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Paweł Huelle's Troubles with Contemporaneity

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to present Paweł Huelle's attitude towards contemporaneity, as well as to give an account of his literary traditionalism. The starting point of the considerations are comments on nostalgia as aesthetics and Huelle's literary practice. The author shows how the writer avoided contemporary themes in his prose and to what consequences led the fact that in some works, as if in spite of himself, he addressed the current reality. The second part of the article considers the possibility of placing Huelle's prose, especially two of his novels (*Castorp* and *Śpiewaj ogrody* [*Sing the Gardens*]), in a postmodern context, as well as the possibility of looking at this writer's nostalgic works in a different way. The discussion closes with comments on the way in which Huelle evokes motifs and works belonging to high culture.

Keywords: Paweł Huelle, Polish prose, contemporaneity, nostalgia.

Introduction

The writing of the Gdańsk-based author Paweł Huelle (1957–2023) is a complex phenomenon that is still intellectually appealing. In this article I want to focus on just two interrelated dimensions of this it, namely on Huelle's literary traditionalism and his attitude to modernity.¹ I limit my

¹ Paweł Huelle did not shy away from self-commentaries – those recorded mainly in press interviews run into the hundreds. Added to this is the enormity of non-literary statements scattered in the literary and daily press; the only compact publication that brings together

recognition to the artistic prose signed with Huelle's name, so I do not consider his output as a poet, playwright, screenwriter, essayist and publicist, although I will occasionally refer to literary views he expressed in a discursive manner.

I make no secret of the fact that I have a personal reason to address the issue of Huelle's literary conservatism.² I accompanied this body of writing as a literary critic, commenting on the publication of all the books of this prematurely deceased writer, from the first to the last. On many occasions I referred not so much to the literary traditionalism manifested by Huelle, as to – and this is a more categorical term – the anachronism of his prose, using colloquial lexis acceptable in the language of criticism, for example “old-fashionedness”, “out-of-date”, and “retro.” I further argued that he struggled to engage with contemporary topics, and that his attempts to comment on and evaluate our “here and now” (e.g., social life in Poland in the era of political transformation) generally ended in failure.

Since we are now dealing with a completed body of work, and four years will soon have passed since the publication of Huelle's last book, it is worth, I believe, enquiring into these provisional and ad hoc diagnoses, to verify them to some extent, and consider today whether there is another way to look at the same thing, that is, at this literary traditionalism (or anachronism). What needs to be discussed, therefore, is literary issues considered in the context of the transformations of contemporary Polish prose, seen against the background of broader literary phenomena and cultural processes. In this approach, it would be more appropriate to speak not of modernity, but of modernity and its limits and relationship to postmodernity. As for the second issue – the writer's attitude towards modernity understood socially – I do not think any major revisions should be expected. After all, Huelle's position has been fixed in his novels and short stories; at most, one can look for some deeper or non-obvious justifications for his beliefs.

a small part of Huelle's discursive texts remains a collection of literary columns and mini-series *Ulica Świętego Ducha i inne historie* [The Street of the Holy Spirit and Other Stories] (Kraków: Znak, 2016), which is an expanded version of the earlier volume *Inne historie* [Other Stories] (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 1999).

² I do not refer here to specific bibliographic sources, limiting myself to stating that they can be found in perhaps the most complete compilation of subject and object literature on P. Huelle's literary activity; the study was conducted by the Provincial and Municipal Public Library in Gdańsk and is available at the following link: <http://old2.wbpg.org.pl/slowniklista.php?pisarz=5>.

Why Did Paweł Huelle Dislike the Present Day?

As early as his debut novel, Huelle took a notable stance that essentially defined the permanent character of his writing. This attitude should be recognised as radically nostalgic. It is worth recalling that the final phrases of *Weiser Dawidek* (1987, *Who was David Weiser?* 1991), which belong to the final passage in which the narrator addresses himself, read:

[...] pomyślisz, że wszystko, co oglądały twoje oczy, i wszystko, czego dotyczyły twoje ręce, dawno już rozsypało się w proch. Patrzeć będziesz przed siebie tępy, nieruchomym spojrzeniem, nie słysząc już wody ani wiatru, który targać będzie twoje zlepięne włosy.³

[...] you'll think how everything that came within your view, and everything that lay within your touch, has long ago crumbled to dust. You'll stare ahead of you, with a fixed and vacant gaze, no longer hearing the water, or the wind that will start to ruffle your matted hair.⁴

A few years later – already in the form of a self-commentary – the writer explicitly referred to this finale, suggesting that it should be seen not only as the essence of his literary programme, but also, in a generalisation, as the foundation of writing as such. He declared:

Myślę, że mechanizmem literatury jest nostalgia, tęsknota, wszystko jedno za czym... Nostalgia, wywołana obrazami przywoływanymi z pamięci, z różnych jej pokładów, przekłada się na literaturę. [...] W tym sensie jest to powieść [*Weiser Dawidek* – przyp. D.N.] o dojmującym poczuciu nieuchronności przemijalności świata.⁵

[I think that the mechanism of literature is nostalgia, longing, everything for which... Nostalgia, evoked by images recalled from memory, from various layers of it, is translated into literature. [...] In this sense, it is a novel [*Weiser Dawidek* – note D.N.] with a nagging sense of the inevitability of the transience of the world.]

The past world is gone (“crumbled into dust”), while the current world is an area affected by multifaceted negativity, marked by a sense of emptiness and absurdity, disappointing in every way, basically unacceptable. So says the nostalgic. I do not want to get entangled in a consideration of nostalgia as an attitude towards reality, which is also a particular way of experiencing it,

³ Paweł Huelle, *Weiser Dawidek*, (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie, 1987), 215.

⁴ Paweł Huelle, *Who was David Weiser?*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Bloomsbury, 1995, first published Berkshire: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 1991), 215.

⁵ “Dzieciństwo po Jałcie. Z Pawłem Huelle, Wojciechem Koniecznym, Pawłem Zbierskim i Stefanem Chwinem rozmawia Krystyna Chwin” [Childhood after Yalta. With Paweł Huelle, Wojciech Konieczny, Paweł Zbierski and Stefan Chwin, Krystyna Chwin Talks], *Tytuł*, no. 3 (1991): 3. Quoted according to the edition: *Rozmowy "Tytułu,"* ed. Krystyna Chwin (Gdańsk: Zarząd Główny Zrzeszenia Kaszubsko-Pomorskiego, 1996), 100.

taking as a warning the words of an expert on this issue: "Nostalgia umieszcza ideał w przeszłości i jest to jedyna rzecz pewna, jaką można o niej powiedzieć"⁶ [Nostalgia places the ideal in the past, and this is the only certain thing that can be said about it]. Although I want to avoid detailed enquiries into nostalgia, which, incidentally, are not needed here, three observations seem to be necessary.

First of all, Paweł Huelle has never changed his attitude towards nostalgia, invariably taking the position that his literature stems precisely from the despair of the past, from the longing for an irretrievably lost world, order and meaning; a longing that here and there turns into a lament. Thus, one would have to declare – the conclusion is all too obvious – that the programmatic nostalgic dislikes the present, consciously fencing himself or herself off from the acute immediacy of time, as it were, by definition; since he or she is a declared nostalgic, he or she probably cannot take a different position. Secondly, Huelle's nostalgic orientation was not isolated. Marek Zaleski, just cited, was convinced that in the late 1980s and early 1990s nostalgia had become an ideological stance and an almost dominant aesthetic, and a later monographer of this issue, Przemysław Czapliński, writing about the Polish prose of the 1990s, reported on the disturbing scale of the phenomenon (he referred to many writing practices marked by nostalgia, taking nearly twenty prose writers active in the last decade of the 20th century as the subject of his detailed analyses of novels and short stories).⁷ Thirdly, and finally, at the very end of the 1990s, an important turn was revealed in terms of the approach to nostalgic forms of prose writing. While in the first (*Formy pamięci*) of the two studies cited here, literary nostalgia is valorised positively, generally linked to the aesthetics of the sublime, championed by Jean-François Lyotard, in the second monograph (*Wzniosłe tęsknoty*) it is considered in a highly critical manner, most often presented as an evasion or capitulation; writers not only fail to take up the challenges coming from the present, but also evade designing the future, Czapliński argues.

In order not to stray too far from Paweł Huelle's literary creations, and thus from the question of his attitude to the present day, it is worth recalling

⁶ Marek Zaleski, *Formy pamięci. O przedstawianiu przeszłości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej* [Forms of Memory. On Representing the Past in Polish Contemporary Literature] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 1996), 11.

⁷ Przemysław Czapliński, *Wzniosłe tęsknoty. Nostalgie w prozie lat dziewięćdziesiątych* [Sublime Longings. Nostalgias in the Prose of the 1990s] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001). In this study the author refers, among other things, to two collections of short stories by Paweł Huelle: *Opowiadania na czas przeprowadzki* [Stories for the Time of Removal] (London: Puls Publications, 1991) oraz *Pierwsza miłość i inne opowiadania* [First Love and Other Stories] (London: Puls Publications, 1996).

elementary facts. Thus, the action of the novel *Who was David Weiser?* takes place in two time periods, namely in the second half of the 1950s of the last century, when we observe the events involving the title character, and twenty years later, when the narrator and, more broadly, the "host" of the story (Paweł Heller), who is already a mature man, conducts a private "investigation" into the mysterious disappearance of a childhood friend. As he undertakes this "investigation", he also reflects on loss, absence, the transience of the world, and the impossibility of communicating with what has passed.

In the next two books by Huelle (collections of short stories indicated in note 7), the situation repeats itself: the writer turns to the past, captured – as in the case of a nostalgic – as "paradise lost". In most of the works – the exceptions are indeed few and far between – at the centre of the story is a child protagonist (a boy of about ten years old), who tells about affairs – his own and his family's – taking place somewhere in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is significant that even where we are dealing with current reality, the narrator-hero's gaze is also directed toward past affairs. This is the case in the story *In Dublin's fair city...* (earlier volume), where reflections revolving around the fate of the protagonist's grandfather are incorporated into the account of his stay in contemporary Dublin. This rule, i.e. a smooth transition from the current world to the more or less distant past, is even more evident in the short story *Ulica Polanki* [Polanki Street] (a later volume). This overtly autobiographical story deals with Paweł Huelle's presence at President Lech Wałęsa's birthday party in 1995.⁸ The writer has doubts about whether to attend the party, but eventually decides to do so, because family memory has preserved the fact that his grandparents used to attend balls hosted by Ignacy Mościcki, the pre-war president of Poland. Huelle's protagonist feels deeply disappointed by the reception at Wałęsa's house (located precisely on the eponymous street), has no mercy for the participants of the meeting, especially the representatives of the new political elite constituted after 1989, and does not feel comfortable there, so he sets in motion numerous fantasies – whether about his ancestors, or about peo-

⁸ The autobiographical protagonist sees himself as a private person, perhaps even as an outsider: "Czegoż mógł chcieć ode mnie, pod koniec września 1995 roku, prezydent Lech Wałęsa? Urzędy, o które nie zabiegałem, dawno zostały już rozdane, koncesje przydzielone, hierarchia zasług w boju o niepodległość na wieki ustalona [...] O cóż więc mogło chodzić?" [What could President Lech Walesa want from me, at the end of September 1995? The offices I did not seek had long since been handed out, concessions assigned, the hierarchy of merit in the battle for independence forever established [...] So what could it have been about?]. Paweł Huelle, *Ulica Polanki* [Polanki Street], in Paweł Huelle, *Pierwsza miłość i inne opowiadania* [First Love and Other Stories] (Gdańsk: Tower Press, 2000), 90.

ple and events related to a place important to him (Gdańsk's Polanki Street appears repeatedly in his prose).

The motif of escaping from the current reality, from a world that brings only disappointments and causes frustration that is difficult to overcome, is best seen in the novel for which lovers of Huelle's prose enchanted by *Who was David Weiser?*, had to wait for a full 14 years – *Mercedes-Benz. Z listów do Hrabala* (*Mercedes-Benz. From Letters to Hrabal*). Here, again, the overtly autobiographical narrator-hero (Paweł) is taking a driving lesson, talking to and flirting with his instructor (Miss Ciwle). Paul confronts his story about a trivial experience, which is, after all, the acquisition of a driving license, with the content of a short story by Bohumil Hrabal *Večerní kurs* [Evening Driving Lesson] (Polish: *Wieczorna lekcja jazdy*, trans. Andrzej Czycibor-Piotrowski, or *Wieczorna jazda*, trans. Mirosław Śmigielski) and at the same time “converses” with the Czech writer, evoking a large corpus of his works. He does this as if he is blending his own speech into the prose of the Czech master, whom he admires in an unconscious way. In addition, he makes abundant use of family history, evoking the lifestyles of interwar Poland (typical, of course, of the privileged strata) – here the cult of a car manufacturer (Mercedes-Benz cars) occupies a prominent place.

I am interested in what he has to say about the present day, after all, he has his practical driving lessons on the streets of Gdańsk in the 1990s.

The story begins with a roadside confrontation. The student's car goes out in the middle of an intersection, all hell breaks loose:

[...] kierowcy innych aut biegli do nas [...] żeby na tym małym fiacie wyładować całą swoją złość za zatłoczone drogi, niewyremontowane mosty, podwyżki cen benzyny i wszystko to, co dotknęło ich tak niedługo po upadku komunizmu [...].⁹

because the drivers of other cars blocked by the tram and the truck had also left their vehicles and run up to us now, to shower us in all their anger about traffic jams, broken bridges, rising petrol prices and everything else affecting them since the recent collapse of communism [...].¹⁰

To all intents and purposes, all the “quotes from reality” are of the same nature – they are fiery complaints about an ill-mannered world full of social selfishness, unkindness and, above all, injustice (here woven into *Mercedes...* the story of a prominent Gdańsk doctor – a crook and degenerate). Huelle has shown – not for the first time, after all – how to deal with the present day, for which there is not a single good word. As one critic perceptively noted: “Paweł zaczyna opowiadać, aby się osłonić przed wstrętną, agre-

⁹ Paweł Huelle, *Mercedes-Benz. Z listów do Hrabala* (Kraków: Znak, 2001), 8.

¹⁰ Paweł Huelle, *Mercedes-Benz: from Letters to Hrabal*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Serpent's Tail, 2005), 2–3.

sywną, brutalną, napierającą zewsząd rzeczywistością”¹¹ [Paul begins to tell stories in order to shield himself from the awful, aggressive, brutal reality pushing in from everywhere]. A special role fell to Hrabal's prose admired by the narrator-hero; this prose is conceived on the pages of this novel as the unsurpassed art of storytelling, or rather, elaborate, meandering, digression-filled storytelling (in the commentaries devoted to *Mercedes...* this figure located inside the text, i.e. Paweł, was called a “storyteller”, the Polish incarnation of the Czech “pabitel”).

The most important thing seems to be that in his second novel Huelle transforms the nostalgic discourse to which he has so far been faithful. This time he is not concerned with the apotheosis and elevation of a world that has passed – I mean here the pre-war Arcadia, the most visible sign of which was the ownership and use of luxury German cars by Paul's ancestors. The salvation of the nostalgic, who feels extremely ill at ease in the current world, comes from the side of the story itself as a sophisticated creative activity, entangled in a dense intertextual network (not only Hrabal's prose is involved here), courting the reader especially on the stylistic level (*Mercedes...* is filled with elaborate sentences stretching sometimes for several pages, the language of this novel is extremely ornate and sophisticated). This was best put by Krzysztof Uniłowski, just cited, who, writing about Huelle's 2001 novel, made a generalisation valuable for these considerations about Polish prose of the late 1990s and early 2000s:

[...] współczesna proza czuje świadomy bądź podświadomy lęk przed współczesnością jako czymś, o czym opowiadać nie potrafi lub o czym w ogóle opowiadać się nie da. Jej wycieczki w przeszłość, jej kreowanie światów czerpiących siłę z przeciwstawiania się współczesności, jeśli podszyte są jakąś tęsknotą, to wyłącznie tęsknotą za opowieścią. Prawdziwą Arkadią, jedynym azylem dzisiejszej literatury byłaby zatem... sama literatura, skądinąd znękana własną bezradnością wobec świata.¹²

[contemporary prose feels a conscious or subconscious fear of contemporaneity as something it cannot tell or it is impossible to tell. Its excursions into the past, its creation of worlds that derive their strength from opposing contemporaneity, if they are lined with any longing, it is only a longing for a story. The true Arcadia, the only asylum of today's literature would therefore be... literature itself, otherwise jaded by its own helplessness in the face of the world.]

Considering the issue that interests me (Huelle's troubles with contemporaneity), it is fair to declare that his next novel *Ostatnia wieczerza* (*The Last*

¹¹ Krzysztof Uniłowski, “Nie będzie uczeń nad mistrza...” [No Pupil Shall Be above the Master], in Krzysztof Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę! Szkice i recenzje* [Buy a Book! Sketches and Reviews] (Katowice: FA-art, 2008), 125.

¹² Uniłowski, “Nie będzie uczeń nad mistrza...,” 127.

Supper),¹³ published six years later (2007), was perhaps a breakthrough. In what sense? First of all, the fact that after the publication of this novel the writer parted with contemporary subject matter (a few exceptions will be noted in a moment); one can guess that at that time – in 2007 – he finally understood that commenting and assessing social reality simply did not work for him, lead to numerous misunderstandings and threatened his authority as a writer.

I will not reconstruct the plot of *The Last Supper* at this point; instead I shall remind the reader that the action of the novel takes place just as much in contemporary Gdańsk as in a Gdańsk that has been moved several years into the future. Futuristic motifs are few, basically limited to the “prophecy” that soon there will be mosques built en masse in Poland, and that tensions between jihad and Mcworld, to refer to the title of Benjamin R. Barber’s famous book, will become increasingly vexing. The issue of Islam taking a hold – as in Central and Eastern Europe – is needed by the writer as an argument in the novel’s debate on religion (enquiries into the religiosity of contemporary Poles form one of the novel’s major themes). However, the most important element in the considerations undertaken here is that Huelle used the poetics of a venomous pamphlet: everything that irritated him in the current world was shown in a caricatured way, especially in relation to people around the writer, with whom he was in conflict (*The Last Supper* is a novel with a key; almost every novel figure corresponds to a real character).

This is an unusual, to put it mildly, approach to the present day. The literary statement becomes an opportunity to settle personal scores; the frustrated subject comes to the fore, the pettiness of the writer himself is revealed, and the scope of what he does not like about current reality is enormous. Huelle’s malignancy extends not only to Gdańsk artists, whom he portrays as hucksters and degenerates, but above all to the political elite ruling Poland in the first years of the 21st century. The writer does not deny himself journalistic insertions, ad hoc assaults on representatives of either the Gdańsk or national establishment. Expressing his political anger more as a citizen than as a widely known artist, he uses digressions thrown into the main plot and even gives journalistic footnotes placed at the bottom of the page.¹⁴ Even if one were to come to the conclusion that the narrator, speak-

¹³ Paweł Huelle, *The Last Supper*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Serpent’s Tail 2008).

¹⁴ One of these footnotes reads as follows: “Sformułowania w rodzaju ‘spieprzaj, dziadu’ czy ‘bura suko’, wprowadzone do obiegu przez najwyższych rangą polityków, zadziałały inflacyjnie: odtąd nawet uczeń podstawówki mógł rzucić nauczycielce w twarz: ‘spieprzaj, dziadówko’ lub ‘kłamiesz jak bura suka’ bez żadnej sankcji, skoro cytował jedynie pana prezydenta czy ministra spraw wewnętrznych. Tego, zaiste, w państwie wcześniej nie notowano” [Phrases like ‘fuck off, grandpa’ or ‘you lie like a bitch’, introduced into circulation

ing on behalf of the writer, has good reasons for expressing his dissatisfaction with the way social and political relations have turned out in Poland, the form in which this was expressed cannot be called sophisticated.

Huelle's last two novels (*Castorp* and *Śpiewaj ogrody*, there will be more about them) separated him from modernity, which – there are many indications of this – he neither understood nor could accept, which was a source of suffering for him, caused frustration, which he was literarily unable to control. When he returns to contemporary themes in several short stories from a later period – the collections *Opowieści chłodnego morza* (*Cold Sea Stories*) and *Talita* – he either captures them in manners familiar from *Mercedes-Benz* or shifts toward the uncanny. A good illustration of the former strategy and also the method of imagery is the short story *Doktor Czen* (*Doctor Cheng*). Here, after a long absence from the country, a former resident of this city (he was in exile in the United States) appears in contemporary Gdańsk. What does he see, looking at the modern city, when he goes beyond the reasonably well-maintained main streets? What does he think about as he flips through today's newspapers? It is worth giving a slightly longer excerpt:

Przywitały go rozpadające się garaże, przepełnione śmietniki, rachityczne ogródki i zatłuszczone tynki. Z bram i podwórek wyziewał ten sam, wieczny zapach pijackich szczyń, naftaliny, chwastów, nigdy nieobeschniętych kałuż, warzywnej zupy, petów i kocich wesel. Zdecydowanie więcej było natomiast samochodów i psich kup. Zamiast sentymentalnych westchnień – których, prawdę mówiąc, trochę się w tym miejscu spodziewał – odczuł narastającą niechęć. [...] usiadł w barze i pił wódkę, przeglądając gazety. Zirytowali go politycy: nawet dziecko kłamałoby z większym wdziękiem niż ci panowie oskarżający się nawzajem. Przypominali pijanych, spoconych tragarzy, wrywających sobie walizkę jednego pasażera na jakimś prowincjonalnym, źle oświetlonym, dawno zamkniętym dworcu.¹⁵

He was greeted by crumbling garages, rubbish bins full to overflowing, sickly little gardens and peeling plaster. From gateways, courtyards and toolsheds yawned the same, eternal odour of drunkards' piss, mothballs, weeds, puddles that never dry up, vegetable soup, fag ends and feline nuptials. On the other hand, there were definitely more cars and dog mess. Instead of sentimental sighs, a few of which he had been expecting in this place, he felt rising disgust. He did not take a single photo, and when he returned to the boarding house by taxi, instead of heading off on his afternoon

by top politicians, have had an inflationary effect: henceforth, even a primary school pupil could yell at their teacher: 'fuck off, grandpa' or 'you lie like a bitch' without any sanction, since he was only quoting the President or the Minister of the Interior. This, indeed, was not recorded in the state before]. Paweł Huelle, *Ostatnia wieczerza* (Kraków: Znak, 2007), 113. The president mentioned in this quote is Lech Kaczyński, and the minister is Ludwik Dorn; the politicians' appalling expressions, widely reported by the media, are from November 2002 and March 2006, respectively.

¹⁵ Paweł Huelle, *Doktor Czen*, in Paweł Huelle, *Opowieści chłodnego morza* (Kraków: Znak, 2008), 102.

walk along the sea, he sat down in a bar and drank vodka, while browsing the papers. The politicians annoyed him: a child could have told lies with more charm than these gentlemen, casting aspersions at one another. They were like drunken, sweaty porters, competing to snatch the suitcase of the only passenger at a badly lit, provincial station, long after hours.¹⁶

The rule in Polish discussions of new, i.e. currently published literature is that the mere taking up of contemporary themes is a bonus, especially when the reviewers have before them a freshly published work by a recognised and respected writer – such as Paweł Huelle. Therefore, the observation of one reviewer commenting on *Talita* is not at all surprising. In his opinion, from the fact that the works collected in this volume are framed by stories set in the present day, it follows that “Huelle daje w ten sposób odpór tym spośród krytyków, którzy zarzucają mu pewien tradycjonalizm czy anachroniczność, i dowodzi, że interesuje go również nasze ‘tu i teraz’”¹⁷ [Huelle thus provides a rebuff to those critics who accuse him of a certain traditionalism or anachronism, and proves that he is also interested in our ‘here and now’]. The point is that Huelle is interested in our “here and now” framed in a special way, marked – as I have already hinted – by incredulity.¹⁸

Returning, then, to *Talita’s* frame, the longer and also title story that opens this volume is plotted around a ritual of mourning still found in the countryside today. In Huelle’s case, it is a Kashubian village (a short distance from Gdańsk), where an all-night vigil is being held over an open coffin in which lies a little girl (Bernadette, who drowned in the river). Family and local residents sing appropriate mourning songs, say prayers, and the ritual is called the “empty night”. It is not about the fact that, as we read, – “dawniej śmierć była przy rodzinie, teraz w rękach pogrzebowych firm”¹⁹ [formerly death was by the side of the family, now it is in the hands of the funeral directors] and that the opportunity comes to save this archaic custom of the “empty night” from oblivion by giving it a literary elaboration. It concerns the set of events that accompany the depiction of the “empty night” ritual, starting with the appearance of a mysterious visitor in the dead girl’s house

¹⁶ Paweł Huelle, *Doctor Cheng*, in Paweł Huelle, *Cold Sea Stories*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Manchester: Comma, 2012), 95.

¹⁷ Karol Alichnowicz, “Ogród o rozwidlających się ścieżkach” [A Garden of Forking Paths], *Akcent*, no. 3 (2021): 101.

¹⁸ Not necessarily in the sense imposed by Sigmund Freud and which has long been in the language of the humanities. So not, to use the original word, *das Unheimliche*, but rather pop-cultural “bizarreness,” which, thanks to Olga Tokarczuk’s prose volume *Opowiadania bizardne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018), has made quite a career in Polish discourse on literature.

¹⁹ Huelle, “Talita,” in Paweł Huelle, *Talita* (Kraków: Znak, 2020), 9.

– neither a monk nor a pilgrim, undoubtedly a person not from this world, a figure that cannot be fully explained within the realist discourse used by the writer. The key figure is, of course, the resurrection of the innocent Bernadette – in dialogue, of course, with the biblical story of the resurrection from the dead of Jairus' daughter; more than just the title of the story comes from the Aramaic phrase from the Gospel of St. Mark, "Talitha kum" ("Little girl, I say to you, arise!"). Did the miracle of the resurrection happen, or is it rather only a fantasy of Mary, the main character in *Talita*, a woman struggling with depression, distraught over more than just the tragic death of her niece?

In turn, the closing story of the collection, based on a simple anecdote, *Cadyk* [Tzadik], concerns a miracle involving the fact that a wish uttered over the grave of Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism in the 18th century, came true. The writer made the protagonists of the story two Poles who, due to a car breakdown, were stranded for several days in Mezhibuzh in Ukraine – one of them insisted on visiting the ohel of the famous tzadik erected in the area, and was rewarded for his persistence. Superstitions are not to be taken lightly, Huelle tells us.

This part of the consideration does not, I think, require a separate summary. The answer to the question as to why Paweł Huelle disliked modernity, in a way, comes to mind by itself.

A Postmodernist in Spite of Himself?

In the excellently received *Who Was David Weiser?*, a novel instantly recognised as a literary revelation, a flaw was detected. Well, the plot or rather "conceptual" (I mean the writing concept) dependencies of *Who Was David Weiser?* were traced to Günter Grass's micro-story *The Cat and the Mouse* (Polish edition 1963). When asked about this in interviews, the writer argued that he is not an imitator, but a continuator, that he does not imitate Grass's prose, but conducts a subtle, sophisticated dialogue with it. He explained: "książki mogą ze sobą rozmawiać. Idea wielkiej biblioteki – trochę jak u Borgesa – to jeden z moich pomysłów na pisanie"²⁰ [books can talk to each other. The idea of a great library – a bit like Borges – is one of my ideas for writing]. The fact that this issue became uncomfortable for the writer, and that he had to explain these affinities or dependencies, shows that at that time (the late 1980s and early 1990s) the modernist idea of originality as

²⁰ "Jestem tradycjonalistą. Z Pawłem Huelle rozmawia Natalia Adaszyńska" [I Am a Traditionalist. Paweł Huelle Is Interviewed by Natalia Adaszyńska], *Teatr*, no. 9 (1993): 46.

a requirement for artists of words, remained in force (a phenomenal novel must be an original novel).

The difference between *Who Was David Weiser* somehow depending on Grass's story and Huelle's later adulterous works is that in *Mercedes...* and *Castorp* these dependencies are ostentatiously brought to the fore. Using the terminology we are accustomed to when describing Hollywood cinema, the first of these novels can be said to be a spin-off anchored by Bohumil Hrabal's short story, and the second to be a prequel to Thomas Mann's masterpiece. It is fair to add that starting with *Mercedes...* both the writer and his publisher invariably used the neat and rhetorically-bearing formula of "paying homage" (to Hrabal or Mann). According to this formula, then, Huelle's adulterous novel was neither a manifestation of imitation, nor a continuation effect, nor a pastiche, but something, as they tried to suggest, much nobler and more momentous: a tribute to writers of the past.

Tracing the connections between specific texts is among the activities customarily undertaken by interpreters. Meanwhile, I would like to redirect attention to a higher level: convention and literary consciousness; to enquire into the astonishing "everlastingness" of Huelle's prose, moving on to the issue that is most important to me, namely, the unobvious anachronism of this writing practice. Przemysław Czapliński noted:

U schyłku lat osiemdziesiątych i na początku lat dziewięćdziesiątych dominująca praktyka wytwarzania literatury polegała na symulowaniu nawiązań do – wyraźnych i łatwo rozpoznawalnych – tekstów literackich z tradycji wysokiego modernizmu. Książki stawały się więc płaszczyzną, która stwarzała iluzje głębi [...].²¹

[In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the dominant practice of producing literature was to simulate references to – explicit and easily recognisable – literary texts from the tradition of high modernism. Books thus became a platform that created illusions of depth [...].]

This simulation of links with the "tradition of high modernism" and "creating the illusion of depth" – as a supra-individual literary tendency, of which Huelle was a representative – did not cease with the end of the 20th century. For here, with regard to a group of novels (titles are not necessary for us here) published in the first years of the 21st century, Krzysztof Uniłowski formulated the following observation:

Mamy oto zjawisko wyrastające z ukrytego przekonania, że skoro pewna formuła literacka znakomicie sprawdziła się w przeszłości, to nadal będzie pozostawała pro-

²¹ Przemysław Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje* [Poland to Exchange. Late Modernity and Our Grand Narratives] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2009), 346. Emphasis mine.

duktywna, tym bardziej, że kultywowanie dawnych wzorów może być rozumiane jako wyraz dezaprobaty dla stanu dzisiejszej kultury. Rzecz jednak w tym, że ów swoisty literacki konserwatyzm pozostaje bezradny wobec nieaprobowanych przez siebie zjawisk. Nie proponuje niczego oprócz odmowy przyjęcia ich do wiadomości. Heroizmu w tym niewiele, sporo za to wygodnictwa.²²

[Here we have a phenomenon growing out of the implicit conviction that since a certain literary formula has excelled in the past, it will continue to remain productive, especially since the cultivation of old patterns can be understood as an expression of disapproval at the state of today's culture. The point, however, is that this peculiar literary conservatism remains helpless in the face of the phenomena it disapproves of. It offers nothing but a refusal to acknowledge them. There is little heroism in this, but instead a lot of convenience.]

I would add that Uniłowski is concerned with the same thing – the literary traditions of high modernism and their – as “old models” – cultivation. The problem was, and still is, that these imitative-simulative practices are noted only by perceptive literary scholars dealing with contemporary Polish prose. The wider reading public does not see them; moreover, the artistic qualities that are the fruit of these practices are rated extremely highly. To give at least one example here, I will point to the opinion of a reviewer of the portal “Onet”, delighted with the novel *Śpiewaj ogrody*, who opens her commentary with a telling sentence: “Najnowsza książka Pawła Huellego jest przykładem doskonałego wypełnienia zadania literatury”²³ [Paweł Huelle's latest book is an example of a perfect fulfilment of the task of literature]. What the reviewer means is that the writer invites us into – let us use excerpts from two consecutive tasks – a “mysterious garden” and “brilliantly” leads us through its “thicket”; as a result – “we are captivated”. I do not mean emphatic metaphors (“mysterious garden”, “thicket”), my attention was caught by the conviction in this review that *Śpiewaj ogrody* is a novel that perfectly meets the reader's expectations; its “perfection” lies in the fact that it fulfils, and even exceeds, a certain aesthetic ideal. This is not an isolated incident – more experienced literary critics have commented in the same vein on Huelle's last novel.²⁴

Standing on the ground of a pragmatic as much as a consumerist approach to literature, one could say that it is not particularly important, or

²² Uniłowski, *Modernizm kontratakuje*, in Uniłowski, *Kup pan książkę!*, 120.

²³ Marianna Janicka, “Recenzja “Śpiewaj ogrody” Pawła Huelle” [Review of “Śpiewaj ogrody” by Paweł Huelle], <https://kultura.onet.pl/recenzje/recenzja-spiewaj-ogrody-pawel-huelle/m278nqj>.

²⁴ See, for example, the enthusiastic comments by Andrzej Franaszek, “Flet szczurołapa. Huelle i jego księga” [The Rat Flute: Huelle and His Book], *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 1 (2014); and Bogdan Rogatka “Odsłony pamięci” [Unveiled Memory], *Nowa Dekada Krakowska*, no. 3–4 (2014).

perhaps not important at all, whether the anachronistic and imitative (simulative) character of a given piece of writing has been noted. Since readers feel satisfied, in the process of reading, they become convinced that they are communing with literature of the highest order, perhaps the matter is not worth shaking up? I think it is indeed worth it.

In an interview, Huelle noted:

Żyjemy w rzeczywistości postmodernistycznej. Istnieje wielość równoległych światów. Nie rządzi nami jedna idea ani jedna estetyka. Nie ma wyższych ani niższych cywilizacji. Wszystko wygląda inaczej niż myśleli nasi przodkowie. Otóż w tej sytuacji bardzo trudno jest żądać od pisarza, aby zajmował się akurat tą, a nie inną sprawą, sferą, dziedziną. Każdy robi to, co wydaje się mu najważniejsze.²⁵

[We live in a postmodern reality. There is a multiplicity of parallel worlds. We are not ruled by one idea or one aesthetic. There are no higher or lower civilisations. Everything looks different from what our ancestors thought. Well, in this situation it is very difficult to demand that a writer deal with precisely this and not another issue, sphere or field. Everyone does what seems most important to him.]

Huelle says that the aesthetics he has chosen for himself are part of a larger set of poetics, conventions or, to put it most bluntly, ideas for practising literature, all of which function – in reference to the writer’s words – “in postmodern reality”. So his prose, described as traditionalist and/or anachronistic, is part of this package, which brings to mind one of the more imaginative accounts of the relationship between modernist and postmodernist literary formations.²⁶ I have in mind Ryszard Nycz’s suggestive observation of “modernism as an inclusion of postmodernism”. In this sense, Paweł Huelle is a postmodernist in spite of himself, a writer functioning in a world that is no longer “ruled by one idea or one aesthetic”, and we used to call this multifiform, pluralised and democratised situation (the condition of literature) postmodernism. Moreover, today we can make a correction in looking at the nostalgia and the writing practices developed on its grounds.

If one were to come to trust Svetlana Boym as the author of *The Future of Nostalgia*, Huelle’s longing for a lost world, his reference to past social orders and aesthetic regimes need not be seen at all as a rebellion against modernity. As Boym persuades the reader: “nostalgia is not “antimodern”; it is not necessarily opposed to modernity but coeval with it. Nostalgia and pro-

²⁵ “Bo są góry. Z Pawłem Huellem rozmawia Janusz Wróblewski” [Because There Are Mountains. Paweł Huelle Is Interviewed by Janusz Wróblewski], *Polityka*, no. 3 (2002): 48.

²⁶ Ryszard Nycz, *Języki modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* [Languages of Modernism. Historical and Literary Prolegomena] (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika 2013), 44 ff.

gress are like Jekyll and Hyde: doubles and mirror images of one another".²⁷ The retrospective orientation, Boym says, can even be seen as prospective,²⁸ so the anachronism (here of Huelle's writing) falls under the guise of not being self-evident. Which more perceptive readers of Huelle's later prose were aware of. This can be seen especially in reactions to *Talita*.²⁹ One reviewer, in connection with this volume of prose, noted that one can "derive from Huelle's short stories a (somewhat perverse) pleasure that we can rarely afford: to enjoy a perfectly guided narrative that openly defies the order of modernity." Reading Huelle's old-fashioned, non-futuristic prose gives pleasure – it is worth emphasising – "somewhat perverse", but also unique, exclusive, and rare in our world. Thus, it can be said that we are dealing here with something akin to a game of marked cards, only that the participants in this game (the writer and his recipient) are fully aware of it. Of course, not all "players", in fact, only a few. I shall now explain what I mean.

In 2004, Huelle announced *Castorp*, a novel that originated from a brief mention made by Thomas Mann about a character from *The Magic Mountain* (when Hans Castorp arrived in Davos, he had completed two years of engineering studies at Gdańsk Polytechnic Institute). Thus, Huelle created a striking fantasy of the Danzig years of the newcomer from Hamburg, entangled him in a love infatuation, even in a criminal intrigue, brilliantly – as in many of his earlier and later books – reconstructed the old Danzig, which was then – at the beginning of the 20th century – part of the German East and characterised German-Polish relations and so on (one could talk at length about *Castorp's* cognitive qualities).³⁰ However, from the perspective of the considerations undertaken here, the most interesting thing is that Huelle's novel can be successfully read without a knowledge of Mann's masterpiece. It is not just that one can derive reading satisfaction by accompanying the adventures of the title character, and thus read this novel as a historical narrative with a dominant romance-crime theme, addressed to a wide audience. It is more to the point that Huelle in *Castorp* – contrary to the "dialogicality" he affirmatively embraces – "does not talk" to *The Magic Mountain*, does not polemicise with the views or ideas contained in this novel, does not parody it, does not transform it in any way at all, with his

²⁷ Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2007): 7–18, <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents>.

²⁸ Cf. Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," 8.

²⁹ Maciej Libich, "Zagraj to jeszcze raz" [Play it again], *Dwutygodnik*, no. 9 (2020), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artypkyl/9148-zagraj-to-jeszcze-raz.html>.

³⁰ This was pointed out by Michał Głowiński, "Nad Castorpem" [Over Castorp], *Przegląd Polityczny*, no. 70 (2005).

own writing needs in mind. Of course, the more discerning reader, equipped with no small amount of literary competence, will compare the current novel to the one published eighty years earlier, looking for differences, similarities or analogies (e.g. ones concerning the characters; here, say, the character of Kławdia Chauchat against her counterpart, Wanda Pilecka).

The case of *Castorp* shows the limitations when it comes to “symulowanie nawiązań do tekstów literackich z tradycji wysokiego modernizmu” [simulating references to literary texts from the tradition of high modernism] (Czapliński’s formulation). After all, Huelle is by no means concerned with discussing the fundamental problems of European humanism or equally serious issues; this is the ambition of Thomas Mann, not Paweł Huelle. Moreover, it is worth noting how the signs (emblems) of high culture function in his novel. For whenever motifs appear on the pages of this work, with which a modern reader might have some trouble, very often, in one way or another (usually in a narrative commentary), they are explained to him or her.³¹ A good example is provided by one of the last scenes of Chapter XII, when the protagonist, “Hans Castorp stood in the middle of the frozen river at the very heart of the city and saw three suns, gradually appearing from behind the clouds, one beside another, not on top of each other”.³² The motif of three suns could be troublesome to interpret, were it not for the fact that a few lines earlier we read “the saddest of the twenty-four most beautiful songs in the world began its prelude”,³³ and Schubert’s name occurs as many as three times within the paragraph from which I took the excerpt. Although the name of this composer’s collection of songs is not mentioned in the text (we have a harsh winter, so this “riddle” is also easy to solve), the principle by which the writer reveals various sources – literary or musical – remains the same. I mention this to emphasise once again that when reading Huelle’s prose, it is not at all necessary to have the cultural capital we used to associate with classical education or familiarity with the domain of high culture.

The writer probably had no illusions about the cultural competence of his readers. If it had been otherwise, his most erudite novel, *Śpiewaj ogrody*, would probably have taken a different shape. In this work we can see Huelle’s favourite figure in the foreground – a boy to whom adults explain the world. I guess one can make the assumption that we, the readers of *Śpiewaj ogrody*, are that child. Therefore, among other things, we learn why the names of one of the characters (Ernst Theodor) preceding his name (Hoff-

³¹ Cf. Paweł Huelle, *Castorp* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2004), 200.

³² Paweł Huelle, *Castorp*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (London: Serpent's Tail, 2007), 234.

³³ Huelle, *Castorp*, 234

mann) are allusive,³⁴ what the content of the legend of the flautist from Hameln is, created by Richard Wagner, why Hoffman's favourite sentence was a phrase taken from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke (*Singe die Gärtner*, the Polish translation of these words gave the novel its title),³⁵ and, in general, who Rilke was and what his most important works are. Greta, Hoffmann's widow, is one of those German women who were not forced to leave Gdańsk after 1945. The aforementioned boy befriends her, and she introduces him to the richness of German culture, especially music, teaching him how to distinguish between Schuman and Schubert, telling him about the pre-war Wagner Festivals held in nearby Sopot and other matters, which are always within the field of high matters.

Repetition of Repetition (Instead of Summary)

It should not be forgotten that on an overarching level in *Śpiewaj ogrody*, as in many of Huelle's other works, there is a figure that we can successfully identify with the writer – he is an adult, tired of life, probably also a bitter man who resorts to literary sorcery to find solace, to communicate once again with his fantasy about the future, assuring us, of course, that the basis of this fantasy is his memories. Furthermore, these are memories that are constantly being reinvented. After all, it is not insignificant that *Śpiewaj ogrody* took its name from an expansion of an old Huelle short story (*Przeprowadzka* [The Removal] from the volume z tomu *Opowiadania na czas przeprowadzki* [Stories for a Time of Removal]). In a child protagonist who absorbs adult matters (e.g., the literary culture of high modernism and the musical culture before the modernist turn in classical music), one can see not only a figure subjected to intensive and arguably more effective education – it is also a figure conceived therapeutically.

In *Mercedes-Benz* – which has already been mentioned – Huelle's autobiographical storyteller immerses himself in the storytelling element and stylistic beauty of Hrabal's prose, in the unsurpassed, in his opinion, literature of the author of *Postřižiny* (*Cutting It Short*), he seeks refuge; the literary worlds of the Czech writer become, so to speak, helpful in existence. *Castorp* can also be interpreted in this perspective: the spirit of Mann's story or the very undertaking of reconstructing the reality of the early 20th century can have (I am not at all saying that they certainly do) a therapeutic dimension. The assumption that the writer has become a part of the world created in

³⁴ See Huelle, *Śpiewaj ogrody*, 256–257.

³⁵ See Huelle, *Śpiewaj ogrody*, 226–227.

Castorp is perhaps not overly audacious. Of course, it would be wrong to be naïve, after all, we have known for a long time that the gestures in question here are planted on an illusion described, for example, by Frederic Jameson.³⁶ We know from him that postmodern nostalgia is caused by an inability to deal with both the present and history. With the latter, in the sense that we do not recall the past, Jameson instructs us, but only its simulacrum transformations, disjointed images and uncertain constructs of a fuzzy, sometimes pop-cultural, origin.

The motto with which the writer labelled *Castorp* is a repetition from *Repetition*,³⁷ which Huelle probably intended to cancel the problem of... repetition. Does the repetition of repetition abolish the oppositions: contemporaneity – non-contemporaneity, modernity – anti-modernity, repetition – novum? I am not sure of the answer, but undoubtedly in such a perspective – perverse, marked by paradox – one can also consider Paweł Huelle's writing.

Translated by Anna Wyleżątek and David Lilley

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³⁶ See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London–New York: Verso, 2008).

³⁷ "Właśnie dlatego, że było, powtórzenie staje się nowością" [Precisely because it has been, repetition becomes novelty]. Søren Kierkegaard, *Powtórzenie. Próba psychologii eksperymentalnej przez Constantina Constantiusa* [Repetition. A Rehearsal of Experimental Psychology by Constantin Constantius], trans. Bronisław Świdorski, in Søren Kierkegaard, *Powtórzenie. Przedmowy* [Repetition. Prefaces] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2000), 39.

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Pawła Huellego kłopoty ze współczesnością

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie stosunku Pawła Huellego do współczesności, a także zdanie sprawy z jego pisarskiego tradycjonalizmu. Punktem wyjścia rozważań są uwagi na temat nostalgii jako estetyki i praktyki literackiej Huellego. Autor pokazuje, w jaki sposób pisarz unikał tematyki współczesnej w swojej prozie i do jakich skutków doprowadziło to, że w niektórych dziełach, niejako wbrew sobie, zajął się aktualną rzeczywistością. W drugiej części artykułu rozważana jest możliwość umieszczenia prozy Huellego, zwłaszcza dwu jego powieści (*Castorp* oraz *Śpiewaj ogrody*), w kontekście postmodernistycznym, a także możliwość innego spojrzenia na twórczość nostalgiczną tego pisarza. Rozważania zamykają uwagi na temat sposobu przywoływania przez Huellego motywów i dzieł należących do kultury wysokiej.

Słowa klucze: Paweł Huelle, proza polska, współczesność, nostalgia.

Paweł Huelles Probleme mit der Gegenwart

Abstract: Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, Paweł Huelles Einstellung zur Gegenwart darzustellen und sein traditionalistisches Schreiben zu erläutern. Ausgangspunkt der Überlegungen sind Kommentare zur Nostalgie als ästhetische und literarische Praxis Huelles. Der Autor zeigt, wie der Schriftsteller zeitgenössische Themen in seiner Prosa vermied und zu welchen Konsequenzen dies führte, wenn er sich in einigen Werken wie „gegen sich selbst“ mit der aktuellen Realität auseinandersetzte. Im zweiten Teil des Beitrags wird versucht, Huelles Prosa, insbesondere zwei seiner Romane (*Castorp* und *Śpiewaj ogrody*), in einen postmodernen Kontext zu stellen, sowie aus einer anderen Sicht das nostalgische Werk dieses Schriftstellers zu betrachten. Abschließend wird auf Huelles Bezüge auf Motive und Werke der Hochkultur eingegangen.

Schlüsselwörter: Paweł Huelle, polnische Prosa, Gegenwart, Nostalgie.