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A THREAT OF EXCLUSION – NEGATIVE AESTHETICS ON THE EXAMPLE OF ZYTA RUDZKA'S WORK

Abstract: In her work, Zyta Rudzka shows the sphere of periphery, exclusion and the edges of human histories, both in individual and collective dimensions (World War II, fate of German women from post-war recovered territories, Jews at various historical moments, June 1956 in Poznań, March 1968, December 1970 events from the Gdańsk Shipyard, destinies of rural and working-class communities, the poor, the underprivileged and victims of the political and economic shifts of 1989). In the realm of Zyta Rudzka's literary creations, her main characters find themselves suspended, residing precariously on the fringes of reality's tapestry. She dares to cast a spotlight on negative aspects of existence, boldly elevating them to prominence. The hallmark of her characters' lives is a perpetual state of non-transition, lingering impermanence marked by uncertainty. Rudzka weaves enigmatic figures, whose nature is elusive, non-obvious and often disconcerting, capable of provoking extreme, frequently adverse emotions, yet paradoxically eliciting empathy and a slender strand of sympathy. These transgressive denizens of her prose and dramas remain stuck in the liminal zone. The way they are presented brings to mind the Derridean metaphor of the parergon. Rudzka employs a language rich in sensuality, veering from the brutally blunt to the elegantly poetic, as she introduces readers into borderline twisted worlds that defy categorization and escape simple narratives. What is important in the lives of the characters is what happens in the in-between – a world devoid of belonging, teetering on the precipice, caught in a suspended state, where ruptures, voids and the gradual erosion of identity hold sway.

Keywords: Zyta Rudzka, Poznań Literary Award, negative aesthetics, exclusion, novel, writing

“A tooth is not soft tissue in a lovely snack from a cold buffet, prompting an exchange of fire”¹.

“I step into the subway, descending into the subterranean world, onto the escalator and lose my balance, my head sways back for a fleeting moment. I regain my equilibrium. / Finally, I am inside the carriage. / Lady, take a seat. / He makes a smacking noise, amused – a man with a towering figure, bald-headed, his gray ponytail trailing behind him like the remnants of a life chasing elusive benevolence, the last vestiges in a hunting ground. / I turn sideways. / Lady, take a seat, he repeats. Sit, lady! / Sit? And what else? Give a paw? Sit down! I chuckle wryly and with a hint of sadness. / I'd be happier if, old man, you showed me the bent elbow gesture, not surrender the seat to me! – I yell. / Well, let me slump, he mumbles with a groan. / He slumps down on the seat. I feel sorry for him. For a brief, unexpected moment. / Like a kid I move to the end of the carriage. One doesn't seem to grow out of it. / Somewhere deep within me, a phrase etches itself: “Will you shed your clothes or take the fingerprints?” Perhaps it will endure, finding its place in a poem. I take the white pills to nurture new memories. I take the yellow ones too, hoping to blur the recollection of old memories, yet they refuse to erase anything, even in a forbidden triple dose. The image of the boot, the doll's hands, the condom, the smeared boards, the ice, the mossy well casing, the ice hole – they persist, omnipresent. / From birth, this has not been how it was supposed to be. I wanted differently; it's always “not the way it was supposed to be”. Everything converging into nothingness, for no one”².

In Zyta Rudzka's literary realm, Roma, the central character of *Krótką wymiana ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire], finds herself ensnared within the liminal, an indistinct space, trapped between middle age and the precipice of old age (she muses: “Meanwhile, I've become old and I'm standing at the bus stop”³), between married and divorced, at the peak of her career and its twilight. The reader participates in the ritual of the heroine's descent into its twilight⁴. However, Gennep's rite of passage does not have a chance to be fully accomplished – the transitional / liminal period lasts indefinitely, the phase of inclusion does not occur, and exclusion takes its place. As we traverse the pages of Rudzka's subsequent works, the reader's impression lingers on participating

¹ I. Iwasiów, *Laudacja dla Zyty Rudzkiej* [Laudation for Zyta Rudzka], <https://poznanska-grodaliteracka.pl/laudacja-dla-zyty-rudzkiej/#more-940> [accessed: 15.05.2023].

² Z. Rudzka, *Krótką wymiana ognia*, W.A.B., Warszawa 2018, pp. 7-8.

³ Ibidem, p. 6.

⁴ Cf. A. van Gennep, *Obrzędy przejścia. Systematyczne studium ceremonii*, transl. B. Biały, Warszawa 2006; V. Turner, *Proces rytualny*, transl. E. Dżurak, Warszawa 2010.

in an incomplete rite. The three ritual phases – initial (*preliminal*), transitional (*liminal*) and inclusive (*postliminal*) – falter in their realization. Inclusion is usually incomplete, the state of suspension accomplished in the transitional phase lasts for most of the characters' existence and *postliminality* is replaced by exclusion, banishment, rejection, elimination. Roma Dąbrowska's reality refrains from adhering to simple binary oppositions. Her existence remains suspended across numerous existential dimensions. She does not know where her daughter, Zuzanka, once an outstanding pianist with absolute hearing, who has not contacted anyone in her family for many years, has run away. She does not know who her father is and cannot get this truth out of her mother. Their relationship is marked by constant tension, understatement, secret grief and a hidden past. As a poetess, she continues to be published and invited to book signing meetings, although books with her poems no longer sell so well, there are fewer and fewer readers in the meeting rooms, and a decreasing number of those who would like, if not to be artists, then at least to be with the artist. Her body still needs closeness, although the heroine smells her own decay more often than her desire. During the book signing evening, she ponders: "A young fella, so what, I won't go with him. Even for a quickie. Such a rookie, neither pretty nor ugly, just anybody, any kind. Today all adolescents are bland, it's a pity I'm not one. / Me and this young man. (...) Can I write? He sorts of busts my balls again. Just a few words. You will allow me, won't you? I will write, he begs. I always wanted to. / Little boy, come on, I snort. I wave my hands as if I were guarding myself against a wasp. / He says something else, gets puffed up and turns crimson, goes pale, turns red again. / I watch him. I'm not listening, but I'm getting more and more curious about what he smells like. In the hollow of his jaw and neck. How he smells under the hard nipple. On the navel. When I put my hand there. In the taut muscle – thighs under the outline of the butt, probably small and hard as a green cherry. What does he smell like to me, this one?"⁵.

The way Roma's character is structured encapsulates the very essence of the Derridean metaphor of the *parergon*. "Being neither work (*ergon*) nor out-of-work, neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, the *parergon* subverts all dichotomies, its own identity remaining amorphous while birthing the work itself"⁶ – this definition serves as a fitting mirror to the literary world crafted within the novels and dramas of the Polish writer. Rudzka employs a language that is extremely sensual, at times very blunt, and at other times poetic – guiding the reader into realms that defy convention, reside on the peripheries, are twisted and evade simple narratives. The crux of her characters'

⁵ Z. Rudzka, *Krótką wymiana ognia*, op. cit., p. 6.

⁶ J. Derrida, *Prawda w malarstwie*, transl. M. Kwietniewska, Gdańsk 2003, p. 16.

existence hinges on interstitial spaces –realms bereft of belonging, occupying the margins, suspended in ambiguity, ruptured, vacuous and gradually dissipating. As Anna Krajewska articulates, “We are tasked not with recalling the world but with conjuring it anew each time, invoking its outline rather than its substance. We are meant to be ensnared on the fringe, positioned at the precipice. We cease to be mere observers, transforming, as Hannah Arendt envisaged, into active participants in the process of comprehending the world. It's akin to modern drama, where we must continually establish the ontological status of the world. Topoi were vessels of certainty. Rhetorically, they safeguarded the beginnings and endings. Their artifice stemmed from an awareness of necessity for repetition. For Derrida, the commencement presents a conundrum and writing perpetually embarks on new beginnings”⁷. Inspired by Derrida's reflections, the scholar ushers in concepts like the aesthetics of unpreparedness, the aesthetics of the middle, or the aesthetics of the “in-between”⁸.

In any case, the central figures within the corpus of works, both novels and dramas, penned by this year's recipient of the Poznań Literary Award⁹, reside in a perpetual state of suspension, lingering on the edges of reality. Traditional aesthetic binaries – beauty and ugliness, pathos and sublimity, repulsion and disgust – remain unfulfilled in this domain. While the writer does, in a manner of speaking, elevate the negative aspects, thankfully without succumbing to pathos, she nonetheless grants readers access to these transgressive (or rather partially transgressed) characters. Their defining trait is an enduring state of non-transgression, impermanence and uncertainty. The author masterfully crafts figures that defy easy categorization, shrouded in ambiguity, inscrutable in pivotal life moments, capable of provoking irritation, occasionally arousing extreme – often negative – emotions, yet still eliciting empathy and a faint strand of sympathy. Apparently, Rudzka fully realizes her stated creative intent: “Crafting a simpering hero or a victim that elicits sympathy is no art. And write in such a way as to evoke empathy with someone who is different, a stranger, who irritates. It's the form that sifts the content so much that it triggers empathy”¹⁰.

My journey into the realm of Rudzka's literature commenced with the theatrical piece *Cukier Stanik* [Cukier Bra], an offering from the compendium titled *Zimny buffet* [Cold Buffet]¹¹. My interest in her work did not arise in con-

⁷ A. Krajewska, *Dekonstrukcja jako problem estetyki (na przykładzie dramatycznego dyskursu Jacques'a Derridy)*, “Przestrzenie Teorii” 2006, No. 6, p. 26.

⁸ Ibidem p. 27.

⁹ Poznań Literary Award, <https://poznanskanagrodaliteracka.pl/zyta-rudzka-laureatka-poznanskiej-nagrody-literackiej-2023/> [accessed: 15.05.2023].

¹⁰ *Brunatne kukulcze jajo*. Justyna Jaworska in conversation with Zyta Rudzka, “Dialog” 2018, No. 9, p. 37.

¹¹ Z. Rudzka, *Zimny bufet*, ed. M. Borowski M. Sugiera, A. Wierzchowska-Woźniak, Kraków 2012.

nection with the wave of popularity after she was presented with the Poznań Literary Award. Rather, it blossomed in the course of my dedicated exploration of her work when I immersed myself in the realms of sensuality, perception and emotion. I embarked upon this literary odyssey through her prose with *Ślicznotki Doktora Josefa* [Dr. Josef's Beauties]. Within its pages, the protagonist, Czechna, observes her fellow denizens within the confines of a nursing home, granting the reader passage into the crucible of aging and affliction. "Strolling amidst them, she clandestinely scrutinized the residents. They were sitting on the terrace, gazing ahead, basking in the sun's embrace akin to lizards petrified among the stones. They surrendered themselves to the caress of warmth – a congregation of skulls adorned with sparse, withered hairs, visages seemingly stitched together from disparate swatches of flesh, cheeks marred by contusions, lesions and festering scratches. Blotchy eyelids, stomachs distended by the ravages of illness, battered hands, fingers knotted in arthritic rigidity, thighs reminiscent of jabots, swaying freely, trembling with each bodily motion. Feet released from their shackles of shoes and slippers, toes contorted and gnarled like age-old tree branches, protuberances and watery growths"¹². My literary journey eventually led me to her maiden novel, *Białe klisze* [White Clichés] (1993). Within its pages, the author herself, via one of her characters, proclaims and elucidates the rationale behind her multi-sensory and profoundly imaginative, always subjectively potent interpretation of reality – a quest to mirror it in the fluidity of language. "The genesis of all sensations emerges from direct sensory communion with the world or through the prism of our dreams, fancies and delusions"¹³.

In this concise discourse, encapsulating the comprehensive body of the work authored by the poetess, playwright, novelist, author of scripts for films about art and psychologist proves an insurmountable endeavor. It is a daunting task to omit any bibliographic entry, for her characters, themes and motifs meander freely across her literary tapestry. The reader is enlightened to this profound interconnectedness when perusing the author's successive creations – an interwoven fabric of a narrative, a "literary labyrinth", as Krajewska astutely observed¹⁴. She is best known for her novels *Ślicznotka Doktora Josefa* [Dr Josef's Beauty] (2006), *Krótką wymianą ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire] (2018) and *Tkanki miękkie* [Soft Tissues] (2020), all crafted during the 2000s. Critics have collectively anointed this trilogy of novels as an "opus of unparalleled linguistic prowess and psychological acumen. Within these pages, elderly protagonists, often relegated to the peripheries of societal and cultural consciousness,

¹² Eadem, *Ślicznotka Doktora Josefa*, W.A.B., Warszawa 2021, (first edition: 2006), p. 7.

¹³ Eadem, *Białe klisze*, Świat Literacki, Katowice 1993, p. 49.

¹⁴ A. Krajewska, *Teoria splełniana*, "Przestrzenie Teorii" 2020, No. 34, p. 11.

emerge resolutely into the forefront of literary contemplation,” as discerningly noted by the editors of the “Odra” art and culture magazine¹⁵. In contrast, Inga Iwasiów posits a trinity, designating the author's final trio of novels as an integrated whole. She delineates, “I divide Zyta Rudzka's work into three phases. The inaugural one primarily involves prose, where she traverses the realms of the contemporary and the past, the landscapes of Poland and distant shores. The second phase embodies the realm of drama. The third, an ongoing evolution, blossoms into a trilogy: *Krótką wymianą ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire] (2018); *Tkanki miękkie* [Soft Tissues] (2020); *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby* [The One Laughs Who Has Teeth] (2022)”¹⁶. The author's dramatic texts form a very important part of her oeuvre, echoing and influencing the stylistic essence of her prose creations¹⁷.

The first words and sentences of Rudzka's novels are extremely emphatic, surprising, foreshadowing what is yet to happen or be explained; they are concise, perfectly planned, there is nothing redundant in them; they are like, if I may dare employ a more colloquial comparison than a scholarly one, a “sudden impact of a clenched fist against one's nose or solar plexus.” The author's chosen linguistic palette is weighty, imbued with a rich tapestry of sensory stimuli, brimming with repetitions and enumerations, delivered with blunt precision. Formally and semantically, the works frequently manifest as first-person narratives. In the initial pages of *Ślicznotka Doktora Josefa* [Dr. Josef's Beauty], we delve into Czechna's recollections of her wartime experiences: “Upon her initial encounter with Dr. Josef, at the tender age of twelve, standing bare and exposed, she sensed his admiration – profound and unwavering. His gaze, vigilant and intense, fell upon her. A clenched hand ensconced within a white glove. The measured strokes of the horsewhip against the polished boots. / He singled her out instantly. Angular. Veined. Capillary. With a face shaded by thick locks of hair. A frost-kissed underbelly. Legs bowed in crooked symmetry. Thighs between which the frigid breath of winter squeezed”¹⁸. Roma embarks on her first-person narrative in *Krótką wymianą ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire], interwoven with her mother's monologues, with the following utterance:

¹⁵ P. Doczekalski, *Nagroda “Odry” dla Zyty Rudzkiej*, 02.11.2021, <https://dzieje.pl/kultura-i-sztuka/nagroda-odry-dla-zyty-rudzkiej>[accessed: 15.05.2023].

¹⁶ I. Iwasiów, *Laudacja dla Zyty Rudzkiej*, op. cit.

¹⁷ Her dramatic works include *Cukier Stanik* [Cukier Bra] (2007, printed in 2008), *Fastryga* [Basting Stitch] (2008, printed in 2009), *Eskimos w podróży służbowej* [Eskimo on a Business Trip] (2009), *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby. Monodram* [The One Laughs Who Has Teeth. Monodrama] (2010), *Pęknięta, obwiązana nitką* [Cracked, Tied with a Thread] (2010, printed in 2011), *Zimny bufet* [Cold Buffet] (2011, printed in 2012), *Krótką wymianą ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire] (2014), and *Kuku* [Cuckoo] (2018).

¹⁸ Z. Rudzka, *Ślicznotka Doktora Josefa*, op. cit., p. 6.

“Meanwhile, I’ve aged, finding myself at the bus stop, proclaiming aloud: / Is it truly so unfathomable to believe that Mother was never there, so unfathomable?”¹⁹. Ludwik, a paediatric physician in *Tkanki miękkie* [Soft Tissues], commences his narrative in the following manner: “It has been roughly a week since my wife contemplated ending her own life, death like any other death, no semblance of civility in it. / From amidst the books, I retrieved thick pipes, stashed away to soot the black hour. A few puffs while standing, I almost died. I blasphemed the abomination of words and lunch. Only recently, I chain-smoked and fucked half the night. This winter shall consume me”²⁰. In her latest work, *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby* [The One Laughs Who Has Teeth], Wera addresses herself, as well as the reader, in particular, decidedly surprising, even shocking words: “Securing suitable footwear for a departed soul proves to be a formidable task. / There exists a distinction between shoes destined for the final repose within a coffin and those intended for the living. Shoes for the recently deceased – good if they are new. Or worn and exuding an appearance of expensiveness. Preferably new and expensive. If fortune favours the departed, he will get well-worn coffin shoes that, ironically, surpass the pristine elegance of those fresh from the box”²¹. The sentences quoted above promptly usher us into the realm of the parergon and the aesthetics of negation – nudity, old age, suicide, death, trauma (individual and collective).

What is particularly intriguing is the fluidity with which characters and narratives traverse the literary realms in Rudzka’s oeuvre, reminiscent of the stylistic eclecticism of Witkiewicz. For instance, Czechna, the central figure in *Ślicznotka Doktora Josefa* [Doctor Josef’s Beauty], reemerges as the same-named character in Rudzka’s earlier drama, *Fastryga* [Basting Stitch]. Furthermore, Czechna’s prototype, Hanna, from the monodrama (not the novel) *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby* [The One Laughs Who Has Teeth], shares common threads with her. In a similar vein, Roma from *Krótką wymianą ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire] embarks on a visit to Dr. Arnold Rosner’s office, where her persistent seductive attempts culminate in a meeting with his wife, Lilianna Rosner, mirroring the same temporal and situational backdrop as in the drama *Fastryga* [Basting Stitch] (March 1968). Dr. Ludwik Prokopiuk from *Tkanki miękkie* [Soft Tissues] materializes as a former patron of Wera’s barber shop in Rudzka’s latest novel, *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby* [The One Laughs Who Has Teeth]. And the aforementioned Wera, a men’s hairdresser (she introduces herself as “Wera, The Men’s Barber Shop”), encounters Mira and Dawid

¹⁹ Eadem, *Krótką wymianą ognia*, op. cit., p. 6.

²⁰ Eadem, *Tkanki miękkie*, W.A.B., Warszawa 2020, p. 6.

²¹ Eadem, *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby*, W.A.B., Warszawa 2022, p. 7.

Cukier from the drama *Cukier Stanik* [Cukier Bra] within the novel's pages, with David as her former lover and Mira representing Wera's unfulfilled love interest. Rudzka herself readily acknowledges her attachment to certain characters, frequently revisiting their stories and descriptions in her memory. The worlds she conjures within her novels often stem from the internal monologue of the protagonist, mirroring a narrative style that she adapts for theatrical production, as exemplified in the monodrama *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby* [The One Laughs Who Has Teeth], initially published as part of a collection of plays and later expanded into a novel in 2022. Additionally, *Krótką wymianą ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire] originated as a dramatic work published in "Dialog" in 2014²². Her earlier works, including *Białe klisze* [White Clichés] (Katowice 1993, second edition: Izabelin 1996), *Uczty i głody* [Feasts and Famines] (Warszawa 1995), *Pałac Cezarów* [Caesars' Palace] (Izabelin 1997), *Mykwa* [Mikvah] (Izabelin 1999), and *Dziewczyny Bondy* [Bond's Girls] (Warszawa 2004) laid the groundwork for the plots, characters and linguistic themes that matured in her later writing phase. Even in her debut novel, *Białe klisze* [White Clichés] (although her proper literary debut was the poetry volume *Ruchoma rzeczywistość* [Moving reality]), a penchant for exploring the unsavoury, the grotesque, the beguiling, the awkward and the discomfiting is already evident. Henryk Bereza aptly noted in 1993 that Rudzka's first novel's "greatest narrative allure resides in its ability to encapsulate the profound drama of human interaction through the senses"²³. Bohdan Zadura, who authored the introduction titled *Cząstka wielkiej otchłani* [Particle of the Great Abyss], observed that "the metaphysical shudder or the downright physical tingle that passes down the back when reading the last words of *Białe klisze* [White Clichés], as an argument, has little persuasive value. (...) "And he went to ascend to heaven" [the last sentence of the book - M.B.] - for me, this is an abyssal and disposable statement, the most laconic possible and at the same time pushing the horizon of this novel beyond the limits of sight. He did not ascend, he did not go, but just "went to ascend," so as not to disturb the legacy. For me, this "legacy" is a testament to discretion, precision and authorial restraint, a restraint that has nothing to do with cowardice. Here, one gets as far as one can..."²⁴.

It is worth pausing here to reflect on the words of Kinga Dunin, as published in "Krytyka Polityczna", following the release of *Krótką wymianą ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire] in 2018. She articulated, "This novel unfolds within the confines of language; it does not recount tales unknown to us or life

²² Eadem, *Krótką wymianą ognia*, "Dialog" 2014, No. 4.

²³ H. Bereza, *Wypiski*, 25.02.1993. Quote from the bookmark cover of the first edition of the book: Z. Rudzka, *Białe klisze*, Świat Literacki, Katowice 1993.

²⁴ B. Zadura, *Cząstka wielkiej otchłani (wstęp)*, [in:] Z. Rudzka, *Białe klisze*, op. cit., p. 8.

narratives that are not, in some way, mundane. It is the language, the form, the structure that, though it's challenging to label this book as enjoyable, engulfs us like a well"²⁵. The author herself expounds on the language of her work in interviews, stating, "Literature is not akin to salon discourse. What are the criteria, you ask? There are no ugly words, just as there are no inherently beautiful ones. Words are, quite simply, words [...]. Literature, for me, transcends the realm of scripted narratives and metamorphoses into a crafted narrative. Form is the cornerstone of my literary craftsmanship"²⁶. In another conversation, she further elucidates, "I've returned, but with a distinct disposition. *Krótko wymiana ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire] bears stylistic similarities to my initial works, such as *Mykwa* [Mikvah] or *Białe klisze* [White Clichés], characterized by terse, staccato sentences. However, after delving into the realm of drama, I recalibrated my approach to structure. Immersing myself in dramatic form taught me to craft character structures and psychologies differently. My studies in psychology contributed little to this endeavour. Today, I deliberately shatter conventions and refuse to adhere to traditional narrative patterns, eschewing the so-called plot ladder and the obligatory transformation of the protagonist. (...) What we often perceive as a climactic zenith may, in fact, be nothing of the sort. And why must the protagonist undergo a metamorphosis? Literature does not serve as a life coach. It is more potent when it eschews insincere consolations. I prefer art that dislodges people from their comfort zones. That's when the possibility of breaking free from tunnel vision arises, allowing us to perceive the world from a less narcissistic vantage point"²⁷. Regarding her protagonist, Roma, she adds, "I am frequently confronted with queries about why I chose to write about old age. After all, (...) Roma yearns for another shot at life. Who wouldn't? The young aspire to reinvent themselves; why should the elderly be denied that opportunity? She can. But I agree, yes, my heroines have bodies with all the implications of that. So, there is both sex and sexuality, sensuality and pain. (...) But I concur, some may find my heroines vulgar. They are not but can be because they can opt to be. Vulgarity is a matter of perspective, with some individuals highly attuned to it and others perhaps lacking the sensitivity to discern the essence of language itself. Language doesn't emerge from a vacuum; it is made up of all our experiences. It is easy to take offense at vulgarity,

²⁵ K. Dunin, *Zajrzeć do studni*, „Krytyka Polityczna”, 25.04.2018, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/kultura/czytaj-dalej/kinga-dunin-czyta/zyta0rudzka-recenzja-zajrzec-do-studni/> [accessed: 15.05.2023].

²⁶ *Czas na inne piosenki*. Agnieszka Sowińska in a conversation with Zyta Rudzka, "Dwutygodnik.com" 2018, No. 3, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/7740-czas-na-inne-piosenki.html> [accessed: 15.05.2023].

²⁷ *Brunatne kukulcze jajo*. Justyna Jaworska in a conversation with Zyta Rudzka, op. cit., p. 34.

but such offense can hinder the emergence of empathy. I had no intention of portraying my heroine as conventionally likable – the kind of character we read about for the sake of comfort to the heart. I believe saccharine literature seldom yields anything truly worthwhile. (...) I endeavoured to capture the cadence of the protagonist's breath – the rhythm of an elderly person, rushed, breathless, often anxious, this amalgamation of geographical, genealogical and historical disorientation. Roma is a poetess; language serves as her vessel for expression, self-discovery and concealment"²⁸.

For the author of *Zimny buffet* [Cold Buffet], a dramatic text is akin to a musical score – its full dimension unfolds only upon the stage. It abandons the simplicity of linear narratives, where one traverses a person's fate in a chronological order, tethered to the chain of cause and effect, heading in a predetermined direction. Translator Krzysztof Majer, when discussing the texts he deals with, finds the writer “progressively challenging”²⁹. On the other hand, Maciej Jakubowiak, in his piece for the “Dwutygodnik” online magazine, dubs Rudzka “an unsentimental narrator acutely attuned to the fragility of the world.” He characterizes her as a “pitiless chronicler who derives peculiar satisfaction from delving into the depths of her innermost self”³⁰. He writes about the heroes and heroines of her novels, explaining, “The author is drawn to worlds that are discordant, convoluted, defying the confines of smooth narratives. Instead of fashioning characters designed to prove a particular point, she allows her creations to flourish unbounded in all directions. They grow like untamed shrubs, far from the neatly pruned hedges of conventional gardening. Only in the process do we, and indeed the readers themselves, begin to fathom the contours they assume – or, perhaps, she entrusts that very task to her female readers”³¹. The term “contours” feels out of place here, for her characters shatter them, eluding classification and transcending their boundaries. Moreover, why limit her readership to the female kind? While the majority of her central characters are women, her work transcends the confines of so-called “women's literature.” In my *Literary Research II* seminar, I introduced students to post-structuralism and deconstruction, and they characterized the author of *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby* [The One Laughs Who Has Teeth] with words such as “leech,” insinuating that her work clings to them during reading, absorbing their reading faculties. They called her writing “clumsy” and “defiant”³². However,

²⁸ *Czas na inne piosenki*. Agnieszka Sowińska in a conversation with Zyta Rudzka, op. cit.

²⁹ *Brunatne kukulcze jajo*. Justyna Jaworska in a conversation with Zyta Rudzka, op. cit., p. 34.

³⁰ M. Jakubowiak, *Nieczuła narratorka*, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artypk/9184-nieczula-narratorka.html>[accessed: 15.05.2023].

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Student contributions made at two seminars taught by me at Adam Mickiewicz University: *Literary Research II*, 16.05.2023 and *Literature in Relation to Visual and Performing Arts*, 18.05.2023.

during another seminar centred on *Literature in Relation to Visual and Performing Arts*, one female student found the aforementioned novel “captivating.” She was entranced by the language and structure of the narrative, which wove a spellbinding monologue through Wera's voice. Conversely, another participant in the seminar deemed the text “challenging and enigmatic” but added that “precisely these qualities make it alluring”. These divergent viewpoints underscore the artist's propensity for traversing realms of aesthetic risk.

Arnold Berleant's proposition of “negative aesthetics” introduces a dimension into the realm of aesthetics that dwells on the periphery, in the obscure recesses and in the spaces betwixt. “Negative aesthetics represents sombre enlightenment, an unveiling of those aspects of existence that often elude our notice, obscured by the veil of habit, the blindness of familiarity, or the shroud of ignorance. (...) Our sensitivity is constantly offended, abused and at times even annihilated by aesthetic negativities thrust upon us unwittingly. These manifestations are boundless, ranging from various forms of sensory pollution and environmental degradation to social barbarism. They do not merely exist within the realm of aesthetics; they possess moral dimensions as well. And owing to their societal nature, they are inherently political”³³. The sentiments voiced by this French scholar serve as an ideal point of departure for scrutinizing the diverse border and threshold situations, and people and groups living on the margins of social life (outside or against the prevailing rules, customs, norms and patterns of behaviour) portrayed within Zyta Rudzka's body of work. In the fate of characters there is usually some split, breakthrough, or transformation. We can say with Paweł Dybel: “Trimming the *parergon*, the delicate periphery of a flower, as if taking aim at its very essence, resembles the severing of life from a human soul. Its blow, invariably brutal, wrenches away the “expediency” entwined with the “target”, casting all into the abyss. It divides existence into two disparate yet intimately entwined realms. One, in lieu of all that once “was”, becomes a hollow void, a stark absence. The other, in the realm of “after”, echoes with “emptiness”, an abyssal gap, a mere “trace of a trace”³⁴.

The structure of Rudzka's novel, as the author herself suggests, “mirrors the structure of memory. It consists of short, episodic chapters, resembling snapshots. Indeed, life is not akin to a voluminous tome; that's not how we perceive it. Instead, memory operates much like brushstrokes in pointillist painting – our recollections are composed of spots and points”³⁵. In their introduction

³³ A. Berleant, *Wrażliwość: wzrost pewnej estetyki*, “Sztuka i Filozofia” 2010, No. 37, p. 10

³⁴ P. Dybel, *Piękny tulipan, trup i bez czystego cięcia. Bez-duszna estetyka Derridy*, “Teksty Drugie”: *Widmologie*, 2016, No. 2, p. 390.

³⁵ *Brunatne kukulcze jajo*. Justyna Jaworska in conversation with Zyta Rudzka, op. cit., p. 34.

to the anthology of Rudzka's dramas, Małgorzata Sugiera and Mateusz Borowski contextualize her plays within the framework of "the dialectic of memory and forgetting"³⁶. Although their reference pertains to her dramatic works, this theme has been constantly present since the inception of her literary career. Even in her debut novel, *Białe klisze* [White Clichés], one of her characters, the partner of Adam Kadman's father, ponders: "Suddenly, she discerned the colour of his shirt. / It resembled the curtains in her childhood room, upon which she often fixated for hours each morning while waiting for her mother's arrival. / They weren't pleasant memories. But they were memories, and she couldn't erase them. / Does life comprise memory? / Is life a rejection of memory? / When it's in motion, it nullifies memory. / But is it motion? / Is it a process that changes everything? A process that alters everything? / »Every thing aspires to remain itself«"³⁷. Beata Popczyk-Szczęśna observes that Rudzka's work employs strategies for making the past present in the writer's work. She characterizes her texts as "manifestly literary, hybrid and self-referential, (...) where the minimal, the insignificant, the personal and the private intertwine seamlessly with explicit stylistic or compositional elements, narrative patterns and cultural schemas"³⁸. She notes that in the drama *Pęknięta, obwiązana nitką* [Cracked, Tied with a Thread], Rudzka "constructs a residual and sentimental tale about wounded individuals. (...) Here, the past converges with the present, becoming its determinant and a source of trauma, bestowing upon the latter an elusive quality – an undefined, ambiguous world of uncertain events. (...) The central writing strategy lies in the poetics of unspokenness, concurrently juxtaposed with references to well-known quotations or other texts"³⁹. Jacek Kopciński also notes that memory becomes "institutionalized within Rudzka's work, overshadowing the private, individual memories that persist on the periphery of the dominant narrative or discourse, and is ignored and 'forgotten'". He adds, "The characteristic feature of Zyta Rudzka's playwriting was and is ambiguity, allusiveness, non-conclusiveness. This is determined by the author's writing attitude, in spite of strong tendencies in contemporary theatre shying away from ideological didacticism, moralizing or propaganda"⁴⁰. Rudzka has an innate ability to

³⁶ M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, *Pochwała zapominania*, [in:] Z. Rudzka, *Zimny bufet*, ed. M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, A. Wierzchowska-Woźniak, Panga Pang, Kraków 2012, p. 10.

³⁷ Z. Rudzka, *Białe klisze*, op. cit., pp. 81-82.

³⁸ B. Popczyk-Szczęśna, *Doświadczone – powtórzone: strategie reprezentacji świata w wybranych dramatach Artura Paługi i Zyty Rudzkiej*, [in:] *Dramat i doświadczenie*, ed. B. Popczyk-Szczęśna, M. Figzał, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2014, p. 338.

³⁹ Ibidem, s. 338.

⁴⁰ J. Kopciński, *Biedne krokodyle, czyli dramaturgia sygnałów...*, [in:] Idem, *Wybudzanie, Dramat polski / Interpretacje*, Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, Warszawa 2018, p. 67. First printed in: J. Kopciński, *Biedne krokodyle. Dramaturgia sygnałów Zyty Rudzkiej*, "Dialog" 2011, No. 3, pp. 68-69.

“distill human communication from everyday discourse, crafting her drama in a musical, even poetic, fashion”⁴¹. Her works are characterized by brevity, repetition and a polyphony of voices, and the unspoken often eclipses the spoken – a realm where the most profound significance resides. What truly matters are the rhythm, tempo, tonality, mood and the colloquial register, occasionally interwoven with vulgarity – yet even this vulgarity is “orchestrated into a higher order of sound and words”⁴². Reading Rudzka's texts “demands vigilance and patience, (...) for no hint, however subtle, should escape our notice”⁴³. These attributes of her playwriting, as highlighted by the scholars quoted above, position her works alongside the dramas of Artur Pałyga or Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk – works that exhibit equally intriguing treatments of language and the construction of the depicted world.

Simultaneously, while exploring the margins, pushing beyond the confines of convention, but most often strongly exceeding it, the author herself is firmly established within the literary landscape. Her earliest novels have already secured her literary prizes and her name as a playwright consistently emerges among the finalists for the prestigious Gdynia Drama Award, with the added distinction of having received the award for her play *Zimny buffet* [Cold Buffet]. Her dramatic works regularly grace the pages of “Dialog”. Her debut novel, *Białe klisze* [White Clichés], stands adorned with the J. Iwaszkiewicz Award and the S. Piętaś Award in 1993. *Krótką wymiana ognia* [A Brief Exchange of Fire] (2018) made it to the finals of the Nike Literary Award in 2019. The writer received the Gdynia Literary Award for it, and the “Polityka” weekly hailed it as one of the finest Polish books of the decade. Her novel *Tkanki miękkie* [Soft Tissues] was honoured with the Warsaw Literary Award in 2021 and named one of the ten best books of the year by the bimonthly “Książki. Magazyn do czytania”. In 2023, she ascended to the pinnacle, claiming the Poznań Literary Award – the esteemed Adam Mickiewicz Award⁴⁴. In her commendation, Inga Iwasiów, a juror of the award committee, asserts: “Rudzka navigates the terrain of themes and language with equal measure. She masterfully wields

⁴¹ Ibidem, pp. 69-70.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 70.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 71.

⁴⁴ The Poznań Literary Award was jointly established in 2015, after the death of Stanisław Barańczak, by the Mayor of Poznań, Jacek Jaśkowiak and Prof. Bronisław Marciniak, then Rector of Adam Mickiewicz University. It consists of two parts. The Adam Mickiewicz Award, in the amount of PLN 60,000, is presented for a lifetime achievement, while the Stanisław Barańczak Prize-Scholarship (PLN 40,000) goes to an author under the age of 35. Partners of the Poznań Literary Award include the Castle Cultural Centre and the Adam Mickiewicz Foundation, <https://amu.edu.pl/dla-mediow/komunikaty-prasowe/zyta-rudzka-i-anna-wakulik-laureatkami-poznanskiej-nagrody-literackiej-2023>[accessed: 24.052023].

various registers of speech, including the colloquial and heard, converting them into sequences of gripping monologues. Always intrigued by form, she transposes the prose experience into drama and theatre to book. The result is narratives that are lengthy, yet abounding in shortcuts, with scenes and dialogues that are hard to walk away from, just as it would be hard to walk away during a play.” The 2021 award recipient, Jan Gondowicz, extols the author's “ferocious talent,” describing her latest creation as “a brutal, penetrating, coherent and entirely original work – undeniably deserving the title of a significant literary achievement”⁴⁵. It is imperative to add to these accolades that she embodies an unwavering spirit of courage, commitment to unyielding authenticity, remarkable intellectual prowess and a profound psychological insight – a testament to her training as a psychologist.

Her books have been translated into many foreign languages (German, Russian, French, Czech, Italian, English, Croatian and Japanese). She shows the sphere of the periphery, exclusion and the edges of human history in both individual and collective dimensions (World War II, the plight of German women in post-war recovered lands, Jews in various historical moments, Poznań June 56', March 68', December 1970 events from the Gdańsk Shipyard embodied in the resounding slogan “Janek Wiśniewski fell,” poignantly revisited in *Pęknięta obwiązana nitką* [Cracked, and Tied with a Thread])⁴⁶. Rudzka's narratives also delve into the destinies of rural and working-class communities, the underprivileged and victims of the political and economic shifts of 1989, and they turn out to arouse great interest and equally strong emotions among readers, critics and researchers. At the same time, the author's literary output, already quite substantial, awaits an in-depth scholarly analysis that would consider all forms of her work, beginning with the poetic volume *Ruchoma rzeczywistość* [Moving reality]⁴⁷ (1989).

In the analysed texts, border states and a sense of threat are embodied in the characters' narratives as well as in the process of their reading reception. Rudzka writes about her interest in the themes of the borderland, otherness and danger in the *Introduction* to a book collecting new readings of mythological female characters entitled *Ziarno granatu* [Pomegranate Seed]. Mythology according to women]. In this text, she makes a kind of a self-commentary on the characters appearing in her novels and dramas. “Reading the Greeks confronts us with the abyss of life. Wisely and bravely. No censorship, no veil,

⁴⁵ Poznań Literary Award, <https://poznanskanagrodaliteracka.pl/zyta-rudzka-laureatka-poznan-skiej-nagrody-literackiej-2023/> [accessed: 15.05.2023].

⁴⁶ Z. Rudzka, *Pęknięta obwiązana nitką*, [in:] Eadem, *Zimny bufet*, ed. M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, A. Wierzchowska-Woźniak, op. cit. First printed in: “Dialog” 2011, No. 3.

⁴⁷ Eadem, *Ruchoma rzeczywistość*, [Poems], ed. J. Koperski-Leszin, Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, Warszawa 1989.

no filter. Mythos is pure existence. I interact with the raw world, unformatted with false comfort and other fillers to improve my mood. Greek myths reveal modern barbarity. Ancient aggression and mythical indifference towards the murdered, abused and expelled – this is today's world. (...) Mythos are messages that question the superficial view of reality. They reveal the murky nature of human nature. They want to understand the world, not sugarcoat the world. Tenderness, for example. Antiquity gave us brave, predatory, cruel stories that violated taboos. At the same time, it is strongly metaphorical, symbolic, therefore stimulating the imagination – and here it is instructive. Greek myths are hauntingly current. They do not lose their power and meaning. Literature that does not flirt to the reader draws from the language of antiquity. It does not provide false comfort, safe twaddle [*głędźba*] and other benzodiazepines of literary processing. It drags you out of your comfort zone. It wakes you up from feeling good. I don't think anything good has come from writing to comfort the heart. Writing is, after all, a resistance movement against death, suffering and the indifference of the world. We are not giving up our weapons. Let the gods descend from Parnassus”⁴⁸.

Now, let us lend our ear to Wera, the protagonist of Rudzka's latest novel, *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby* [The One Who Laughs Has Teeth]. Within the intricate tapestry of societal stigmas (delineated by Erving Goffman⁴⁹), Wera finds herself ensnared in the domain of exclusion. Here, old age intermingles with unemployment, poverty and widowhood, sexual rejection by her husband – infidelities, bisexuality and an inability to navigate the labyrinthine pathways of the emergent socio-economic landscape (in days of yore, she was renowned and esteemed as the proprietress of a men's barber shop). And yet Wera has pride, self-esteem and self-respect. A signboard from her former barber shop is a symbol of her former life, although not ideal, but nevertheless successful in many ways in her memories. “Something in my head was sloshing and gushing in all directions. Probably from prolonged abstinence from sustenance. I was in a hurry to get things done. / I nestled scissors in my coat, I set off. / Whistling, I ventured forth across the threshold of my establishment – my “Wera. Men's barber shop.” / I walked from the entrance to the wall. My sink, my drip mould, my towel pegs – they were all there. Now it's the resting place of the armchair, one, the other, and the table, skinny, unsteady as a foal. A potential fear to place a flask lest it may collapse. / In this corner, made, well I don't know for what services to the public, hung a signboard. “Wera. Men's barber shop.” / It was,

⁴⁸ Z. Rudzka (2022) *Wstęp*, [in:] *Ziarno granatu. Mitologia według kobiet*, Warszawa: Agora SA, pp. 32-36.

⁴⁹ E. Goffman, *Piętno. Rozważania o zranionej tożsamości*, transl. A. Dzierżyńska, J. Tokarska-Bakir, Gdańskie Towarzystwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2005.

undoubtedly, my signboard. I had conceived it, tirelessly searching for a painter to bring my vision to life. Every letter was scrutinized, coaxed into alignment with its brethren, ensuring that none leaned askew or faltered towards oblivion. Everything in a row, nothing outside it. Everything was as I wanted it to be. I was the one who paid for this signboard. / A letter arrived. I ended up in the cardiology ward. Upon my release, marred by the stains of misconduct, I returned to find nothing but desolation. (...) I didn't anticipate that I would reunite with my signboard. / I walked closer to it to see if they had destroyed it. Nothing had changed. Mere hints of tarnish had crept into the corners, evidence of a hurricane, one I had fervently wished would whisk the entire fucking country away to warmer climes, to something better. I had even stationed myself in the yard with Jockey and the cats, yearning to be swept away faster. I felt bad. Memories resurfaced, it was fucking cold, bending us to the ground, tugging like before when I got beaten up, kicked, pulled by the hair in the doorway. We were not blown away to new life. The bridge was torn down, the electricity cut off, the roofs ripped off, the bricks in the dumpster moved. The hairdresser, the jockey with cats under his arm were left behind. / With a pointed finger, I made my intentions clear. / Let the barber dismantle it. This was not a picture to grace these walls. (...) I am Wera. And here is my "Wera. Men's barber shop"⁵⁰.

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⁵⁰ Z. Rudzka, *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby*, op. cit., pp. 144-145.

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ZAGROŻENIE WYKLUCZENIEM – ESTETYKA NEGATYWNA NA PRZYKŁADZIE TWÓRCZOŚCI ZYTY RUDZKIEJ (streszczenie)

Zyta Rudzka w swojej twórczości ukazuje sferę obrzeży, wykluczenia, krawędzi ludzkich historii zarówno w wymiarze indywidualnym, jak i zbiorowym (II wojna światowa, losy Niemców z powojennych ziem odzyskanych, Żydów w różnych momentach dziejowych, poznański czerwiec 56', marzec 68', wydarzenia grudniowe ze Stoczni Gdańskiej 1970 roku, losy społeczności wiejskich i robotniczych, biedoty, ofiar przemian polityczno-gospodarczych 1989 roku). Główni bohaterowie jej utworów żyją w stanie zawieszenia, gdzieś na obrzeżach rzeczywistości. To, co negatywne: starość, nagość, samobójstwo, śmierć, trauma (indywidualna i zbiorowa) pisarka stawia na pierwszym planie, a nawet w pewien sposób uwzniośla. Cechą charakterystyczną egzystencji bohaterów jest stan permanentnego nie-przekraczania, przejściowości i niepewności. Autorce udaje się stwarzać postaci wieloznaczne, nieoczywiste, w trudnych życiowych momentach, irytujące, wywołujące nieraz skrajne emocje, często negatywne, a mimo to wzbudzające empatię i nić sympatii. Transgresyjne postacie jej prozy i dramatów utknęły w strefie liminalnej, ich konstrukcja nasuwa skojarzenia z Derridańską metaforą parergonu. Rudzka używa niezwykle sensualnego, raz bardzo dosadnego, a raz poetyckiego języka, wprowadzając czytelnika w światy odmienne, graniczne, powykrcane, wymykające się prostym narracjom. Ważne jest w życiu bohaterów to, co dzieje się w międzyprzestrzeni – w świecie bez przynależności, na marginesie, w zawieszeniu, pięknięciu, pustce i stopniowym zanikaniu.

Słowa kluczowe: Zyta Rudzka, Poznańska Nagroda Literacka, estetyka negatywna, wykluczenie, powieść, pisarstwo

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