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Travelling in Time and Space: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll and *In Wonderland* by Sylwia Chutnik

Abstract: The paper offers a reading of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Sylwia Chutnik's collection of short stories *W krainie czarów* [In wonderland], addressing the protagonists' journey into self. Chutnik's stories are interpreted in terms of some key motifs drawn from a reading of Carroll's novel, which constitute the touch points of the two authorial designs: dream, imagination, metamorphosis, change, language, auto-thematicity, the demiurgic role of the narrator, and an open ending. Juxtaposed, these concepts shed light on the problem of travelling in time and space understood as a return to the world of childhood imagination. The analysis of Chutnik's eleven short stories reveals a literary creation of signifying space, in particular the images of Warsaw and Silesia as sites appropriated by history as well as by the protagonists. In every case (be it cities, people's experiences or post-traumatic stories), an attempted interpretation of particular places and times is shown as a process of discovering the mythology of space – a return to a personal Wonderland. The reflections are brought together by referring to the problem of "bad memory", a literary means of presenting the reader with alternative testimonies of postmemory.

Keywords: dream, imagination, metamorphosis, change, language, autothematism, the demiurge-narrator, an open ending

KEY ELEMENTS – A RECONNAISSANCE

Published in 2014, the short story collection *W krainie czarów* [In wonderland] by the Polish author Sylwia Chutnik is discussed here¹ in the context of travelling in time and space understood as a return to the world

¹ The present article is a modified version of my text "Powrót do Krainy Czarów. Podróż w czasie i przestrzeni w prozie Sylwii Chutnik" [A return to Wonderland. Travelling in time and space in the fiction of Sylwia Chutnik], published in Polish in the edited volume: D. Hejda, A. Jakubowska-Ożóg (eds.), *Przestrzeń i czas w lekturze – lektura przestrzeni i czasu* [Space and time in reading – reading space and time] (Włodarczyk, 2019).

of childhood imagination. Before moving on to present these reflections, however, I will identify key elements drawn from the construction axis of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which are reflected in Chutnik's fictive convention. The Polish author's stories serve here as an illustration of a literary creation of signifying space, in particular the images of Warsaw and Silesia as sites appropriated by history as well as by the protagonists. In every case (be it cities, people's experiences or post-traumatic stories), an attempted interpretation of signifying places and times is shown as a process of discovering the mythology of space – a return to a personal Wonderland².

My reflections are brought together also by a reference to the problem of “bad memory” as a literary means of presenting the reader with alternative testimonies of postmemory³. The elements emerging from my reading of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*⁴, which are the touch points of the two authors' visions, give insight into the problem of the returns in time and space in Chutnik's short stories. These motifs include: dream as a form of movement and return, offering an opportunity for self-analysis; imagination, initiating the possibility of self-creation and self-change; mental and identity

² Chutnik, unlike Carroll and his Polish translators, does not capitalize the noun. I follow her convention unless using “Wonderland” as a proper name and metaphor.

³ The term refers to the conference *Bad memory: Counter-history in Polish theatre and drama*, organized by the Faculty of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University, Jerzy Grotowski Institute, and the editorial team of *Didaskalia* journal in 2011. “Bad memory” should not have negative connotations; it refers to narrative and performative devices aimed at violating the current symbolic order, breaking stereotypes and creating alternative testimonies, bringing back past events from oblivion, deforming them and presenting them as a negative, i.e. incorrectness. Such ways of presenting post-traumatic experiences may cause concern or indignation, but their aim goes beyond exposing audiences to ugliness. Namely, it is about restoring to history that which has been forgotten or passed over in silence. When transferring these reflections to the level of literature, it should be emphasized that contemporary narrative ceases to be transparent and innocent. Thus, it brings justified fear and anxiety, inflicts suffering on the reader, leading him or her towards attempts at self-recognition and self-determination (see Kwaśniewska, Niziołek, 2012).

⁴ I deliberately omit the following aspects: the analysis of Carroll's language; his mathematical references; the symbolic layers of the characters, i.e. their links with their real-life models, whom the author used in a polemical manner; the characters' status in the work; and the controversies around Carroll himself. These problems merit separate studies, far beyond the scope of the present paper.

An interesting contribution to the discussion around Carroll is the documentary film *The Secret Life of Lewis Carroll*, which portrays the author and the origins of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The authors decipher his pen name and address issues such as the influence of Victorian moral puritanism on his writing, accusations of paedophilia connected with his passion for photographing half-naked young girls, or his opium experiments, as well as the disappearance from his diary of pages from the period when the Liddell shastily left Oxford.

metamorphosis; change as movement, return and a process of (re)constituting oneself; the power of language, which individualizes the characters or the narrator and creates of the world; the auto-thematicity of storytelling; the demiurgic role of the narrator; an open ending.

IN ALICE'S WORLD...

*Alice! A childish story take
And, with a gentle hand,
Lay it where Childhood's dreams are twined
In Memory's mystic band.*

(Carroll, 2002: 10)

In order to shed light on the links between Chutnik's stories and Carroll's novel, we must return to the world of Alice herself. One July afternoon, Alice Liddell and her two sisters, Lorina Charlotte and Edith Mary, took a boat trip on the Thames⁵, accompanied by the Reverend Robinson Duckworth and the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the future author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which was published under his pen name Lewis Carroll. The story about Alice's adventures originated as entertainment for the girls during the lazy time on the boat; its book version was created two years later, at the request of the then ten-year-old Alice Liddell. The adventures of the little heroine are unusual for several important reasons.

AN ONEIRIC IMAGINARIUM

Falling asleep, the girl actually escaped boredom. She did not fancy picking daisies for daisy-chains or being a diligent and polite pupil in the care of her governess. The fictional space thus appears as an opportunity to open a more attractive dimension. Alice takes a nap because sleep is a way of getting around or breaking the rules of Victorian upbringing, which have become deeply ingrained in her, to the extent that they manifest themselves in the dream space, when Alice seeks a rational explanation of the laws governing the underground world. This is in vain, Marta Matylda Kania argues, because Alice "fell into a world improved by herself", which, "however, does not fulfil her dreams; moreover, it surprises, irks and even frightens her time and again" (Kania, 2014: 198)⁶.

⁵ The boat trip took place on 4th July 1862, taking the participants from Oxford's Folly Bridge to the village of Godstow.

⁶ Polish-language sources referenced in the bibliography, including Chutnik's stories, were not translated into English. The quotations were translated by the translator of the present article.

In the oneiric story, the girl draws up a letter to her foot⁷, scolds herself or allows particular behaviours⁸, or triggers desired actions⁹. For example, let us remember that when the Queen of Hearts orders her to be beheaded, Alice rationally assesses the situation and reacts decidedly: “Nonsense!” (Carroll, 2002: 36). Similarly, when in the court scene she realizes that she has found herself in an irrational and fictional situation, she speaks out agitated: “Who cares for you?” said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.) “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” (Carroll, 2002: 50). Even the Duchess, who tries to come up with a moral to every sentence in a conversation, notes: “what a clear way you have of putting things!” (Carroll, 2002: 39). Indeed, for her age, Alice is exceptionally capable of assessing her own situation. She skillfully takes advantage of the fact that this is a space of her own dream.

MOCKING A CHILDREN’S FAIRY TALE

In light of the above, it becomes clear that we are only seemingly dealing here with a story for children, which subverts the convention of a traditional fairy tale. Jolanta Kozak, the author of the sixth Polish translation of the masterpiece, calls it an unconventional fairy tale (Kozak, 2000: 167). This is already visible at the narrative level, with a clearly defined boundary between the space of the realistic and that of the fantastic. However, this border is not due to a lack of contact between or mutual permeability of these structures; it is Alice herself who, despite being in a “dream reality”, constantly bangs on the door of the world that exists beyond dream. Carroll employed auto-thematic writing with mathematical precision, while at the same time creating an oneiric story and a deconstructed fairy tale, transgressing the traditional writing conventions of his age. Thus, in a mocking gesture, he inscribed himself in the story. The question remains open as to the extent to which the author himself speaks through the figure of the young heroine.

That said, the fairy tale fantasy convention requires that the space of fiction is governed by its own laws, and indeed this is the case here, except

⁷ “Alice’s Right Foot, Esq., Hearthrug, near the Fender, (with Alice’s love)” (Carroll, 2002: 14).

⁸ “Come, there’s no use in crying like that!” said Alice to herself, rather sharply; ‘I advise you to leave off this minute!’ She generally gave herself very good advice, (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes” (Carroll, 2002: 13).

⁹ “I do hope it’ll make me grow large again, for really I’m quite tired of being such a tiny little thing!’ It did so indeed, and much sooner than she had expected: before she had drunk half the bottle, she found her head pressing against the ceiling, and had to stoop to save her neck from being broken. She hastily put down the bottle, saying to herself ‘That’s quite enough – I hope I shan’t grow any more – As it is, I can’t get out at the door – I do wish I hadn’t drunk quite so much!’” (Carroll, 2002: 21).

that rational reasoning is beginning to replace the fairy-tale quality and the faith in the legitimate existence of fantasy space. Thus, what should remain justified within a fairy tale and acceptable according to its internal cause-and-effect sequence, though inexplicable from the position of rational thinking, becomes an obstacle to considering *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in fairy-tale terms. The protagonist keeps clearly counteracting the tradition, thus appearing as a girl with an extraordinary personality, intellect and awareness. In fact, the oneiric space is reserved for expressing the inexplicable, specific and unconventional. And although the framework of the story follows a fairy-tale, fantastic logic, Alice continuously and unsuccessfully tries to explain the fantastic order in terms of real meanings, principles and implications. Subjected to ever new transformations, she begins to miss the Victorian reality, although her new situation does not cease to pique her curiosity. At one point, she confesses nostalgically:

I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole – and yet – and yet – it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what can have happened to me! When I used to read fairy-tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I'll write one – but I'm grown up now” (Carroll, 2002: 21).

Moreover, the protagonist's adventures auto-thematically become the content of the story. Thus, Carroll not only mocks conservative morality and the upbringing of young girls, but also unmasks the metaphoric structure of fairy tales¹⁰. The metaphor undergoes metamorphosing, so that what is not possible in reality becomes possible on the quasi-fantastic plane, except that Carroll unmasks it, unfreezes it and makes it real at the level of language. This results in further rhetorical modification of the catachresis, for example when the Duchess's ugly screaming baby is shown as a piglet. Carroll does not stop at linguistic comparison. Consequently, that which would usually be possible only at the level of language becomes possible in Wonderland.

Linguistic games therefore enable all kinds of metamorphoses, because it is on the ground of language that the logic of the absurd can come into existence. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is thus a quasi-fantastic realization of a fairy tale, where the metaphor subjected to metamorphosis retains a strong connection with reality. Thus, Carroll's story can also be seen as a mystification of a fairy tale, a “false lie”¹¹. The metaphor is embodied almost too accu-

¹⁰ A perfect example of “unfreezing” metaphors at the linguistic level is the fictional embodiment of the idiomatic “Cheshire cat”. For a discussion of how problematic this proved in Polish translations, see Kozak, 2000: 170, 175–177.

¹¹ Jolanta Kozak argues that Carroll's story “is a mystification of a fairy tale, a false lie – if a fairy tale, by definition, is to be a true lie: a metamorphosis” (Kozak, 2000: 173).

rately, even surrealistically, on the verge between reality and dream¹². Kozak convincingly concludes that “The whole *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is a metaphor for the revival of a reality sunken in metaphor like an insect in amber” (Kozak, 2000: 173). Carroll’s mocking gesture is revealed here, which goes in the direction of magical (or fantastic) realism. The author in a sense plays a game with the reader, involving him or her in a world which combines fantastic and realistic elements, because the border between them is definitely blurred.

Thus, reading becomes a deciphering of meanings. Moreover, the main story takes place in the space of the dream and imagination of the extra ordinary protagonist, where timelessness and inexplicable logic reign supreme. On the one hand, Alice is endowed with demiurgic power, influencing events and the world, and consequently disturbing its order. On the other hand, however, as an intruder rather than an inhabitant of Wonderland, she undermines its logic, trying to refer to principles familiar to and acknowledged by herself.

ALICE’S TRANSFORMATION: SUBJECTIVITY AND LANGUAGE

These observations lead to an important question: what and whose metamorphosis is actually at stake here? Falling down the rabbit hole brings to mind the passage from lethargy to deep sleep. Alice is on the verge of dreaming¹³. Her story constitutes a space of adventure and surreal situations, but also a synonym of a wondrous, indeed dream-like reality. Her falling is slow enough to allow time for reflection. Falling down and falling asleep are thus a certain rite of passage. Alice is puzzled. “Down, down, down. Would the fall *never* come to an end?”, the narrator comments: “Down, down, down. There was nothing else to do, so Alice soon began talking [to herself] again” (Carroll, 2002: 12).

The laws of time and logic do not matter in this reality. Time is devoid of its linearity, and consequently it is difficult to determine it with any precision. It is the space of the heroine’s adventure, the product of her exuberant imagination, and the effect of her short nap. In timelessness, Alice experiences the duality of her selfhood (she talks to herself, scolds herself, undergoes physical metamorphoses), but the most important are her mental and identity transformations. When she and her world fall apart, it happens in the safe perspective of dream. When Alice wakes up, she will never be the same person again. Dream

¹² In this regard, it is quite telling that the arch-surrealist Salvador Dali illustrated all chapters of Carroll’s novel. Also Andre Breton and Marc Chagall reimagined Alice’s adventures in their works.

¹³ It is worth pointing out that the first stage of slow-wave sleep, NREM (non-rapid eye movement), may involve various sensations, including that of falling down. This marks the passage to deep sleep proper, i.e. the REM phase, which involves dreaming.

is a road to *Bildung*, to growing mature, to identity shaping, but it is also a catalyst for the disintegration of the existing image of self and the world, and thus a road to developing a strong subjectivity.

An interesting context for the above considerations is provided by Kania's analysis of Alice as a rhetorical subjectivity, *homo rhetoricus* (Kania, 2014). In light of Harold Bloom's theory of *The Anxiety of Influence* (Bloom, 2002; see Auerbach, 1987), Carroll's heroine is a dynamic character, who, thanks to her own power of imagination, undergoes a transformation in a new space: her subjectivity changes and develops. Indeed, subjectivity and imagination are closely interdependent; it is thanks to imagination that there exists a subjectivity able to transform particular structures, traditions and cultures.

The same holds true for Bloom's vision of the young poet trying to transcend what he found. In order to express himself as an author, he has to make a certain transformation in relation to the achievements of his predecessors. Important for understanding the transformation of subjectivity are the figures of reduction and representation. The former comprise *clinamen*, *kenosis*, and *askesis*.

The new situation and new rules are defined as *clinamen*, which is followed by a painful disillusionment with the previously observed rules, expressed as *kenosis*; this is manifested in a reflection after a given event: *askesis*. Alice, too, travels through the underground world, investigating its rules and ineffectively trying to apply petrified conventions. All kinds of cognitive disproportions force her to rethink the situation. The gaps emergent in the figures of reduction are alternately filled by other figures, belonging to the category of representation, namely *tessera*, *daemonization*, and *apophrades*.

Tessera is a corollary and complement to *clinamen*. And thus the new must fill the emergent clefts. Alice thus tries to play according to the rules applied by the inhabitants of Wonderland residents, and to draw further conclusions on that basis. The reflection of *askesies*, in turn, leads her towards *daemonization*, which means making an effort to be independent and trying to influence the events and changes in the new situation. The protagonist examines the rules on her own and tries to verify them in order to be able to settle in the new reality. *Apophrades* crowns the individual's efforts: it entails opening up to the new world. This issue remains unknown, because Alice wakes up. Even having read *Through the Looking Glass*, we have no way of knowing whether her transformation would be ultimate and lasting.

Drawing on the figures of reduction and representation, one can see that it is above all the protagonist's subjectivity that undergoes a metamorphosis. Quite significant for her search of self is her meeting the Caterpillar. Asked who she was, she replies very rationally:

I – I hardly know, sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.

”Pressed by the Caterpillar, she continues: “I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, sir;” said Alice, ‘because I’m not myself, you see’ (Carroll, 2002: 24).

How and where are we to learn who Alice is?

The answer has been hidden in Alice’s mysterious surroundings; it is this environment that guards the secret of her transforming identity (Auerbach, 1987: 33). After all, the girl does not ask where she is, but who she is. In this way she opens up to the possibility of change. Alice tries to change the dream world and thus confirm her identity. This happens with every obstacle and new situation she encounters. However, these actions do not lead her to a great change, or at least this does not transpire from Carroll’s oneiric story. The protagonist is clearly not ready for a definitive breakthrough. Her metamorphic subjectivity only transforms that which is known and stable. That said, despite her immaturity, Alice tries to experiment, impersonating Mary Ann, White Rabbit’s housemaid. In this way, she wants to test safely the effect a potential transformation might have on her.

She is also undeniably aware of the differences between herself and her peers. She conducts an insightful and apt analysis of this matter:

‘I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night?... I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that’s the great puzzle!’ And she began thinking over all the children she knew that were of the same age as herself, to see if she could have been changed for any of them. ‘I’m sure I’m not Ada,’ she said, ‘for her hair goes in such long ringlets, and mine doesn’t go in ringlets at all; and I’m sure I can’t be Mabel, for I know all sorts of things, and she, oh! she knows such a very little! Besides, she’s she, and I’m I, and – oh dear, how puzzling it all is!’ (Carroll, 2002: 14–15).

The girl feels she is an exceptional and unique individual, and this is why Carroll lets her break rules and have her own opinions. Nevertheless, she needs stability in self-perception. And it is not her body, alternating in size, but her language that turns out to be the strongest gesture of individualization when the continuous changes of the environment disturb the feeling of being oneself.

The metamorphoses that she accepts transform her body or, temporarily, her identity, but they are the only way of into Wonderland. Changes in her situation broaden her field of vision. Identity and the need for individualization become a task to be accomplished. The very leap into the rabbit hole is the first step towards independence. But Alice rejects adventure the moment she wakes up. Rationality takes control over illusion. Alice is a child, and she returns to herself: to a safe space, familiar and stable. It is only in the future that she will face real choices and changes. The dream metamorphoses were a general rehearsal, an initiation in the path of constant growth and maturation, of distinguishing what is one’s own, not one’s own, and foreign. However, for change to be lasting, a will to change is needed, and Alice is after all still a child.

According to Bloom's theory, the essence of metamorphosis is the possibility of liberating the imagination, which marks the beginning of creation, of creating and transforming oneself, rather than being a reproductive gesture. And although Alice, as a child, should not find this difficult, it turns out that she is firmly rooted in the spacetime of the 19th-century Victorian England. We will not know the end of her journey, for in fact this is not what matters most; what does is the path itself, movement, change, and the transformation of the protagonist. Carroll skillfully dodged ultimate resolution when he made Alice's sister wake her up. This means that the way back is not closed. The door to Wonderland can still be opened.

RETURNS AND RECONFIGURATIONS IN SYLWIA CHUTNIK'S WONDERLAND

The Polish author Sylwia Chutnik also leaves all of her short stories suspended. Hidden behind her protagonists, she slightly opens the door to their inner Wonderlands. Like Lewis Carroll's story, sleep/dream is used here to tame difficult subjects. Chutnik certainly ranks among the pioneers; alongside Joanna Bator, Igor Ostachowicz or Michał Witkowski, she was one of the first Polish authors of fiction who made everyday life their theme. In an interview for the Polish Radio, she said she wanted to "write herself out" (Nowak, 2014). In this vein, she shows what is going on here and through the looking glass, behind the wall, under the rickety floor, torn wallpaper or flaking plaster, and thus she reveals secret passage ways into her characters. The each short stories¹⁴ collected under the heading *In Wonderland* are governed by nonsensical lowness, drowsiness, stupor, withdrawal from the actual here and now. This is necessary to enable the protagonists' transformations. Lack of closure is compensated for by the chance to return to childhood, where everything was possible and acceptable. The escape into sleep or apathy is underlain with a fear of reality. A leap into another dimension, on the one hand, means withdrawal or inactivity, yet on the other hand it is an attempt to understand one's situation, to live for a moment by a different story, and finally to reflect on oneself: on death, loneliness, one's own and the other's identity, pain, suffering. Like in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, in Chutnik's writing the inner space is fictitious, because it is made of hopes and memories, but the cities and sites are very real indeed. Both space and time undergo a kind of mythologization, becoming a safe somewhere and sometime. It is worth considering how and under what circumstances Sylwia Chutnik managed to awaken Alice in herself, and also, what status she has as a narrator of the stories: is she rather Alice or perhaps her older sister?

¹⁴ Later in the article, I refer to nine out of eleven stories that illustrate the transformation process of each of the characters, which is the key to rebuilding their current lives.

It is undoubtable that the story of Lewis Carroll's young protagonist influenced Chutnik's collection of short stories *In Wonderland*, yet both the references to the specific concept of a fairy tale and the protagonists go beyond a superficial inspiration. The Polish author's stories tear the reader out of his or her safe space, mercilessly cutting open living and sore tissue, and shutting out the previously possible passageways to Wonderland with a big bang. Before our eyes, the protagonists undergo significant transformations, and we as readers grow to develop empathy. Whether they miss a deceased husband or grandfather, a cat, a child put to adoption, parents, or normal life, the characters' longings are mythical signifying spaces and signifying times: a land of happiness. But they are also a spacetime in which life was real and lived on one's own behalf, a spacetime whose axis delimits the border between now and then, life and death, imagination and reality, between retreating to a safe place and time and the need for development, maturing to be able to change, and transforming oneself. These are ordinary situations, nothing here is fiction; yet the protagonists fall into fiction when they flee deep into themselves, sink into themselves. Indeed, there is no wondrous magic and there will not be. Reality is the prose of life and a stream of stories. Chutnik examines all remains and fossils under a magnifying glass, reviving and transforming them. As the critic Jarosław Czechowicz argues, the art of narrating stories consists in carefully "listening to those who do not want to speak even to themselves, and Chutnik listens attentively, makes literature out of it, and reaches a point where stories come to life while the storytellers want to be absorbed by nothingness" (Czechowicz, 2014).

Falling as a process of liberating oneself from the current space time happens not only to Alice and to the protagonists of *In Wonderland*, but also to ourselves. The rabbit hole and the slow fall signify one's readiness to understand oneself in a different space; they carry the opportunity to open up to future events or return to the past, displacing the present. Chutnik rebels against the way of the world. She is well aware that she needs to change herself in order for the space around her to be transformed as well. She does not know how to define herself differently, yet she has to rewrite herself in a way.

The eponymous opening short story "In Wonderland" is fundamental in this respect, as it reveals the auto-thematic quality of her prose. Following the sudden, unexpected death of her grandfather, the author begins to put together her personal story. She returns to the allotment garden, her childhood hideout, understanding, though not accepting, the fact that life is not a fairy tale. With her grandfather's passing, her safe world falls apart. Magic will not work here, and rationalizing the situation only strengthens her sense of guilt for not using her time efficiently. In order to reassemble that which has disintegrated, she must redefine the world and transform herself. Expressing mockery and pain, Chutnik writes: "When I was very young, I was also small, but nothing ever surprised me... Now I know that... death can also be in the bushes, leaves

and in the soft grass, which had been reserved for fairies, ants, cigarette butts” (Chutnik, 2014: 9–10).

She reminisces about the building of the house on the allotment, about her grandfather’s making sure that it is solid and durable – especially the roof as the archetypal sense of security. All the more so that her grandfather was a roofer. Being an only child, she treated this place above all as a field where her inner imagination and creativity could be triggered, but also as a safe shelter. Beginning to tell the story to herself, Chutnik restarts the process of sinking in her thoughts, gradually returning to Wonderland – to the places that constitute the map of her growing up. Even though it has been two years since the tragic event on the allotment, she cannot cope with the loss of a loved one, she is helpless, and, like Alice, on the one hand she tries to rationalize the situation, but on the other hand she would prefer to hide in a safe place, to return to herself in a different space and more opportune moments: “An adult Alice is readjusting the bows on her pigtails and figuring how to squeeze through the door” (Chutnik, 2014: 28). Similar as in the case of Carroll’s protagonist, here, too, the change of situation broadens the field of her vision of herself, a vision which she would have probably not ventured soon otherwise.

RETURN AS RETRIEVING ONESELF

Chutnik’s personal story is only an introduction, a rehearsal before further explorations and expansions, a way of renaming oneself and developing subsequent deliberations. How, then, can one return to a safe land when faced with a deficit of wonder? One must dare leap down the rabbit hole, like the eponymous protagonist of the second story, “Anna”, in which sleep plays a significant role. The author presents the story of Anna Kowalec and her mother, who live in Mysłowice, Silesia. Anna lives an unsuccessful life with her unemployed husband and two children. She is the carer of her old, incapacitated mother, who has led an empty existence since her last parting with her parents at the gates of the ghetto. The premature and unexpected loss of marks her for life. The narrator penetrates into the woman’s dementia-ridden subconscious: “This time is called sleep, the eyelids are closed, but terrible images pass underneath, like in a *kaiserpanorama*. Slide by slide. Here, mother is Antonina Żabińska¹⁵, age eight” (Chutnik, 2014: 38). The woman is stuck in her childhood, waiting for the return of her guardians; she does not even try to live in the present. Following the seventy-year-old wheel-chaired protagonist through the streets of the former ghetto on her journey to meet herself, to return and an-

¹⁵ While watching TV broadcast, it is highly probable that the main protagonist compares her childhood during occupation with the early experiences of the writer Antonina Żabińska, the wife of the director of the Warsaw zoo. Probably dementia is blurring the lines between her life and the biography of the other one. Both lost their parents very early during World War II.

chor herself in her time and space, we get to know the topography of the area. However, the wartime map of the city has been covered by new infrastructure. In the end, the old woman is stopped by the police. Sitting in her wheelchair, she will not talk to the officers; her imagination takes her to a different time and place. It is the language that would be the only way to transcend herself and space-time, constituting a gesture of individualization in spite of physical disability. But she does not have it and never did, or, more precisely, she has denied herself the right to have it: “She stopped talking because it didn’t make any sense anymore” (Chutnik, 2014: 52).

Chutnik gives her back her lost voice, creating a story that will make her return possible. The old woman “was preparing herself for the road, testing different scenarios in her head, amidst what-ifs, trying to predict various situations” (Chutnik, 2014: 50).

She set off to bring back the past, in the city of the former ghetto, former glory, Kiepura [popular singer] and Gierek [communist party leader], even Pola Negri. She was all in herself, in the excitement, holding dresses which she had prepared for better times. She ran away from staring into the window. To the ghetto (Chutnik, 2014: 46).

Her story has a metamorphous finale. Thanks to Anna, who had previously ignored her mother’s nostalgia, the ending remains open. The mother recovers herself, and the daughter transforms herself, because so far “she did not understand anything, but in moments of stress the mind often takes on open forms, which we would not even expect, which are normally alien to us. And the daughter’s mind has understood everything” (Chutnik, 2014: 54).

POLA NEGRI: AN IMAGE TRANSFORMED

In the third story the eponymous “Pola” lives by illusions, waiting for a different, better time. The narrative reveals a short episode from the life of the actress Pola Negri, the star of silent film; it is only a fragment of her stay in Sosnowiec, where she married a count and for a moment got trapped in his claustrophobic family relations. The time of 1919–1920 stopped in a particular space, but the heroine is long gone. Only a commemorative plaque on the tenement house is a trap for memories. Chutnik presents the city as a prison for outdated dreams, from which it is impossible to escape. Sosnowiec, which became the film star’s home only for a while, appears as a “sucker of talents, aspirations and ambitions” (Chutnik, 2014: 67). Perhaps the present should come to terms with this unwanted moment, which for Negri meant no more than a short flash. For the actress, it was an unexpected leap down the rabbit hole, which brought deep disappointment and left a few unwanted photographs. The ghost of that times haunts the space of the tenement house as though entrapped, struggling against internal destruction caused by a toxic relationship.

Thanks to Chutnik, the image of Pola Negri is transformed. The author brings to life her void story and frees her from the obligation to serve the memory of place and time.

TRANSGRESSING ONESELF

“Bożena from Poznańska Street” is the protagonist to whom Chutnik gives a voice in the fourth short story. Bożena has no illusions about her life; she is aware of her downfall. She unceremoniously states in an imaginary conversation: “I’m an old slut who can be spat at when she shows up” (Chutnik, 2014: 71). Even though life keeps throwing her into unwanted spaces after she got herself involved in the world of prostitution, nightclubs, and random events as a young and carefree girl, she now declares: “I don’t care, it’s nothing to me” (Chutnik, 2014: 75). However, she feels stuck in a deadlock. After all, it is impossible to cut out nagging thoughts, to stop reflecting on alternative scenarios, especially that she cannot merely watch her life fly past.

She is haunted by the demons of the past; she returns to the moment when she was abducted by two men and brutally raped. Back then, the only way to survive was to withdraw from herself, use the power of imagination and endure the paralyzing fear. As she self-diagnosed it after many years, what worked at that time was “mainly the defense mechanism of self-preservation, a transition to another dimension [so that] the girl lies there and waits” (Chutnik, 2014: 78–79).

Bożena knows that she built her life in the shape of a cage, which she is not able to leave slamming the door behind her. In the course of the narrative, however, the woman, now past fifty, returns to a signifying space, namely a hospital in Pomerania, where she left her daughter after birth. Coming there for a ritualistic holiday every year, Bożena frees herself from a mental trap. Even though she knows she is not going to meet her child there, this return takes her to a space and time where she can experience herself from years before. The author paves for her protagonist a way through the looking glass.

RE-DESCRIBING ONESELF

“Innocent sorceresses” introduces the reader to two women, whose story takes place on a lazy, hot July day, like the Thames cruise in which Alice and her sisters took part. One of Chutnik’s protagonists recently lost her husband in tragic circumstances, the other lost her cat. They share the same surroundings (they both live in Warsaw) and experiences from back when they were young girls; their friendship has stood the test of twenty years’ time. In the story of one of the women, a significant role is played by a mirror, which made her house a two-dimensional space. Every time she entered the room, her husband’s desk was reflected in it, and with it the small gifts he would leave there for her. In that sense, the ability to as if go through the looking glass gave her

a feeling of a personal, safe space. But this Wonderland ceased to exist with the sudden death of her husband. She confesses: “When I go in now, I don’t look at anything, because there’s no mirror. / I broke the mirror. I started pounding it with my shoe until it fell and smashed into pieces. Without the gifts on the desk I don’t need the mirror” (Chutnik, 2014: 10). It is only when she meets her schoolfriend that the possibility of a transition into another dimension opens up, so that there is a chance for return.

The other protagonist allows the first one to cast a spell on the spacetime, if only for a moment, to find herself in physical closeness. Then, like Alice, she closes her eyes and falls into lethargy, a space close to her opens. She says: “Then I realized that it could be something good, a safe sort (because it’s with a friend) of playing house. Playing marriage. Playing something that is not there, playing two bodies” (Chutnik, 2014: 118). In this way, a kindred soul helps her return to the time with her husband. After all, she will need to re-write herself.

NARRATIVE LANGUAGE AS THE PATH TO RETRIEVING ONESELF

The eponymous protagonist of the seventh story, “Tadeusz”, lives with his old infirm mother in Sosnowiec. He has been suffering from a writer’s block for twenty years. He is not able to catch the rhythm anew; as Chutnik suggests, his greatest desire is to renew his personal alphabet. He is constantly struggling, because

He forgot his words; he got lost in thousandfold narratives... History knows such cases, where someone has completely stopped believing in letters, in speaking and writing. He would box the double meanings, wrestle the lack of substance... By himself, completely alone, he would punch the air helplessly with his fists, trying to break through one hundred thousand walls stopping him from finally understanding communication” (Chutnik, 2014: 126–127).

Like Carroll’s Alice, the burnt-out writer knows that in linguistic and logical reasoning “even when the sense is lost, one must not stop looking for it. That’s how it’s done” (Chutnik, 2014: 127).

He manages to find himself in the space of memories, returning to the 1970s. One summer holiday, when they were fishing together on the lake, Tadeusz’s father drowned before his son’s eyes. Years later, as an adult man, Tadeusz returns to that time, knowing “that this is the last moment to tell his mother what he has been carrying inside him for so long” (Chutnik, 2014: 131). For there are two versions of the tragic event. In the second one, he did not try to rescue his father, rather thinking of saving his mother from him.

As the woman is dying in a dementia trance, Tadeusz brings himself to tell the story. From that moment on, he retrieves time, individualized language and lost meaning; he starts writing again. One night,

“the ageing man was writing down his forgotten words until dawn. He jumped from one letter to another, looped meanings and lured punch lines. That sounds good, fresh. A, b, c, d, e, all the rest. He wrote out two cartridges, used a ream of paper. Then he slept for two days, calm and satisfied. When he woke up, he put the finished text in the drawer” (Chutnik, 2014: 143–144).

In fact, a leap into the space of sleep becomes a time of return to oneself. Thanks to Chutnik’s story, Tadeusz regains his language and transforms himself. The continuation remains open to new words, sensations and memories.

TIME ARRESTED: OPENING A NEW SPACE

We meet Piotr, the protagonist of the eighth story in the volume, “A dance”, at a point when he finally manages to convince himself to go to a carnival dance party. Dancing with a stranger, he returns to his old self, from back at technical college. The dance creates a kind of timelessness and a blurred, lethargic space:

“They were two separate people trying to look for their own meanings of life, currently trampled by hundreds of feet jumping like possessed. / Happy and unsure, he closed his eyes and for a moment he was nowhere. This sensation let him recall a similar scene at a disco in Piaseczno” (Chutnik, 2014: 160–161).

This experience helps Piotr see himself in a different way. In his present daily life, time has stopped. He recovers it when he allows himself to break the usual way of spending his days.

Caring for his sick mother, he completely forgot himself, he fell into numbness. This inert trance, the state of his mentality and emotions trapped in a void, is best reflected in the space of his room, which

looked like a mausoleum of a hibernated man without a future. / His mother lay there for years, half-conscious, all in fear. What’s going to happen when I’m gone, my little son, you won’t cope. The little son would then look at the clock and multiply the minutes of his disappointment. He wanted that this may already. He didn’t have the strength for all that anymore... In a sense, he was suspended in a void, like dust, which can be seen against the light, but there is no use for it, and no one cares about it (Chutnik, 2014: 165).

Chutnik gives us a peek of a world in which the protagonist’s metamorphosis cannot be completed yet. We witness the general rehearsal of his barely noticeable rise towards independence and the right and will to be a separate individual. The momentary curvature of his spacetime during the dance party continues in his imagination, when the next morning Piotr returns to the events of the evening. Then the narrative laconically indicates the inconspicuous death of his mother. Without emotions, the protagonist begins to fold his clothes, as if getting ready for his transformation.

MURANÓW DISTRICT AND THE HISTORY OF NON-MEMORY

The story “Murano” settles the balance with history’s remorse, also revealing Sylwia Chutnik’s spectacular fairy-tale and historical writing gusto. Thanks to the memories of the old, bitter grandmother, two grandchildren tackle the myths of an old tenement house which supposedly hoards valuables left by the Jews. The house in Dzielna Street, present-day Muranów district, during World War Two stood within the borders of the Warsaw Ghetto. The story is a post-memorial narrative of a signifying place and time, whose history cannot be remembered by either the children protagonists or Chutnik herself. As a result, we are dealing with a specific way of evoking images of the past, taking the form of “bad memory” (Kwaśniewska, Niziołek, 2012). These writerly devices are well illustrated by the character of the medium-like grandmother, who “will always be out-of-date for the rest of her life, like an old can of the past”, because “In a senile body, cut wider than to measure, sit the horrors of history, and sometimes they flow out like an infection” (Chutnik, 2014: 181–182).

Countering the grandmother’s story, the author creates an alternative testimony of that time and space, bringing back past events from oblivion to restore the forgotten and the unmentioned. As she claims, “After all, if only there had been a small landslide of spacetime, we would be rotting in the trenches or in a buried basement like an old hag, like a hardtack... Those people from There must be somewhere, they didn’t all die right away” (Chutnik, 2014: 179). The children reach the mythology of space, but instead of treasures they find a rubble, from which the figure of a little boy emerges. He got lost in time, engrossed in a search for his metal toy car. It turns out that he is a purgatory soul; he asks: “please, live my life a little, would you? Please, live for me, play for me, okay?” (Chutnik, 2014: 210). In this way, Chutnik’s narrative saves invisible protagonists and transforms the memory of subsequent generations about the history of those times.

A POST-MEMORY HISTORY OF THE COLLECTIVE SUBCONSCIOUS

In the final story, “Basement”, which is written as a radio play, a peculiar “basement drama” (Chutnik, 2014: 240) is unfolding. The dialogues of the protagonists – Tola, her mother, old Kominkowa, and Pola – are a post-memorial way of saving histories heretofore absent from the universal historical narrative. As men are fighting in the uprising in the streets of Warsaw, the life of four women is going on underground; they bicker and quarrel, then make up with one another, provide mutual help and support. A kind of a her story emerges. Chutnik carries the spirits of the past, she transforms history. The basement becomes an inner city, a subconscious. Sleep plays an important part here. As the mother is inducing Tola’s lethargy, she softly says to her: “Close your eyes, never mind it’s dark here anyway. But if you keep your eyes closed, nothing can distract you. Imagine...” (Chutnik, 2014: 246). Also when the disaster is approaching, all women try to

get to sleep. Even as the end is near, Pola says firmly: “let’s go to sleep, we must go to sleep” (Chutnik, 2014: 251).

The little Tola Chodakowska then dreams a catastrophic and surreal dream in which a big, smiling cat appears, like in *Alice’s Adventures*. The cat scratches her; its belly is full of people. But then it turns out that she is that predatory cat. Whether awake or deep in lethargy, Tola has a vision: “a huge palace grows up before us, how beautiful, I think. All made of gold. I want to go in, I jerk the handle, but the door is locked. I’m trying to get in through the window, but it’s too high. Finally, I just walk through the wall. Like a ghost!” (Chutnik, 2014: 253). Could it be that the women died, and no one helped them through to the other space? Not only does Chutnik save them in her narrative, but she also helps them return.

The basement provides the women with eternal shelter when they wander inertly in the new, unfamiliar space of Warsaw. Mother says:

What am I to do? – I ask myself and my voice tells me: go back to the basement. I don’t want to, but I really don’t know what to do. I feel that any moment now my body will fall apart into a thousand pieces. So I go to Mokotów, to the only basement I know. I got everything from that basement. It’s like mother’s belly, a uterus. And we, basement children, we don’t have colour to our skin or eyes. Because we had lived so long without air, without sun. We became transparent, absent. Grown into the basement. In Olesińska Street I find my family house and go through the gate. But behind the gate there’s nothing, no palace nor the cat with its torn belly (Chutnik, 2014: 254).

Thanks to the story the ghosts of the past are now only summoned by the writer herself.

AUTHORIAL NARRATIVE CREATION: JOURNEY – RETURN – TRANSFORMATION

Chutnik’s protagonists do not live by the present; their lives are as though suspended; they wait, barely existing, and their past and future are woven from unfulfilled dreams and unfinished stories. Every piece in the collection leaves the protagonist with a dilemma and the possibility of making a decision; it does not give a definite answer as to what comes next. As in a radio or TV documentary feature, each story needs to be revisited with the camera’s eye, each continuation requires recording by a caring reporter.

Chutnik’s demiurgic narrative introduces us secretly into the spaces and times that belong to the personal lands of the characters. She transforms himself like little Alice, going through the looking glass and far beyond. She opens worlds and after worlds, she travels through signifying spacetimes and tears out the protagonist’s personal stories from oblivion. By enabling their return and transformation, she also reopens her private wonderland, with one exception. Chutnik’s presence as a narrator and author has a dual character. In

fact, rhetorically, she is both Alice and her older sister, who well understands time and space, rules, tradition and culture, and who

“sat on, with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality... Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago: and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days” (Carroll, 2002: 52).

And this is what Chutnik did. She grew up. Metamorphosis completed.

Translated by Zofia Ziemann

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