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(Bio)biographies: A Parenetic Turn in Literature for a Young Readership and in Education at School?¹

Abstract: The authors of the article consider the place of biography in Polish studies education and, more broadly, in humanities education. They suggest that the list of canonical writers about whom students learn during Polish language lessons should be supplemented with biographies of people who are not related to literature, but to other disciplines of science. An example of such a biography is the biography and achievements of Simona Kossak, an excellent Polish biologist, scientifically and privately associated with the Białowieża Forest. Silesian researchers argue that critical reading of Kossak's biographies and texts strengthens the effect of an ecological turn in Polish language education, which thanks to such procedures becomes not only interdisciplinary, but by convincing that biography can be taken as a challenge to change attitudes and make bold decisions, it gives students a sense of agency.

Keywords: biography, ecocriticism, ecological turn, humanistic education, Simona Kossak, Białowieża Forest

*Our hamlet consists of a few houses situated
on the Plateau, far from the rest of the world.
The Plateau is a distant geological cousin
of the Table Mountains, their remote harbinger.*
(Tokarczuk, 2019: 20)

The new core curriculum for Polish instruction, both at the primary- and at the secondary-school level, clearly makes amends regarding biography. Following a lengthy period of structuralist-inflected teaching practices, which are still a strong presence in Polish classrooms, writers' biographies are again looked at with an approving eye, though this eye is, regrettably, profoundly ideologised.

Such an affirmation of biography has not always been the case. As early as in 1914, Kazimierz Wóycicki called for a sound detachment from biographical

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narratives and warned that ‘the literary history that looks for feelings and ideas in the poet’s life, attitude to society, in personal, family and historical events, runs a serious risk’ (Wóycicki, 1914: 43)² of becoming reduced to the history of the poet’s experiences alone (Łojek, 1985: 202). Yet, at the end of the 20th century, Stanisław Bortnowski ardently argued for restoring biography to what he considered its rightful place and deplored seeing ‘the author manhandled’ (Bortnowski, 1998: 45), a practice that flourished as structuralism made serious inroads into Polish classrooms and spurred the deprecation of history and the history of literature for the benefit of immanent text:

One is prompted to protest [...] when witnessing an almost complete invalidation of the writer’s biography, contempt for attempts at interpreting texts in the context of writers’ lives, the conflicts they experienced, the dilemmas they had to solve, the feelings that tossed them. I regard it as a vote of non-confidence against a certain sphere of culture. It seems not to matter anymore what towns writers inhabited, what houses were connected with them, what people they loved, liked or hated, what objects they left behind, where they were laid to rest after death, and how others remember them; all this is deemed a liability, something good for museums, but bad for literary studies. (Bortnowski, 1998: 45)

Bortnowski’s alarmist tones were slightly mitigated by the methodological contribution of Alina Zabrotowicz, who highlighted the essential presence of biographies in Polish classrooms. Zabrotowicz showed that biographical resources could be effectively used as a context to support the understanding of texts, the retracing of creative processes and the appreciation of the relevant cultural epochs. Zabrotowicz also pointed out that writers’ biographies had a meaningful part in upbringing (Zabrotowicz, 1997: 14–17).

What is the place of biography in Polish education in the 2020s, almost twenty-five years after Bortnowski and Zabrotowicz shared their insights? I will try to answer this question by referring to the biography of Simona Kossak.

I believe that biography is still waiting for an apt reconsideration, one reason for this being that the humanities as discussed today rarely come without any adjectival modifier. The new humanities, as Ryszard Nycz reminds us, are ‘a world of immanence, a reality of participation, of learning from within, of participant knowledge’ (Nycz, 2017: 59), which results not only in a new humanistic lexicon but also in new research practices. Przemysław Czaplinski claims that a major change took place when concepts inherited from the anti-positivist turn came to be replaced. A range of notions, such as ‘boundary,’ ‘counter-,’ and ‘trans-’ in the sense of thinking against (constraints) and above (boundaries), were supplanted by new ideas and practices, including subversion, recognition, utilisation, reassembling, interweaving and node (Czaplinski, 2017: 19–20). This means that the

² All quotations from the texts that have not been published in English are given here in the translation of the translator of this text. (translator’s note)

new humanities are simply engaged or, as Justyna Tabaszewska puts it, ancillary: ‘Their utility is thus founded on their capacity to complicate and undermine the entrenched thought patterns, making the world far more difficult, rather than easier, to grasp’ (Tabaszewska, 2022: 38). Tabaszewska’s model of the humanities as disrupting the comfort of easy knowledge brings it to our attention that, if embracing this mission, humanistic education ‘can on a daily basis demolish our sense of at-homeness in the world and equip us to detect trivialisations replete in daily life’ (Witkowski, 2007: 278). Humanistic education inspired by the thought of Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze, 2017) or Rosi Braidotti (Braidotti, 2012) helps understand the human as ‘an outcome of an ongoing process of individuation, of the solidifying and destabilising of symbolic and material relations’ (Chutorański, 2020:115), as a relational being that consists of ‘the a-personal, the sub-subjective, the objective, the symbolic and the affective’ (Chutorański, 2020:115). The interwovenness of human existence and planetary relations has been compellingly captured by Tim Ingold:

Living beings [...] make their way *through* a nascent world rather than *across* its preformed surface. As they do so, and depending on the circumstances, they may experience wind and rain, sunshine and mist, frost and snow, and a host of other weather-related phenomena, all of which fundamentally affect their moods and motivations, their movements and their possibilities of subsistence, even as these phenomena sculpt and erode the plethora of surfaces upon which inhabitants tread. (Ingold, 2011: 73; italics original)

This way of looking at things is particularly worth embracing now that ‘crisis’ appears to be the key word to depict education. Today, Ingold’s belief that we are all interconnected – not only in the human-to-human sense, but also across the scales of connectivity, including human-nonhuman (or perhaps, better, suprahuman, as this term does not add another opposition to the world that is divided more than enough) and living beings-matter – does not sound novel. These interrelations simply illustrate the first law of ecology (see Commoner, 1974), which is rather heavily cited in the time of the climate crisis and critical reflection on the Anthropocene. What we can wish for is an educational upheaval that transforms this idea into an ethical obligation, rather than just into a formatively functional ecological imperative capable of essentially recasting the perception of humans as an integral part of the bio-community, without perpetuating an anthropocentric bias.

HUMANISTIC ‘EDUCATION +’

Such an education could be designed as ‘education +’ since the presence of various actors included in it would foster ever new configurations, ever new collectives and, in this way, also attempts at re-building our shared world in

which constant change would be presupposed and taken into account. However, the point is not for the idea of education receptive to the notion of constant change to produce an unstable school in a flutter. Rather, education should be responsible for re-organising curricula, syllabi and teaching/learning methods so as to transcend their fossilised one-sidedness, which the current crises have laid bare, their isolation from the world and their ignorance of transformations at hand. The point is for education not to pursue predefined outcomes or to verify petrified achievement, but to incorporate necessary changes again and again, and again.

We know today that learning is not about the acquisition of information but about making sense of information and that, as such, it is not cumulative, but multidirectional. We are aware that learning is situated and embodied, because it always takes place in a particular setting and abolishes boundaries not only between expert and common knowledge but also between school subjects or scholarly disciplines. We believe that learning is related to emancipation, which should lead to a more conscious and, thus, better experience and life (Skórzyńska, 2018). Importantly, Agata Skórzyńska claims that ‘social knowledge is historically produced (and hence also expanded and accumulated over time), but in the process of learning we experience knowledge BIO-graphically’ (Skórzyńska, 2018:7), which she believes offers an opportunity for linking the knowledge we acquire to particular experiences in our lives.

In my view, the implementation of humanistic ‘education +’ should be concerned not only with the capaciousness and openness of the project, but also with the verifiability of its principles in everyday practices and thus with the degree of its commitment to the affairs of our shared world. In this context, my ponderings are encouraged by Maksymilian Chutorański’s insistence, when championing ‘long-range pedagogy,’ that ‘good educational theory should have something to say [...] about everything that is going on in the world when people do education, rather than only about what is going on within education’ (Chutorański, 2020: 177).

BIO-BIOGRAPHIES IN ‘EDUCATION +’ AT SCHOOL

What place in humanistic/Polish ‘education +’ should be ascribed to biographies of authors and artists in order to turn Polish instruction into ‘long-range education’ and to make the reading of ‘*vitae*’ relevant to the working-through of currently pertinent issues? If we are supposed to experience learning ‘BIO-graphically,’ which entails transposing learning onto our own life experiences, we should rely on an encounter with somebody’s biography to find either a confirmation or an interrogation of our own experience and, regardless of which it is, to open up to opportunities of finding out/going through something new. Today, it is not enough to have biography in Polish classroom for

the purposes listed by Zabrotowicz, such as reproducing or, at best, harnessing the knowledge it conveys as an interpretive tool for the reading of texts.

Firstly, we need new models of doing biography at school; we need to curb or to complement the national-liberation paradigm, which stands tall despite the passage of time. The pantheon of the national bards, most of them males, should be extended to include women and local 'heroes,' since the latter – as contributors to the surroundings in which readers are immersed – stand a greater chance of making for a compelling story that will be more readily integrated with young readers' personal experiences and biographies.

Secondly, it is an urgent task to rethink biographical areas in contemporary education. Should they be primarily filled with mainstream narratives, or should they also make room for those that revolve around individuals conspicuously absent from school-told tales so far, for example, members of minorities, including sexual minorities, and nonhuman characters?³ In other words, are we able to imagine a Polish lesson in which the biography of the writer or the protagonist shakes hands with a biography of, say, the Lithuanian backwoods or Lithuanian flies? What I mean is not just providing a simple account of places or nonhuman actors, because such assignments are a staple of classroom discussions; what I mean is a deconstruction, or perhaps rather a reconstruction, of the narrative so as to nurture the perception of the 'entirety' of mutual entanglements.

Thirdly, will Polish lessons prove hospitable to biographical stories from outside the circle of writers and culture-makers? If humanistic education in the age of critical reflection on the Anthropocene is supposed to unseal its familiar narratives, we can also expect Polish instruction at school to put forward models of examining nature-culture. Therefore, the training in reading textual and cultural products, and thus in exploring the world of culture, should be expanded by adding the reading of nature-culture. This would require revising school reading lists to incorporate popular-science publications, such as popular-science essays on the natural sciences, geology, hydrology and (post)industry. A wealth of such writings can be found in the work of Urszula Zajączkowska, Adam Wajrak and Jacek Karczewski. Whose biographies could be mobilised in the service of this sector of nonfiction, and what role should they play in education?

We need both old, but newly reconsidered biographies and fresh biographical tales not only to open the school up to the future, but above all to encourage

³ I mean, for example, biographies of places, such as *Ekobiografia Krakowa* [An Ecobiography of Cracow] (2018) edited by Adam Izdebski and Rafał Szymtka and *Pnińskie błota. Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku* [The Marshland of Pnin: Nature, Knowledge and Politics in Polish Polesia until 1945] (2022) by **Ślawomir Łotysz**. Both publications are monograph studies of selected areas, produced from an environmental perspective.

learners to undertake the work of imagination. This responsibility is not informed by the belief that there is any already given and structured knowledge; just the other way round, it is premised on the idea that knowledge is negotiable. Inspiration for such approaches can of course be derived from the texts of Donna Haraway, a fierce opponent of dogmatic objectivism and universalist research methods as principles put in place by the experimental sciences in the mid-17th century (Haraway, 2009). In the 21st century, school and childhood need new biographies and new protagonists of biographical narratives. In this respect, the imagination is given a powerful boost by the appeal articulated by Ursula Le Guin, who asked in her talk at *The Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* conference in 2014:

May there not come even that bolder adventurer, the first geolinguist, who, ignoring the delicate trenchant lyrics of the lichen will read beneath it the still less communicative, still more passive, wholly atemporal cold volcanic poetry of the rocks, each one a word spoken how long ago by the earth itself in the immense solitude, the immenser community, of space. (Kanngieser, 2015: 1)

The criteria of ‘an even bolder adventurer, the first geolinguist’ are in my view met by Simona Kossak, whose biography is in sync with Haraway’s strategy of searching for real stories that are at the same time speculative fabulations bound up with speculative realism (Haraway, 2019). In other words, the narrative of Simona Kossak is a story that leans toward the future of what Haraway calls Terrapolis, heralding possible life scripts.

As a matter of fact, tales of this kind have inundated bookshop shelves for at least three years now, with this upsurge probably resulting from a somewhat arrogant belief that the young generation will handle the climate crisis and, in general, design a better world if only youngsters are given appropriate education, which apparently and for no explicable reason cannot be extended to those for whom systemic learning is already a thing of the past. Literature for a young readership investigates not only the interlacements of bio-community but also human agency, which may overcome the torpor of the Anthropocene, melancholy and climate depression. The belief in agency instils hope, giving readers motives to be active. The pro-active attitude may spark rebellion, disobedience and anger, fanned by concern for the closest surroundings and the world at large. For this reason, despite their triumphant-sounding titles, today’s enormously popular books, such as Justyna Suchecka’s *Young Power. 30 historii o tym, jak młodzi zmieniają świat* [Young Power: 30 Stories about How the Young Change the World], Anna Dziewit-Meller’s *Damy, dziewczuchy, dziewczyny. Historia w spódnicy* [Ladies, Wenches and Girls: History with a Skirt on] and Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo’s *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women* (published in Polish as *Opowieści na dobranoc dla młodych buntowniczek*.

100 historii niezwykłych kobiet) are supposed to startle instead of putting at ease and to encourage active involvement instead of spawning complacency. In other words, these books persuade (primarily) young girls that, although contemporary crises have become enveloped in a mesh of catastrophic narratives, crisis situations can indeed be kairoitic, rather than merely apocalyptic. On this model, crisis is an opportunity – one not to be missed – for courageous decision-making and active engagement. The future of the world is at stake.

The catalogue of books that promote pro-active attitudes by marshalling concrete real-life examples includes at least two other books: Olga Ślepowrońska's *Klimatyczni* [The Climate People], illustrated by Weronika Żurowska, and Wojciech Mikołuszcza's *Wielkie przygody w świecie przyrody* [Grand Adventures in the World of Nature], illustrated by Joanna Rzezak. The former, as the writer claims, seeks to give climate activists the publicity usually showered on rock stars and football players (Ślepowrońska, 2020: 144), because while the problems besetting our world are eloquently addressed, solutions are only rarely and reluctantly proposed. Indeed, this gap is redressed by this publication, as it contains a series of biographical vignettes recounting the lives of, for example, William Kamkwamba, Henryk Jordan, Wangari Maathai and Arvind Gupta. Importantly, the parenetic episodes in their lives are supposed to inspire readers, whom Ślepowrońska exhorts to take care of the air, waste segregation and community building through, for example, arranging neighbourhood picnics or energy-saving practices. At the end of the book, readers are urged to look carefully around, identify the shortcomings and needs of their localities and deal with the problems at hand. A range of local ills can be averted by fundraising, corresponding with sick children, helping at shelters, feeding birds in winter and supporting species in danger of extinction (by constructing houses for insects).

The latter book is filled with tales of people from various walks of life whose biographies may be an inspiration to young readers. The inclusive gallery of the protagonists brings together writers, saints, musicians, naturalists, activists, etc., such as St Francis, Alexander von Humboldt, Greta Thunberg, David Attenborough, Jane Goodall, Urszula Zajączkowska, David Rothenberg, Iwa Momatiuk, the Łyczkos and others. The multiplicity and the diversity of the tales are supposed to make readers realise that 'the paths trodden by the protagonists of this volume represent but a fraction of possibilities that nature affords us. [...] I hope that everybody will find something that suits them best' (Mikołuszczo, 2020: 5).

These two bio-biographical books can be a useful exercise for young readers' ecological intelligence. As explained by Daniel Goleman, this kind of intelligence combines cognitive skills with empathy for all life. In order to develop it, one must relinquish the notion that humankind is situated outside nature

(Goleman, 2009: 43–51) and accept the fact that humans and nature are intrinsically interwoven.

BIO-BIOGRAPHY AS *RESPONSE-ABILITY*

I believe that Simona Kossak's bio-biography is about something more than just building linkages and connections with the world. Her biography is particularly rewardingly read through the lens of another concept advanced by Haraway. In an interview with culture-studies scholar Martha Kenney, Haraway spoke of response-ability as 'a specific relation of humans and nonhumans, as a result of which we develop an ability to act by becoming capable of responding' (Chaberski, 2019: 248). As an effect, we never lose sight of environmental problems (Chaberski, 2019: 248). Haraway's concept is highly useful in the study of literature, including biographical texts, the reading of which can breed readers' disposition to make decisions (*response-ability*) that are conducive to new modes of interpreting the world and constructing their lives.

The story of Simona Kossak's exclusion from the human community and her striving to become part of the nonhuman world is perfectly suited to this end. Kossak became a household name when a massive logging of the Białowieża Forest was launched in 2017, with the government citing the combating of the bark beetle infestation as an excuse. Powerful machines, each capable of cutting up to three hundred trees a day, entered the forest. Kossak had been dead for ten years at the time, but her biography penned by Anna Kamińska and published in 2015 turned her into a special hero by reminding the reading public of Kossak's extraordinary intimacy with the forest that was being annihilated at the moment. Kamińska's *Simona: Opowieść o niezwykłym życiu Simony Kossak* [Simona: A Tale of Simona Kossak's Extraordinary Life] draws a portrayal of an outstanding scholar, a sensitive inhabitant of the forest and an outcast from the closest of human communities – her family. Born a girl rather than a long-expected son and without a talent for painting, Kossak failed to meet her family's criteria of a cherished child, was appallingly betrayed by her fiancé, despised and lied to by her sister and then unfairly disinherited by her mother; all in all, she perfectly exemplifies exclusion. Additionally, hers was a thoroughly 'unfeminine' profession, since having abandoned her major in Polish Studies, she became a biologist and professor of forest sciences. Whether alone or later with her partner Lech Wilczek, she lived deep in the woodland, relinquishing the human community for co-being with non-human life forms. Kamińska eagerly emphasises Kossak's incompatibility with the world outside the forest, without needing to contrive any special arguments for that, as the life of Kossak, a dweller of a forester's lodge, itself abounds with them.

Kossak herself was keen to underscore her singularity:

Driven by atavism, I settled in the primeval forest. At a certain moment, I realised that I had crossed the cordon and found myself siding with trees and animals. So I speak on their behalf. I graduated from biology, but it was only the years of living in the woods that taught me to understand the language of animals. I know it so well that I should be burned at the stake as a witch. (Kamińska, 2015: 4; cover page)

Interestingly, Kossak's accession to bio-community came with the Harawayan disposition for response-ability – responding to the call. As a result, Kossak became not only a biographer of vegetal and animal species, but also of their particular specimens. This is epitomised in *Opowieści z Dziedzinki* [Tales from Dziedzinka] and *Trzy żywoly* [The Three Elements], in which Kossak relies on specific and, so to speak, embodied experiences from the micro-space, sourced from the immediate surroundings of the lodge and from the Białowieża Forest. These texts offer a glimpse into how the researcher's participation in the field, co-being in the landscape and interplays with other beings fostered her capacity to stand up for their 'interests' and speak on behalf of those whose language we do not understand.

This exegesis of human-nonhuman relationships was refined in the volume titled *Saga Puszczy Białowieskiej* [A Saga of the Białowieża Forest]. The generic choice of the saga reasserts the universality of the first law of ecology. Everything is connected with everything else, and if the Plateau, as Tokarczuk states in the motto to this paper, has its geological cousins, the Białowieża Forest must also be a relational space in which Kossak found her own place.⁴ The book was designed as a historiosophical biography of the backwoods. The tale opens with a bitter recollection of 1992, when Kossak protested against one of the many logging campaigns. Spanning nearly 500 pages, the narrative goes back to the distant past, medieval economic policies and increasingly ruthless hunting practices not only to deconstruct the myth of Poles' attachment to land and their respect for native nature, but also to argue that the eponymous saga is drawing to an end:

The Białowieża Forest is dying [...].

That it has not yet shared the fate of other primeval forests of which only the names have survived results from its seemingly inexhaustible vital powers, from the terrible tribute paid to game hunters and from its geographical location, far away from populous agricultural settlements and big cities; situated at the border of countries and nations, hidden in the marshland, it has survived. Gravely mauled, robbed of trees and animals, but still the only European forest vaguely reminiscent of the primeval backwoods that covered the European Lowlands from the Carpathian Mountains up to the Baltic Sea six thousand years ago.

Our generation are witnessing the last act of its history. (Kossak, 2016: 11, 13)

⁴ This way of approaching space was evidently appreciated by Kamińska, who wrote a book on relations with place in 2017. Her *Białowieża szeptem. Historie z Puszczy Białowieskiej* [Whispering about Białowieża: Tales of the Białowieża Forest], which is a biography of the forest, won the Wiesław Kazanecki Literary Award funded by the Mayor of Białystok.

Written for a young readership as part of the biographical series *Oni zmienili świat* [They Have Changed the World], Kossak's biography is less alarmist. Agnieszka Ludwig-Słomczyńska portrays the naturalist first and foremost as a dweller of Dziedzinka, an old forester's lodge in the Białowieża Forest. Both the title of the book – *Simona Kossak. Mieszkanka dzikiej puszczy* [Simona Kossak: An Inhabitant of Wilderness] – and Marcin Bruchnalski's cover image suggest that the protagonist paradoxically found calm in the wild, which, rather than frightening her, protected her. On the cover, the rejuvenated Simona looks at readers, and though her characteristic features are easily recognisable, the impression is that she is represented as a young girl, perhaps almost a peer of the book's implied readership. She is holding a young roe deer in her arms, with a wild boar, an owl and a raven behind her in the background. Having read the book, we will know that the wild boar is Żabka, Kossak companion for seventeen years. There are photographic records of this extraordinary relationship, showing Kossak sharing bed and board with Żabka, but none of these multiple, nearly 'cult' photos are included in the book. The raven pictured on the cover is Korasek, a scourge of the Białowieża residents. Korasek

was a terrible nuisance, stealing keys, money, cigarette packs, hairbrushes, notebooks [...] Worse still, the bird would tear off hens' heads, push people off bikes and pull at women's skirts. Only Simona was able to domesticate the 'gangster raven,' as he was called in the area, and even make friends with him. (Ludwig-Słomczyńska, 2021:17)

In her mini-biography of Kossak, Ludwig-Słomczyńska espouses the idea that the protagonist, who suffered exclusion from early childhood on and had no loving relations with her parents, bonded with nature in search of attachment. The writer highlights the role of the garden to which Simona regularly sneaked out as a girl. Long catalogues of tree species in the garden and an observation that Simona was fascinated by moths and beetles suggest that Kossak saw the garden as a dependable system, whose rhythms furnished her with security, which was a scarce commodity at her familial home. Interestingly, Bruchnalski's illustrations convey the fraught nature of Simona's relations with parents. In his images, her mother and father are reduced to legs alone, while the animals, plants, objects and places important to Simona are accurately pictured with a fair share of realism (readers may learn how to tell trees from one another based on their drawings).

Kossak's new home is presented through increasingly detailed and specific depictions. If one page features a brief description of the Białowieża Forest complete with a map and a European bison as its emblematic animal, the following ones focus on a concrete location in the wilderness, namely, on Dziedzinka, a forester's lodge where Kossak came to live. A modest cabin, without electricity or running water stands in stark contrast with a Cracow villa owned

by Kossak's parents, who hailed from affluent intelligentsia families with artistic traditions on her father's side. Paradoxically, however, and in an uncanny play-on-words, *Dziedzinka*⁵ became the young woman's real home. By fashioning a welcoming space and a shelter for animals in need, Simona naturally, as it were, became part of the local community. *Dziedzinka* proved 'a home for everybody' (Ludwig-Słomczyńska, 2021: 15), for the human and the nonhuman alike.

Additionally, Ludwig-Słomczyńska's book blurs the boundary between 'wards' and 'friends.' The fuzziness of these notions basically only reaffirms the fluidity of the distinction between the ontological statuses of humans and animals, an indeterminacy of which Simona became convinced when studying the zoopsychology of wild game, primarily of roe deer. Having fathomed and mastered a rich array of deer behaviour, she was recognised by them as part of the herd, so much so that they would warn her against an approaching lynx. This bonding with roe deer made it imperative to her to vocally denounce killing wild animals when she was invited to an opening of *The Year of a Hunter* exhibition at the Wincenty Pol Manor House as a daughter to Jerzy Kossak and a great-granddaughter to Juliusz Kossak, apologists and painters of hunting:

People of grand lineage are expected not to bring shame. I believe that it's not enough. If we celebrate the great deeds of our ancestors, we must also know what was contemptible in their actions and what still breeds pernicious consequences. It is our duty [...] to redress this evil. [...] I have [...] my views on killing wild animals, and these views are informed not only by emotions but also by the facts of science. Considering hunting in ethical terms, I believe that to kill animals only for entertainment was and still is unworthy of civilised human beings. (Kamińska, 2015: 206–207)

Concluding her tale of Simona Kossak, Ludwig-Słomczyńska discusses her research work and her popular outreach. Readers find out that Kossak had her own radio show titled *Dlaczego w trawie piszczy*⁶ (1816 episodes of which were aired), wrote books, made nature documentaries and was a renowned animal psychology scholar. Nevertheless, Kossak's most salient achievement defies measurement:

Rejected by her own family as a child that failed to live up to their hopes for her, Simona created her own extraordinary world at the heart of the Białowieża Forest. She was eagerly visited by other researchers, tourists and above all common

⁵ The play-on-words involves the morphological similarity between *Dziedzinka* as the name of the lodge and *dziedzictwo*, a Polish word denoting legacy, heritage, inheritance, and the uncanniness is related to the fact that Kossak's mother later disinherited her.

⁶ The title literally means: 'Why is there buzzing in the grass?' but playfully echoes 'co w trawie piszczy' (literally: what's buzzing in the grass), a popular Polish idiom which expresses the idea that one should find out what is actually going on. (translator's note)

people, who knew that Dziejdzinka was an oasis of unity with nature, giving them joy and the sense of meaningfulness. (Ludwig-Słomczyńska, 2021: 21)

The short book is capped with a call: ‘Follow the example of ‘the forest woman’ and never abandon your dreams!’ (Ludwig-Słomczyńska, 2021: 21). Haraway reiterates that it matters what stories we use to construct other stories, whose thoughts we rely on to think our thoughts, what depictions we draw on to construct our depictions and, above all, how stories make the world and how the world inspires stories of it.

This is the reason why thinking by and through new biographies makes sense, especially in the model of humanistic ‘education +’. Despite her traumatic exclusion from one community, Simona Kossak, a woman and a researcher, found a way to enter another community, based on bio-communal principles. Her biography is an ecobiography insofar that it comprises examples of ‘other possibilities’ for reconsidering one’s life, which Julia Fiedorczyk views as representations of “‘other possibilities’” for the world – other than the progressing devastation of the systems sustaining life on the Earth, other than the increasing economic gap between the rich and the poor, the two most salient challenges of our times’ (Fiedorczyk, 2019: 15). With its anchoring in the Greek etymology of ‘ecology’, stemming from *oikos* (house, household with its relationships) and *logos* (knowledge), ecobiography suggests how the knowledge of ‘home’ may translate into good ‘husbandry’ (Fiedorczyk, 2015: 17), or, in other words, how we can live better lives. The inclusion of such biographies or biographical motifs when reading canonical texts⁷ at school would encourage exploring new horizons and looking into entwining and couplings that can help us find ‘a new system of symbiosis with nature and all creation’ (Skolimowski, 1995: 10) and enable us to return home, that is, to re-establish our severed ties with the environment.

I believe that there is a shortage of such tales in Polish schools today. This observation should compel us to open up to a new preventive power of biography and to commit to its three principles of: resilience as adjustment to challenges and adaptation to changes; persistence as a capacity to consistently pursue our goals; and sustainability as the promotion of the harmonious integration of relations with the non-human world (environmental dimension), human relations (social dimension) and relations to the self (spiritual and emotional dimension). To accomplish this, we need biographical narratives that undermine (school) habits and make us receptive to ‘other possibilities’: ‘Throughout my life, I’ve been looking for people to unsettle my world. With such people, I can realise that a felled tree is not dead at all, that a pack of wolves is like a family rather than

⁷ I have discussed this theme elsewhere. See M. Wójcik-Dudek, ‘Inne możliwości. “Uziemianie” romantycznego pejzażu,’ in B. Gala-Milczarek and A. Raszevska-Klimas (eds.), *Wiek XIX na lekcjach języka polskiego. Literatura – język – kultura – historia* (Siedlce: Instytut Kultury Regionalnej i Badań Literackich im. Franciszka Karpińskiego, 2020). pp. 293–312.

a dictatorship, and that a forest is not a plantation of boards. Such people air my head, and Simona Kossak is a classic in this department' (Kossak, 2022: 4, cover page; endorsement by Łukasz Długowski).

We need ecologically engaged biographies.

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