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MYSTIFICATIONS AND GAMES – ABOUT IDENTITY DISCOURSE IN MODERN BULGARIAN PROSE (ALEK POPOV)

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It would be a gross error to say that Polish readers know Alek Popov's prose. Despite having published six collections of stories and one novel he is still not widely known in Poland (in contrast to Germany and Great Britain). In the last couple of years translations of the author's stories have appeared in "Opcje" (2003, 2) and "Literatura na Świecie" (2006, 3–4). A very important event came at the end of January 2007 in the series "Balkan, Balkan" – a selection of Popov's stories from *Droga do Syracuse. Opowiadania niesamowite*¹, which includes texts from his collections *Lubieżne sny* and *Droga do Syrakuz*. In 2008 Muza published in Poland Popov's novel entitled *Mission: London* translated by Zuzanna Bochenek.

The forty-three year old Bulgarian prose-writer, essayist and author of film and radio scenarios – Alek Popov (born 1966) – is known as one of the most interesting of contemporary authors. He has received the prestigious Grawiton prize, which is awarded in the field of scientific fantasy. He is associated with the inspiring influences of that nestor of Bulgarian literature – Svetoslav Minkov – whose stories *Sila nieczysta* came out in Poland in the above-mentioned series in 2005. Thus Popov's prose will interest us in the context of inside-text discourse on modern humanity identity.

Identity is a fashionable but not concrete concept. It is very useful in a lot of different fields as a description category. Identity is a tool applied in analyzing

¹ A. Popov, *Droga do Syrakuz. Opowiadania niesamowite*, ed. M. Wnuk, R. Sendek, introduction M. Wnuk, Kraków 2006.

social changes in many spheres: politics, economy, gender, ethos, work and free time organization, sexual activity and participation in the life of local communities. This term, related to so many contexts, describes a condition in which man has many identities. However, according to Antonina Kłoskowska, such an approach should pertain to social roles only, rather than to the concept of personality². Identity is a process shaped by the dialectics of the internal (my thinking about myself) and external (what others think about me) sphere. Identity is an aspect of human personality which is subjective and directed to oneself. In the post-modern world – characterised by increased mobility and fragmentation of social life, favouring consumption and situating man in diverse cultural contexts – identity disintegrates. The modern multiculturalism brings in its wake heterogeneity of the cultural-ethnic picture of modernity (especially in its metropolitan aspect) and the problem of multiple identities³. Postmodernists enclosed the description of identity procedures in metaphors of ferns, margin, chaos, movement, uprooting, moment, difference, repetition, changeability, non-definition, a-structuralism.

The concept “identity” could be defined on a basis of psychological, sociological and cultural criteria. According to the Polish dictionary “identity” means “to be alone”, “sameness”⁴. The sociological compendium defines this category as a “okazywanie innym jednostkom i samemu sobie identyfikacji z jakimiś elementami rzeczywistości społecznej, także umożliwienie innym zidentyfikowania danego obiektu przez pewne cechy charakterystyczne dla danego obiektu”⁵.

The psychological conception of identity emphasizes a sense of cohesion of subject in a perspective of time and space or assuming of social roles. In the presented text we will understand the category of identity as “a concept of myself”⁶. This concept of identity will help us to describe chosen elements of the described world in Popov’s prose, such as the space-time continuum and the creation of heroes.

The titles of stories greatly influence upon their character. The subtitle *Opowiadania niesamowite* refers to the American master of detective and fantasy stories – Edgar Allan Poe. The patronage of Poe’s prose is most obvious in the carefree comparison of the joint elements of realism and fantasy. In the presented

² A. Kłoskowska, *Kultury narodowe u korzeni*, 2nd ed., Warszawa 2005, p. 104; eadem, *Koncepcje typu osobowości we współczesnej antropologii kulturalnej*, in: *Z historii i socjologii kultury*, Warszawa 1969, p. 37–49.

³ See: Z. Bauman, *Wieloznaczność nowoczesna, nowoczesność wieloznaczna*, transl. J. Bauman, Warszawa 1995; *Dylematy wielokulturowości*, ed. W. Kalaga, Kraków 2004; W. Burszta, *Antropolog na krawędzi wieku*, in: *Antropologia kultury. Teorie. Tematy. Interpretacje*, Poznań 1998, p. 173–180; A. Giddens, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. „Ja” i społeczeństwo w epoce późnej nowoczesności*, Warszawa 2001.

⁴ *Słownik języka polskiego*, ed. M. Szymczak, Warszawa 1996, vol. 3, p. 481; *Słownik języka polskiego*, ed. W. Doroszewski, Warszawa 1967, vol. 9, p. 206–207.

⁵ K. Olechnicki, P. Załęcki, *Słownik socjologiczny*, Toruń 1997, p. 228.

⁶ M. Melchior, *Spoleczna tożsamość jednostki*, Warszawa 1990; Z. Bokszański, *Tożsamość – Interakcja – Grupa. Tożsamość jednostki w perspektywie teorii socjologicznej*, Łódź 1989.

collection the space is free from regimes of realistic locations and the semantics of space are not based on consciousness of ethnographic regionalism nor on an overwhelming passion for catching facts.

Such a resolution gives an author two major assets. First of all, anti-realistic convention controverts quasi-publicist aspirations to some generalizing diagnoses: social, cultural or ideological, which was elaborated through experiences of the XIX century.

Secondly, in an anti-realistic proposal the author of *Droga do Syrakuz* provides us with interesting and intellectual alternatives to stereotyped perceptions of the “space” of Bulgaria which travel agencies want to offer. Baedeker’s vision of a Black-Sea resort is very popular among Polish readers, if not exclusively so.

The identity of space can be, but does not have to be, a keystone of periodicity of the collected stories⁷. In the texts presented here there is no homogeneity of space. A plot can develop in flats, in cellars, on the street, in the bathroom, at a shoemaker’s, in the office or in bed. The scenerios work on the rule of conventionality. Locations are factual and indefinite. They are the foundations of a mystification of poetics. Thanks to esthetic procedure, space has a lot of diversity, fragmentation and conventionality. These features decide the identity of space in Popov’s collection of stories.

Such organized space is almost entirely free from elements which allow it to be defined through cultural or national categories. These assets are useless in a mythological world. Only occasionally does Popov decide on *explicite* to indicate to the reader specific national realities as a place of action. But he does this knowingly – he juggles with stereotypes and laughs at conventions. He is able to look at Bulgaria as a mannered businessman who, contaminated with a simple and mass-media world-vision, will only notice a “backward, Balkan state”⁸. But when he changes the place of action to London or its surrounding neighborhoods, he creates credibility thanks to a couple of properties.

Space considered in this way shows its incredible mystery and lability. Nothing here is assured. Shapes change, properties disappear and appear, objects come under the law of animation and personification. The real world coexists with imagination, the truth mixes with fiction, heroes cross the borders of time and space (*Porno-śmierć, Jamajka*). This labile space arouses, on the one hand, fear and, on the other hand, excitement. The aspirations of the heroes are to go deep into its secrets. They are obsessed, they make a fetish of lunettes. To increase the perspective of perception, they move to other places. They believe naively in the truth of the senses of the eye (*Czerwony pokój*).

The history of culture teaches us that cities could have been seen as an idyll and urban nightmare; they could have been an embodiment of the power of human

⁷ K. Jakowska, *Czas i przestrzeń w cyklu opowiadań*, w: *Czas i przestrzeń w prozie polskiej XIX i XX wieku*, ed. Cz. Niedzielski, J. Speina, Toruń 1990, p. 37–45.

⁸ A. Popov, op. cit., p. 110.

thought or the lair of pathologies⁹. The described space is often unfriendly to humans. It is an exterior with elements of strangeness, fear and danger. In *Droga do Syrakuz* it is mostly an urbanizing space. The imputation to the destructive features of agglomerations and the perception of them as a pathological habitat is an extension of the pre-industrial myth. Popov's cities are devoid of features of the post-modern architecture in its meaning described by Charles Jencks¹⁰. These cities remind the reader of a terrible labyrinth which is full of corners and pubs. It could be also the huge mystic buildings of institutions with the terrifying power we recognize from Kafka's and Orwell's prototypes (*Raport gotowy*). These projections do not shock with excessive modernity, which might have resulted from Bulgaria's lagging behind in civilization development.

The conventionality of the properties' within the described world is exposed through the story *System kontroli*. Here, in the pattern of a James Bond film – the lighter is a cipher, a waste bin is a contact box, a lover is a spy. An ordinal neighbour's flat is a terrible laboratory of tortures (*Nastuchiwacz*). A house in which lives a widow with children is a tomb of a dead husband (*Piwnica*).

The pathological belief in the “doubleness” of reality, in hidden meaning of all facts and things, prevents normal existence, forcing upon the heroes a variety of roles. In this sense Popov leads a discourse on possibilities and limitations of a perception of a modern human, on recognizing tools and understanding the world. And despite hyperbolic techniques, the manners of grotesque copying and ironic relativity, it is not difficult to notice collections of serious thought about the ontology of the world – still defying the recognition of a human who is tempted by the perspective of uncovering some truth. In this sphere Popov's prose is inspired by the experience of postmodernism. Juggling the conventions of relation game (here in a spy novel and horror) embodies the post-modern belief in the death of the author, in the power of quotation and intertextuality. This is an answer to “the exhaustion of literature” in the meaning John Barth assigned to this concept in his programme essay in 1967. These are also narrative inspirations from the Derridean theory of transgression¹¹ (here in its genealogical variety, transgressing generic norms, blending conventions). According to postmodernists, reaching to the experience of popular culture is intellectually and aesthetically valid and engenders senses. After the final devaluation of the bipolarity of low vs high culture, various forms of popular culture (commercials, films, pop music, comic books) are becoming an attractive area to penetrate academically¹². Their

⁹ B. Żyłko, *Czytanie miasta*, Tytuł 1997, 3–4, p. 22–29; Z. Rybicka, *Projektowanie miasta. (O dyskursie urbanistycznym dwudziestolecia)*, Teksty Drugie 2000, 4, p. 57–69.

¹⁰ Ch. Jencks, *Architektura postmodernistyczna*, transl. H. Gadomska, Warszawa 1987; M. Mazurek, *Cyberpolis. Podmiot w przestrzeni terminalnej*, in: *Dylematy wielokulturowości*, p. 295–306.

¹¹ J. Derrida, *Struktura, znak i gra w dyskursie nauk humanistycznych*, transl. W. Kalaga, in: *Współczesne teorie badań literackich za granicą. Antologia*, ed. H. Markiewicz, vol. 4, Kraków 1992, p. 166–184.

¹² W. Burszta, W. Kuligowski, *Sequel: dalsze przygody kultury w globalnym świecie*, Warszawa 2005.

hybridity and polymorphism store features which characterise our fragmented world and ourselves – people of confused identities – which was interestingly described by Tim Edensor and Marek Krajewski¹³.

Potem przyszło mi na myśl, że niegdyś mianem „Bułgara” określano w Europie człowieka o nieznanym pochodzeniu, przybywającego z odległych stron. [A man from an obscure background]. W takim znaczeniu Bloch mógł być każdym – Serbem, Włochem, Estończykiem, Łotyszem.¹⁴

This reflection, which is taken from the story *Jamajka*, could be a motto for many texts which are presented in the collection. An illegible identity is a leading problem in Popov's stories. It is not about national or cultural identity of heroes but always about individual identity. When the main hero of *Jamajka*, who is interested in half-legendary history from previous centuries, attempts to follow the trail of a mariner's secrets, it is *de facto* about a person but not about a countryman. It is about gratification of one's own curiosity but not about national pride and local patriotism. The mysterious Bloch is, in Popov's projection, more of an everyman (but not in a Kafka-esque sense) than a citizen whose condition can be described in binding social and cultural category.

The identity of Bloch conceals mysteries of history, deficiency of historical sources and ultimately – disability of human perception. But if we look closer at the creation of Popov's heroes, something seems to be fuzzy, shaky and illegible. Information about them is knowingly casual. The characters often have only names or only initials or nicknames which have allegorical functions (“Che Guevara”, “Wysokoprocentowy”).

Two aspects of a heroes' identity interest Popov in a special way: single and social identity. The first one is attached to psychophysical and moral conceptions. It implies reorganization towards oneself. The second version – determines a net of diverse relations with other people. The identity of Popov's characters is blurred and discontinued, it undergoes hybridisation. His narrations illustrate the postmodernist belief that identity is not given to us but it is a choice, a declaration made by a man. The possibility to choose sacralizes the category of freedom. Thus the modern identity is no longer – in line with the famous metaphor by Zygmunt Bauman – a restraining iron mask from which we cannot free ourselves. The modern pattern of identity resembles a light coat which can be shaken off the shoulders at any moment. Such potential stimulates openness and implicates a collage-like quality of the assumed identities.

In the space of reflection over social identity of heroes one should consider pragmatics of social roles. Popov states these roles precisely. His heroes are mothers, daughters, lovers, husbands, editors, tourists, cosmonauts, gangsters, thieves, clerks, orphans etc. These roles are the most legible characteristics of

¹³ T. Edensor, *Tożsamość narodowa, kultura popularna i życie codzienne*, transl. A. Sadza, Kraków 2004; M. Krajewski, *Kultury kultury popularnej*, Poznań 2003.

¹⁴ A. Popow, op. cit., p. 352–353.

heroes of *Droga do Syrakuz*. It could also be an attempt to state that heroes of stories exist in the described world if they play social roles. These roles not only determine their being but condition their existence. The roles create a human. So it is being for Other and through Other.

In the zone of reflection over the single identity of Popov's heroes a very useful tool will be mystifications and games. Through theorists we can accept that rivalry, which is a feature of play, has a human character and it is determined as an aspect of being (Hans-Georg Gadamer)¹⁵, the foundation of development of a single human and entire society (Johan Huizinga)¹⁶ and that all play defines the area of freedom which realises a regular form of pragmatics (Roger Caillois)¹⁷.

To go deeper into play, it creates an identity of a participant. The hero becomes a rival, an opponent, an enemy. An agreement to accept the rules of the game determines a set of desirable features. It is interesting that heroes enter the play unwillingly (*Asystentki poszukiwane*, *Staly klient*) and then they accept the rules and also show desirable creativity. A very complicated scenario could be an escape from an arduous client (*Staly klient*), a quasi-spy story of an imaginary conspiracy full of complicated procedures (*System kontroli*) or Orwell's situation of permanent encirclement and spying (*Raport gotowy*).

All three above-mentioned versions combine an experience of surveillance. A consciousness of surveillance imposes on the subject a stigma of artificiality, changing naturalness into a more or less aware form of mystification. The shadower and those heroes under surveillance are absorbed by a meticulous realization belonging to situational procedures, they discard their individual identity. They become robots, industrialized elements of a complicated mechanism. Breaking loose of their single identity also helps their psychical condition as heroes. Popov show us neurasthenic characters (*Staly klient*), those with schizophrenic predispositions (*System kontroli*) or paranoiac predispositions (*Raport gotowy*, *Drzwi*).

The above-mentioned sicknesses, which determine the attendance of unnatural behavior, correspond in some way with mystifications proper arranged by the heroes. Popov's characters often appear in other roles; they pretend to become someone else. The participant in the establishment of an eastern world from time to time undergoes a change into a psychopathic degenerate who looks for his victims among the social stratum of a middle-European country (*Sezon lowiecki*). The prestidigitator becomes a pathologic killer who wants to make a presentation of his murder – a work of art (*Asystentki poszukiwane*). In the mini-story *Biały koń* the dreamlike plot forces a hero to become a white horse or a black horse. These mystifications determine the necessity of fitting to a social order, even to a definite situation which makes a hero a black or white horse. And in the context of these

¹⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *Słowo, rozum, dzieje*, Warszawa 1973.

¹⁶ J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Zabawa jako źródło kultury*, transl. M. Kurecka, W. Wirpsza, Warszawa 1985.

¹⁷ R. Caillois, *Gry i ludzie*, Warszawa 1997.

fictional situations there hides the fear of being stigmatized as different, of being excluded, of deprivation. The Strange/Other is, in a Lèvinasan way, culturally dependent¹⁸; he is a reversed projection of the subject “I”¹⁹, yet, primarily, the Other unmasks the incoherence of the world in the ontological, epistemological and axiological sense²⁰.

Nie wiadomo dlaczego społeczeństwo odrzuca T., przez co był on zmuszony uciekać się do najróżniejszych kombinacji i sztuczek, byle tylko przyłączyć się do tej błogosławionej braci²¹

– the narrator wonders in the miniature impression *Król zwierząt*. Here, the play is more sophisticated. It is a combined mystification’s structure of accepted roles. The hero changes into a lion (he accept the role/he starts working in zoo). After coming back home he sheds a used costume and paradoxically it appears to be a human skin. The reader can not be sure which role is real. Life becomes to be a simulation *constans*. The pragmatics of existence generate an attitude of hypocrisy and mystification not only towards others but also towards oneself. But here it is also legible within a ritual context, from the classical approach of Arnold van Gennep²², as a spectacle of a character in a liminal stage, which is a consequence of changing the social stratum.

Popov does not judge his heroes nor does he rebuke them for their changing manoeuvres and cheating. Popov’s attitude towards them is closer to sympathy, for their choices which they have to make and to the mystification to which society condemns them to function in. Sporadically, in the collection there is articulated a tone of accusation towards the coming into others’ roles which eventually disturbs a verdict *Fatum* (*Cudze kroki*). Also, very seldomly, there appears sympathy towards heroes who come into the game and do not exactly know its rules (*Asystentki poszukiwane*). Some eschatology occurs in and beyond the area of interests of the author of *Droga do Syrakruz*.

The varied versions of games and mystifications, which lead Popov’s heroes, could also be considered in the category of spectacle and media. The presented events in the stories fulfill features of spectacle categorized by Roland Barthes²³: zdarzenie (przedmiot obserwacji), odbiorca (obserwator), wspólnota przestrzenna, natychmiastowość komunikacji. The show redefines a category of intimacy, breaks taboo, glorifies exhibitionism. All is for sale – sex and emotions (*Sprawa Aniuty*). The mercantilism joins with

¹⁸ M. Jędraszewski, *Wobec Innego. Relacje międzypodmiotowe w filozofii Emanuela Lèvinasa*, Poznań 1990.

¹⁹ Z. Benedyktowicz, *Portrety Obcego. Od stereotypu do symbolu*, Kraków 2000.

²⁰ *Tropy tożsamości: Inny, Obcy, Trzeci*, ed. W. Kalaga, Katowice 2004.

²¹ A. Popow, op. cit., p. 178.

²² A. van Gennep, *Obrzędy przejścia. Systematyczne studium ceremonii*, transl. B. Biały, introduction J. Tokarska-Bakir, Warszawa 2006.

²³ R. Barthes, *Świat wolnoamerykanki*, in: idem, *Mitologie*, trans. A. Dziadek, Warszawa 2000.

ideology, commerce with big politics. The Show produces demigods: tanned, athletic and creative. In the lights there is no place for mediocrity and grayness.

And some more words about obsessive subjects form of this prose. A secret and a betrayal, a surveillance and control, an unconditional belief in the power of the system, a conviction about inessential biography in confrontation with the plan of the whole – there are emotional stigmas and intellectual coercion. To the subject of grotesque transformation of communistic realities – Popov does not so willingly return. “The story *Dzien niepodległosci* is unique and great”. We can find here echoes of a discussion of two generations. They talk about transformation in the final decade of the last century and responsibility for the last coercion system and the modern pauperization of society. All this is in the poetics of a grotesque oxymoron, malicious irony and unexpected paradox, stylization and pastiche. Departure from realities of time and space, universalism of transmission, a manner of symbolic shortcuts and existential and ontological subjects means that beneath every latitude Popov’s short prosaic forms have much to offer a modern reader.

Summary

Mystifications and Games – About Identity Discourse in Modern Bulgarian Prose (Alek Popov)

The object of the analysis are short prose works written by Bulgarian author Alek Popov. The manners of the defining of an identity of a modern person – taking into consideration a psychological, sociological and anthropological context – are conceptual. A concept of the identity has become a pretext for the description of chosen elements of the world introduced in Popov’s prose – such as space-time and creation of heroes.