

Catharsis by the Bug River. *Przewóz* [The Carriage] (2021) by Andrzej Stasiuk as a ‘Cleansing’ Novel

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ANNOTATION

The main goal of this paper is to analyze, depict, and characterize the semantic construction of the latest novel *Przewóz* [The Carriage] (2021) written by one of the most significant contemporary Polish writers Andrzej Stasiuk. A key way of organizing Stasiuk's novel is juxtaposing semantically distant wholes, which creates strong tensions not only at the level of language but above all at the level of meaning. Categories of different meaning interpenetrate in the novel, creating a conglomerate of new meanings, showing the fractures of the world described by the novelist, the incoherence of a reality infected by war.

Such construction of the novel, based on contrasts and the tensions resulting from their occurrence, allows Stasiuk to reflect the tragedy of wartime experience. War is a catalyst that makes us aware of the uncertain anchoring of concepts and categories, hitherto considered unchanging and permanent, it allows us to capture the illusory nature of human beliefs, the incoherence of human actions, and the naivety of human recognition. The marginal comes to the fore, becoming a model of the world under a microscope, a theatre of history, revealing the nakedness of human existence. Such basic and key concepts as strength, courage, beauty, sacrifice, patriotism, culture, universality, boundary, and truth are questioned.

Stasiuk's ontology is based upon a constant play of tensions between particular categories that make up reality. Nonetheless, the writer does not propose a coherent, unambiguous assessment of reality but rather draws attention to its complexity, impossibility of complete cognition, elusiveness, and delusion. These tensions, so pronounced in Stasiuk's novel, reveal the illusory nature of the concepts in which a human is immersed, and at the same time, as one of the fundamental elements determining the artistic value of artwork, they are expected to lead to a *catharsis*, to a release of emotions, they also help to understand better the situation into which a person is thrown at the border moments. Thus, works designed in this way – as

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cleansing and releasing, and saturated with tension and contrasts – become, as it were, automatically universal, going far beyond transient vogues.

The goal of the paper is also to focus on these aspects of Stasiuk's novel, to demonstrate how war as a border situation can lead to a relativization of concepts, how it can introduce confusion and chaos into a well-established, as it would seem, axiological system, which the writer demonstrates precisely by creating clear tensions. In his novel, Stasiuk does not offer a zero-one vision of the world, tensions are not created mechanically, and the writer uses contrasts and paradox, but what is really important for him are half-tones, ambiguities, multivalencies, and a smooth transition in between categories. This is what sets Stasiuk's world in motion.

KEYWORDS

contemporary Polish literature, contemporary Polish prose, catharsis, tension in literature, Binary opposition in literature, war in literature, wartime experience, Andrzej Stasiuk

INTRODUCTION

Stasiuk made his readers and critics wait for *Przewóz* [The Carriage] (2021) for over 12 years, that is how long it has passed since the publication of the last long fictional prose *Taksim* (2009). For 12 years, Stasiuk concentrated his efforts primarily on travel essays, he also wrote columns,¹ however, he had intended to write a novel for a long time.² The process of writing the novel was tedious, it took 5 or 6 years, as Stasiuk recalls in an interview conducted by Marcin Gaczkowski.³

Przewóz contains themes known from the writer's earlier works. Virtually all the threads in Stasiuk's oeuvre have been deepened and problematized more precisely in his latest novel. We are talking primarily about issues related to history and the stigma it imposes on human life, these are also social and geopolitical shifts in Central Europe, it is the issue of memory and remembering, forgetting and oblivion, the gap between nature and culture, and it is finally an affirmation of nature.⁴

¹ In 2010, he published *Dziennik pisany później* [A Diary Written Later], a record of a journey through the Balkans, two years later a collection of four brief stories devoted to life and death entitled *Grochów*, followed by collections of travel essays *Nie ma ekspresów przy żółtych drogach* [There are no Expressways along Yellow Roads] (2013), *Wschód* [East] (2014), *Kucając* [Crouching] (2015), *Osiółkiem* [On a Donkey] (2016), *Kroniki beskidzkie i światowe* [Chronicles of Beskidy and the World] (2018). In 2015, the readers had the opportunity to read an extended interview (STASIUK–WODECKA 2015).

² In an interview published in July 2017, Stasiuk explains the idea of his planned novel: “I am writing a novel that takes place on the Bug, although the word ‘Bug’ itself will not appear in it, the context will make it well known anyway. The plot starts in June 1941 with the exit of Germans from the village and ends in 1947. I tell this story through the prism of my father's life and a bit from my own memory, through the eyes of a man who transports people across the Bug. It will be a typical historical novel with battles and shooters, the cursed and the non-cursed. We will have the Russians on the one hand, and the Germans on the other, and we will try to live it all. It will be violent, just like those parts of the world, which are apparently idyllic, and yet have witnessed such atrocities” (STASIUK–PAROL 2017: 50).

³ <https://www.facebook.com/DzienWolnosciChlopskiej/videos/512965343253340/>

⁴ Similar conclusions are presented by Elżbieta Dutka, who emphasizes the continual character of Stasiuk's writing: “Despite the considerable diversity of individual works, one can readily state that the writer constantly tells a story written in various languages, he continues to tell a story about a sensual experience of the world, decay and



In an interview conducted following the publication of the novel *Przewóz*, Stasiuk emphasizes that he uses contrasts in order to create much needed tensions so the text may acquire artistic quality.⁵ In July 2013, he answers the question asked by Janina Koźbiel: “Do you like tension?” – “For a writer, every tension is creative. Anything unharmonized is more interesting, it creates an opportunity. That is when you can seek harmony” (STASIUK–KOŹBIEL 2016: 119).

These tensions, so pronounced in Stasiuk’s novel, reveal the illusory nature of the concepts in which a human is immersed, and at the same time, as one of the fundamental elements determining the artistic value of artwork, they are expected to lead to a *catharsis*, to a release of emotions, they also help to understand better the situation into which a person is thrown at the border moments. Thus, works designed in this way – as cleansing and releasing, and saturated with tension and contrasts – become, as it were, automatically universal, going far beyond transient vogues.

The narrative in Stasiuk’s novel is multi-track, with different overlapping timelines. Pictures of the Bug River villages from 1941 intertwine naturally, coexisting in perfect harmony with digressions about the narrator’s father, through the eyes of whom we see the struggles of 1941, with images from the narrator’s childhood spent with his grandparents in the countryside. Then there is a thoroughly contemporary layer: the narrator visits the eastern parts of Poland during the already prevailing coronavirus epidemic. Sławomir Buryła sums up this procedure used by Stasiuk penetratingly, noting the intricate structure of the piece: “Scenes from childhood are close to the reality of the last few months. Real space [...] intertwines with something imaginary, projected, generated by memory and imagination” (BURYŁA 2021: 116). Thus, polyphony is established in the novel, which Stasiuk has already used earlier.⁶ The current, contemporary plan of the novel serves as a means for revising any illusions, and the fantasies, the weakness of the heroes’ dreams and their lack of embedding in reality are exposed in a crude way. Nearly everything is reassessed: the concept of strength and weakness, femininity and masculinity, freedom and enslavement, courage and cowardice, beauty and ugliness, transience and continuance. The balance of dialectical systems is constantly violated and questioned by Stasiuk, there is a balancing between the poles, a dynamic shifting in the equation of forces, and the regrouping of accents under one category.

In the novel, it is possible to distinguish precisely these counterpoints, peculiar poles between which the author placed the history of the June days of 1941, where the fate of heroes from various social strata and of different political, cultural, and national affiliation takes place on the border of non-existent Poland, wedged between two powers. All heroes in Stasiuk’s novel are already charred by the war,⁷ although there are four long years till the end, some of them come out burned from this contact, while for some war means death.

death, about escaping from nothingness, seeking something that can be opposed to existential emptiness and passing” (DUŃKA 2014: 451). The words of Martyna Sienkiewicz imparting the content layer of the collection of essays *Wschód* may in fact serve as a description of Stasiuk’s latest novel: “There are scenes from the Second World War, the Germans, the Russians, the extermination of the Jews, displacements, childhood and youth in a communist reality. The autobiographical hero sets out in search of meaning, understanding himself, and answering questions that torment him” (SIENKIEWICZ 2017: 83).

⁵ A conversation between Katarzyna Kreglewska and Andrzej Stasiuk: <https://www.facebook.com/BETWEEN-POMIEDZY/videos/1343464346055393>.

⁶ The issue of polyphony in Stasiuk is addressed in KLIŚ 2011.

⁷ A term used by the recently deceased Israeli writer and translator of Polish origin, Irit Amiel (b. Irena Librowicz), who in 1999 published a collection of shocking stories under this title, devoted to Holocaust survivors.



Such construction of the novel, based on contrasts and the tensions resulting from their occurrence, allows Stasiuk to reflect the tragedy of wartime experience. War is a catalyst that makes us aware of the uncertain anchoring of concepts and categories, hitherto considered unchanging and permanent, it allows us to capture the illusory nature of human beliefs, the incoherence of human actions, and the naivety of human recognition. The marginal comes to the fore, becoming a model of the world under a microscope, a theatre of history, revealing the nakedness of human existence. Such basic and key concepts as strength, courage, beauty, sacrifice, patriotism, culture, universality, boundary, and truth are questioned.

In my paper, I wish to focus on these aspects of Stasiuk's novel, to demonstrate how war as a border situation can lead to a relativization of concepts, how it can introduce confusion and chaos into a well-established, as it would seem, axiological system, which the writer demonstrates precisely by creating clear tensions.

ETERNITY WOVEN FROM MOMENTARINESS

One of the tensions clearly marked by Stasiuk which can be found in the novel *Przewóz* is the juxtaposition and confrontation of the momentary, the ephemeral in contrast to the “old age”, or something eternal, permanent, unchanging. This aspect was pointed out by Leszek Bugajski, who portrayed Stasiuk's novel as:

[...] a story about the fact that human life runs its own course regardless of the events around it; it is a story about people who are not willing to know about great things, do not want to participate in them because they live – at least for now – on such a level that these matters do not concern them directly. They are victims but they do not break down; they rather persistently return to their elementary duties because life must follow a fixed course, in any event (BUGAJSKI 2021: 115).

The protagonists from the Bug River village are convinced of the existence of an age-old duty, a strong internal imperative that makes them take cows to pasture every morning, water and feed the animals, cultivate the field, sow in spring and harvest in autumn. This immersion into everyday life allows us to survive the madness of war. The immemorial rhythm in which they have been moving since childhood gives meaning to their actions, which somehow saves them from the burden of war. Renouncement of daily chores would mean death, the end of something far beyond the narrow horizon of human destiny. The world, still disturbed by the war, by the marches of foreign troops, is kept in curb precisely by the daily tedious activities related directly to the rhythm of nature. “It was going to be dark in an hour, so we had to be on time with everything. Milking, adding chaff and tying at feeding troughs, before the hermetic and great night would come [...]” (STASIUK 2021: 19).

It is in this distance from the outside world that wisdom is born but also an eternal distrust towards all ideas, a belief in the instability of the world of culture and civilization, and suspicion towards everything that goes beyond the eternal schemas. The scene in which the partisan commander Siwy tries to force the carrier Lubko to swear an oath that the latter would join his unit takes on a symbolic meaning. Lubko, who cannot eat with a fork, who does not know the taste of cognac, and who is endowed with the wisdom resulting from experience, Lubko, who has



never killed anyone, although he could have many times, disposes of Siwy with an indisputable argument: “Now, I must chase away the cow” (STASIUK 2021: 353). This is the final argument and cannot be polemized with. Lubko prefers to plunge into the world of colloquial events, as understood by the philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina (see BRACH-CZAINA 2018: 68), into an everydayness that draws in, it saves, overwhelms but also puts one upright. At the same time, this own, unique world allows him to remain himself, an individual being, not susceptible to objectification, not subject to manipulation and various pressures (MADEJSKI 2003: 50). The peasant in *Przewóz* – not only the one mentioned by Lubko – is organically related to land, space, and biology, as Stasiuk characterizes this social layer in an interview with Janina Koźbiel (STASIUK-KOŹBIEŁ 2016: 104). This is Lubko, separate, different but connected with the countryside, being its immanent part.

The protagonists in Stasiuk’s novels are burdened with the burthen of eternity and duty, which keep them alive, keep them above the surface of events and save them from madness. Immersion in everyday life also has its downside and consequences that are difficult to bear, which the Polish philosopher defines:

The trap set for us is that our existence is absorbed by everyday life, so as if reduced to it, identified with it, so we should even feel grateful; here we exist thanks to everyday life but it is also destructive. While we may breathe, it is only provided that we consent to being choked. If we were to imagine existence as a flame in everyday experience, it would be muffled. It is only allowed to smolder on the verge of extinction (BRACH-CZAINA 2018: 70–71).

The constant bustle around the animals and the yard is a kind of escape from big questions. It is a convenient refuge since it is easier to follow the path trodden by previous generations.

Bustle keeps everyday life at an uncertain point of tension between existence and nothingness. Although we do not hear the sounds of the struggle moving back and forth, we take part in it (BRACH-CZAINA 2018: 89).

Idleness is a sin; it gives rise to unnecessary deliberations that bring nothing good for reflections. Everyday life involves constancy, immutability, which appear here as good because in the lives of the rural protagonists from Stasiuk’s prose, change usually means a change for the worse. The mechanism of this forced supineness, a passivity resulting from the need to survive, was perfectly captured by Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez:

A world that presents so much resistance to any change is seeking to outsmart death with its passivity. Changes always mean a catastrophe, and at the same time they are a reminder of the first cosmic catastrophe, the careless mixing of spirit and matter, and their subsequent struggle full of conflicts (SNOCHOWSKA-GONZALEZ 2013: 304).

That said, at the same time, it is still suffocating, consistent with the faint smoldering of the flame which Brach-Czaina mentioned. The protagonists in Stasiuk’s novels, living in the Bug River areas, suffer from a sense of lack of agency (STASIUK-OKOŃSKI 2021: 64), which “gives birth” to helplessness, powerlessness, and passivity. Lack of agency is passed on like a trauma from generation to generation. Their decisive vote sounds only in the sphere of everyday events.



By way of constant contact with animals, which are an inseparable element of their fate, the Bug River villagers have taken over vigilance, timidity, and a strongly developed survival instinct from the animals. Stasiuk emphasizes their deep sense of alienation, constant uprooting, the conviction that everything is fleeting, that someone stronger can always come and claim everything as theirs.

They emerged from the darkness of the war and perked up their ears to the returning German, the resurrected Jew, or the departing Russian. [...] They had this country but it was not theirs. They had lived there as long as they could remember but it was not theirs to own. [...] They sat and drank in the Jewish house at night, and perked up their ears to the returning German, to the Russian that would banish them [...] (STASIUK 2021: 46).

Such an attitude is a natural follow-up to living in constant fear, in the shadow of a symbolic and most real gallows, which Kacper Pobłocki describes in a shocking study of the fate of Polish serfs:

Captivity is a process of reification: transforming a sentient being into an object. Into a heap – a completely worn out tool. [...] The starting point, as always in the serfdom world, was beating. It is in the act of violence that a living being would be transformed into a passive, dead body. [...] In order to hide from them, one had to barricade himself (POBŁOCKI 2021: 44).

A group of partisans, having captured Lubko, resorted to precisely such methods. They beat him methodically – it is anyone's guess, why – and the scene goes on for several pages (STASIUK 2021: 57–62). Lubko has to atone for the faults of his own and others, he must confess something but it is not known what, he has to plead guilty but there is no knowing what is the guilt.

The peasants-protagonists in *Przewóz* are inscribed in a different course of things than the “urban people”, they share a different reality: in order to survive, they must remain silent, they must learn to forget, to repress from memory. This is precisely the doing of people who live a dozen or so kilometres from extermination camps – this motif often appears in Stasiuk's works. Washing away the human fat that settles on the windows, they displace the existence of mass genocide, not knowing that they will suffer a retrograde catastrophe, as defined by Przemysław Czapliński:

Is there a possible fire that has broken out long ago but is consuming buildings only now? Or an earthquake from the past that is destroying cities today? Yes, I think that just such a fire and such an earthquake are possible – once unnoticed, and therefore illusionary, made real only when finally seen. This is what a retrograde disaster is. The witnesses did not see it while it lasted, they did not recognize its essence, and did not come up with preventive measures for the future. When, over time, their descendants regain their ability to see and understand as they devise countermeasures, the disaster from the past begins to repeat itself – spreading in all directions (CZAPLIŃSKI 2015: 37).

According to the Polish researcher, the extermination of Polish Jews is just such a retrograde catastrophe in Polish culture. Charred by the extermination – once again referring here to the term used by Irit Amiel – not only those who have lost their neighbours remain but also their children and grandchildren, who were silent about the Holocaust, who received only scraps of information, growing up in a vacuum and with a vague sense of breaking the continuity. Stasiuk is



aware of the motivation of such behaviour, referring to the tragic fate of Polish serfs: “The Polish peasantry, that is a tribe traumatized by slavery and objectification, found in the person of a Jew someone worse than itself. Contempt was a form of therapy, an abreaction” (STASIUK–WODECKA 2015: 108). Passivity, on the other hand, was a natural follow-up to the monotony that Pobłocki mentions, the endless enslavement of minds, souls, and bodies, when the best survival strategy is absence, hiding, relinquishing any responsibility (POBŁOCKI 2021: 45). That is why the villagers were indifferent to the smoke coming from the pits where the bodies were burned, and therefore they postponed reflection on ongoing events, agreeing to the imminent retrograde catastrophe. Is it relevant, in that regard, that this time, unlike Stasiuk’s earlier texts, e.g. from the volume *Wschód*, there is an absence of distinct motives regarding the seizure of Jewish property by peasants and the stealing of Jewish valuables (RYS 2018: 239).

Nevertheless, the image of the village proposed by Stasiuk in *Przewóz* differs from the approach from earlier prose, for example, in *Opowieści galicyjskie* [The Galician Tales] (1995), where the negative image of the countryside dominates.⁸ The Bug River village, squeezed in between two clashing forces from the East and the West, is neither good nor bad, it does not have an unambiguous tone, it is ambivalent, as Stasiuk admits in one of his interviews.⁹ It is beyond the horizon of moral judgment but full of tensions that generate questions.

DIFFUSION – BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

Stasiuk employs contrast. This aspect is particularly accentuated in passages dedicated to specific places, which turn out to be something completely different. One of the protagonists, Młody [Youngster], describing the village he comes from, sees it as an ideal country of his childhood, an idyllic, safe place, away from the turmoil of war. Stach’s story contains an almost exemplary topos of “the sweet quiet countryside” in Poland, there are visible references to the Arcadian myth. Only the last sentence mentions the name of the village, i.e. Sobibór (STASIUK 2021: 183–184). The reader already knows what is hidden under this name, the contrast comes as a shock to him, and the Arcadian myth is immediately deconstructed.

In a similar way, a great discrepancy and a great tension, a great chasm arises in the descriptions of Birobidzhan – in the ideal vision of Maks and Doris, siblings of Jewish origin who wish to escape the Holocaust. It is a land of milk and honey but we know from the emerging flashes and bits of information that things are different. The protagonists are driven by a naive belief in a safe enclave, their image of Birobidzhan resembles descriptions from tourist brochures or from propaganda leaflets distributed in the 1930s in the USSR (MAKSIMOWSKA 2019: 45–46). The gap between truth and imagination is colossal: Doris and Maks design a dream land of eternal happiness, equality, and peace (STASIUK 2021: 74), hiding in forests and barns, they daydream about fabulous exotic lands embodied by Birobidzhan. But the reality is harsh: “Too many swamps and mosquitoes to make it a promised land. And a generally unfavourable climate, in, let us say, a Zionist sense” (STASIUK 2021: 159), says one of the Jews who, seeing the events in the East, decid-

⁸ This is mentioned by Przemysław Czapliński, who compares the villages of Stasiuk and Myśliwski: “In Myśliwski, the most important heritage is the culture explaining the world and allowing one to live in it, for Stasiuk, it is strangeness, a sense of disinheritance, and a leftist culture. Myśliwski emphasizes the cohesion and independence of the peasant world, while Stasiuk describes a reactive community that adapts to conditions” (CZAPLIŃSKI 2017: 16).

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/DzienWolnosciChlopskiej/videos/512965343253340/>



ed to return. Maks and Doris, standing just above the abyss, have their bittersweet dream about camels, the beauty of the landscape, community but at the same time they know that they are merely dreams, a desperate mirage of a tormented imagination (STASIUK 2021: 257–261). Hidden in the barn, exposed to attack from all sides, they balance between reality and sleep. However, Maks slowly realizes that Birobidzhan is merely a chimera, an empty shell, a being without real foundations (STASIUK 2021: 266).

Stasiuk presents a similar ambiguity in the suggestive and emotional scene of hanging a stranger who was considered a spy by a partisan unit. Siwy gives the order, and the partisans unskillfully try to hang the alleged spy. They finally succeed in obeying the order but in a grotesque manner: they hang themselves on the desperately fighting man, grabbing his legs, and dragging him to the ground. The scene acquires a symbolic dimension, in killing a man, the insurgents themselves die in a way, they become victims of the cruel times in which they live. They become hostages of the inhuman act they have committed, this act consolidates the group because they are united by a common macabre secret (STASIUK–OKOŃSKI 2021: 64). It is a kind of rite of passage, a symbolic loss of innocence. The line between the victim and the murderer is obliterated. Everybody is guilty and everybody is innocent, an alleged spy dies in the heat of war but his tormentors are also blackened.

Stasiuk does not smooth out the contrasts, on the contrary, he doses tension, exacerbates conflicts, emphasizes controversies, avoiding unambiguousness. He portrays how a human identity (one of the characters, a borderland peasant, Romaniuk) can flow in a rapid stream, bypassing stones and changing its course; at some point, he hesitates how to cross himself before a meal: whether it should be done by pointing his hand first towards the left or the right shoulder.

Stasiuk constructs another character in a similar ambiguous manner: the partisan Stach, who, after a quarrel with his comrade-in-arms, Wydra, uses a moment of inattention to strangle the unconscious Wydra with a blanket. Stach is a killer but at the same time he is an unconscious saviour: he saves the terminally ill Wydra, whose body is suffering from gangrene, from a painful and prolonged passing.

There is a diffusion of two seemingly separate and diametrically different categories: it turns out, however, that they are not separated by a transparent and impenetrable border, on the contrary, there is a permeable membrane between these categories, penetrated by molecules, colliding with each other, mixing, and contaminating one another. After the war, which is a catalyst for this interpenetration, nothing will ever be the same, evil and good have touched, they have come into contact with one another, the executioner and the victim are “flowing” into one whole; Sobibór is an idyll infected with evil. There is a melting of opposites.

WEAKNESS AND STRENGTH – DIFFERENT FACES

A further sphere of tensions in the novel is the juxtaposition of accepted and well-worn images related to what is male and female, and what is strong and weak. In his earlier works, the writer centred around on the crisis of male communities and male narratives (KLEDZIK 2013: 199), in *Przewóz*, he seems to move one step further. Women are presented as flesh and blood heroines: steadfast, tough, endowed with a sense of practicality, who do not lose their cold blood at key moments, who are not afraid. This is how they are: strong and independent. This is Maryśka, a rural herbalist and philosopher; this is the inconspicuous housewife working for a priest, who



puts on men's shoes in the middle of the night, and goes to show the partisans the way across the river; this is Romaniukowa, who is able to wash out a worm-covered wound without blinking an eye, strong and determined to protect her own and others' lives. In their presence, some male heroes seem detached from reality, absorbed in war, caught in the tentacles of ideology, stuck in the world of ideas and phantasms. Men, especially those "not from the countryside", are entangled in various phantasms, they live in a world of appearances, they are prisoners of their own beliefs, persecuted like the priest from the novel by real and imaginary demons. They suffer from a disease called ideologization, which blinds them; it disrupts their common-sense view of reality. Maryska offers the escaping Jewish siblings real help, shelter, and a bowl of soup.

Stasiuk proposes a broader perspective of these considerations in the recurring theme of metal and iron, which represents the world of culture and civilization. Metal stands in opposition to nature and its changeability, adaptability, and durability. The tension between nature and culture is strongly felt in the novel and returns in various modifications and intensities.¹⁰

The vision of troops pulling east, equipped with transporters, weapons, and tanks is often repeated. The opposition is "what is animalistic, vegetative, and terrestrial" (STASIUK 2021: 35). The locals watch with bated breath the march of the "iron serpent": German troops heading east (STASIUK 2021: 273). Iron is a symbol of wealth and strength, metal seems to be durable and indestructible but it is iron that rots, crumbles, breaks down in fingers, just like the remains of metal objects left in a bunker and uncovered many years after the war (STASIUK 2021: 45). Stasiuk confirms this in a symbolic scene, when the carrier Lubko rummages in the ruins of his house burnt down by the Russians: only bent metal objects, devoid of value, poor and abandoned, have remained (STASIUK 2021: 110). After the departure of the Germans stationed in the village, the only thing left is a knife with a handle decorated with a swastika (STASIUK 2021: 347), nature, vegetation, and the river have remained in their place, invincible, permanent, and they will soon consume what is metal.

In opposition to the metal, there is everything that is wooden, that is derived from nature, something that can survive, that can change, that can transpose to continue to exist. It is elusive, momentary but paradoxically strong, permanent and indestructible. The world of iron encompasses soldiers, partisans who clean their weapons maniacally, while women belong to a different order: primary, survival-oriented, seemingly impermanent but resistant to destruction. Such an approach to the ambivalence of strength and weakness frequently appears in culture, it is enough to mention the biblical characters of the brothers Jacob and Esau, or the fight between David and Goliath, given as an example by Stanisław Krajewski (see KRAJEWSKI 2019: 47–48). "[...] deliberately chosen weakness consists in resignation from reinforcing measures, from 'weaponry'; then achieving the goal despite such weakness is strength: this weakness becomes strength" (KRAJEWSKI 2019: 46). The manifestation of apparent strength reveals true weakness, and in apparent weakness, there is a cumulation of strength.

All of them, the weak and the strong, men and women, soldiers and civilians are characterized by enormous loneliness,¹¹ confronted with the compulsion to live together, in the bonds of common interests, military exchange, and in fetters of dependence. Weakness and strength are not given forever, each decision is a test of strength, and an exam that reveals weaknesses.

¹⁰ An investigative analysis of this issue in Stasiuk's work can be found in SETLAK 2017.

¹¹ This is another characteristic feature of Stasiuk's work, which is analyzed in detail on the basis of his earlier texts in KWOLEK 2017.



CONCLUSION

The tensions contained in the novel which constitute the main structural axis of Stasiuk's text influence its dynamics; they knock the reader out of usual ideas and draw him into a suggestive game of meanings, symbols, illusions, dreams, and cruelty. One cannot remain indifferent to such a convincingly constructed text. The aim of this construction is to arouse maximum emotions, which, in line with the Aristotelian concept of art, is supposed to lead to purification, to a *catharsis*. *Catharsis* is designed to help in understanding the mystery of human fate, in bringing closer the knowledge of hidden meanings. The procedure of juxtaposing extreme categories employed by Stasiuk in order to graduate tension leads to the release of emotions. The killer becomes the saviour, metal crumbles to dust, what is static dies, and what is variable endures and transforms, daydreams turn out to be permanent and realizable, while ideas corrode and turn to dust.

This is well illustrated by the recurring issue of memory, which appears to be impermanent, fleeting but in fact, *Przewóz* can be read as a testimony to the power of memory that triumphs over everyday life, memory which is a carrier of meanings and a transmitter of identity. *Przewóz* becomes an epic about the laborious reconstruction of narratives that seem archaic but are strongly and permanently present in Polish identity.

Przewóz is an open work that leaves ample space for many interpretations. A number of threads remain unspoken, potential, which is in line with Stasiuk's concept of the world, the structure of a novel and life in general. "[...], absence, emptiness, this is an opportunity for potentiality. It must be constantly filled with imagination, thoughts, and own presence" (STASIUK–WODECKA 2015: 16). It is also the responsibility of the reader to clarify what has been left unsaid.

The title of Stasiuk's novel is endowed with an exceptional emotional and symbolic charge, life is presented as "a cart or a carriage", a series of irrevocable and challenging decisions that must be made at almost every step. *Przewóz* is also a transition to the other side, to a seemingly better, safer world but one which proves to be just as dangerous and ridden with menace. Both sides of the river are full of hazards, there is no suitable shelter for man because there is no escaping one's fate, one's identity, and oneself.

The author himself becomes a kind of carrier, as Łukasz Grzymiśławski notes:

A narrator of completely modern interjections (he mentions, for example, the lockdown), first-person and endowed with all the features of Stasiuk himself, from time to time he breaks away from his characters but not from their location. Because this is also the location of his family. He was here as a child, he smelled the lazy summer, he was an initiate, he performed his rituals of passage. Now he is the carrier. He carries a load of own memory and scraps borrowed from its father, who now does not want to and cannot explain anything anymore (GRZYMIŚLAWSKI 2021: 10).

Przewóz is a war book but devoted to a war that is, as Stasiuk repeats many times, one in a symbolic sense. War is an endless and Sisyphean struggle with the world, with oneself, with a past that is hard to bear, and with an insecure future. The choices that the writer puts before his protagonists are ones which everyone will face sooner or later. As Stasiuk emphasizes in one of



his interviews,¹² in the novel *Przewóz*, everything is final, which also sharpens the eyesight and hearing of the reader, the recipient of the novel.

Reckoning with memory, the past, war, reminiscence, or rather the lack thereof, is finally also a story about a world that has passed away but is still present because the consequences of choices made years ago are borne by successive generations to this day. Being charred with war turns out to be being charred with life, being touched by a unitary, individual trauma that everyone will experience sooner or later. Tension, which is the clearest building block, a constituent element of the novel, tension, which is gradual and silenced, increases and fades away, it allows us to grasp human experience into concrete and tangible frames.

Stasiuk distinguishes the unobvious. He sees unobvious beauty but also unobvious evil, which can be called omission, passivity; he notices unobvious dedication, unobvious courage; he sees contestable, controversial cowardice, which can also be considered a certain conservatism, passivity, or a highly developed self-preservation instinct. The cathartic nature of the novel is also evident in how the narrative is conducted, which leads to the climax at the end. The events are gaining momentum, and the goal is liberation, cleansing – thus Stasiuk reaches to the primal roots of art, which is to reveal the structure of reality but at the same time to heal, purify, and liberate. The intensification of experiences, the exaggeration of contrasts, the accumulation of tensions have a major impact on the novel's dynamics.

The reading of *Przewóz* resembles original rituals which leave the reader feeling cleansed and devoid of negative emotions. The writer thus uses the Aristotelian understanding of *catharsis*, he awakens bad emotions to purify the reader, in showing evil, he attempts to tame it, he looks into the abyss of destruction in order to extract values. Stasiuk introduces the reader to Nietzsche's state of intoxication, which in relation to literature takes the form described by the recently deceased American critic and literary scholar J. Hillis Miller as being thrown out of one's own fate:

The word 'drunkenness' means being forcefully thrown out into another reality, which in no sense is the domain of peace. In one way or another, it is connected with the extreme dimensions which I have indicated: death, sexuality, and the irrational dimension of language. Literature snatches me and takes me to a place where pleasure and pain combine (MILLER 2014: 36).

For Stasiuk, philosophical goals become superior, and writing becomes a way of touching the meaning of human existence. Stasiuk's proposal seems to be radical and idealistic in its own way: to face traumas, crookedly healed fractures, badly healed wounds, concealed sins, repressed complexes, through purification, a kind of attempt at fire, to be reborn again, shake off the past, stand naked, and start all over again.

Andrzej Stasiuk does not write literature; by writing, he wishes to look deep into what is. And this must be recreated, it is more than merely a matter of style and idiom, it is an existential imperative: we must access places buried in the past, contained in memory, anew, and till the end (GLEŃ 2019: 77).

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/BETWEENPOMIEDZY/videos/1343464346055393>



All these extremes can be found in great intensity in the latest prose by Stasiuk. Death, sexuality, war, all these elements stick together through a specific language which is vulgar and blunt but at the same time poetic, refined, suggestive, and extremely vivid. It is the language of the novel that heightens the tension, it enhances the meanings.

A monotonous, uninteresting universe, a “green hicksville” (STASIUK 2021: 31) becomes the centre of the world in the novel, the *axis mundi*, around which events revolve. A margin, a space on the sidelines, is brought to the light, exposed in the spotlight.

Central European existence has been stigmatized by history, marked by loss, mentally limited, and torn by fear. Lost images, bound by melancholy are actualized in geographically real but repulsed spaces (FRANKOWIAK 2008: 13).

Stasiuk deliberately describes the war periphery, places that are not characteristic in any way, a zone that is merely a place of march, insignificant, remote from the world. This way of presenting reality also builds suspense. There is simply no other universe, it is here and now, and the whole world has shrunk to the size of the Bug River periphery. There is life somewhere far away, uprisings break out, pacts are signed but only echoes of memorable events reach here. The province becomes a carrier of important meanings and senses. “The narrator of Stasiuk’s texts, under the guise of the basic tourist desire to discover the ‘authenticity’ of the province, interprets it, inscribing into it his baggage of meanings and experiences” (KLEDZIK 2013: 195).

In his novel, Stasiuk does not offer a zero-one vision of the world, tensions are not created mechanically, and the writer uses contrasts and paradox, but what is really important for him are halftones, ambiguities, multivocalities, and a smooth transition in between categories. This is what sets Stasiuk’s world in motion.

The writer seems to focus his gaze on what hurts and pinches in Polishness and humanity in general, what has not yet been worked through and understood. He describes the microcosm of the Bug River countryside but he writes about matters of universal importance, about struggles with memory, with the past, he looks back nostalgically, asking himself where he is going, which is a characteristic feature of the latest Polish prose (BALOGH 2014). He looks beyond individual experience, he tells a story basically known to everyone, a story in which one can hear echoes of tales told by grandparents, aunts, friends who have been affected by a border situation, charred by a traumatic experience. In one of his interviews, Stasiuk emphasizes: “It is true, everyone has their own Polish–Ruthenian–German family story that does not fit well with the official, correct version of history” (STASIUK–KOŹBIEJ 2016: 121).

A key way of organizing Stasiuk’s novels is juxtaposing semantically distant wholes, which creates strong tensions not only at the level of language but above all at the level of meaning. Categories of different meaning interpenetrate in the novel, creating a conglomerate of new meanings, showing the fractures of the world described by the novelist, the incoherence of a reality infected by war.

Stasiuk’s ontology is based upon a constant play of tensions between particular categories that make up reality. Nonetheless, the writer does not propose a coherent, unambiguous assessment of reality but rather draws attention to its complexity, impossibility of complete cognition, elusiveness, and delusion.



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