

Anaesthetic gardens. On *Metaphysics* by Lech Majewski

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Abstract

Interpretation of *Metaphysics* – the novel written by Lech Majewski, is the subject matter of theoretical, aesthetic and anthropological considerations. Synthesis of arts: literature, film, painting and theatre, which occur in the novel, opens a perspective of intertextuality and provokes questions about ekphrasis, varied materials, ways of experience mediated by dispositives and reflections on humans among other problems. The crucial point in both: Majewski's novel and this dissertation, is a triptych painted by Hieronymus Bosch – *The Garden of Earthly Delight*, which gradually annexes the featured world – becomes a basic figure in trying to show, how the aesthetization of reality brings Wolfgang Iser's category of an(a)esthetics.

Key words: majewski, bosch, metaphysics, ekphrasis, anaesthetics, intertextuality

Re-creations and unblazed trails

We shall begin with a repetition – if it may be considered as a beginning at all. Repetition of the world as a literature domain becomes nearly identical to a reminiscence. As Kierkegaard wrote in his famous treatise: “Repetition and reminiscence are the same steps, but taken in opposite directions. What we reminisce has already happened, then we repeat ‘from the back’. A proper repetition is a reminiscence directed to the future” (Kierkegaard 2000, p. 50)¹².

A large part of literature is created on the basis of these two models¹³ and that kind of literature is inseparably related to the functions of human memory. The world of literary works is then, based on reminiscences reaching the future – the world of memory forms which significantly complicate the traditional theory of *mimesis*.

In *Metaphysics* by Lech Majewski the issue is topicalized by formal construction of the text and directly in the process of narration. The first person in the monologue created ‘the

¹² If not differently marked, all the quotations are translated by Agnieszka Krywalska.

¹³ According to the conception formed by, among other authors (Zaleski 2004).

world recurred' (Zaleski 2004, p. 10). I reminisces on the history of a short and thorough metaphysical affair with Bea, brought to an end by death. After only reading the first sentences of the novel, the reader is already introduced to nostalgic areas, because the ideal, incessantly reminisced, is placed in the past. Marek Zalewski claims that the introduction is only a means of expression that mediates in unveiling reality. What is most important, however, hides beyond the plot which the medium makes available here and now (Zaleski 2004, p. 12). The monologue would not make any sense without hope for coming back to the past, for making it 'accessible' through an aesthetic aura – a peculiar echo of the past. Majewski's narration is fragmentary, interrupted. It consists of short stories about the sequence of days from the short, shared life of the lovers. It all happens in the extraordinary scenery of Venice where Bea, suffering from cancer of the larynx wants to die. Majewski sends his protagonists for a journey where they follow well-known traces of literary tradition, in the first place marked out in the famous short story by Thomas Mann entitled *Death in Venice*. The plot of the novel, describing events from the life of the couple, alternates with ephrastic descriptions of works of art and philosophical tirades, as well as more intimate reflections of the author. The reader can see through the lens of these intimate confessions, put on past reality, described by Luis. It is at the same time the prism of pain felt after the death of a beloved person. Therefore, the perception of the reality and objects immersed in it, gain a typically nostalgic character. The reality is based most of all on the remembrance that becomes the only consolation for the aching soul: "Do you remember? Darling, do you remember? I remember. Therefore the moment is alive, as long as I can remember. Memory is life. Memory..." (Majewski 2002, p. 9).

Nevertheless, the memory apology becomes paradoxically questioned in other text figures. Luis does not create the image of the past reality only with the help the medium of memory, but with what remains in himself as a subject. The lovers were obsessive about video taping during the time of their relationship. Those video tapes become a peculiar element integrating memory. The past is then conveyed not only with the help of memory medium but the memory itself is stimulated or even generated during video projection. Luis soon realizes that the picture takes control over his life: "It is amazing that picture is more permanent than body. Trace is more permanent than life. As if the whole complicated kingdom of tissues, cells, particles and atoms grow only to fall apart. But trace – merely a few electromagnetic reactions on a thin tape – remains" (Majewski 2002, p. 10).

Apart from being a story about love and death, *Metaphysics* is also a story about perception and consolidating it by different dispositives. The picture is built on the elements

of the past reality – those that are preserved and transformed. Thanks to the picture possibilities (despite the fear of distortion) and the possibilities of relay, those elements may become the substrates of the new form, and there is no defence against media taking over reality. The protagonist is entirely submissive to the transfer, treats video tapes as the only chance to capture the past and demonstrates a painful certainty that the picture-trace is more permanent than life.

The second signal questioning the power of memory, hides directly in the formal structure of the text – its fragmentary features and entropy of descriptions. The cracked surface of the language, creating a peculiar poethics of fragment, seems to result directly from the awareness of a broken image and inability to create a complete picture from the scraps of memory and tapes. The modernist collapse of thought about the whole resulted in the poethics of fragment, quotation, brought to its extreme in literature and the postmodern mentality. That is why the prose of Majewski lacks the possibility of experiencing the whole, which in this case was negated because of the traumatic experience of the beloved one's death. There is no chance of recreating any complete form. The desire of the whole, and at the same time the inability to reach it, creates the novel apory – an unblazed trail between what exists and what is inexpressible. The novel can only exist within this apory. On the principle of this apory, death is continuously present in life, a move forward and backwards in repetition and physics in metaphysics. The only way of crossing the line of this apory, the only possibility of re-creation and re-construction is repetition, representing a special moment of transcendence:

[This – footnote M.B.] “moment of existence is transcendently-metaphysical, meaning that it unveils the truth going beyond/abolishing temporal order, which we got used to. In this way the new epistemological order is introduced. However, it has to stay in hiding or is doomed to paradoxical co-existence with regular time” (Melberg 2002, p. 176).

So if the truth – then the new truth. If the whole – then the new whole. If the time – then the new time. It seems that the protagonist-narrator in Majewski's novel is aware of that power of repetition. The protagonist is convinced that reality cannot be named. He is overwhelmed by the power of the inexpressible, the quicksands of experience. It all contrasts with the scientific mind of the physicist who always looks for sense and finds explanations 'under the sun'. Paradox? Well, it is solved by repetition, and at the same time repetition propels the paradox – against or close to death.

'Granular' ecphrasis

The central motif of the book, that to a great degree organizes the following events and the form of their description, is the work of art – the triptych by Hieronimus Bosch entitled *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Bea, Luis' beloved one, is an art historian and is working on a PhD dissertation concerning this particular painting. The lovers become obsessed with this work of art. Bea analyzes even its smallest detail and slowly introduces Luis to the world of *The Garden*. There is more ecphrasis gradually appearing in the novel and it becomes denser than its meaning. Ecphrasis represents the representation. According to the source of the world, it makes things visible. However, in the process of transposition of painting symbolism into a language system, ecphrasis to some extent makes things blurred – makes them visible in a different way. We enter areas of art auto reflexiveness, that want to present different art – at the same time dealing with the material of a former one. Auto reflexiveness touches upon the problem of one's personal sphere and abilities. In order to identify ecphrasis in a work, not only the ecphrasis of description, according to Adam Dziadek, a text must contain specific metalingual determinants that refer directly to a certain work of art (Dziadek 2004, p. 55). Majewski's *Metaphysics*, above all, contains a lot of ecphrastic descriptions of the one painting (although there are also several descriptions of different works of art), that is, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Bosch. The ecphrasis of the whole painting in the novel is divided into several short fragments, concerning particular parts of the work. These mentions are placed in a narration, on the principle of associations with scientific theories, with elements of the world presented and novel events and by characteristic selectiveness of memory. Two representative fragments are quoted here:

“His [Bosch's – footnote M.B] biblical paradise, Eden which we have lost and which we should mourn, constitutes only the left wing of the triptych, that – although full of peace – is empty. There is no one there, except Christ, Adam and Eve. Not all the animals have yet been formed – a lizard with winding trunk of a snake or a unicorn with a fishtail, in a pond. There are also animals marked with the divine number three – a three-headed salamander and a three-headed ibis. And the Tree of Life with triple branches” (Majewski 2002, p. 10). “You explained to Elms the idea of *The Garden of Delights*, the union of animals and people in an alchemic dance; six-legged wild strawberries, flying fish, people growing out of flowers, exchanging body parts between plants and animals, as if fruit flush, fish gills and a cheek were all the same substance” (Majewski 2002, p. 28).

Majewski's ecphrastic descriptions seem to draw their stylistic shape and structure from the same work of art which, while presenting tearing the world apart into dozens of elements, put it together in an illusory disorder. Thus ecphrasis is incredibly dynamic,

although – paradoxically – does not contain many verbs. These descriptions are built, above all, on enumerations (using polysyndetons or asyndetons). Life and motion are moved to the structure itself, to the essence of objects, which are very frequently described by the use of participles – therefore the epithets grow out of the verb soil. This fact is illustrated by fragments of the foregoing quotations: ‘a lizard with winding trunk of a snake’, ‘flying fish’, ‘people growing out of flowers, exchanging body parts with plants and animals’.

However, Majewski’s ephrastic descriptions are unique because of something different. Bea wants to make a film about *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which she would analyze in detail. Together with Luis, she fulfills her dream, and they both start working on the film. After Elms, the producer, resigns from the enterprise, they have to abandon all hope of releasing the film. Nevertheless, they carry on videotaping and the access to the work of art is conveyed through the eye of the camera. Here, we can use the term called mediated reaction, used in the first place by film experts in order to describe the situation when an original work is presented in another medium. In this case the path to the literature leads through the film. Let’s pay attention to some descriptions:

“The eye of the camera goes down. The cavalcade of naked riders sets off around a pond. They mount camels, unicorns, horses, leopards, deer, goats, griffins, tigers, pigs, a bull, a donkey, and a bear – animals that symbolize astral senses and influence. The cavalcade is divided into twelve groups” (Majewski 2002, p. 103). “The camera catches a couple on the back of a saddle-horse, united in the love embrace. They are covered with the calyx of an enormous flower and they carry its stem. They are happy and do not seem to notice the world; their sole vision is the frailty of striped, crimson petals” (Majewski 2002, p. 110).

The lovers videotape not only the painting, as they had initially planned, but also themselves and the places surrounding them – the scenery of Venice which is the background to the events. The narration time is the time when Luis, after Bea’s death, replays the tapes and wants to create the new whole out of them. I have mentioned memory, the broken picture of the past and the repetition which in the formal structure give the novel the fragmentary form. It is worth adding that another characteristic feature of the novel, to some extent imitating memory processes, is film editing. In the novel editing is presented as a technique of forming history by free addition of events that results in a variety of elliptical figures. Such a technique should not be surprising because Majewski studied thoroughly the secrets of film craft. It is another, typically modernistic trick creating time and space ellipses and determining the inner bond of such poethics of fragment. As a consequence, a synthesis of arts is created, in which artefacts and various sign systems interpret one another.

The Gardens of delights

'Granular' (because dispersed) ecphrasis proliferates in the world presented in the novel, spreads and sprouts among the love of the protagonists, who, together with their world, become a part of the work. The couple act out the successive scenes from the Bosch's triptych. The string of events is stretched between life and death. What dying Bea wants most is to live her last weeks in the real garden of earthly delights, created on the model of Bosch's work of art, which for the last years has been her obsession. Venice becomes the stage and all of the lovers' actions are acted out, have a performative character. Their performance annexes the space of Venice, their bodies, inhabitants of the town, surrounding objects. The most important issue, the basis of the performance is a peculiar expansion of the work of art on the whole reality: "In the next take, you sleep in the cocoon with your head resting on a bunch of grapes, just like the man in *The Garden* under the air-bladder, and I wake you up and feed you. In the water of a fountain the ibis feeds the woman with a wild strawberry impaled on a thin needle like a beak, and I stick wild strawberries on the hairpin" (Majewski 2002, p. 112).

"I embrace you. We dance in the knee-deep water, just like the couple from *The Garden of Delights*, next to the goldfinch feeding the faithful people blackberries" (Majewski 2002, p. 102). This both performative and imitative character of actions constitutes the next transfer, is the next substrate of art synthesis – a theatrical element.

Together with the performance, aesthetic thinking stretches across the whole reality. Ontology, epistemology and axiology become intertwined, gaining their fully aesthetic dimension. Only that dimension enables functioning of these elements on the stage of events. Then we deal with aesthetization of the reality, where all the elements of the world presented, undergo the aesthetic transformation. At this moment one can refer to the conception of Wolfgang Iser, who does not treat aesthetics only as the knowledge of beauty, but referring to the source of the term and to the philosophy of Kant, Iser understands aesthetics as: "Topicalization of all kinds of perceptions, sensory perceptions equally with spiritual ones, ordinary and sublime perceptions, belonging to the empirical world and to the sphere of art" (Iser 1977, p. 521).

However, the theory of Iser also includes anaesthetics that is not the opposite of aesthetics, but anaesthetics that permanently exists within the sphere of aesthetics. This is the attitude of growing 'anaesthesia' for aesthetic stimuli, the field interested in lack of any sensations. According to Jan Balbierz who interprets Iser (and who uses the most appropriate vocabulary for these reflections), the sphere of anaesthetics includes: "virtual 'gardens of delights', video clips offering three-dimensional copies of the most impressive

monuments in the world and finally `phones that use television pictures. That is why they do not necessarily mean spiritual dwarfishness but they enable (safe because anaesthetic) fulfilment of the most secret dreams of humankind” (Balbierz 2004, p. 464).

Majewski looks at reality through the prism of art and in this way he analyzes it, using his own dispositives and being lavish with intertextuality as the only possibility of explaining the world. Anaesthetic discourse is extremely important in the novel and virtual ‘gardens of delights’ are permanently included in art and are not situated at its antipodes: “The Television screen is now the moon rising and setting in our flats. It determines plans for the day, attracts and repels, stimulates and calms. The Television screen casts its artificial light on our motionless pupils and all earthly matter is subordinate to it. We do not live, we watch and the television lives our life. Constantly busy, it is everywhere and nowhere. Why move and think when it knows and answers for us. Its existence is rich and accompanied by blondes wearing make- up and gigolos with flawless teeth and tie knots. If Bosch were alive, he would not paint the children of the moon but the children of the television, drowning in a technically perfect hell” (Majewski 2002, p. 30).

It is an odd type of irremovable reverse in great art which at the same time gives sense to any art discourse – in spite of, or maybe thanks to growing certainty that trace is more permanent than life.

Translation: Agnieszka Krywalska

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