginative attachment to an inaccessible space. The image of such a place emerges through the shaping power of family narratives and cultural myth, rather than through direct, embodied experience.[41]

The imagined place is, of course, deeply anchored in postmemory: the concentration camp exists through the mother's testimony—through the story of her personal tragedy. Yet beyond the framework of "imagination," this particular site of memory may also be understood through the lens of "dispersion." The dispersed space of the concentration camp is bound to the mother's transgressive stance, shaped by the fluidity of memory itself—Alzheimer's disease erases recollections, but never entirely or permanently. Memories are safeguarded by the daughter, who becomes the inheritor of her mother's narrative of (un)forgotten spaces. The concentration camp thus emerges, on the one hand, as an imagined place, and, on the other, as a dispersed one.

The construction of autobiographical places in Joanna Bator's *Ciemno, prawie noc* parallels those found in Magdalena Tulli's prose. Both authors intertwine autobiographical experience with

[41]Czermińska, 194.

spaces that actively shape and define that experience. In *Ciemno, prawie noc*, the story of the town transcends the conventional framework of place-based storytelling. The autobiographical potential of geopoetics here is rooted above all in the author's intimate engagement with familiar locations—most notably with Wałbrzych, Bator's hometown. Although the author resists identification with the novel's narrator, Wałbrzych nonetheless emerges as an autobiographical space, partly through the use of the aforementioned "zahaczka."

Wałbrzych thus becomes a distinctive site of memory, one conspicuously devoid of sacralization—in fact, a counter-model to the "literature of small homelands." The town is ugly, chaotic, and in architectural disarray; its external decay mirrors its spiritual decay. By contrast, Alicja resides in Warsaw, a modern metropolis, rich in opportunities. In Bator's novel, geopoetics draws upon cultural stereotypes: modernized Wrocław stands in stark opposition to neglected Wałbrzych. Yet these stereotypes are not merely invoked—they are powerfully reinforced by the narrative itself. Wałbrzych appears repulsive, just as the behavior of its inhabitants is repulsive; evil flourishes in spaces stripped of identity. The town lacks identity:

> I watched people vanish swiftly into the underground passage, and a crushing sense of loneliness overtook me—so heavy that I could scarcely make myself walk toward the train station. Inside, the building seemed deserted. On the wall, someone had scrawled: "Górnik F.C. sucks" and "Górnik F.C. rules." Perhaps the newcomer was already being pressed to choose, sealing his fate before even exploring the town. [*Ciemno, prawie noc* 13]

> I gazed at the sleeping town: [...] the *Apollo* cinema, its blueberry façade dulled and scratched; the *Oleńka* confectionary, still serving doughnuts and cakes for special occasions; and the Roma tenement houses on Pocztowa Street, clinging to life with their last remaining strength. [*Ciemno, prawie noc* 15]

Wałbrzych greets Alicja with coldness, strangeness, and an elusive sense of alienation. Confronted with crumbling buildings, drifting clouds of cigarette smoke, and the repulsiveness of passersby, the narrator keenly perceives that evil inhabits the city. In this context, it is worth recalling Agnieszka Czyżak's category of the "non-town," which alludes to Marc Augé's notion of the non-place.[42] Wałbrzych emerges here as a space "alien, devoid of positive values, impossible to tame and to recognize as one's own."[43]

Yet urban space is not the only terrain Alicja Tabor traverses. The protagonist and narrator also returns to her family home, itself a kind of non-place. Like Wałbrzych, the home functions as a site of memory—a repository of both recollections and traumas. Alicja's childhood in a dysfunctional household can be read as analogous to the shaping of Wałbrzych: the memory of the town becomes inseparable from individual memory. Bator constructs a palimpsest narrative in which overlapping stories generate an increasingly complex and heterogeneous image.

[42]Marc Augé, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

[43]Agnieszka Czyżak, "Nie-Miasto Joanny Bator" [Joanna Bator's Non-Town], Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Poetica 2 (2014): 46–47.

Autobiographical Worlds: Poetics and Form. Conclusion

The study of the autobiographical in Polish women's writing involves more than reconstructing individual experiences within external or spatial contexts. Equally crucial is the exploration of the narrative forms that shape autobiographical expression. The storytelling techniques employed in the analyzed novels vary considerably, yet they consistently foreground the female perspective—that is, and ought to remain, central to women's writing. Unsurprisingly, drawing on Stanzel's typology, the most prevalent narrative modes are the first-person narrative situation (as in the works of Oryszyn, Tulli, and Bator) and the personal narrative situation (as in Ukniewska's novel).[44] At first glance, the first-person mode appears ideally suited to conveying autobiographical experience. Yet this is only an illusion. The autobiographical, even at the level of narrative, can operate as a game—one that encodes and conceals meaning beneath the surface of the text.

In my view, the author does not need to vouch for the autobiographical with her signature. Even if the author acknowledges that the novel draws upon her memories and experiences, this does not alter the fundamental fact that the autobiographical in literature is always a construct: it actively shapes the subject, the narrative situation, and even events that may be rooted in reality but are inevitably refracted through the fictional framework of the novel.

How, then, can autobiographical experience be expressed so that life writing becomes creative rather than merely confessional? The answer lies in the narrative, which simultaneously reveals and encrypts meaning, while centering the experiencing subject, whose perspective and lived reality remain paramount. The formal parameters of autobiographical writing are inherently fluid; each text articulates its own theory. The manner in which the novel constructs its subject, though marked by fictionality, does not preclude biographical interpretation. For this reason, the autofictional cannot be understood in isolation from the autobiographical. Every autofictional text is autobiographical, and every autobiographical text is, in turn, an autofictional creation of the subject. The prefix *auto* signifies a form of vivisection—an introspective probing of the self—that nevertheless does not invalidate fiction.

All the novels examined here share a defining characteristic: they hover between the reconstruction and the deconstruction of autobiographical experience. The lives of their protagonists unfold as singular struggles—against the system, against the past, against family. These conflicts are simultaneously explicit within the narrative and yet subtly concealed, much like the autobiographical references themselves. It is for this reason that the metaphor of waves—waves that dissolve and reshape experience—becomes central to my exploration of the autobiographical in Polish women's writing. The act of reconstruction thus emerges as a collective endeavor, undertaken by the author, the reader, and the broader interpretive community, all of whom recognize the creative potential embedded in female experience.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[44]See: Franz Stanzel, A Theory of Narrative, trans. Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 200–232.

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KEYWORDS

EMANCIPATION

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Abstract:
Polish literary scholars have long examined the autobiographical dimensions of women's writing from a variety of perspectives. In light of recent theoretical developments, however, this category invites renewed consideration. New interpretive tools allow for the redefinition and deconstruction of traditional autobiographical practices grounded in the autobiographical pact with the reader. The novels of Maria Ukniewska, Zyta Oryszyn, Magdalena Tulli, and Joanna Bator, analyzed here as case studies, extend the theoretical framework of the autobiographical by embedding it within the contexts of personal and generational experiences, the representation of space, and formal experimentation. Although these novels articulate the "self" in diverse ways, they converge around female subjectivity—often shaped by external conditions—and suggest that an autobiographical reading need not depend on the authorial signature. Instead, it may be understood as a mode of reading that opens a communal space of interpretation and shared experiences.

TRAUMA

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

novel

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The desire for meaning: Urszula Zajączkowska's reading of nature

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1.

Although we cannot be sure what it is supposed to be or what it would actually entail, reading nature has a long tradition.

"Even raindrops arrange themselves into syllables, into sentences,"[1] Jacek Gutorow once wrote. "A leaf is a letter in the rustling book of the tree"[2], added Radosław Nowakowski around the same time. In this conviction of the linguistic or textual character of everything that touches us, one can still hear a distant echo of a line of thought dating back to the early Middle Ages. This tradition emerged from speculative theology and mystical philosophy, and it became established in the homiletics of the following centuries. It is, of course, the tradition of imagining the world or nature as a book – *liber naturae*. Within this tradition, the world and all its things are to constitute a complete book; "… for by its creatures, as by living letters, we may read the excellence of the Creator,"[3] which is the task of the righteous person. In a short time, the metaphor of the world as a book became secularized and entered common use.[4] We find it in the work of Paracelsus and in the writings of Michel de Montaigne. It is employed by Thomas Browne, John Donne, and John Milton. Voltaire and Denis Diderot argue for the superiority of studying the book of nature over all other books – for it is the source of knowledge about what truly matters. One merely needs to learn the script in which it has been written. For Galileo, that script was already the language of mathematics: „and the characters are

[1] Jacek Gutorow, X (Legnica: Biuro Literackie, 2001), 43.

[2] Radosław Nowakowski, Traktat kartkograficzny, czyli rzecz o liBeraturze [A cartcographic treatise, or a matter of liBerature], 2nd edition, expanded, corrected, and updated (Dąbrowa Dolna: Liberatorium, 2021), 105.

[3] Luis of Granada, Simbolo de la fé, quoted in: Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[4] Curtius, 328.

triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures."[5] But even for Goethe, "thus is Nature a living book / Whose sense may be taken, though oft mistook."[6] The readability and legibility of the book of nature – although the metaphor itself lost its force over the centuries, first becoming a commonplace and then falling simply out of use – returns as a theme in twentieth-century literature. These returns are rather occasional and point not so much to a way of being of the world (a finite, meaningful whole with a determinate significance guaranteed by an authorial instance) as to the activity of the individual participating in an unending process of semiosis, and to the procedure of reading itself as a way of positioning oneself in relation to signs and meanings. It is enough to recall that in *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, Schulz writes that "the text of spring is punctuated with implied meanings, with omissions and ellipses, dotted without letters in the empty blue, and into the free spaces between the syllables birds insert their capricious guesses and surmises."[7] Jorge Luis Borges takes a somewhat different approach. The volumes filling the Library (that is, the Universe) are said to contain "all possible combinations of the twenty-two orthographic symbols (a numer which, though unimaginably vast, is not infinite) – that is, all that can be expressed, in every language."[8] The sole task and destiny of the Library's inhabitants is the care of the books and their reading. Although the content of most of them seems, if not nonsensical, then inscrutable – their pages filled with signs arranged in an apparently random order, in which no linguistic system can be discerned – potentially all of them are meaningful. If the meaning of a book is conditioned by the knowledge of the code – or rather, the codes—in which its various fragments were produced, and which must still be discovered or invented,[9] then understanding the text (and further: the texts) does not guarantee an understanding of the Library itself. Borges insists that reading the books of the world does not lead to knowledge of that world. At most, it leads to knowing, to the ongoing activity of coming-to-know. And in doing so, it offers an insight into the nature of science *par excellence* – invariably progressive, and therefore never final. Nevertheless, reading – and knowing, discovering, but also inventing – is the only thing there is to do in a world-library.

This last idea finds its development in the work of Alberto Manguel, who in his youth served as a reader to Borges, already blind by then. He uses the term *reading* to describe the practice of deciphering any sign whatsoever, and he turns it into a method of understanding how one positions oneself in being and existence. Here, reading becomes a broad—if not overly broad – metaphor for practicing life as such: an interpretive activity of finding one's bearings in the world, of extracting meanings from it. And it constitutes a fundamental function of the human being:

> The readers of books [...] extend or concentrate a function common to us all. Reading letters on a page is only one of its many guises. The astronomer reading a map of stars that no longer exist; the Japanese architect reading the land on which a house is to be built so as to guard it from evil forces; the zoologist reading the spoor of animals in the forest [...], the dancer reading the choreographer's

[5] Quted in: Curtius, 353

[6] Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Sendschreiben, quoted in: Curtius, 354.

[7] Bruno Schulz. Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass. Translated from Polish by Celina Wieniewska. New York: Walker & Company, 1978.

[8] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel", in: Collected Fictions, translated into English by Andrew Hurley. New York: Viking Adult, 1998, 115.

[9] Borges's narrator-protagonist tells the story of a book whose linguistic code was finally "established" after almost a hundred years. It was "a Samoyed-Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with inflections from classical Arabic". See Borges, 114.

> notations, and the public reading the dancer's movements on the stage; the weaver reading the intricate design of a carpet being woven; [...]the parent reading the baby's face for signs of joy or fright, or wonder; the lover blindly reading the loved one's body at night, under the sheets; the psychiatrist helping patients read their own bewildering dreams; [...] the farmer reading the weather in the sky [...]. In every case, it is the reader who reads the sense; it is the reader who grants or recognizes in an object, place, or event a certain possible readability; it is the reader who must attribute meaning to a system of signs and then decipher it. [...] We read to understand, or begin to understand. We cannot do but read. Reading, almost as much as breathing, is our essential function[10].

Here, to read means first of all to notice and recognize the signs in the world, to transform the material into the semiotic. Secondly, it means to invent, negotiate, or adjust the code in which the message-text and its meaning are not yet given, but will only come into being through the reader, in the course of... reading. In his account of reading, Manguel brings together—almost to the point of identifying them with one another: perception, reception, interpretation, and interaction.

One may bristle at Manguel's conceptual sloppiness or – put more gently – his unorthodoxy, as he effectively throws every semiotic activity into the catch-all category of "reading". Yet it is impossible to overlook, and important to underline, that in this universal and inalienable capacity to perform operations on signs, in the ability to produce meanings and to understand or translate them, he wishes to see a fundamental life function. If to live means to read, then – keeping in mind Martin Heidegger's claim that "Remaining within and under the compulsion of its own desire belongs to the essence of the living"[11] – to live also means: to desire meaning and to create meanings.

Why do I bring this up?

In 1968, Friedrich Salomon Rothschild wrote that living systems are from the very beginning constituted as systems of signs[12] – and he did not mean only human organisms. Biosemiotics, of which he is one of the co-founders,[13] links semiotic processes with fundamental life processes – across almost all species of living beings.[14] Under its framework, the biosphere *par excellence* turns out to be a semiosphere[15]: the reception, interpretation, production, and transmission of signs cease to be the exclusive domain of *Homo sapiens*. In the preface to the anthology of foundational texts of biosemiotics, Donald Favareau notes:

[10]Alberto Manguel, A History of Reading (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1998), 12-13.

[11]Martin Heidegger, Basic Concepts, translated by Gary E. Aylesworth (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 4.

[12]Friedrich Salomon Rothschild, "Concepts and Methods of Biosemiotic", Scripta Hierosolymitana 20 (1968): 174..

[13]Rothschild was the first to use the term "biosemiotics", but it is generally accepted that it was Thomas Sebeok – who synthesized various semiotic traditions together with the research of Jakob von Uexküll – who "initiated the project that we now call biosemiotics". Donald Favareau, "Introduction: An Evolutionary History of Biosemiotics", in: Essential Readings in Biosemiotics. Anthology and Commentary, ed. Donald Favareau (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London, New York: Springer, 2010), 44.

[14]"Biosemiotics, or semiotic biology, is the study of qualitative semiotic processes that are considered to exist in a variety of forms down to the simplest living organisms and to the lowest levels of biological organization". Timo Maran, "Biosemiotics", in: Keywords for Environmental Studies, ed. Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason, David N. Pellow (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 29.

[15]"[T]he province of biosemiotics coincides in its entirety with that of the biosphere, which, in this context, is tantamount to the 'semiosphere'". Thomas A. Sebeok, "Biosemiotics: Its roots, proliferation, and prospects", Semiotica 134 (2001): 63.

> Biosemiotics is the study of the myriad forms of communication and signification observable both within and between living systems. It is thus the study of representation, meaning, sense, and the biological significance of *sign processes* – from intercellular signaling processes to animal display behavior to human semiotic artifacts such as language and abstract symbiotic thought. Such sign processes appear ubiquitously in the literature on biological systems. Up until very recently, however, it had been implicitly assumed that the use of terms such as *message*, *signal*, *code*, and *sign* with respect to non-linguistic biological processes was ultimately metaphoric; and that such terms could someday effectively be reduced to the mere chemical and physical interactions underlying such processes[16].

Communication among living beings cannot, however, be reduced to a simple mechanism of stimulus and response. A critique of the mechanistic doctrine of living creatures was undertaken already in the 1930s and 1940s by Jakob von Uexküll, among others. He also introduced the concept of *Umwelt* to describe the specific way in which organisms of a given species perceive and experience the world – a way shaped by the capacities of their sensory organs and perceptual systems. *Umwelt* denotes the perceptual reality unique to each species or – more precisely – the organism's semiotic world, which encompasses all aspects of reality that are meaningful to it. Every living organism communicates with and relates to its environment in its own way; by interacting with the world, it creates and transforms its own *Umwelt*[17]. As a "semiotically alert respondent to signals coming from both outside and within"[18], an organism recognizes such signals and situates them in relation to its current condition. Yet it is able to absorb information from its environment only if it possesses the appropriate key or code: "There must exist an internalized system of signposts to provide a map to the actual configuration of events"[19]. This internalized system – Thomas Sebeok uses the term *semiotic self*, which can be grasped only through the concepts and terminology of sign theory – accounts, in every living being, for the individual capacity to gather, store, replicate, and transmit information, to extract from it what is most appropriate or proper for itself, and to generate new meanings. Sebeok writes:

> living entities are, in one commonly recognized sense, open systems, their permeable boundaries permitting certain sorts of energy-matter flow or information transmissions to penetrate them; they are at the same time closed systems, in the sense that they make choices and evaluate inputs, that is to say, in their semantic aspect[20].

The organism's interaction with its environment thus follows a path of interpretation and leads to an act of creation. For it is precisely the meanings it has absorbed that shape the organism's new form, structure, or way of being. Living beings, as Timothy Morton has noted, translate other objects into concepts related to their own existence[21]. For a linguistic being – for a human –

[16]Donald Favareau, „Preface: A Stroll Through the Worlds of Science and Signs", in: Essential Readings in Biosemiotics, v.

[17]See Jakob Johann von Uexküll, "The Theory of Meaning", in: Essential Readings in Biosemiotics, 90–114.

[18]Julia Fiedorczuk, Maciej Rosiński, Metafory w każdym życiu: fenomenologia, biosemiotyka, poezja [Metaphors in every life: phenomenology, biosemiotics, poetry], in: Po humanizmie. Od technokrytyki do animal studies [After humanism: from technocritique to animal studies], ed. Zuzanna Ładyga, Justyna Włodarczyk (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, 2015), 224.

[19]Thomas A. Sebeok, A Sign Is Just a Sign (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), online: https://publish.iupress.indiana.edu/read/cf71d152-9cd8-40ad-ad4d-a2e1e92108ea/section/bef741c6-c0e9-41cd-87d3-598cf2ae603b#ch4, date of access: 12.03.2025.

[20]Sebeok, A Sign Is Just a Sign.

[21]Timothy Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defence of Poetry", New Literary History 43 (2012): 207.

any thing, event, or phenomenon, everything that becomes present in time and space, that lends itself to perception and/or enters into interaction with them is clothed, or is in the very process of being clothed, in a meaning that can be expressed in language. However, as Paul Cobley argues:

> The human phenomenon of language is just one minuscule aspect of a broader semiosis, the action of signs throughout the universe, no matter how they might be embodied. Put this way, language looks very small compared to the array of signs engendered by all interactions between living cells[22].

The meaning-generating activity and productivity of every living being that does not possess language thus reveals itself elsewhere: in the manner of its existence[23].

On the one hand, there is a somewhat forgotten intellectual and literary tradition; on the other, there are scientific proposals from the very contemporary field of biosemiotics. Together they delineate a space in which the reading of nature – as I would like to understand it here – acquires a kind of preliminary outline, contour, provisional shape, and meaning.

To read nature would therefore mean, first, to understand its existence, its forms, and its modes of being as *semiosis* and as *poiesis*. And second: to desire its meaning.

2.

Urszula Zajączkowska speaks freely in many languages, and her work can be situated across several areas of the cultural field. As a botanist, she writes and publishes in high-ranking journals discursive texts on the geometry and forms of plants, their anatomy, biomechanics, regeneration, growth, and movements. For a humanities scholar specializing in literature, this work may appear somewhat hermetic and even disorienting, although the titles of some articles can be intriguing and enticing – such as „On the benefits of living in clumps: a case study on Polytrichastrum formosum."[24] Within the literary field, she functions as a poet, columnist, and essayist. She debuted in 2014 with the volume *Atomy* [*Atoms*] and has since published three books of poetry and one of essays. Each of them has been nominated for numerous awards, several of which she has received.[25] Zajączkowska is also a film editor trained at the Academy of Film and Television and – apart from using cameras in her research – creates short auteur films and video clips. *Metamorphosis of Plants* (2016), a filmic miniature inspired by Goethe's work, in which plant movements intertwine with those of a ballet soloist, won, among other distinctions, the Scinema Festival of Science Film award in the category Best Experimental Film/Animation.

[22]Paul Cobley, Cultural Implications of Biosemiotics (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), 19.

[23]"The biosemiotic approach does not imply that humanity is nothing special but only that the obvious uniqueness of humans is not as users of signs but as creatures who can readily teach themselves to master a special form of sign usage – symbolic reference – that is the basis of linguistic competence". Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and Life of Signs (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 26.

[24]See Urszula Zajączkowska et al.., "On the benefits of living in clumps: a case study on Polytrichastrum formosum", Plant Biology 2 (2017): 156–164.

[25]In 2017, she received the Kościelski Foundation Award for the volume minimum. In 2019, her book Patyki, badyle was awarded the Golden Rose by the Book Institute, the magazine Nowe Książki, and the Science Festival; a year later, it received the Gdynia Literary Prize in the essay category.

She herself explains this freedom to speak across different cultural fields, discourses, and media in the following way:

> Everything, I think, comes down to language—or rather, to its insufficiencies. The language of science is stiff, but painfully precise. […] Poetry can construct thought and reflection; it carries more between the lines, while with film one can link concrete content to the full expressiveness of image and sound. Film is the most intense; it easily operates through associations and builds new sentences[26].

None of the languages Zajączkowska uses is able, on its own, to grasp, present, or express what she comes into contact with. Each has its limitations. The only question is: what is it that reveals the inadequacy of these languages when they encounter it?

In Zajączkowska's work, the focus is on the living: on the expression and creativity of plants. She states this clearly and directly in the note to the volume *minimum*:

> The world of plants expresses itself. With its whole body, it expresses itself. Learning the language of plants and translating it into the language of humans resembles deciphering the signs of ancient writing symbols. But I still lack human words[27].

These few sentences succinctly and accurately capture the main premises of her project of reading nature. It is to encompass: reading, exegesis, and translation.

3.

First, then, the task is to read: to perceive, once again, in what is material – and at the same time alive – the semiotic; to recognize the signs, the text produced by means of them, and to subject that text to decipherment. By skillfully using the appropriate code, one must assimilate the context; one must understand, at least on the most elementary level, what has been expressed and communicated by means of signs. In carrying out this preliminary procedure of recognizing and deciphering the poiesis of plants, Zajączkowska often draws on categories from the field of poetics.

In *minimum*, there is a passage that reads:

> This linden was felled at the end of summer. It had grown in a blissful atmosphere. It had a pastoral life. It recorded this in its anatomical diary. I read there of an abundance of water and of mild winters; you can see it in the undisturbed arrangement of the wood cells and in the area of the phloem. The phloem lazily transported sugar from sun-soaked leaves throughout its whole life – that is, for three years[28].

[26]Adam Pluszka, "Gdzieś tam jesteśmy. Rozmowa z Urszulą Zajączkowską" [We are somewhere out there, An interview with Urszula Zajączkowska] Dwutygodnik 207 (2017), online: https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/7104-gdzies-tam-jestesmy.html, date of access: 16.09.2024.

[27]Urszula Zajączkowska, minimum (Wrocław: Warstwy, 2017).

[28]Zajączkowska, minimum, 76.

The term *diary* as a generic label is used intentionally in this necrological note. The idea of chronologically ordered records of ongoing events that a plant inscribes in its very shape, anatomical structure, form, and chemical composition seems comprehensible, obvious – even, one might say, natural. In her most recent book, however, Zajączkowska explains this obviousness by writing that "sticks, when they are alive, grow, get plump; later, already as branches and soon as boughs, constantly recording in their bodies with extraordinary diligence the entirety of what happens in them and around them, preserving its descriptions forever, until something decomposes them, burns them, or tears them apart."[29]

This thought gravitates toward regions where Francis Ponge had already staked out a strong presence in the 1940s, writing that trees are nothing but a desire for expression:

> They have nothing to hide from themselves; they cannot conceal a single thought. They open themselves completely, honestly, without restraint. They lazily spend their time complicating their own shape, perfecting their own bodies toward the greatest possible intricacy of analysis. [...] Animals express themselves with voice or with gestures that cancel one another out. Plants express themselves in writing, once and for all[30].

Plant records and protocols encompass both the events and conditions governed by the logic of chance or fate, and those that follow from the operation of higher-order laws – physics, chemistry, biology. For a plant participates in its surroundings: it not only exists in a given space, but also makes its body into a space of inscription, a notation of presence and of influence. It registers and preserves its own existence and the existence of its environment in almost all of its aspects. This is, in fact, a fundamental principle of its being: "the growth of plants is a continuous dialogue with the environment and with gravity [...] plants that do not listen to their surroundings must die."[31]

In the anatomical diaries, the history of an organism's interior must therefore be inseparably intertwined with the history of its exterior – confession with testimony[32] – for interior and exterior constantly act upon each other, permeating one another with influences "such as the color of light, the sugar in the tissues (or its absence), the death of particular cells, the rate of trunk growth, the flow of water, the action of wind, air temperature, the presence of people, birds, fungi." [33] Seemingly motionless, the plant reaches out toward exteriority, turns itself wholly toward it, and acts "as the media of proto-communication between diverse aspects of physis."[34]

For this reason, too, an anatomical diary – like many diaries well known in the history of literature – will never be uniform. The simple story of wood accretion may in the end turn out to be "a novel with an unpredictable plot"; alongside the dry reports of a tree's growth

[29]Urszula Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle (Warszawa: Marginesy, 2019), 9.

[30]Francis Ponge, "Fauna i flora" [Fauna and Flora], translated by Jacek Trznadel, in: Utwory wybrane [Selected works] (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1969), 40–41. Translation into English mine, PZ.

[31]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 58.

[32]See Małgorzata Czermińska, Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie [Autobiographical triangle: testimony, confession, challenge], 2nd, revised edition (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

[33]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 53.

[34]Michael Marder, Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life, foreword by Gianni Vattimo, Santiago Zabali (Now York: Columbia University Press 2013), 66.

and existence, other genres may also find their place – whether a "song exulting in life" or an "oratorio of light and earth."[35]

These poetological remarks – offered by way of connotation or approximation – scatter meanings not only across the terrain of plant anatomy and morphology, but also, and perhaps above all, across that of their ontology. And here, plant existence proves to be non-obvious and not entirely clear: it eludes stable, unequivocal identifications, conventional imaginaries, and ultimately destabilizes the paradigm of metaphysics. What becomes problematic above all are such metaphysical values as identity and presence, or the subject–object relations; the life of a plant is heteronomous in character, wholly oriented toward an other, dictated by its law and entirely dependent on it.

This striving of the plant toward the other – which Michael Marder calls the non-conscious intentionality of vegetal life[36] – manifests itself not only in its growth, in its absorption of nutrients from its surroundings, and in its reproduction, but above all in the fact that, as a "middle place, standing at the intersection of the physical elements: the earth and the sky, the closed and the open, darkness and light, the moisture of the soil and the dryness of crisp air" [37]. It does not organize its environment, does not dominate it, and does not oppose it, but only – or rather: precisely – gathers within itself those diverse external forces. It gathers them and, in a material, bodily way, expresses the beings that surround it: "it lets beings be and, from the middle place of growth, performs the kind of dis-closure of the world in all its interconnectedness,"[38] becoming "a passage or a medium for the other."[39] It does not thereby establish an identity. Neither its own – for it does not barricade itself against its environment, does not negate its intertwinement with other beings, does not abstract from them in order to become fully itself in isolation; for it is constituted by what it is not – nor that of anything else:

> In the branch and in the arranged cells – the letters of the wood – there is likewise encoded the weather that has passed, the sun and the winds, the incidents such as May frosts, and whether the soil in which the entire tree was born had been generous to it or rather barren; whether rains had ever been lacking, and in which year they came down so heavily that there was not enough air left to breathe.[40]

The heteronomy of plant life also determines their otherness – their otherness to the human being:

> The otherness of plants is expressed above all in the fact that, for the most part, they do not need to kill anyone or anything in order to nourish themselves, to grow, and to take up space; and in the fact that they are bound to their place forever, and thus are even more co-feeling with their surroundings. They must be. They cannot run.[41]

[35]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 7, 10.
[36]Marder, 152-154.
[37]Marder, 65.
[38]Marder, 66.
[39]Marder, 180.
[40]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 8.
[41]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 133.

4.

At this point, one must inevitably pose the question of the reading competencies and capacities of the one who attempts to undertake the deciphering and reading of the "hieroglyphs of anatomy", as well as the question of the effectiveness of such efforts.

The reading subject in Zajączkowska's work bears the features of Borges's librarian. In *Patyki, badyle* [Sticks, stalks], this subject is above all a subject of knowledge – a subject of scientific competence and specialized skills. Its position in the text – the position of an expert, an authority, a guide – is built upon its familiarity with laws and principles: of biology, physics, and chemistry, but also of the practice of science and the production of knowledge. For Zajączkowska not only describes, reports, and explains: whether it be the survival strategies of horsetails and mosses, "the survivors of the Devonian," as "sensitive hydrographers of the forest"; or the processes by which trees heal their wounds, which prompt her to ask about "the primordial source of nature's self-creation"; or the influence of the moon and its gravitational field on plant movements; or finally, the law of apoptosis – the programmed self-destruction of plant cells – as a necessary act of life. The authority of this subject of knowledge is authenticated by numerous illustrations: microscopic photographs, graphs, diagrams, but also – crucially – by accounts of the practice of research, of laboratory work. Thus, we read both about filming plants with time-lapse techniques, and about the strenuous efforts to keep them alive, and about bombarding them with rays of light or drops of water, and, finally, about the endless killing, slicing, and turning them into hundreds of slides on a microscope stage.

This knowledge and these skills are the *sine qua non* condition of any reading whatsoever. Zajączkowska writes: "When someone learns even a little of the language of anatomy, they can attempt to read its sentences written by plants in dialogue with their environment". And she immediately adds:

> For plant anatomy is their intimate language. Learning it is laborious and offers no guarantee of success, but it gives hope that one day it will be possible to decipher the code at the true source of existence. Every linguist knows this thrill.[42]

This thrill – this desire for meaning, for the knowledge of meaning – was also known to the inhabitants of Borges's Library of Babel as they searched for the total book, "the cipher and perfect compendium of all other books."[43] Botanists – "prisoners of Euclidean space," as Zajączkowska notes – find themselves in a situation similar to theirs. Only, condemned to the schematized and standardized language of science and subordinated to the rules of knowledge production, they must usually satisfy this desire through simplification, generalization, or a more or less abstract model: "In our laboratories, at closed symposia, in the codified language to which only we have access – we standardize, polish, categorize, and turn chestnuts into spheres, or better yet, into cubes of x g in mass"[44]. The case of *Arabidopsis thaliana*, "the saddest plant in the world", because it has been "crowned by science as the model",

[42]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 60, 61.
[43]Borges, 116.
[44]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 54–55.

obliged to "bear witness to sequoias, poplars, poppies, or lemon balm"[45], becomes in her account yet another (one of many) indication supporting the Foucauldian conviction that discourse – in this case, the discourse of science – does not reflect reality but imposes upon it its images and representations. The awareness of the limits of knowledge and of the non-final, non-conclusive character of scientific findings, expressed in *Patyki, badyle* more or less explicitly, nevertheless has a positive dimension. It is capable of activating the potential for exegesis and for translation.

Doubting the cognitive capacities of science – its ability to grasp with precision, to decipher and express, the full scope of plant expression and creativity – does not invalidate the cognitive effort. Nor does it discredit the knowing subject; rather, it allows the subject of understanding to come into being: the one who attempts to comprehend this whole (the infinity of nature's continual self-creation)[46]. To understand – meaning first of all to subject it to conscious reflection, one that both orders and explains, and at times to set in motion a procedure of inquiry whose spirit is hermeneutic, a search for meaning.

Zajączkowska – although, to be scientifically precise, one should say: the textual subject of her work – assumes both of these roles at once. Both roles are likewise shaped by the desire for meaning, although in each of them this desire leans in a different direction. In the case of understanding, it leans toward rescuing singularity from the grip of generalized abstraction. For after all, "each form quietly creates a personal pattern, enchants with its intricacy, and awakens an entire cascade of questions about the path it has taken through time"[47].

The subject of understanding comes to the fore in the narrative–reflective sections. The life stories of individual beings or the narrativized accounts of life processes unfolding at the micro-, or even nano-scale, incline one to conclude that for the subject of understanding, the meaning of the record of life is the life itself – the spatiotemporal movement of the plant, whose vector is directed toward what is other, and which can be told. Only here, the understanding at issue no longer belongs to the domain of theoretical knowledge, founded on distance from the world, but rather to practical knowledge, through which plants, inhabiting their own perceptual reality (*Umwelt*), belong to their surroundings (in both senses at once) and remain "impossibly close to us"[48]. The subject of understanding is therefore identical with the subject of existence: the concrete existence of Urszula Zajączkowska, but also existence understood as a meaningful belonging-to-the-world, as a being-with the world (as Heidegger translated *ver-stehen*). For this reason, the narrative in Zajączkowska – functioning as a tool of exegesis, explication, and translation of the meaning of the records of plant life – does not lead to the stating or confirming of something banal: it is, it exists, it lives *(or conversely:* it is not, it does not exist, it does not live), but rather emphasizes and accentuates co-existence. Yet the experience or sensibility of co-existence here does not consist in becoming entangled in narrative-stylistic-linguistic attempts to do justice to plant agency, to invent a voice for plant subjectivity, or to work out strategies of plant narration capable of grasping and expressing the specificity of a plant perspective (which is usually an expression, above all, of

[45]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 123, 125.

[46]"To experience the limit of understanding infinity, it is enough to go into the forest in the rain". Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 85.

[47]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 54.

[48]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 73.

human hubris), nor does it consist in reducing the plant world to a mere backdrop for affective-impressionistic self-portraits. Indeed, anthropomorphizing narrativizations of life processes can produce an image of them, making their significance and role more accessible – as in this fragment:

> It is warm, springtime, the branches are being clasped by the claws of birds. Sunlight. The cells of the fresh wood are watery, soft, and pliable. People go outside. They warm their faces in the sun. The leaves are light green. The cells mature for a moment, grow, begin to stiffen their walls, and then they only digest themselves from within, killing themselves. But it was meant to be that way from the beginning: from their formation they contain tiny vesicles that are known eventually to burst, releasing enzymes that digest the entire living protoplast. They chisel themselves out, devour themselves, collapse into nonexistence. Springtime chirping. Light – finally spring light – the wood cells are now empty. Like an apartment after a move, with the spirit of a former existence, except that into these wooden rooms water will soon break in, flooding them completely, right up to the ceiling. For this death exists so that their interiors may be filled with water. And it will soon flow vigorously, from the roots to the spring flowers and the young leaves for which we have longed so much[49].

Although we are given here a cognitively fruitful example (one of many that weave through the pages of this prose) of how knowledge is taken up and shaped by narrative, the meaning of the narrative itself (as well as the meaning of plant life), though present, is only approximated; it does not express itself directly. And that meaning is, no more and no less, the spatial and temporal non-autonomy of plants – their subjection to the law of the other, and their incomplete grounding in being, in existence.

And that meaning is, no more and no less, the spatial and temporal non-autonomy of plants – their subjection to the law of the other, and their incomplete grounding in being, in existence. In the fragment above, that "other" toward which the organism turns, toward which it initiates a more or less direct movement, is light ("the sun", "spring light"), the changing season ("warmth, spring"), water, but also the human being longing for flowers and young leaves. By turning toward them, the plant becomes what it is.

The co-existence toward which Zajączkowska's subject of understanding gravitates can only ever be an approximation, a coming-closer: it accepts, at face value, the impossibility of fully harmonizing or attuning the different *Umwelten* (human and plant). The encounters with plant life that Zajączkowska cultivates – whether in the quiet, sterile space of the laboratory or during her nocturnal wanderings through the backstreets of Wołomin, whose photographic and verbal notes also fill the volume – may bridge this gap, but they do not eliminate it entirely. Put differently: the intersection of two worlds that occurs in the encounter with a plant is above all an intersection of two different relations to the world, two ways of inhabiting it, which – in order to remain themselves – cannot be reconciled. The desire for meaning is a desire for otherness – for the preservation of otherness. This lack of congruence, this mismatch, separateness, and alterity resound perhaps most powerfully when, in Zajączkowska's reading, plants – generating meaning in a bodily, material, finite way – mark time: they spatially express their own time and the time of the other. And this time turns out to be asynchronous with human time, or else it flows beneath the threshold of human perception:

[49]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 31.

> The time of trees – visible in their growth, regeneration, and death – when set against our time of growth, regeneration, and death, forecloses our ability to see the becoming of trees. We don't stand a chance. [...] How can we accommodate, in our consciousness, the fact that plants, on their own time scale, grow quite vigorously, often in pulses – not only in the rhythm of day and night, but in their own rhythm, arising from their character, their specificity – precisely the kind of variability that allows us to distinguish a nettle from a violet? What are we to do with this? What are we to do with the indeterminacy of these differences?[50]

Zajączkowska's scattered remarks about the human scale of perception – defined as much by the limits of the body and of time as by the limits of imagination ("the temporariness of life and the violence of the eye"[51]) – a scale that gives us no chance of "seeing and experiencing"[52] those smallest and largest particles of nature, offer insight into the very practice of reading nature as she cultivates it. This practice seems to bear the marks of a... literary reading – that is, one whose object is also the reader herself. For it is meant to be an experience of the whole subject, embracing nearly all aspects and dimensions of the individual. No longer merely an experiment or investigation regulated by a predetermined procedure, designed to confirm or refute a previously formulated thesis, but also a personal and person-involving engagement in a certain event of understanding and meaning that unfolds in the course of reading. An event in which the experiencing-understanding subject is also the experienced-understood. Put differently: what takes place in the act of reading nature is co-existence, co-presence of the reader and the read, but also of the active subject in the role of the object of reading.

To conclude, I will cite a passage in which a sensitivity to this co-existence is, somewhat perversely, cultivated in yet another sense. The chapter devoted to synanthropic plants (those that accompany human beings) draws on certain generic conventions of the hymn. At moments, it becomes a song of praise, extolling the species that overgrow "backyards, roadsides, dumps, wastelands, cultivated fields"[53] – a song inlaid with frequent apostrophes addressed to them. Its coda, however, takes the form of a kind of reminder and admonition, directed not to the plants but to the readers, and intended for *their* (the plants') well-being:

> It matters to them only that we remain ourselves – that is, appropriating, exploiting the environment, transforming nature in ways absolutely unique to us. Then they, too – the synanthropic plants, our companions, the links in chains of connection with us, forming the ecosystems of cities, villages, mines, rail tracks, flophouses — steadfast and unbelievably loyal. Human[54].

translated by Paulina Zagórska

[50]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 44, 132.
[51]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 131.
[52]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 73.
[53]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 156.
[54]Zajączkowska, Patyki, badyle, 159–160.

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LIBER NATURAE

Abstract:
This article is an attempt to develop and apply the concept of reading nature within an interpretive practice directed at the poetic and prose works of Urszula Zajączkowska. In the notion of reading nature, at least two distinct intellectual traditions can be identified. The first reaches back to the concept of the book of nature, i.e. the *liber naturae*, rooted in early medieval theology and philosophy. The second consists of scientific proposals emerging from the field of biosemiotics. To read nature would therefore mean, first, to understand its existence, its forms, and its modes of being as semiosis and as *poiesis*. Second, it would mean, in probing its meanings, to employ practices characteristic of reading. In Urszula Zajączkowska's work, reading nature encompasses both the decoding of "the hieroglyphs of anatomy" and their exegesis and translation – practices that open onto the experience of co-existence.

EXPRESSION OF PLANTS

co-existence

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Ironic idolization.

Bruno Schulz beyond the veil of reality

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1.

The common understanding (but also the classic rhetorical definition) of the term "irony" centers around the stark contrast between what one believes and what one says[1]. As a result, it is common to equate irony with a type of "conscious lie," which often appears as mockery, serving as an outlet for malice. Of course, what has been stated above cannot serve as an exhaustive definition of irony because it is a complex phenomenon that takes various forms depending on the context. Nearly everyone is familiar with the idea of irony, thanks to Socrates, who pretended to be a simpleton to present philosophical arguments imbued with deeper wisdom. The phenomenon of Romantic irony is also well known, expressing the distance between the author and their work and, in practice, turning the work into a sort of game. This

[1] This exegesis was noted by Michał Paweł Markowski in a book devoted to the works of Bruno Schulz. Thus, he lay foundations for the inseparability of irony and Schulz's langauge (Michał Paweł Markowski, Polska literatura nowoczesna. Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy [Polish modern literature: Leśmian, Schulz, Witkacy] [Kraków: Universitas, 2007], 263).

latter type of irony has likely had the greatest influence on the 20th-century understanding of literature, from the experimental works of the modern avant-garde to postmodernist playful approaches to literature. As a fundamental creative principle, the common understanding of irony seems to go no further than the first of the above definitions, thereby shaping how a work of art - whether literary, visual, or musical - is experienced. At the same time, it is said that the modern world is one in which the so-called grand narratives have been forgotten, replaced by a construct that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would describe as schizophrenic in the sense that multiplicity replaces all individuality[2]. Instead of grand narratives, we are faced with many small narratives, which is undoubtedly also a symptom of a fragmented world ruled by relativism. It is impossible to identify an overarching narrative in this world because each narrative about the world is potentially equally important and true. Simultaneously, none of them fully captures the complexity of reality. Relying on several smaller narratives, we lose, on one hand, our cognitive abilities and, on the other, our sense of integrity, which in turn leads us to doubt the validity of the famous Cartesian phrase "I think, therefore I am," considering it either false or at least unjustified. Therefore, the mind of the modern human being is schizophrenic, one for which any illusion can appear to be the truth.

Early modern literature – especially that defined by Michał Paweł Markowski as critical modernity, meaning literature characterized by "questioning the possibility of representing the world and expression[3]" – is focused rather on exploring those narratives which, influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis and William James' pragmatism (though subjectively), are taken to be true[4]. In modern literature, it is therefore difficult to find trends that aim to restore a uniform narrative of the world, apart from certain exceptions, of course. A fairly obvious example here is the work of Thomas Mann, although it seems to belong to a slightly different branch of modernity, growing out of pre-modern literary doctrines – conservative modernity.[5] It is much more difficult to see such tendencies in literature considered avant-garde, but it is not impossible. A striking example of this seems to be Bruno Schulz, whose work is undoubtedly based on this pursuit.

2.

It is widely accepted in Schulzological circles, and not without good reason, that the prose of the Drohobych eccentric is a prime example of highly mythologized creativity. After all, in his short essay-manifesto *Mitologizacja rzeczywistości* [*Mythologization of Reality*], he clearly defined the foundations of his poetics and set a clear goal for all artists of language, including

[2] Indeed, in their introduction to Tysiąca plateau [A thousand plateaus] the authors pick up this thread, which becomes a frame for their analyses (Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Tysiąc plateau, [Warszawa: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, 2015], 3–5).

[3] Markowski, Polska literatura nowoczesna, 42.

[4] Both Freud and James question the nominal integrity of the human psyche, referring to the animialistic origin of man. Freud's expression of this is his concept of the Unconscious, whereas James focuses on the facade of the „pragmatic theory of truth" (Sigmund Freud, Introduction to psychoanalysis, transl. by Salomea Kempnerówna, Witold Zaniewicki [Warszawa: De Agostini Polska & Ediciones Altaya Polska, 2001], 15–16; William James, Pragmatism, transl. by Władysław N. Kozłowski [Kraków: Vis-à-Vis Etiuda, 2016), 122–146]).

[5] Markowski, Polska literatura nowoczesna, 42.

himself: "[...] all poetry is mythologization, it strives to recreate myths about the world[6]". For Schulz, literature becomes an expression of longing for an orderly world, one that fits within a cohesive narrative, a tool for sealing off reality, although – as has been proven on numerous occasions – such a view can invite sharp criticism.[7] According to Schulz, the concepts we use and the stories we tell are shadows of the original story, which we have forgotten. The old reality constantly breaches the fabric of everyday life, reminding us of the archaic "motherland" from which humanity originated (cf. P 443–445). The artist's declaration, announced by him in *Mityzacja rzeczywistości*, must be regarded as a key text in any discussion of Schulz's work. It is impossible to understand his prose, just as it is impossible to grasp the visual aspects of his work, without recognizing this brief statement as a signpost that offers an essential guide through Schulz's labyrinth.

In light of the above, the issue of Schulz's irony is a particularly sensitive one. Markowski, despite certain inaccuracies in his interpretation of the phenomenon, provides a fairly accurate introduction to it. He writes:

> [...] irony divides the world into two contradictory parts: true essence (in the rhetorical sense: true meaning) and false appearance (in the rhetorical sense: apparent meaning). It can be said that the world has an ironic structure when we assume that the same categories can be applied to reality and to linguistic expressions, and vice versa. This is one of the most important premises of Schulz's worldview.[8]

This observation can be supported by the last sentence of the aforementioned *Mityzacja* rzeczywistości, in which Schulz concludes, almost revolutionarily, that "Philosophy is actually philology, that is, a deep, creative study of words" (P 445). Therefore, if philology were to replace philosophy in its primary function, which is undoubtedly the attempt to describe and understand reality, then this reality, to be a credible subject of research, would have to be linguistic in nature. This statement does not differ too much from later 20th-century attempts to grasp the subject, whether in the context of post-war structuralism or in the rhetorical complexities of deconstruction. However, from a phenomenological perspective, such a formulation automatically implies the ironic nature of a conglomerate composed of two factors: the world of things[9] and a certain narrative about that world[10]. The latter takes the form of reality, but does not necessarily reflect the truth of the world. Irony can be described

[6] Bruno Schulz, „Mityzacja rzeczywistości" [„Mythologisation of reality"], in his: Proza [Prose] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1964), 444; the remaining works from this volume are indicated here with the letter „P" and page number.

[7] Suffice to mention the notorious Dwugłos o Schulzu [A two-voice on Schulz] by Kazimierz Wyka and Stefan Napierski (Kazimierz Wyka, Stefan Napierski, „Dwugłos o Schulzu", Ateneum 1 [1939]: 156–163). The authors accuse Schulz of epigony, claiming (justifiably so), that his literature reflects the Romantic rather than the modernist paradigm. Their assessment of Schulz's work is negative, but those same premises can lead to different conclusions.. I have discussed this issue in a text devoted to Schulz's relationship to the texts of the Romanticism in „Schulz/Forum" (Bartosz Kowalczyk, „Zakamarki", Schulz/Forum 21-22 [2023]: 143–154).

[8] Markowski, Polska literatura nowoczesna, 263.

[9] One could go a step further and call it the world of things-in-themselves.

[10] Jean Baudrillard once referred to Jorge Louis Borges' novel, in which he found such a precise image of a map, that it obscured completely the entire territory it was supposed to cover (Jean Baudrillard, Simulacrum and simulation, transl. by Sławomir Królak (Warszawa: Sic!, 2005), 5–7]. Analogically, reality can be said to be a variant of this map that we see as a replacement of truth hidden underneath.

as a tool that , in Schulz's hands, serves not so much to distance oneself from reality or the world of things, but rather to reach a mythical, primordial reality. This is probably what Schulz had in mind when he included the motif of the Book in his prose, although the resolution of this thread may seem to lead to slightly different conclusions. Markowski considers the moment when the Book, or the Authentic, turns out to be a few pages of a commercial catalog, banal in content, to be thoroughly ironic in a way that creates distance[11]. However, it seems that this is not the purpose of the Book itself – in the story that begins Schulz's *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą* [*Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*], we find the following passage illustrating the narrator's indignation in response to his father's gesture of handing him the Bible: "You know, Father," I cried, „you know very well, don't hide it, don't make excuses! This book has betrayed you. Why are you giving me this tainted apocrypha, a thousandth copy, a clumsy forgery? Where have you put the Book?" (P 164). The theme of the Book creates an effect of distancing, but it is an expression of an organic desire to know the truth. The fact that this seems impossible to achieve does not contain a hint of irony, but rather becomes an expression of underlying despair and powerlessness.

3.

One of the most vivid examples supporting the thesis that Schulz pursues a primal, mythical reality can be found in the short story *Pan* [*Pan*], included in *Sklepy cynamonowe* [*Cinnamon shops*].

Basically, it is a story about a childhood adventure, though that is probably obvious: most of Schulz's stories are about childhood. The structure of this text confirms the existence of two levels; the story's narrative hides the real world. It is useful to start with what is hidden, meaning that which is not an appearance. Here, boys are taking apart a board in the fence that separates the yard from the unknown world beyond. Their childish curiosity pushes them to squeeze through the gap in the fence and explore. On the other side, there is a garden, very different from the plain yard. The narrator is amazed by its wildness and lushness. Among the plants, he notices a figure – a vagrant who is in the process of relieving himself. Immediately after doing so, he hurriedly walks away with his pants still down. And that is it. This scene could be summed up in one sentence: a boy climbs through a hole in the fence into a garden, where he sees a man defecating. This more succinct description of events seems even more fitting, considering that nothing much happens, or at least nothing significant. However, Schulz often presents a kind of dualism: nothing happens, and yet, everything happens; nothing special occurs, but simultaneously, fundamental things unfold, which Schulz describes in his own unique way.

> In the corner between the rear walls of the sheds and outbuildings was a backyard alley, the furthest, last branch, enclosed between a chamber, an outhouse, and the rear wall of the chicken coop - a deaf bay beyond which there was no way out.

[11]Markowski, Polska literatura nowoczesna, 246–250.

It was the furthest cape, the Gibraltar of this courtyard, desperately banging its head against a blind fence of horizontal boards, the closing and final wall of this world (P 100).

From the outset, Schulz intensifies successive circles of dualisms, or rather, there is but one dualism, but the author brings its hidden levels to light. The laconic description of the courtyard at the beginning of the story is, in fact, a description of a familiar reality – structured, with clearly defined boundaries, creating an impression of completeness. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of the fence marking the boundary of this world. Behind the fence lies the unknown, which we are about to enter together with the narrator.

> [...] we made a breach, we opened a window to the sun. Standing with one foot on a plank thrown like a bridge across a puddle, the prisoner of the courtyard could squeeze through the gap in a horizontal position, which released him into a new, airy, and vast world (P 100).

One can sense the excitement accompanying this discovery. Here, the fence becomes a symbol comparable to a theosophical "veil" separating the known world from the hidden world, accessible only to a few adepts. Crossing this boundary results in enlightenment ("we opened a window to the sun," P 100) and the realization of the dream of freedom ("the prisoner of the courtyard [...] could squeeze through [...] into a new, airy and vast world," P 100). Things are exactly the same here as in one of Arthur Machen's most famous stories, which begins with a description of an experiment aimed precisely at tearing away the veil of reality[12].

The world beyond the fence is indeed different from the world the boys know in their backyard. The "large, wild, old garden" (P 100) that appears before the narrator's eyes seems to exceed his wildest expectations of what reality could be like. The wildness of nature contrasts sharply with the orderliness of the backyard. Admittedly, even within the latter's confines, there is an element beyond control – a trickle of water whose source is on the other side of the fence, and in fact, it is partly responsible for the boys' later crossing of the border. It is as if this foreign, wild reality literally seeps through the boundaries into the known world and proves that these boundaries are not as tight as they might seem. It is also significant that, however black and smelly (P 100), it is water, a substance essential for life. Perhaps this association is all the more significant because real life also consists of elements that elude order, which Schulz uses to create an evocative characterization of this trickle. The world on the other side of the fence only confirms these observations. To say that the vegetation of the old garden is teeming with life is to say nothing – it is, in fact, life itself. In considering the nature of the category of "holy human being" (*homo sacer*), Giorgio Agamben examines two concepts used by the ancient Greeks to describe life. The first of these, *bios*, meant socially conditioned life – a life proper to a human being who is by nature embedded in a socio-civilizational framework. The second, *dzoē*, was used to denote a characteristic inherent in all living beings – life in itself or, as Agamben would have it, bare life[13]. The latter concept perfectly describes the nature of this vegetation. The garden strikes visitors with its lushness, wildness, and endless, swelling fertility:

[12]Arthur Machen, „The great god Pan", in his: Other worlds, transl. by Tomasz S. Gałązka (Białystok: C&T, 2007), 11–69.

[13]Giorgio Agamben, Homo sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life, transl. by Mateusz Salwa (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2008), 9.

> There was no longer an orchard there, but a paroxysm of madness, an explosion of rage, cynical shamelessness, and debauchery. There, unbridled, empty, feral burdock cabbages, giving vent to their passion, ran rampant – huge witches, tearing themselves out of their wide skirts in broad daylight, throwing them off, skirt after skirt, until their bloated, rustling, holey rags buried the quarrelsome tribe of bastards beneath them with their frenzied patches. And the voracious skirts swelled and pushed each other apart, piling up on top of each other, bursting and covering each other, growing together into a bloated mass of leafy metal, until they reached the low eaves of the barn (P 102).

No wonder that in the face of vibrant, naked life, on a scorching hot day, the narrator notices something that cannot be seen in other circumstances.

> There it was, where I had only seen it once, at noon, unconscious from the heat. It was a moment when time, mad and wild, breaks free from the grind of events and, like an escaped vagrant, rushes screaming across the fields (P 102).

> [...] Deeply shaken, I saw how he, roaring with laughter from his powerful chest, slowly rose from his crouch and, hunched over like a gorilla, with his hands in the drooping rags of his trousers, ran away, shuffling through the fluttering burdock leaves, with great leaps – a human being without a flute; retreating in panic to his native forests (P 102–103).

The mythical ancestry of the creature he saw should come as no surprise to anyone. Suffice it to say that the narrator's discovery was an inevitable consequence of crossing the boundary marking the edge of known reality. Like in Machen's aforementioned story, the result of this action was an experience unlike any other. "The ancients knew what it meant to lift this veil. They said that, then one saw the god Pan.[14] "

However, this does not resolve a certain important issue arising from Schulz's dualism. After all, there is nothing divine about the god present in the story – he is, as we remember, a defecating vagrant:

> It was the face of a vagrant or a drunkard. A tuft of dirty hair ruffled above his forehead, which was high and convex like a stone loaf, worn down by the river. But that forehead was twisted into deep furrows. It is unclear whether pain, the scorching heat of the sun, or the superhuman intensity had twisted that face and stretched its features to the point of breaking. [...] And suddenly, from these features, [...] a terrible grimace, broken by suffering, emerged, and this grimace grew, taking in that madness and inspiration, swelling with it, becoming more and more forgiving, until it broke out in a roaring, wheezing cough of laughter. Deeply shaken, I saw how he, roaring with laughter from his powerful chest, slowly rose from his crouch and, hunched over like a gorilla, with his hands in the drooping rags of his trousers, ran away, shuffling through the fluttering burdock leaves, with great leaps – Pan without his flute; retreating in panic to his native forests (P 103).

We are dealing here with a special kind of deification: a degenerate human being becomes a deity. Perhaps it would be better to use the term "degraded" in this context, as we are talking

[14]Machen, 13.

about a person who, perhaps of his own volition, has opted out of civilization, and managed to escape the Apollonian order – to use Nietzsche's terminology – and chosen the Dionysian path. Such deification is ironic at its core, but the nature of this irony does not have to be mocking. The effect of its action brings to mind more contemporary findings regarding the principles of its functioning.

4.

Drawing on the metamodernist paradigm[15], Lee Konstantinou, discussing the transformation of irony in 20th-century literature in his book *Cool Characters*, points to the key moment of World War I and its consequences for interwar literary trends:

> [...] irony became dominant in Western societies after the end of World War I. The Great War, writes Fussel, "was more ironic than any before or since." It was "a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing myth of meliorism that had dominated public consciousness for a century.[16]"

Indeed, it is impossible to treat the literature (and art) of the 1920s and 1930s as anything other than that which, through the newly created avant-garde paradigm, sanctioned the widespread use of irony. From a psychological point of view, it can be noted that this resulted, on the one hand, from profound social changes (leading, for example, in Great Britain, to a weakening of the influence of the aristocracy and reforming the existing social hierarchy), but above all from the need to distance oneself from reality. On a much larger scale, this process, especially after the apocalyptic experience of World War II and the emergence of a new world order that followed, manifested itself in postmodernism. The growing importance of irony caused the need to re-establish human beings in a non-detached reality.

The paintings of Odd Nerdrum, a contemporary Norwegian creator of kitsch who consciously renounces ironic distance, fit into the above classification. After decades of being an outcast in the art world, in the 1990s, the Norwegian decided to reformulate the aesthetic categories in which he operated. This gave rise to the Kitsch Movement – a trend in painting (but also in philosophy, literature, and music), sometimes mentioned among the variants of the metamodernist phenomenon of New Sincerity[17]. In his essay *Four Faces of Postirony*, Konstantinou cites several definitions of this phenomenon:

> D. Jameson described New Sincerity as a set of "common [literary] devices and patterns of devices" (including "a plethora of autobiographies," "minimal punctuation," and "self-revision"), which

[15]The concept of „metamodernism" refers to an aesthetic paradigm proposed in 2010 by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker as a response to postmodernism (Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, „Notes on metamodernism", Journal of Aesthetics & Culture 2 [2010]). Metamodernism oscillates between contradictory concepts and stances like, e.g. honesty and irony, Romanticism and modernity.

[16]Lee Konstantinou, Cool Characters. Irony and American Fiction (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2016), 13] "...irony became the dominant of Western societies after World War I. The Great War, Fussell writes, «was more ironic than any before or since.» It was «a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century»" [author's translation].

[17]This similarity is pointed out by the authors of the Wikipedia entry „New Sincerity" („Wikipedia: New Sincerity", Wikimedia Foundation, last modified 19.02.2023, 23:19 [UTC]).

> is "so transparent and direct and unpretentious that human beings have failed to notice these devices at work." Kelly defines New Sincerity as a method of dealing with a situation in which "the anticipation of receiving external behavior by others begins to take precedence for the actor, so that internal states lose their original contingent status and become instead the effects of this anticipatory logic." [18]

Konstantinou also points out that New Sincerity should not be equated with post-irony

because, in his words, the latter does not answer the question: "What comes after irony?"[19] Admittedly, Nerdrum's painting should not be considered within the framework of post-ironic conditions, since the Kitsch Movement provides a clear answer to the question: "For Nerdrum, the concept of kitsch represents a new superstructure for sincere and narrative figurative painting." [20]

It is worth mentioning one of the Norwegian's paintings, mainly because of its main motif, which closely resembles Schulz's formula in its detail. In his canvas titled *Ecce Homo*, we see the motif from *Pan* in reverse – it is not a human being that is deified, but a deity being "humanised." In the painting, stylistically reminiscent of Caravaggio or Rembrandt, we see a figure crouching inside a room that looks like a prison cell. This figure is Christ, and he is entirely focused on defecation. The figure is positioned so that we can see his back, which also clearly shows the result of his activity. Only upon closer inspection do we notice the face turned toward us, hidden in shadows, with blood dripping down his face, and drawn by the crown of thorns.

5.

At this point, it is necessary to dispel a certain doubt and properly outline the framework that allows Schulz's prose and Nerdrum's canvas to be viewed on the same interpretative plane. This is not a matter of the incompatibility of creative media – Schulz's prose is very vivid, and the author himself is often regarded primarily as a cartoonist, graphic artist, and painter, which is consistent with his own pronouncements. In response to a letter from Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, he wrote: "The beginnings of my drawing are lost in the mists of mythology. I could not yet speak when I was already covering all my papers and the margins of newspapers with scribbles that attracted the attention of those around me" (P 679). The core of the issue is much more subtle.

[18] Lee Konstantinou, „Four Faces of Postirony", in: Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism, ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons, Timotheus Vermeulen (London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 89: „A. D. Jameson has described New Sincerity as a set of «shared [literary] devices and patterns of device» (including «[l]ots of autobiography», «[m]inimal punctuation» and «[s]elf-revision») that is «so transparent and unmediated and unaffected that human beings have failed to see the devices at work» (2012). Kelly defines New Sincerity as a method for dealing with a situation in which «the anticipation of others» reception of one's outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lose their originating casual status and instead become effects of that anticipatory logic (2010, 136)".

[19] Konstantinou, „Four Faces of Postirony", 89.

[20] „The Kitsch Movement", Odd Nerdrum Official Website, https://nerdrum.com/kitsch/: „To Nerdrum, the concept of kitsch represents a new superstructure for sincere and narrative figurative painting".

While the appearance of the figure of Pan in Schulz's imagination is not particularly surprising, the figure of Christ is much more problematic. Neither of his collections of short stories contains a single reference to the Christian Messiah (P 49). Even the formula of "messianism," characteristic of his prose, derives rather from the Judaic tradition and should certainly not be associated with the Christian Messiah incarnated in the figure of Christ. Moreover, knowing Schulz's lukewarm attitude towards religion (at least in its exoteric form), we can assume that he was not particularly interested in the religious context. What is more, there are grounds for believing that the author of *Sklepy cynamonowe* treated the Bible and the stories it contains in the same way that we treat the religious tales of the ancient Greeks today. The Old Testament, and probably the New Testament as well, were for him a collection of myths – myths that no longer had the power to explain the world. The proof can be found in a fragment of the already mentioned short story *Księga* [*The Book*]:

> My father kept shoving towards me one of them, a thick and heavy volume, with timid encouragement. I opened it. It was the Bible. I saw on its pages a great migration of animals, flowing along highways, branching out in processions across a distant land. I saw the sky in keys and fluttering, a huge inverted pyramid, whose distant peak touched the Ark.
>
> I looked up at my father, my eyes full of reproach: "You know, Father," I cried, "you know very well, don't hide, don't make excuses! Why are you giving me this tainted apocrypha, a thousandth copy, a clumsy forgery? Where have you put the Book?" (P 164)

"Contaminated apocrypha," "a thousandth copy," "clumsy forgery"! And further: "The original word was a delusion, revolving around the meaning of light; it was a great universal whole. These days, the word in its common meaning is only a fragment, a remnant of some ancient, all-encompassing, integral mythology" (P 443). Both the Bible and the stories of the ancient Greek gods are essentially the same: texts that are fragments, remnants of the original narrative that binds the universe together. Schulz would not consider the figures of God and Christ in any context other than the mythological one. Even despite its Old Testament origins, the very concept of the Messiah does not have purely religious connotations for Schulz (although it refers directly to the category of the sacred). Still, it derives from the personal philosophy expressed in the *Mythification of reality*, while also constituting an important trope explaining the ontological structure of Schulz's universe. Paweł Dybel rightly argues that through the figure of the Messiah, "the experience of the sacred [takes on – B.K.] a universal form.[21]" Markowski makes a similar obervation: "Incarnation is the entry of God – by definition existing beyond the body and time, beyond language and history – into the huhuman being order, which would be impossible without the mediating function of the logos.[22]" In Schulz's universe, the logos is identical with the structures of that original mythology, which is the object of the author's longing in *Księga*. In Markowski's interpretation, "logos is the boundary between what is human and what is non-human, with the most non-human being called God[23]."

[21]Paweł Dybel, Mesjasz, który odszedł. Bruno Schulz i psychoanaliza [The Messiah who left. Bruno Schulz and psychoanalysis] (Kraków: Universitas, 2017), 37.

[22]Michał Paweł Markowski, Powszechna rozwiązłość. Schulz, egzystencja, literatura [Common debauchery. Schulz, existence, literature] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2012), 150.

[23]Markowski, Powszechna rozwiązłość, 150.

A deeper meaning of this perspective is conveyed through the story of a tightrope walker – probably the most famous Nietzschean parable. It presents an enlightening idea: "Human being is a rope stretched between the animal and the superman[24]." It is a mistake to equate the human being with the tightrope walker – humans are, in fact, the rope. In other words, human is a kind of transitional project, connecting both the animal aspects of non-human existence and the divine. Following from this, the entire truth about the human being is that it is a biological entity, influenced by irrational instincts (because they are beyond reason, in the Enlightenment sense), yet with a spark of divinity. Paradoxically, following from Agamben's philosophy, both animals and saints share the characteristic of bare life (*dzoē*). This means that a human being attains divinity through their own animality.

6.

By deliberately dismantling irony, Nerdrum revealed that astonishing truth about the human being as an entity that combines animalistic and divine aspects. In a similar spirit, Schulz uses ironic poetics not to ridicule the concept of divinity or to underscore his distance from a reality suffused with dualism (partly Gnostic in nature). The aim of Schulz's irony is, in fact, its own overcoming. At the same time, we can discern a clear difference between the short story *Pan* and the painting *Ecce Homo*, and this difference does not concern the aforementioned reversal of the process of deification. For Nerdrum, sincerity is what ought to follow the age of irony, while at the same time serving as a weapon against the ironic gaze cast upon reality. Schulz does not suggest an answer as polarising as this. By tearing up the veil of reality, he attempts to look at what lies at its foundations. By penetrating its fabric, he attempts to reconstruct (and is remarkably successful at this) its mythical substratum, upon which what we recognize as reality has been built for millennia. For Schulz, irony constitutes a tool through which we may also reach the essence of humanity. It gets disarmed, because its internal contradictions are neutralized. Schulz, therefore, is not concerned with irony as such, but with a mythical, pre-linguistic, proto-real truth. His organic need seems to be a "thirst for totality, a hunger for such a teleological structure that would elucidate the meaning of the Universe[25]." This conclusion calls into question assertions about the modern character of the author's works, because in consequence of neutralising its ironic potential, literature ceases to be a game and becomes a necessity. This aspect is best conveyed by the final sentence of *Mitologizacja rzeczywistosci*: "Philosophy is, in essence, philology, that is, a profound, creative study of the word" (P 103). Such an approach, along with justified doubts regarding the affiliation of Schulz's creative project with the modern formation, makes possible attempts at understanding this oeuvre through the prism of the metamodernist proposition, based on which the phenomenon of New Sincerity arises. According to Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, metamodernism breaks with the doctrine of modernity – something that even postmodernism did not manage to achieve. Among its constitutive features, the

[24]Friedrich Nietzsche, Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen, transl. by Sława Lisiecka, Zdzisław Jaskuła (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1999).

[25]Michał Piętniewicz, Bruno Schulz. Między mitem a kiczem [Bruno Schulz. Between myth and kitsch] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2020), 15.

scholars point to the phenomenon of oscillation[26], which stretches the metamodernist experience between extremes and – in a manner that may be compared to the alchemical principle of the balancing of opposites – introduces a long-unseen order[27]. Among these pairs of opposites, one can easily include the opposition between irony and sincerity. Returning to Schulz, ultimately, it is perhaps impossible to classify his poetics as applying the categories of New Sincerity[28]; nevertheless, one may certainly risk a certain generalization that Schulz reveals some post-ironic tendencies, within which myth and mythologization would serve as an antidote to the omnipresence of irony[29]. This, in turn, opens entirely new possibilities for scholarly assessment of Schulz's achievement, while also creating an opportunity to revise the discourse on early modernist literature, which once more proves to be a thoroughly heterogeneous phenomenon.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

[26]Vermeulen, van den Akker.

[27]In a way, metamodernism brings back the melioristic perspective, overturned by World War I, and follows William Jones' understanding of the term, for whom the most important issue was balancing two opposing views.

[28]That is apart from the fact that we would need to retroactively classify Schulz's prose as postmodernist.

[29]Nerdrum believes naturalistic honesty to be an antidote to this.

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KEYWORDS

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Abstract:
The article attempts to reconsider Bruno Schulz's use of irony. The basis for analysis here is the short story *Pan*, included in his *Sklepy cynamonowe*. The ironic device of deification employed by Schulz appears to exceed standard conceptions of irony and suggests an outcome different from the expected one. Ultimately, Schulz's writing seems, in a sense, to inscribe itself within a post-ironic discourse, which prompts a re-evaluation of established judgments concerning this distinctive prose.

NEW SINCERITY

myth

BRUNO SCHULZ

post-irony

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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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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

PROSE OF THE 1980S

evil

experience of evil

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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Video Games for Calm and Introspection: A Brief (and Calm) Examination of *Stillgames*

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Introduction

Video games are often regarded as a noisy medium, overwhelming players with aggressive stimuli. This view comes from a clear source: the aesthetic of noise and excess in video games is rooted in their fundamental characteristics, particularly the combination of ergodicity and audiovisuality. Indeed, in video games, the influence of Batman outweighs that of Bergman. Yet alongside this tradition, a distinct countercurrent has emerged—reflective games that cultivate silence and introspection. I propose to call this trend

stillgames, situating it within a broader constellation of phenomena already discussed in game studies. These include Sonia Fizek's use of interpassivity in her analysis of *idle games*,[1] as well as the aesthetics of "safety, abundance, and softness"[2] that define *cozy games*. This article explores key dimensions of *stillgames*. The first section outlines their historical and media foundations, while the second offers close readings of representative video games that exemplify this emerging trend.

Stillgames: Context and Terminological Framework

My use of the term *stillgames* is motivated by three considerations. First, it functions as a pun on the notion of being still—calm, quiet, and not moving—thereby evoking tranquility, balance, and harmony as the defining qualities of the video games it describes. Second, it serves as a clear declaration that, although the phenomenon under discussion occupies the periphery of the video game universe rather than its center, these works are *still* games. In this respect, the category enters into a subtle yet thought-provoking dialogue with the notion of *notgames*,[3] which I address later in this article. Third, the concept of *stillgames* draws inspiration from Bruno Nadeau and Jason Lewis's art installation *Still Standing*, which offers a critical reflection on contemporary culture and its aesthetics of excess and interactivity. In their article tellingly titled "Inter-inactivity," Nadeau and Lewis observed that "[w]ithin the larger popular culture it can be difficult to find moments of quiet, or periods of stillness, that allow one to process and contemplate all of the information received during the course of a day."[4] *Still Standing* can be seen as a conceptual response to this condition, emphasizing the need for a return to more reflective—quiet, focused, and mindful—forms of participation in culture. Two decades after the article's publication, Nadeau and Lewis's call for inter-inactivity appears even more timely.

Nadeau and Lewis's call for inter-inactivity appears strikingly consistent with Fizek's earlier reflection,[5] which employs the concept of "interpassivity"—borrowed from Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek—to analyze *idle games*. *Idle games* progress, slowly but surely, even when the player is not actively playing the game. Their primary appeal lies in observing the growth of parameters and values, while making optimization decisions—such as investing, upgrading, or automating processes—to accelerate growth.[6] Fizek demonstrates that, in the case of

[1] Sonia Fizek, "Interpassivity and the Joy of Delegated Play in Idle Games", Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association 3 (2018).

[2] Tanya X. Short et al., "Cozy Games", Lostgarden, 24 Jan. 2018, https://lostgarden.home.blog/2018/01/24/cozy-games/.

[3] Auriea Harvey, Michael Samyn, "Over Games", Tale of Tales, 2010, https://tale-of-tales.com/tales/OverGames.html.

[4] Bruno Nadeau, Jason Lewis, "Inter-inactivity", Digital Arts and Culture Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2005, http://www.obxlabs.net/obx_docs/inter-inactivity.

[5] Fizek.

[6] Justin Buergi thus explains the essence of idle games (also called clicker games and incremental games): "idle games, a subgenre within the realm of casual games, are characterized by a core mechanic of waiting, wherein progress continues to accumulate both with and without the player's presence, creating a consistent sense of growth and progression," while "the absence of direct engagement [can] be transformed into a nuanced interplay involving the management of impatience and strategies for optimization" (Justin Buergi, "Idle Games: A Cozy Genre Turned Exploitative", Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies 1 [2024]: 74).

such productions—video games that, in effect, play themselves—the traditional notions of interactivity and agency prove insufficient.

Stillgames should be analyzed within **a syncretic academic framework**. Indeed, video games are characterized by a continually expanding diversity of themes, gameplay types, mechanics, platforms, and narrative forms. Over time, this syncretism has become increasingly pervasive, with new varieties and genres systematically emerging. Several factors contribute to this development. On the one hand, it reflects **the natural evolution of a medium that still has a relatively short history**. On the other hand, this phenomenon must be situated within the wider context of contemporary cultural manifestations, such as:

- **remix culture** defined as "a global activity consisting of the creative and efficient exchange of information made possible by digital technologies;"[7]

- **media convergence** defined by Henry Jenkins as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences;"[8]

- **glocalization**, which, in Victor Roudometof's contemporary understanding, "integrates into a single formulation processes of globalization and localization;"[9]

- **mash-up culture**, defined as activities that "put together different information, media, or objects without changing their original source of information (...). In other words, mashups follow a logic that is additive or accumulative in that they combine and collect material and immaterial goods and aggregate them into either manifested design objects or open-ended re-combinatory and interactive information sources on the Web;"[10]

- and the "**hybridization of contemporary life**,"[11] which Manuel Castells notices in the growing integration of various, also digital, forms of communication.

Thirdly, although the aesthetics of silence, minimalism, and contemplation align with broader trends in contemporary digital culture, stillgames **should be discussed primarily within the context of gaming culture**. Scholars such as Mia Consalvo,[12] T.L. Taylor,[13] and

[7] Eduardo Navas, Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling (Wien, New York: Springer, 2012), 65.

[8] Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

[9] Victor Roudometof, Glocalization: A Critical Introduction (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), 10.

[10] Mashup Cultures, ed. Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss (Wien, New York: Springer, 2010), 9.

[11] Manuel Castells, "Preface to the 2010 Edition of The Rise of the Network Society", in: Manuel Castellas, The Rise of the Network Society (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xxix.

[12] Mia Consalvo, Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

[13] T.L. Taylor, Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

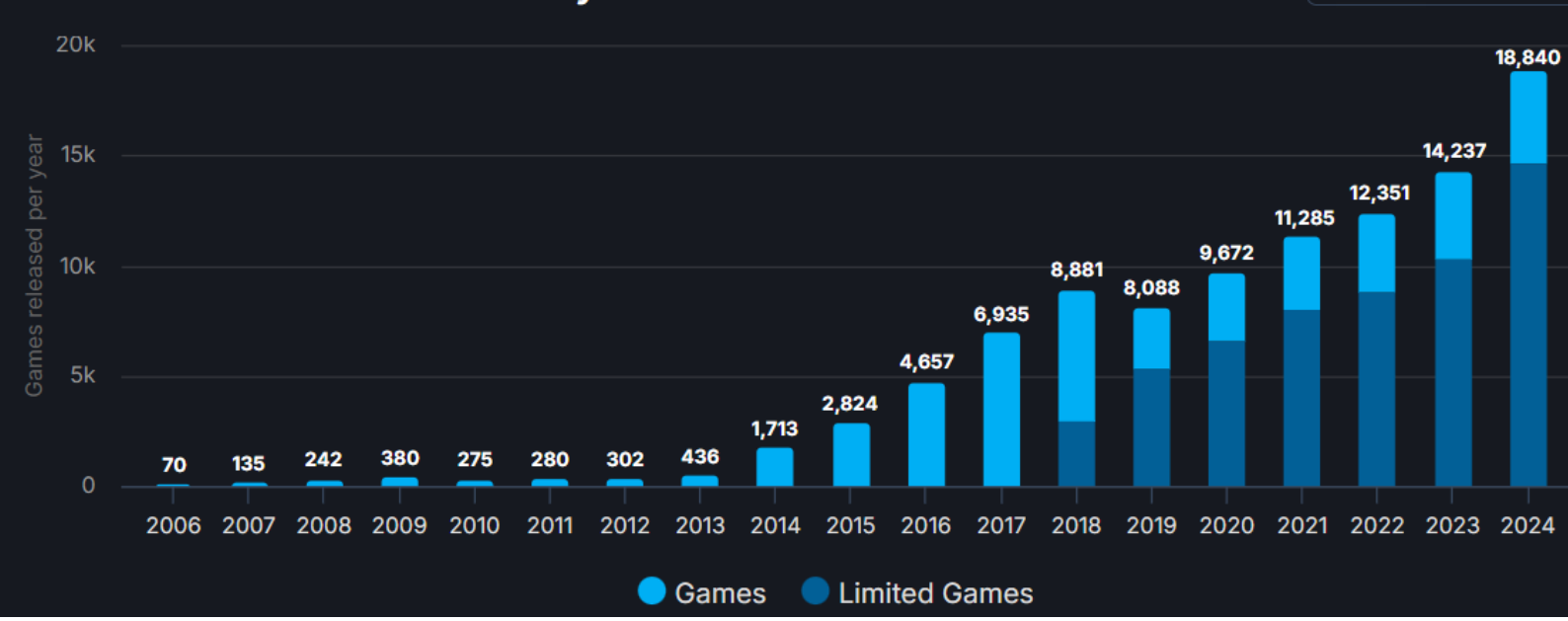
Adrienne Shaw[14] emphasize that video games do not exist in a formal vacuum; rather, they operate within networks of practices, discourses, and social contexts. Increasingly, players seek something else than competition and adrenaline, which reflects a shift in the gaming consumer profile: the average age of gamers in the United States is now 36, and more than a quarter are over 50, playing regularly for relaxation and mental stimulation (ESA 2025; *The Guardian* 2025). On platforms like Steam, communities have formed around emerging *cozy games* as well as another leisurely genre, *walking simulators*.[15] On itch.io, respectively, the popularity of experimental titles that emphasize contemplation and subtle emotions is evident. These works are often created by small collectives or solo developers who treat games as a medium of artistic expression. *Stillgames* should therefore be understood as a response to the maturation of gaming culture: a shift in audience expectations toward titles that offer reflection, affective engagement, and a slower presence within the game world. This distinguishes them from trends centered on comfort or narrative abundance.

Stillgames are not merely an aesthetic choice but also a product of the medium's broader transformation: the rise of digital distribution, the accessibility of creative tools such as Unity and Twine, and—perhaps most significantly—the shifting social profiles of gaming audiences. Media discourse surrounding titles like *Journey*, *Flower*, and *Kind Words* illustrates how categories of tranquility and reflectiveness are actively reinterpreted by players themselves. In forums and reviews, these games are frequently described as a form of "relaxation after work" or as "alternatives to stressful games." Consequently, *stillgames* should be understood not simply as expressions of general aesthetic trends, but as practices deeply embedded in gaming culture—practices through which players and creators negotiate the meanings of entertainment, relaxation, and reflection within the medium.

Finally, the growing syncretization of games can be traced to the systematic rise in the number of titles released each year. On Steam—the leading distribution platform for PC games—18,840 new titles were launched globally in 2024. This translates to more than one new release every half hour, marking a 32% increase over the previous year, itself a record-breaking benchmark. As the chart below illustrates, this sustained growth has intensified competition and market saturation. In response, an increasing number of developers adopt strategies designed to distinguish their products from competitors, echoing Trout's maxim: "differentiate or die."

[14]Adrienne Shaw, Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[15]In this context, it is worth mentioning the brilliant book Wandering Games, in which the author classifies walking simulators as part of a broader category of games about wandering. This framing extends the reflection on "walking in games" beyond a mere generic category, interpreting wandering as a key to understanding a distinctive form of gameplay—one grounded in contemplation, exploration, and being in the world, see: Melissa Kagen, Wandering Games (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022). In Poland, Marcin Chojnacki addresses similar issues, see: Marcin M. Chojnacki, "Flâneur w piaskownicy: O doświadczeniu nawigowalnej przestrzeni w grach komputerowych" [Flâneur in the Sandbox: The Experience of Navigable Space in Computer Games], Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies 1 (2014) and Marcin M. Chojnacki, "Gracz-turysta: Przewodniki po grach i kształtowanie doświadczenia użytkownika" [The Gamer Tourist: Game Guides and User Experience Development], Images: The International Journal of European Film, Performing Arts and Audiovisual Communication 33 (2023).



Screenshot from SteamDB (https://steamdb.info/stats/releases/)
illustrating the number of games released on Steam each year.

When the syncretization of contemporary video games is considered, it becomes evident that *stillgames* should not be regarded as a genre defined within rigid frameworks. Instead, it is more productive to approach *stillgames* as a tendency—one whose features may be found with varying intensity in different titles and at distinct moments in the medium's history. The most salient characteristics of *stillgames* can be summarized as follows:

1. **Minimalist gameplay** – *Stillgames* typically rely on simple gameplay, offering players a limited range of interactions that avoid unnecessary complexity.

2. **Accessible controls** – Regardless of genre or theme, controls are designed to accommodate less experienced players. They emphasize intuitiveness and naturalness, requiring little to no elaborate instruction or onboarding.

3. **Slow progression** – *Stillgames* intentionally moderate gamepace. Transformations within the gaming universe or in the player's state unfold gradually, without abrupt accelerations, difficulty spikes, or high-intensity action sequences.

4. **Minimal or absent meta-game objectives** – These games seldom impose explicit goals such as point accumulation or achievement milestones. Instead, they emphasize immersion in the present moment, encouraging exploration, contemplation, and personal interpretation of the activity.

5. **Rejection of failure-based structures** – *Stillgames* dispense with traditional mechanics centered on the risk of failure. They minimize or entirely avoid negative feedback, including at the level of the graphic interface.

6. **Observation and contemplation as interaction** – The central "action" in *stillgames* lies in watching, listening, and bearing witness—a form of co-presence rather than dynamic

engagement. Participation is often subtle, involving quiet attunement to the world's gradual transformations.[16]

7. **Open, spacious environments** – *Stillgames* frequently feature expansive, open, and empty settings. Their spatial design fosters reflection, deliberately avoiding overstimulation.

8. **Subdued audiovisuals** – Visual and auditory cues are restrained, eschewing sharp contrasts or highly stimulating effects.

9. **Reflective and calm music** – Soundscapes often draw on ambient, contemplative, or meditative traditions. Ritual bells and instruments from Japanese Zen music—such as the shakuhachi flute—are often used to evoke a sense of tranquility and introspection.

10. **Emotional neutrality and gentleness** – *Stillgames* deliberately avoid evoking intense emotions such as fear, stress, or aggression. Instead, they cultivate atmospheres of peace, melancholy, and contemplation.

11. **Reduction of non-diegetic elements** – Graphical user interfaces are minimized or rendered invisible. When present, they remain discreet, stylized, or seamlessly integrated into diegetic elements of the game world.

12. **Minimalist verbal narrative** – *Stillgames* often dispense with verbal storytelling or present it in an extremely pared-down form. Narratives unfold through symbols, environmental cues, and rhythm rather than through words.

13. **Meditative, spiritual, or introspective themes** – *Stillgames* often evoke experiences of meditation, spirituality, or self-reflection. These themes may be addressed directly or emerge implicitly through settings and mechanics that invite interpretation along these lines.

14. **Understatement** – Narrative framing is frequently minimal, with little explicit explanation of the gameplay situation. Questions such as whose perspective is adopted, or where and when the action unfolds, are left deliberately open.

Several of the characteristics outlined above intersect with those of *cozy games*. As Kelly Boudreau notes, *cozy games* are distinguished by a gentle aesthetic, ambient audio, a peaceful atmosphere shaped by music and sound, and low-risk gameplay. Both *cozy games* and

[16]In this respect, stillgames align closely with Merlin Seller's sensing sims, in which conventional action yields to contemplative experience. Seller highlights the importance of the "feeling" of space in such games—a slow, affective exploration of atmospheres often facilitated through unconventional perceptual tools. The concept of stillgames develops along a similar trajectory, but places particular emphasis on silence, pause, and introspection. In these moments, the game no longer functions as a system oriented toward "optimal action;" instead, it becomes a medium for affective engagement and self-reflection. See: Merlin Seller, "Sensing Sims: Atmospheres, Aesthetics and the Cyborg Player", in: Materializing Digital Futures: Touch, Movement, Sound and Vision, ed. Toija Cinque, Jordan Beth Vincent (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

stillgames thus operate within a shared framework of tranquility, absence of pressure, and aesthetic softness. However, they diverge significantly in their underlying **aims and cultural functions**. Differences can be observed in the use of visual and affective codes: *cozy games* emphasize softness and abundance, while *stillgames* focus on minimalism. The affective dimension of the experience also differs, with *cozy games* fostering comfort and *stillgames* encouraging contemplation. Thematic distinctions are equally evident: *cozy games* are often grounded in everyday practices of care,[17] social relationships, and everyday rituals (such as cooking, friendships, and gardening), whereas *stillgames* tend to draw inspiration from spiritual, philosophical, and aesthetic traditions (including meditation, contemplation, and the sublime).

The above list of fourteen features is not a set of conditions that a game must satisfy to be classified as a *stillgame*. Rather, it represents recurring characteristics within a distinct trend, three examples of which I discuss below.

Flow and flow

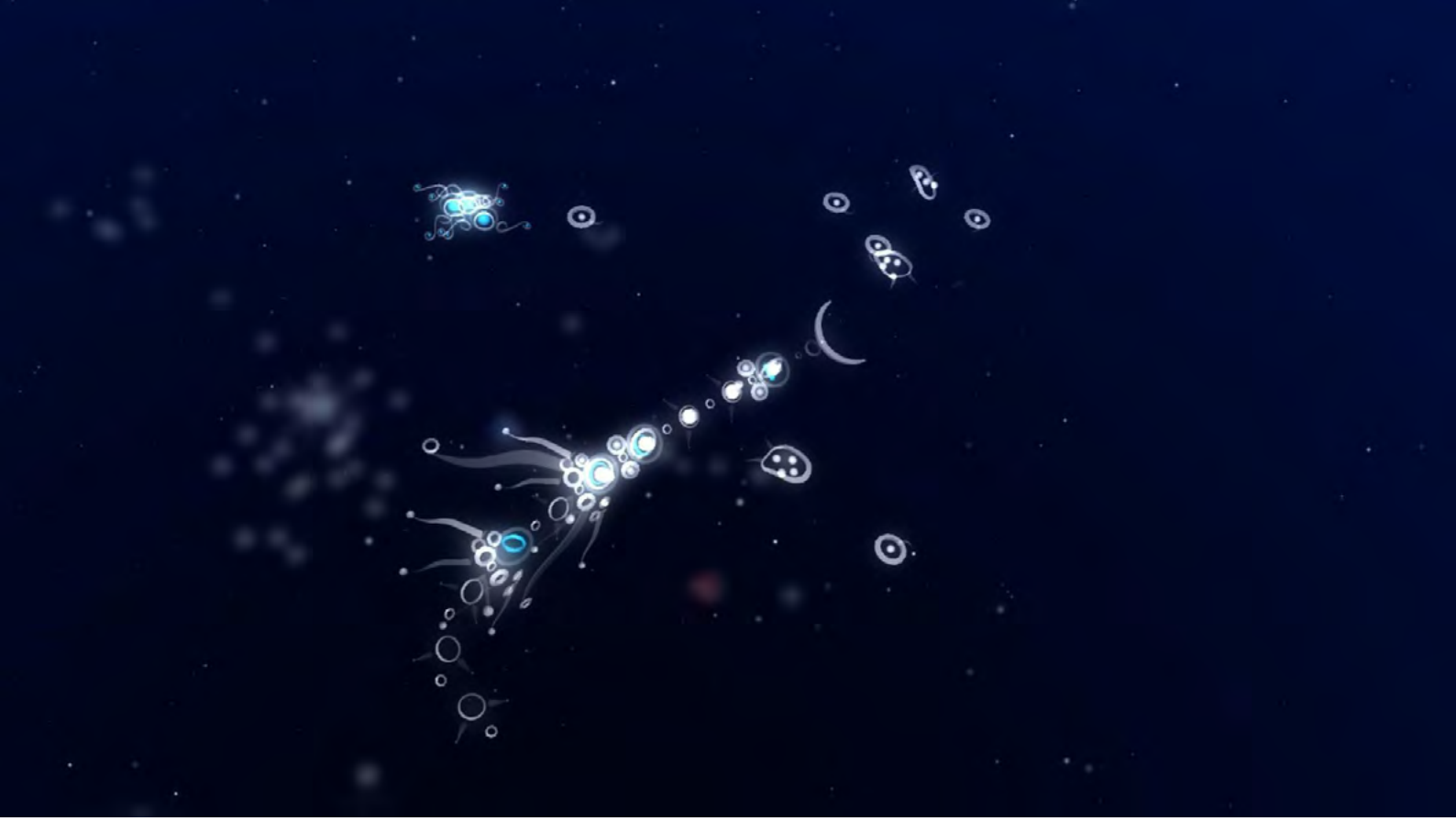
Stillgames are not merely the product of the recent surge in popularity and diversity within the gaming industry. Titles that align with the *stillgame* trend appeared much earlier. A notable precursor to this phenomenon is *Flow* (2006), created by Jenova Chen and the independent studio Thatgamecompany. The video game can be described as a minimalist simulation of existence and evolution: the player inhabits an undefined organic entity—an ephemeral microorganism—that moves through successive layers of an aquatic environment. Interaction with other organisms, primarily through their absorption, drives the gradual evolution of the creature controlled by the player.

Progress is not central in *Flow*; it functions more as a secondary gameplay element. Other features take precedence. Most notably, the interaction system is deliberately not stressful: *Flow* imposes no time limits, avoids conventionally defined enemies, and makes failure impossible. In doing so, the developers dismantled traditional goal-and-reward structures and instead crafted an open-ended experience oriented toward immersion.

Controls are a central element of this experience, carefully designed to maximize fluidity. The player-controlled organism responds to input with gentle, intuitive motions, making it feel easy and smooth. Movement unfolds at a rhythm set by the player, while the aquatic environment amplifies the feeling of presence and invites contemplation.

On an aesthetic level, *Flow* employs visual and auditory features characteristic of meditative experiences—an ambient soundtrack, subtle and delicate animation, and subdued color schemes (at least throughout most of the gameplay). Aggressive or unexpected sensory

[17]It is worth recalling the work of Waszkiewicz and Tymińska, who interpret "care" in the context of cozy games not merely as an aesthetic category, but also as a form of resistance and a cultural practice of social engagement (Agata Waszkiewicz, Marta Tymińska, "Cozy Games and Resistance Through Care", Replay: The Polish Journal of Game Studies 1 [2024]).

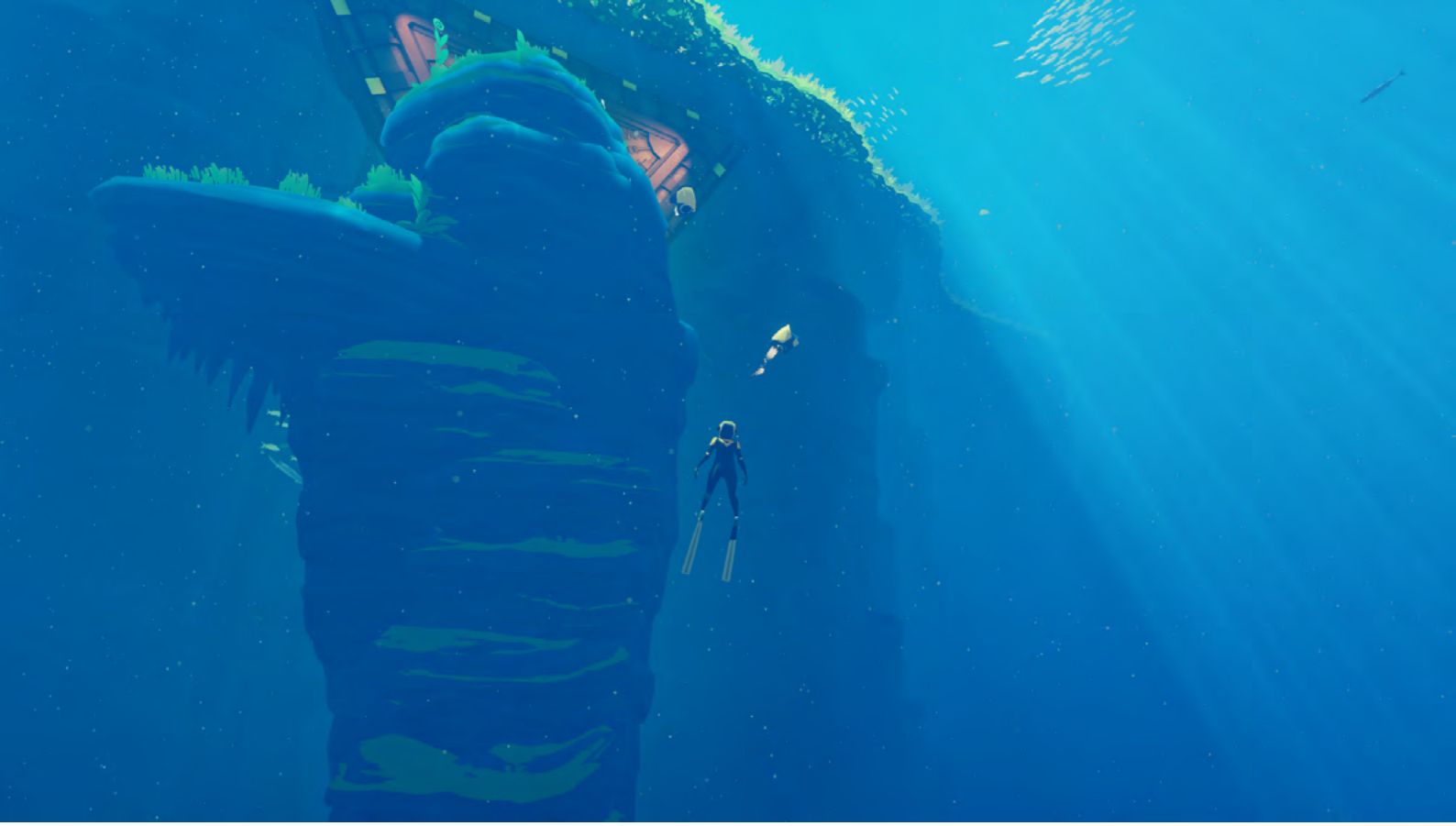


Screenshot from Flow (2006). The player-controlled organism appears at the center, surrounded by smaller consumable creatures

stimuli are, for the most part, absent. The game neither imposes a specific pace nor articulates an explicit goal. Its implied objective arises solely from affordances: the natural trajectory of play suggests the expansion and evolution of the player-controlled entity. Yet nothing compels the player to pursue this direction, nor is any reward offered for doing so (unless reaching the end credits is considered one). Instead, the game opens a space for introspection and invites an interpretation in which its meaning lies not in achieving a specific outcome, but in the act of *being* itself—the contemplative observation of the entity and its ongoing transformation.

The above interpretations are further reinforced by the game's title: *Flow* alludes to the psychological concept of "flow" developed by the Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi—"the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter."[18] Csikszentmihalyi built his theory of "optimal experience" on this foundation, describing a particular configuration of external conditions and internal states that enables individuals to achieve both maximum effectiveness and a profound sense of satisfaction.

[18] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 3.



Screenshot from *ABZÛ* (2016) depicting the protagonist from a distance to emphasize the vastness of the navigable space. During core gameplay, no graphical user interface elements appear on screen, eliminating potential visual noise

The concept of flow "has proven highly valuable to psychologists examining happiness, life satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation; to sociologists, who regard it as the antithesis of anomie and alienation; and to anthropologists, who explore it in relation to collective joy and ritual practices."[19] In psychology, the concept of flow is associated with a state of calm, sometimes even akin to meditation: "in today's world—marked by rapid pace, information overload, and multitasking—the state of flow offers an alternative."[20] In his publicly available master's thesis, Jenova Chen, the lead designer of *Flow*, explores Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow in relation to video games and introduces his own framework for designing games that evoke this state.[21] He also outlines a methodology of *Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment* (DDA),

[19] Anna Porczyńska-Ciszewska, Cechy osobowości a doświadczanie szczęścia i poczucie sensu życia [Personality Traits, Happiness, and the Meaning in Life] (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2013), 44.

[20] Tomasz Kozłowski, "Między przepływem a pop-intymnością: Społeczeństwo wysokich prędkości i ucieczka w siebie" [Between Flow and Pop Intimacy: High-Speed Society and the Escape into Oneself], Tematy z Szewskiej [Themes from Szewska Street] 1 (2015): 80.

[21] It is worth noting that, although the concept of flow is regarded as a cornerstone of contemporary game design, it has also become a subject of critical debate; see, in particular, Braxton Soderman, Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

which he implemented in *Flow*.[22] Chen's game thus operates on multiple levels: it is a widely acclaimed independent title, a practical research and design experiment, and a compelling example of the gaming trend under discussion.

ABZÛ and immersion

The second *stillgame* I wish to analyze in detail is *ABZÛ*, a title that shares many aesthetic and gameplay similarities with *Flow*. Its action unfolds primarily within an aquatic environment. The player assumes the role of a humanoid scuba diver who explores the underwater world, interacting with different objects and observing various forms of marine life. A distinctive feature of the game is its freely rotating camera. By default, when the diver is in open space, the camera is positioned at a considerable distance from the character, emphasizing the vastness of the ocean and evoking a sense of the sublime.

The soundtrack is shaped by water—gentle splashes and the rhythmic movement of waves. The music remains calm and understated, led by soft instrumental compositions. Only in rare moments of implied danger does the atmosphere change, though it never culminates in death or defeat

Navigating the underwater world—so different from the terrestrial environment—encourages playful interaction with the surroundings. Schools of fish invite the player to swim among them, parting gracefully as the character passes through them. The environment's design—featuring underwater corridors, rock arches, and hidden passages—fosters exploration and elevates presence into a lived experience that compels continued engagement.

ABZÛ's diegesis is entirely devoid of text—words appear only in metasystemic functions, for example in the minimalist interface. The control scheme itself is also simple. The player needs to navigate a three-dimensional space and use a single interaction button when approaching a specific object.

Although the game's theme—on the *surface*— is ocean exploration, deeper *immersion* invites introspection, mindful engagement with the world, and contemplation of existence. The most striking example of this is the meditation function: the player needs to find designated spot. When they interact with it, the character assumes a meditative pose, and the camera shifts away from them to follow the freely moving underwater creatures. This reversal of perspective is significant—it redirects attention from the player-controlled figure to the surrounding world, with its calm, silent rhythms. In doing so, it suspends agency and replaces it with an invitation to contemplation.

[22]See: Jenova Chen, Flow in Games (M.A. Thesis, University of Southern California, 2006), 16–17.

Screenshot from ABZÛ (2016). The character begins meditation on an underwater statue

A medium of spiritual contemplation

Another—both intriguing and radical—example of a *stillgame* is the now somewhat forgotten project *Cathedral-in-the-Clouds*, developed by Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, the founders of the Tale of Tales studio. This artistic endeavor, perhaps the most ambitious of all Harvey and Samyn's works, departs from the conventional notion of a "video game" and moves toward what might be described as an interactive meditation grounded in game poetics. *Cathedral-in-the-Clouds* is conceived as "a multisensory, interactive exploration of the great cathedrals of Europe."[23] It consists of semi-static interactive scenes—"digital dioramas," as the creators describe them—drawing inspiration from medieval and Renaissance Christian art. Each diorama offers a unique spatial experience, structured around themes of prayer, contemplation, penance, and spiritual solitude. Gameplay is deliberately minimalist, accompanied by a monumental, sacred, and melancholic atmosphere that relies heavily on light, spatial composition, and religious symbolism.

Technically, the project was never realized in its original form, which envisioned offering players an expansive environment—the titular cathedral—composed of multiple modules (altars, chapels) through which they could freely navigate. Instead, selected fragments were released as standalone VR or desktop applications, distributed either free of charge or for a fee. Among these is *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration,* which immerses the user in the titular chapel. According to the description on the project's website, "[t]he structure of *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration* is based on Hildegard's visions of the cosmos. In these,

[23] Marie-Laure Ryan, Giuliana Fenech, "The CounterText Interview: Marie-Laure Ryan", CounterText 2 (2016): 276.

she would see a geocentric universe embraced by the love of God and animated by the winds of faith and trust. In the *Viriditas Chapel,* this embrace is performed by the Holy Virgin. We find the sphere of fire in the two outer columns and the sphere of water in the inner columns. The central altar piece represents the earth."[24]

Unlike in earlier *stillgames*, text plays a central role in shaping the experience. Beneath the player's feet appears an English translation of *O Viridissima Virga*—a medieval hymn that celebrates the Virgin Mary composed by Saint Hildegard of Bingen. This inscription provides a distinctive interpretive framework for the visualizations encountered by the player. Its placement is a striking rhetorical gesture: to read it, the player must lean forward, effectively bowing before the altar. Interaction within *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration* is deliberately constrained to two gestures—bowing and kneeling before the altar. The player uses a VR application, which means these actions must be carried out physically, enacted directly through the body. The reduction of interactive possibilities, combined with the mystical, visionary quality of the altar's animation and the minimalist form of the entire experience—lasting only a few minutes—renders *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration* legible as a simulation of religious practice, a digital VR space designed for spiritual contemplation.

[24]The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration, https://cathedral-in-the-clouds.net/viriditas/index.html.

Screenshot from *The Viriditas Chapel of Perpetual Adoration* featured on the project's Steam page.

Conclusion

Ambitious titles—those that transcend the conventional boundaries of the medium and engage with philosophical, artistic, or otherwise challenging themes—have often been discussed in game studies and practice. The creators of *Cathedral-in-the-Clouds* likewise engaged with this discourse. In their explorations of the potential of digital entertainment and art, they frequently invoked the term *notgames*. They emphasize that it "is a method of design, a challenge to designers and artists" and as such "[i]t's about broadening the spectrum, not narrowing it down."[25] This proposal functioned primarily as a manifesto—a declaration by its creators that sought to articulate and name a particular design trend. Its goal was to encourage the creation of works that aspire to "incorporate many interactive components and align with the broader tradition of digital entertainment, yet at the same time they reject the conventional aspects of video games—such as competition, challenge, and the very possibility of winning or losing."[26]

Certainly, many *stillgames* can also be classified as *notgames*. Yet while the two categories may share common elements—particularly in their departure from conventional gameplay—their orientations differ fundamentally. *Notgames* function primarily as a design philosophy: an approach that invites creators to challenge the traditional boundaries of video games and to explore new modes of expression. *Notgames* are, in essence, a call to experiment with interactive media in order to expand its creative and reflective potential. *Stillgames*, by contrast, constitute a descriptive category. They refer to existing works distinguished by specific qualities such as broadly defined minimalism, a serene aesthetic, and themes that evoke meditative or contemplative experiences. At the same time, some *notgames* may employ intense and expressive means; likewise, *stillgames* do not necessarily reduce gameplay to its bare minimum. The very term *stillgames* nevertheless introduces two assumptions absent from the postulates surrounding *notgames*. First, testing and stretching the limits of the medium's possibilities does not automatically entail transcending them (*stillgames* are still games). Second, the category presupposes that an aesthetics of silence is an important one. This latter point is particularly significant, given the extent to which *stillgames* diverge from the stereotypical video games seen as a medium of audiovisual excess.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

[25]Harvey, Samyn.

[26]Paweł Schreiber, "Eksperymentalne komputerowe gry tekstowe lat 90. a ruch notgames" [Experimental Text-Based Computer Games of the 1990s and the NotGames Movement], Homo Ludens 1 (2014): 132.

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KEYWORDS

video games

calmness

Abstract:
This article discusses *stillgames*, that is video games designed around experiences of stillness, contemplation, and silence, in opposition to the dominant aesthetics of excess, dynamics, and competition. Characteristic features of this trend are analyzed, such as minimalist gameplay, subdued audiovisuals, observation-based interactions, and a rejection of a gameplay structure based on the risk of failure. *Stillgames* are placed within the broader context of game studies (particularly in relation to *cozy games*, *idle games*, and gaming culture), as well as within the broader context of the medium's history. Their unique nature and cultural significance are thus both established and emphasized.

introspection

close reading

game studies

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Review on the Dissemination and Acceptance of Roman Ingarden in China

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The Polish philosopher, aesthetician and theorist of art Roman Ingarden (1893-1970) is well-known within Chinese academic circles. Renowned for his achievements in the field of phenomenology, Ingarden has had an impact on contemporary Chinese literary and artistic theory. In particular, his illuminating stratification of literary work has been widely accepted across China. Before that, Chinese theorists tended to analyze literary works in terms of two facets: structure and content. According to CNKI, China's biggest academic database, works on Ingarden by Chinese scholars, include 72 journal articles, 23 master theses, and five dissertations; nonetheless, only two articles among these works review the dissemination and acceptance of Ingarden in China – and these two articles were published roughly 15 years ago, one in 2010 and the other in 2011. This paper shows how the transmission and acceptance of Ingarden have occurred in China, with the important goal of helping Polish and other academics learn more about this renowned thinker from a different perspective, addresses a long-standing need.

This article is focused on the following three questions: First, under what circumstances was Ingarden introduced to China? Second, how were his concepts studied and received by China's research community? And last, what is his influence on Chinese students and scholars today? Hopefully, this article will be helpful in promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding between these two countries.

Generally speaking, Western achievements in the sciences and humanities reached China in two waves. The first began after the Opium War in 1840, and the second kicked off with China's reform efforts and opening-up in 1978. Before the Opium War, China had built an impressive civilization and had played a leading role around the world. Ancient Chinese people considered their land to be the center of the world, and the rest as savage and barbarian. This resulted in an attitude marked by arrogance and ignorance towards the budding modern civilization of the West. The situation became particularly grave under the reign of the Qing Dynasty, which ruled China from 1644 to 1911, the authorities of which decided to stop trading and maintaining contacts with foreign countries. The regime's arrogance and resulting seclusion led to China's growing backwardness and its lagging behind the West in modern times. China's failures in the Opium War and other wars motivated its rulers and intellectuals to identify the reasons for these failures and seek out solutions to them; this led them to embark on a process of learning from the West. The slogan "Learn advanced technologies from the foreigner in order to cope with them" was coined under such circumstances. Since then, well-educated Chinese have been keen on introducing, translating and studying Western accomplishments in the natural sciences, technologies and humanities. These Westernization practices reached their peak in 1919 when the May 4th Movement was initiated by professors and students at Peking University and fueled by the masses across China. In this campaign, scholars appealed for a new culture (Western culture) to replace the old one (traditional Chinese culture). Some even advocated for the complete Westernization of Chinese culture, an idea which sparked intense debate and discussion. Many of them argued for sticking to the principle of "Chinese culture as the foundation, Western knowledge for practical application." In consequence, China was forced to become part of modern political, economic and cultural systems dominated by the West.

Nevertheless, the Chinese people actively sought to learn from the West during the second wave of Western influence. Reform and opening-up became part of China's four basic national policies, all rooted in its historical experience and past lessons. As China's President Xi Jinping said at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference in 2018, human history shows that openness leads to progress while seclusion leaves one behind. Due to its self-seclusion, China was constantly invaded and plundered by Western powers during the latter half of the 19th century: its territory was ceded, indemnity claimed, precious antiques looted, and its royal palace burned down. These acts were traumatic for the Chinese people. In order to keep up with international society and to better develop China's economy, its central government made the decision to reform and open up to the outer world in 1978. Since that time, people from all walks of life have competed to build connections with the world, especially the West. Foreign languages, English in particular, became a major subject in school classrooms, enabling Chinese students and scholars to communicate

effectively within the international community. This broader context led to many Western works, particularly those written in English, being translated into Chinese, and then being widely read, studied and discussed among Chinese academics. New concepts, terms and theories gained acceptance and were adopted by Chinese scholars. During this second wave, Ingarden was introduced to the Chinese research community. The Polish scholar's work was subsequently widely disseminated and well received in China.

For the most part, Ingarden gained his reputation in China through translation. Since 1978, Chinese scholars have endeavored to translate Ingarden's works into Chinese. However, most of these translations were not based on German or Polish texts, but on English-language versions. Thus far, only one book has been translated directly from Polish. Initially, only a small part of his papers and chapters from his books were translated into Chinese. For instance, Zhu Liyuan, a well-known Chinese expert in literary and artistic theory, translated "Artistic and Aesthetic Values" from the version published in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* (July 1964 issue), and the translated text was published in 1985. Wang Fengzhen rendered "Phenomenological Aesthetics: An Attempt to Define its Range" into Chinese in 1991. In 2004, Zhang Xushu completed his translation of "The Cinematographic Drama [the Film]"; this was an excerpt from *The Literary Work of Art*. All of these translations were based on English versions. None of Ingarden's works was rendered from Polish until Zhang Zhenhui published a Chinese version of *On Literary Works* in 2008.[1] Although the achievements of these scholars in promoting Ingarden's concept were significant, the language barrier led to misunderstandings and misrepresentations. Both China and Poland need more scholars with a good command of both Polish and Chinese languages and cultures in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas.

Aside from translations, Chinese scholars also read Western studies on Ingarden. Some of these research achievements have been translated into Chinese; these translations have played an important role in China's reception of Ingarden. To name a few, the Chinese translation of Rene Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature*, in which the authors made use of Ingarden's concepts to discuss existential forms of literary works, debuted in 1977. In 1983, Lin Xianghua translated Wellek's *Four Critics: Croce, Valery, Lukacs, and Ingarden*, which ranked Ingarden as one of the four great critics in the West. In 1986, Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* was translated by Wu Xiaoming. Robert Magliola's *Phenomenology and Literature: An Introduction*, which discusses Wellek's incorporation of Ingarden's concepts, was translated by Zhou Ning in 1988 and then re-translated by Wang Yuechuan and Lan Fei in 1992. There are also two Chinese versions of Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, in which Iser discusses Ingarden's initiative of "Indeterminacy." The first was co-translated by Jin Yuanpu and Zhou Ning in 1991; the other by Jin Huimin in 1991. Mikel Dufrenne's *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* was translated from French by Han Shuzhan in 1992. Herbert Spiegelberg's *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, which elaborated on Ingarden's philosophical and aesthetic concepts, was co-translated by Wang Binwen and Zhang Jinyan

[1] Please be noted that The Literary Work of Art was first published in German in 1931, and later in the 1950s it was translated into Polish with the title On Literary Works.

in 1995. Iser's *How to Do Theory*, in which Iser surveyed Ingarden's stratification of artistic works, was translated by Zhu Gang et al. in 2008.

It is a pity that the majority of translations of Ingarden's works were made from English editions, and not from German or Polish, the languages in which he most often wrote. This language barrier has resulted in difficulties in reception and even misinterpretations of Ingarden as well as other Polish brilliant writers, thinkers and even scientists. It is therefore urgent for China and Poland to strengthen cultural and people-to-people exchanges. The Chinese government has appealed for better communication and the exchange of ideas among different civilizations. In the keynote speech at the opening ceremony of The Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations on 15 May 2019, President Xi stated that "we need to stay open and inclusive and draw on each other's strengths." In this speech he also proposed that "we need to advance with the times and explore new ground in development." How can we attain these objectives? The first ground to break is the language barrier, as language is the vehicle of thoughts. Fortunately, a group of young Chinese scholars who know Polish very well are working on translating Ingarden and other writers. It can be expected that an increasing number of esteemed Poles will become widely known to Chinese students and scholars as communication grows between these two nations. It is therefore necessary for both countries to promote student exchanges for the purpose of learning each other's language and culture.

However, long before the translations discussed above were produced, Ingarden's philosophical, artistic and aesthetic theories were already being studied in China. Li Youzheng, a prominent researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, was the first known Chinese scholar to study Ingarden. In 1980, he published an article on Ingarden in *Aesthetics*, one of China's well-known journals (Zhang, "The Reception" 124). The article, entitled "The Phenomenological Aesthetics of Roman Ingarden," laid a solid foundation and had a great impact on later studies of Ingarden in China. The article focused on three questions: first, what is Husserl's Intentional Theory and how did it influence Ingarden's concepts regarding literature and the arts; second, what were Ingarden's most important ground-breaking arguments in his two well-known books: *The Literary Work of Art* (first published in 1931, in German) and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1936, in Polish); and lastly, what were Ingarden's views on artistic value and aesthetic value in two other works: *Ontology of the Work of Art* (1962, in German) and *Experience, Artwork and Value* (1969, in German). By answering these three questions Li delineated Ingarden's key concepts, such as the strata of literary works, to Chinese theorists. The other contribution of this paper was its breaking down of Ingarden's works into two periods, reminding readers that Ingarden's later period writings, i.e., *Ontology of the Work of Art* and *Experience, Artwork and Value*, deserved the same attention as his earlier ones. Shortcomings and deficiencies existed in the article, e.g., there were occasional misinterpretations and an overreliance on references to English sources without any Polish or German ones. Nonetheless, its impact and influence were tremendous, and no other paper has exceeded it within the past two decades (Zhang, "The Reception" 124).

Following in Li Youzheng's steps, many academics and students were engaged in the study of Ingarden and his theories. A total of 72 articles relevant to Ingarden were found in

a search using his name in CNKI.[2] In Chen Deng's survey of Ingarden's art ontology, art cognitivism and aesthetic value theory, he suggested that Ingarden's conceptions have been useful in the analysis and appreciation of literature and art. Chen's article presented a comprehensive introduction to Ingarden's aesthetic theory to China's academic community, and contributed to the transmission of Ingarden's ideas in China. In another article, Jiang Jiyong explored Ingarden's influence on Reader-Response Theory and Reception Aesthetics, arguing that Ingarden's thinking on the readers' role in constructing the meaning of literary works was the origin of Reader-Response Theory and Reception Aesthetics. Jiang provided concrete and detailed proof and examples, strengthening his argument.

Zhang Yongqing, a well-known professor of aesthetics and artistic theory from Renmin University of China, summarized Chinese studies on Ingarden from 1980 to 2010 in an article in which he pointed out three problems in these and proposed two pieces of advice. Zhang argued that Chinese scholars did not sufficiently explore the immanent correlation between Ingarden's philosophical thought and his literary theory, that interpretations of his ontology of a literary work were 'Wellekized', and that interpretations of Ingarden's actualization were 'Iserized'. Here Zhang Yongqing meant that Chinese scholars' understanding of Ingarden had been overly influenced by Wellek and Iser. Most Chinese researchers learned about Ingarden through English sources, they are prone to be affected by Western scholars. Based on these problems, he presented two suggestions: (1) to render more of Ingarden's works from German and Polish in order to strengthen the studies of Ingarden in China; (2) to explore new questions in the process of studying his works (Zhang, "Problems" 40).

Chinese scholars have also delved into the concept of "metaphysical quality" in a number of articles. Li Xiaolin, for instance, contends that "metaphysical quality" is the aesthetic quality of the stratum of represented objects. It is only through the manifestation of the metaphysical quality that a literary or artistic work reaches its peak. Although metaphysical quality is introduced in Ingarden's ontology of literature, it awaits elucidation in the parts of his theoretical writings dealing with aesthetic experience and aesthetic value. Metaphysical quality is not merely an aesthetic style and category but also has values akin to those of religion and metaphysics. Likewise, Ingarden's concept is not only intrinsically connected to phenomenological aesthetics, but also resonates with the tradition of metaphysical aesthetics.

Aside from research articles, a number of master theses and Ph.D. dissertations have also made contributions to the study of Ingarden in China. A total of 23 master theses and 11 doctoral dissertations were found in CNKI; these can be classified into three categories. The first type is studies of Ingarden's theories, the second one consists of applications of his key concepts to analyses of literary and artistic works, and the last one is works where Ingarden's thought is integrated into the study of the phenomenology of aesthetics. For instance, Wu Keqin examined Ingarden's literary ontology thoughts, contending that Ingarden focused

[2] The commonest Chinese translation of Ingarden's surname is "英加登" and "英伽登," therefore both names were searched by subject and abstract in CNKI on October 31, 2024.

on intention analyses of literary works of art, proposing a solution to the argument of "Idealism-Realism," and unifying ontology and epistemology in the study on the existence of literary works. This dissertation attempts to reveal Ingarden's literary ontology thoughts from four perspectives: how literary works "constitute" a realm, a literary work's "regional" existence, a literary work's aesthetic experience phenomenon, and a literary work's aesthetic value systems. Another Ph.D. candidate, Xiong Haiyang, studied Ingarden's art ontology. In order to solve the famous controversy of "Idealism-Realism" in the history of philosophy, he devoted himself to the study of the ontology of art, and examined the existence and essential structure of works of literature, music, painting, and architecture successively. On this basis, he pointed out that works of art are unique purely intentional objects which differ from real objects and ideal objects, and also have a schematic, multi-strata and qualitative structure. In this way, inspired by phenomenological methods, Ingarden provided a set of phenomenological solutions for general theory in art. Ph.D. candidate Zhu Shu applied Ingarden's theory about the stratification of literary works, image-thinking in drama, and poetic literary language to drama translation, suggesting that the dramatic situation is composed of three strata: the stratum of language, that of image, and that of essence, which are all key to an understanding of the structure and significance of the play under translation.

A number of monographs on Ingarden have appeared over the past two decades. These monographs can be divided into two groups, the first one of which is dedicated solely to the study of Ingarden. For instance, Guo Yongjian wrote a book on Ingarden entitled *A Study of Roman Ingarden's On Literary Works from the Perspective of Literature Phenomenology,* published by Academia Press, Shanghai, in 2011. In this book, Guo elaborates on Ingarden's theories in terms of the existential mode of literary works, pure intentional objects, and literary stratification: the stratum of word sounds, the stratum of meaning units, the stratum of represented objectivities, and the stratum of manifold schematized aspects; concretization and polyphonic harmony. He also discussed Ingarden's impact on contemporary China's aesthetics. The second group merges Ingarden into the stream of Phenomenology studies, treating him as a representative of Phenomenology. For example, Zhang Yunpeng and Hu Yishan coauthored *Phenomenology Method and Aesthetics: from Husserl to Dufrenne,* released by Zhejiang University Press, Hangzhou, in 2007. In this treatise, Zhang and Hu chronicled phenomenologists from Husserl to Dufrenne. Ingarden was placed in Chapter 3 between Moritz Geiger and Michel Dufrenne.

Recently, building on previous research achievements, more Chinese scholars have begun to reflect upon Ingarden's theories. Liu Yanshun, for example, criticizes Ingarden's phenomenological reduction. In his article, he suggested that Ingarden embodies the idea and operation of phenomenological reduction in *The Literary Work of Art*, arguing that consciousness in intentional activity can not only be retained as a residue, but also that the essential genes of this intentional activity carried by consciousness can be preserved and restored through recollection and reflection. This leads to a confusion of knowledge and aesthetic pleasure, thereby delaying the reduction of aesthetic temporality. First, the significance or timeliness of aesthetic life is trespassed by cognitive reduction. Timeless knowledge, as a residue, can be preserved through recollection and reflection, but aesthetic life, as sensory pleasure, can only

be primary. The manifestation of its aesthetic timeliness is absolutely occasioned; there is no absolute residue, only a relative one, and only a relative aesthetic reduction can be performed. Second, Ingarden disassembles the absolute simultaneity or absolute intentionality of aesthetic life and replaces it with the relative intentionality or relative simultaneity of scientific life. He then regards the literary work as an absolutely autonomous entity, as a cognitive object solely for recollection and reflection, which inevitably leads to the disappearance of other aesthetic temporalities. Third, Ingarden ignores the unidirectional nature of attention in the continuous form of aesthetic temporal consciousness and the fluidity of its aesthetic temporal body. He mistakenly assumes that a detached observer's attitude can coexist and be juxtaposed with sensory pleasure, and uses this to bridge and transition to the phenomenological reduction of the essence of the literary work.

To sum up, Ingarden's artistic, aesthetic and philosophical theories were disseminated and accepted around China during two waves when Chinese people were rushing to learn from the West. Translations helped him embark on his journey to China, which was accomplished mainly through English versions rather than Polish or German sources, resulting in occasional misunderstandings. Among his writings, *The Literary Work of Art* and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* have gained the most popularity in China. Chinese scholars have conducted research on Ingarden for more than four decades. Works exploring his key concepts, such as the ontology of the arts, metaphysical quality, and the stratification of literary works have been constantly translated, studied and applied by Chinese students and scholars, some of which have even been included in university textbooks for literature majors. Ingarden has become an indispensable figure in China's process of absorbing and integrating foreign theories.

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KEYWORDS

Dissemination and Acceptance

Abstract:
Roman Ingarden was a prominent Polish philosopher, aesthetician and theorist whose achievements in the field of phenomenology have exerted a significant influence on contemporary Chinese students and scholars. Although papers and monographs on Ingarden have been produced within the Chinese academic community, none has been written in English to review his dissemination and reception in China. This paper focuses on the following three questions: First, under what circumstances was Ingarden introduced to China? Second, how was his work disseminated within and received by China's research community? And last, what influence does he have on Chinese students and scholars today? Addressing these questions will help promote cultural exchange and mutual understanding between China and Poland.

China

ROMAN INGARDEN

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