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From old-time to modern Poznań in crime fiction

The present article offers a discussion of selected proper names used in four crime novels written after 1989 and set in the city of Poznań in different periods of its history: *Pętla* (The Loop) by Piotr Bojarski,¹ *Upiory spacerują nad Wartą* (Ghosts Walking on the Warta) by Ryszard Ćwirlej,² *Kamyk* (The Pebble) by Joanna Jodełka³ and *Koneser* (The Connoisseur) by Joanna Opiat-Bojarska.⁴ My aim is to examine how the authors present the space of the city and whether they take into account the actual reality of the period. In doing so, I focus not only on toponyms,⁵ but also consider anthroponyms and chrematonyms, as well as the figure of the author and the circumstances of writing their work.

Onyms play a particularly important role in Bojarski's *Pętla*, where the author makes strong references to Jewish themes and anti-Semitism of the 1930s. They not only make it possible to classify the novel as realistic, but also provide historical and social context of the unfolding events. In order to introduce the reader to the reality of the period, the author includes additional information in footnotes if he considers the text proper too general or too vague to understand the political situation of the day. In one of such examples, he explains:

¹ The plot of *Pętla* spans the period from 2 to 11 November 1938.

² The plot of *Upiory spacerują nad Wartą* spans the period from 3 to 10 June 1985; the novel is part of a series set in the 1980s, the decade of the ultimate decay of communist Poland (the People's Republic of Poland, PRL).

³ The plot of *Kamyk* is set in (otherwise unspecified) today's Poznań.

⁴ The plot of *Koneser* is set in today's Poznań.

⁵ For a discussion of toponyms in crime fiction set in the city of Częstochowa, see Jaros (2015).

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In 1938 Poznań was governed by Tadeusz Ruge, the mayor appointed by the Sanacja regime. Such appointees were in charge of local authorities in the city from 1934 until the war, although it was the Endecja (National Democrats) that won all the elections to the council. (Bojarski, 2014, p. 14)

Other similar remarks concerning particular individuals or organisations active in political life enable the reader to understand the situation without consulting other sources:

The Camp of National Unity (Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego, OZN), popularly known as Ozon, a pro-government political organisation active in 1937–1939. (Bojarski, 2014, p. 54)

Bojarski's care about historical realism is also visible in his choice of anthroponyms. Some characters not only bear names of actual historical figures but also display certain features of their prototypes and act according to the views they followed. The author devotes most of his attention to two people who took a particular stand in the general debate on the position of Jews in the state which divided Polish society in the period. Biographical information about Franciszek Raszeja and Stanisław Hejmowski is presented in a footnote and in the afterword from the author:

Some characters who appear in this book are historical figures. For example, Professor Franciszek Raszeja, who was concerned about mounting political tension in Poznań and had courage to oppose anti-Semitic incidents at university. (...) Stanisław Hejmowski, a renowned defence lawyer who played a commendable role in the city's history: he did not hesitate to represent Jewish clients in courts before the war (which was not quite frequent among local members of the legal profession) and defended the workers involved in the Poznań Protests of June 1956. Some accounts of his life and work reveal that he always felt obliged to 'defend those weaker', which before the war meant the Jews and the communists. (Bojarski, 2014, p. 222)

The use of names of historical figures serves not only the purpose of giving credibility to the described events. The Jewish sub-plot plays an important role in the development of the story: since it is one of the main elements of the investigation, its detailed presentation enables the reader to grasp all elements of the plot. The author's care about historical accuracy can be attributed to his education: he is a history graduate from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. In his afterword, Bojarski mentions that he consulted Professor Rafał Witkowski, the author of *The Jews of Poznań: A Brief Guide to Jewish History and Cultural*

Sights.⁶ Also, the novel provides an accurate image of the city as pictured on the 1938 Map of the Capital City of Poznań (Plan Stołecznego Miasta Poznania) from the collection of the local State Archives. Indeed, the urbanonyms⁷ used in the book reflect the reality of the period and the author informs the reader if some of the buildings no longer exist:

The New Town Hall (Nowy Ratusz) was constructed on the west side of the Town Hall by the Prussian authorities at the end of the nineteenth century. The building, which housed the city council in the inter-war period, suffered severe damage in 1945 and was later demolished. Today the site is occupied by the Weigh House (Waga Miejska). (Bojarski, 2014, p. 222)

Information concerning the topography of the city provided in the text and footnotes enables the reader to become familiar with the space that is being described. Thanks to this, he or she does not feel like a passive observer but is able to adopt the perspective of a Poznań resident who knows the area well enough to easily recognise both official and colloquial place names:

On his way to the local police headquarters, Kaczmarek decided to pop in for a quick coffee at the Grandka, as Poznań residents affectionately called the Grand Café at Liberty Square. (Bojarski, 2014, p. 42)

Familiarising the reader with the space of the city, where the plot unfolds, is important considering the Jewish sub-plot. As described, although the murder was motivated by greed and material gain, the perpetrator wants to convince the police that his or her crimes should be attributed to personal beliefs. This motive could have seemed reasonable in view of the social sentiments and historical circumstances of the day. Socio-political issues are more important than the actual crime story and this dimension of the novel makes it different from other works of the genre considered here. Concern for historical accuracy does not change the fact that most characters in *Pętle* are fictional. Still, their attitudes tend to reflect the mood of the 1930s:

Although Director Konrad Bombka, who tries to use the investigation for political purposes, is certainly a fictional character, to some extent he resembles politicians

⁶ See Witkowski (2012).

⁷ I adopt the classification of urbanonyms proposed by Kwirina Handke (1992, pp. 66–72), including the names of areas, streets and traffic routes, as well as any natural and man-made objects. Following Zygmunt Zagórski (2010, p. 53), I also take into consideration semi-official and colloquial names.

associated with the Camp of National Unity. In the course of the brutal political battle of the day it was both sides that resorted to dirty tricks. (Bojarski, 2014, p. 223)

What also plays a significant role in Bojarski's construction of a historically accurate fictional world is personal names. The choice and variation of anthroponyms make it possible to distinguish a number of different social groups, such as police officers and their family members, e.g. Borowczak, Zbigniew Kaczmarek, Marciniak, Wilk, Franciszek Nowak, Sieczka, Longina Kaczmarek, Grzegorz Anioła. Miłosz Skrodzki (2014, p. 140) observes that while the population of the region of Greater Poland (Wielkopolska) amounted to nine per cent of the total population of the country at the time, the frequency of the surname Kaczmarek was four times higher. His finding confirms a general belief that it is typically associated with the region. Considering the fact that in Bojarski's novel the officer in charge of the investigation is called Zbigniew Kaczmarek, the "familiarity" of this anthroponym might additionally stress the affiliation of the protagonist with the local community and his desire to restore the order that was violated by the murder. The names and surnames of characters involved in the investigation appear in their full official forms both in dialogues and narrative passages referring to professional matters. Private conversations, in turn, tend to feature only the first names, often in diminutive forms (e.g. Lonia, Biniu, Wojtuś, Grzesiu). The pattern is different when it comes to Franciszek Nowak, an officer who recently arrived in Poznań from Warsaw and is a stranger in this part of the country. Regardless of the communicative situation involved, all characters refer to him as "Nowak". His alienation is further stressed by the fact that he does not have a command of the local dialect, which sometimes makes him unable to understand certain dialectical items:

"Does the canteen serve scrambled eggs with chopped *sznytloszek* today?"

"With what!?" Nowak was completely puzzled.

"*Sznytloszek*! Don't you understand what we say around here? Right, you're a Warsaw guy... I mean chives." (Bojarski, 2014, p. 72)

Nowak is an outsider from a different cultural circle, in this case – a different city. Although his language is different and he is treated as an unfamiliar person, it is possible to notice that other characters gradually open to him as the plot unfolds (cf. Pelcowa, 2011, pp. 24–25).

The second social group is composed of petty criminals. In this case, the anthroponyms derive from their appearance (Stary Wojtas, "Old Bertie"; Ślepy Antek, "Blind Tony")

or the area of their operation (Zdzichu z Siennej, Duma Chwaliszewa, "Ziggy from Sienna street, the Pride of Chwaliszewo area"). In this way, proper names used here not only perform identification and differentiating functions, but also serve as a means of characterising the figures who do not play a particularly significant role in the development of the plot and are not described by the narrator in any greater detail. Although Zdzichu (Ziggy), a diminutive typical of the region, formally resembles an augmentative, it can only be used in the context of familiarity between the speakers, which functionally makes it an affectionate form.⁸ In dialogues, characters from this group make a more frequent use of lexical items from the local dialect than other figures in the novel, e.g.: *eka* ("a crew"), *szkieł* ("a cop"), *pierdy* ("silly gossip"), *gibas* ("a tall guy"), *dać sobie w gnyk* ("to get drunk"), *blubrać* ("to talk silly talk").

Another group featuring in the novel are Jews: Julian Kirszen, Margot Kalter, Johann Vogel, Chaim Vogel. Jews probably first settled in Poznań in the fourteenth century. Exempt from the city's jurisdiction, they formed a separate self-governed community living in its own district estimated at about 1,700 residents (Banderowicz, 2012, p. 145). In the 1930s the Jewish community in Poznań was over seven thousand (Kowalski, 1992, p. 83). Although Jewish anthroponyms are not the subject of the present study,⁹ it is worth mentioning that according to the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw the number of surnames distinctively indicating the Jewish roots of their bearers is very limited, hence they are insufficient evidence of Jewish descent (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2012). The Jewish characters in the novel were resettled to Poland from Germany and their names clearly reveal their foreign origin. A number of German surnames were transferred to the Polish linguistic system as ready-made lexical units and retained their function of proper names; they do not have any motivation in the Polish language (Nowak, 2012, p. 133).

The choice of proper names in *Pętle* stems mainly from the issues raised in the text and the times in which it is set. Historical truth and the wish to portray certain attitudes and behaviour of the period are more important than the crime story itself, which is why the reader receives extra information about the city and its residents. This points to the fact that the onomasticon of the novel not only answers the genre conventions,¹⁰ but is also guided by considerations of the subject matter, the issues in focus and the author's aim.

⁸ This question is explained in more detail by Jan Grzenia (2012) in his comment available at Poradnia językowa PWN website.

⁹ For more information about Jewish anthroponyms, see works by Zofia Abramowicz (2003, 2010) and Irena Sarnowska-Giefing (2011, 2015).

¹⁰ For more on the impact of genre on the choice of proper names, see Sarnowska-Giefing (2003).

It can be assumed that in the case of Bojarski's novel the aim was to create a fictional story which apart from an intriguing criminal puzzle would also show an important social problem.

While Ryszard Ćwirlej's *Upiory spacerują nad Wartą* does not focus on an important social problem, the novel includes several elements referring to the period of communist Poland (the People's Republic of Poland, PRL). The names of people involved in political activity are one of them:

A grim portrait of the founder of the Cheka, Comrade Felix Dzerzhinsky, the patron figure of the Citizens' Militia, looked at the officers from the wall. (Ćwirlej, 2013, p. 21)

The author selected the names of historical figures, organisations and business enterprises associated with the period and easily recognisable by the average reader. Hence, apart from Felix Dzerzhinsky,¹¹ the characters also mention Edward Gierek (the First Secretary of the Polish communist party throughout the 1970s), General Wojciech Jaruzelski, also called 'Jaruzel' (who introduced martial law in 1981), Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Solidarity, the Citizens' Militia (Milicja Obywatelska, MO, communist police), the Security Service (Służba Bezpieczeństwa, SB, communist secret police), PGR state farms, POM state machine centres, Polmozbyt (a state-run car dealer and service centre), Pewex (hard currency shops), Stomil Olsztyn (a tyre manufacturer), Hortex (a chain of cafés and a frozen food manufacturer), Radio Free Europe. They also use acronyms from the period, such as ZOMO (Motorised Reserves of the Citizens' Militia, anti-riot police force in communist Poland), KW (Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party), KC PZPR (Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party). In this way, the writer brings the reader closer to the reality of the plot and the novel becomes a literary document of the period. Apart from official figures and institutions, there are also anthroponyms of other real or fictional characters who were generally recognisable in the 1980s:

Marcinkowski tried really hard to recall such an atrocious murder but somehow he couldn't. Instead, he remembered the book *Tomek among the Headhunters* by Alfred Szklarski and the thought sent shivers down his spine. They ran as fast as Irena Szewińska.¹² (Ćwirlej, 2013, p. 13)

¹¹ In the novel, Felix Dzerzhinsky is also called Felix Edmundovich and Bloody Felix (Krwawy Felek).

¹² Irena Szewińska: the best Polish athlete ever, a multiple Olympic champion and 100m, 200m, 400m and 4x100m relay world record breaker (Polski Komitet Olimpijski, n.d.).

The title of the novel by Alfred Szklarski (*Tomek wśród łowców głów*, Tomek among the Headhunters) inspires the protagonist to call the mysterious murderer a “headhunter”, an apt association with the headless bodies of two victims. As it turns out, the reason for the *modus operandi* of the killer stemmed from practical considerations rather than his fascination with horror stories or visions of a brutal murder: he simply had to decapitate the bodies so that they would fit in the boot of his car. The author uses proper names of literary, cultural or sports figures to express emotions of his characters and to compare their actions with those performed by someone well-known and respected. When Blaszkowski, a novice militia officer, feels helpless at the crime scene, he thinks of Kapitan Żbik (Captain Wildcat), a comic book character of extraordinary talents, who would know what to say or do in his situation:¹³

Blaszkowski wanted to say something, to shout ‘Stop or I’ll shoot!’ or something of the sort. Kapitan Żbik (Captain Wildcat) would probably know what to say in such a situation. (Ćwirlej, 2013, p. 12)

The world described by Ćwirlej is one on the verge of social change and change in the way of life. Proper names which appear in the book might be seen as its harbingers and can be classified into five major categories as follows:

- film, song and album titles: *Conan the Barbarian*, *Rambo*, *Ghost*, *Ghostbusters*, *Isaura the Slave Girl*, *Isaura o Isaurze* (Isaura about Isaura), *Winnetou*; “Breakfast in America”, “Don’t Leave Me Now”, “Money, Money, Money”, “You’re My Heart, You’re My Soul”, “The NeverEnding Story”, “Script for a Jester’s Tear”; *Duke*, *Fugazi*, *The Wall*;
- names of fictional characters: Columbo, Shogun, Sherlock Holmes, Philip Marlowe, E.T.;
- artists’ names and stage names: Roger Hodgson, Bruce Lee, Laura Branigan, Limahl;
- names of music bands: Supertramp, Pink Floyd (*Floydzi*), Modern Talking, Boney M., ABBA, Marillion, Genesis, Depeche Mode;
- brand names: Adidas, Wrangler.

The above names confronted with the reality of 1980s Poland indicate that the plot is set in a country isolated from the West. At the same time, however, its people have

¹³ The first comics in the series *Kapitan Żbik* (Captain Wildcat) were published in 1967 (a trilogy entitled *Ryzyko* (Risk) drawn by Zbigniew Sobala). Apparently, the sole aim of the entire series was to popularise the propaganda image of the Citizens’ Militia (MO) and the associated law enforcement agencies: the Motorised Reserves of the Citizens’ Militia (ZOMO) and the Volunteer Reserve of the Citizens’ Militia (ORMO) (Maharana Pratap Singh, 2015).

increasingly more contact with this apparently inaccessible world. Although they still have not gained free access to its products and culture, they are aware of developments beyond the imposed political borders. They also seek contact with Western reality, which they perceive as easier and better, and their effort is rewarded. Proper names used in Ćwirlej's novel mainly convey the spirit of the period. Without any special role in the plot, they certainly do not provide clues to solve the crime. Rather, they function only as part of the background for the unfolding events and set them in a particular historical context, which is required considering that today's reader is not necessarily familiar with the reality of the 1980s and would not be able to understand certain elements of the plot without some clues from the author. Besides, the touch of the period is an additional advantage for receivers interested in contemporary history and social reality.

The choice of proper names plays a lesser role in Jodełka's *Kamyk* and Opiat-Bojarska's *Koneser*, since the importance of onomasticon for understanding issues presented in stories set in today's reality is quite insignificant. Adopting the typology proposed by Aleksander Wilkoń (1970, p. 83), it is possible to say that proper names used in the two novels provide mainly location in space, while location in time which they give is limited to an indication of today's city:

He thought that someone might have died in the building, but when he got closer he noticed a large undertaker's sign and a shop selling coffins. With another funeral directors right next to it, the sight of the hearse was no longer a puzzle. (...) Astonished by the number of funeral businesses just round the corner from the hustle and bustle of the Market Square, he began to wonder what else might surprise him along the street. (Jodełka, 2015, pp. 14–15)

This information on Poznań's topography is quite accurate: Woźna street boasts as many as five funeral directors: Poznański Dom Pogrzebowy, Universum, Kalia, Dobrowolski-Hernes and Funer-Art. Likewise, all other commercial establishments mentioned in this location (a women's hat shop, a wigmaker's shop and a Japanese restaurant) exist in extra-textual space. The other author also presents an exact picture of the physical space of the city and uses urban proper names which set the story in a particular area. Readers familiar with Poznań will easily notice that topography presented in the novel is readily recognisable:

In the meantime, having passed the grounds of the Poznań International Fair and taken the left from Grunwaldzka into the narrow Święcickiego street, he realised that number six he was heading for was Collegium Anatomicum. (Jodełka, 2015, p. 14)

A closer look at the current map of Poznań¹⁴ reveals that the passage features the actual street network and location of the building.

While the elements of urban space add credibility to the story, they do not have an impact on the plot. The choice of Poznań as the setting was most likely dictated by the fact that both authors are local residents and made use of space with which they are familiar. In fact, all their novels are set in in this city. Jodełka's *Kamyk* is somewhat different than the other three novels discussed here, as the writer is focused on presenting reality from the perspective of a blind child. A comparison of *Kamyk* and *Koneser* reveals that it is not the subject matter or social issues in focus that make the picture of the city different in each case. Rather, what plays a major role here is the time setting of the plot and the extent to which familiarity with the described space and socio-historical reality is required to understand the meaning of the novel. Another important point is that the reader who knows the city as it is today might not be aware of what it looked like in the past.

Poznań described in the crime novels considered here is a silent witness of the unfolding events: what is predominant is the story rather than the space of the city as such. The authors select proper names depending on the time setting of the plot and on whether, apart from telling the crime story itself, they intend to provide the reader with information about the history or the way of life of the period

For the authors and the characters, Poznań and its onomasticon, composed of toponyms, chrematonyms and anthroponyms, is a familiar space which does not pose a threat as such. As is the case of the two crime novels set in today's reality, *Kamyk* and *Koneser* do not require additional explanations concerning proper names. On the other hand, the novels whose plot is set in the past need authorial comments, which may feature in the text proper or paratext (footnotes, afterword from the author). In this way, *Pętla* and *Upiory spacerują nad Wartą* are far more interesting for the reader, since they involve the use of old, often obsolete proper names. The onomasticon of all four works considered here includes names that mimetically represent the map of Poznań and the local personal names. They are complemented with other *nomina propria* which provide a broader picture (the names of politicians, sports figures, political organisations, etc.).

Translated by Piotr Styk

¹⁴ Available at: <https://www.google.pl/maps/place/%C5%9Awi%C4%99cickiego,+Pozna%C5%84/@52.4044906,16.9036585,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m5!3m4!1s0x470444ccc4d14021:0xedf5bed18f17ecbd!8m2!3d52.4044906!4d16.9058472> ("Map of Poznań," n.d.).

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From old-time to modern Poznań in crime fiction

The article discusses the image of Poznań in crime fiction written after 1989. The novels were selected with a view to providing examples of plots set in different periods. The purpose of the paper is to show how the choice of proper names affects the understanding of the novel's content and compare the names used by the author with the actual urban names in Poznań, both present-day and those from the period in which the novel is set. The main question considered is whether the time of action influences the selection of proper names and how they are chosen for novels set in earlier periods: does the author use historical or present-day urbanonyms, or adopt a different strategy altogether? The article aims to show how the picture of Poznań in crime fiction is created and how much it corresponds to historical and present-day reality.

Keywords:

crime fiction, literary onomastics, proper names, urbanonyms, place names, city

Od dawnego do współczesnego Poznania w kryminale

Artykuł pokazuje obraz Poznania w kryminałach napisanych po roku 1989. Kryminały zostały wybrane w taki sposób, aby ich akcja rozgrywała się w różnych czasach. Celem pracy jest pokazanie, jak dobór nazw własnych wpływa na zrozumienie treści dzieła oraz porównanie nazw z ówczesnym i współczesnym nazewnictwem miejskim Poznania. Główne pytanie stawiane w pracy dotyczy tego, czy czas akcji wpływa na dobór onimów oraz jak wygląda dobór onimów w kryminałach z akcją osadzoną we wcześniejszych latach. Czy autor odzwierciedla w powieści funkcjonujące wówczas realnie urbanonimy, opiera się na stanie współczesnym, czy obiera jeszcze inną strategię? Artykuł ma pokazać, jak kształtuje się przestrzeń Poznania w kryminale i czy historycznie oraz współcześnie odpowiada stanowi faktycznemu.

Słowa kluczowe:

powieść kryminalna, onomastyka literacka, nazwy własne, urbanonimy, miasto

Note:

This is the translation of the original article entitled "Od dawnego do współczesnego Poznania w kryminale", which was published in *Adeptus*, issue 9, 2017.

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