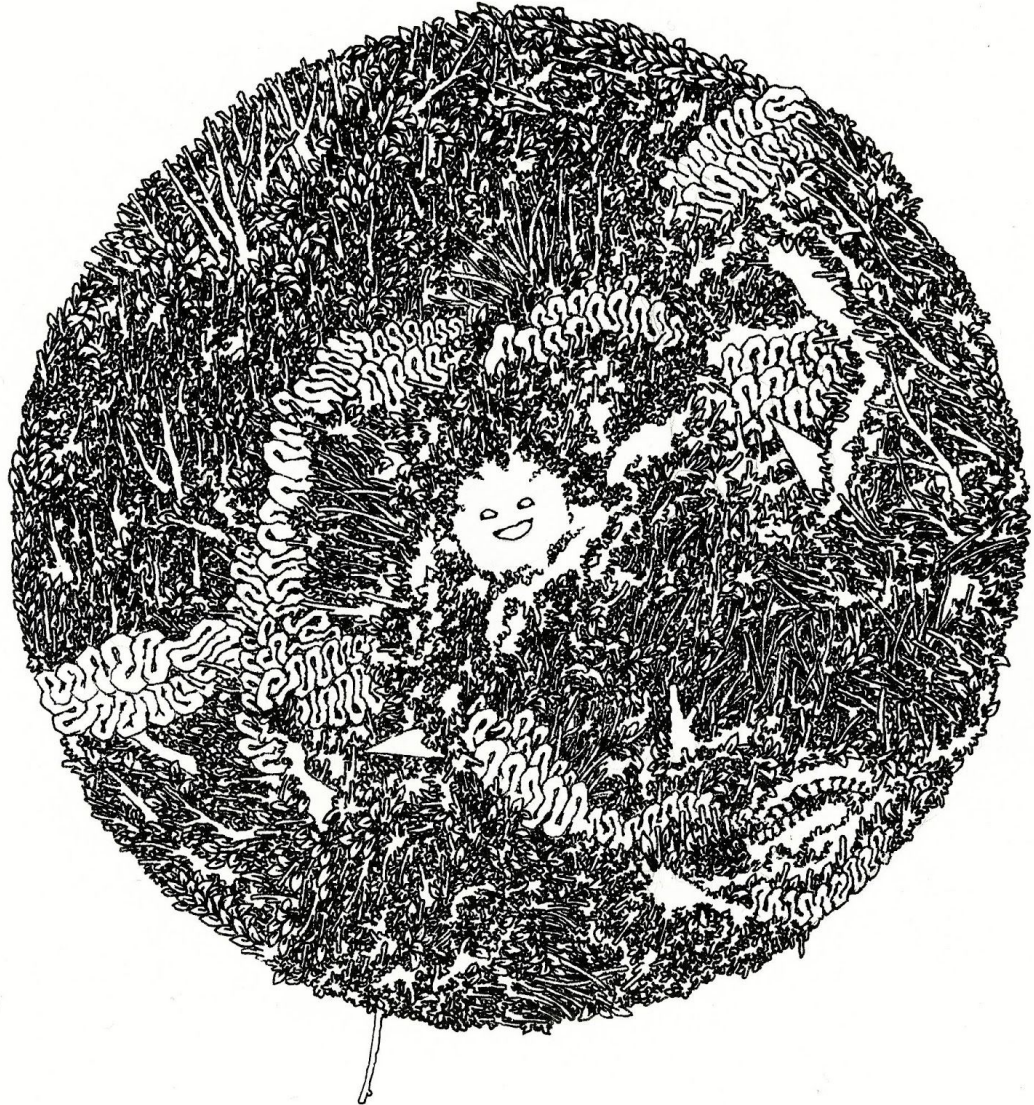


THE CIRCLE OF LIFE, THE ORDER OF DEATH.

Narration as a method of confronting the potential dreadfulness of life



ABSTRACT

The aim of my doctoral dissertation is to bridge the gap between various notions that haunt the modern world and, in my opinion, highlight the need to narrate stories, inherent to human perception. Within the model I propose, on one side there is what is ordered (told). On the other side there is what I call the disordered. The order and disorder occur only within our perception. It is the perspective of sight. I understand the disorder as the potentiality for everything, inexpressibility and infinity - although we do have abstract concepts to describe them, we are not

able to express the inexpressibility or infinity. Arranging the experience, creating cognitive patterns, models that express the world, all constitute a story. And vice versa: it is the stories that create the sense of order, that inform the sense of meaning. For example, this work is an attempt to organize the awareness of the existence of a world independent from any story. In the process of writing, I have been constantly rediscovering that by writing about narratives that organize my own experience, I was creating a certain narrative myself. I can only speak within the framework of narrative structures imposed by language. Outside the story, outside the perception of order and disorder, there is a world that exists independently of our judgments, desires and efforts, a non-human world. In such a world, not related to the story, the suffering of every living creature is the result of accidentality (an accidental mutation that has proven useful for survival); it is a neutral event in the nervous system, devoid of any sense or meaning.

"Snail on the Slope", a science-fiction novel by Strugatsky brothers, is in my opinion a fine illustration of the workings of this ostensible opposition. The book describes the actions of the Institute attempting to investigate the Forest. However, the Forest remains incomprehensible. It appears to be unstructured, unrecognizable, incredible and yet - real. The Forest appears as a process whose aim, if there is any, remains elusive. The reality of the Institute, on the other hand, is hierarchical, therefore structured, has its internal dynamics within which researchers function. The Institute is ultimately unable to explore the forest, and turns to itself. Ultimately, it turns out to be a self-referential structure that does not refer to any "tangible" reality, and can only deal with itself. The Institute emerges as a certain narrative illusion. The narrative it creates and which defines the the aspirations of its employees - is a kind of useful fiction. Therefore, the opposition, the distinction between the order of the Institute and the anti-order of the Forest, is superficial: the Institute itself turns is an irrational, contradictory structure, whose efforts are vain. It turns out to be an entanglement, a chaos whose efforts are barren.

Revealing the narratives as fragile, unreliable and incompatible realities is an act of discovering the lack of control over the reality that exists independently from us, unlike our stories. However, the fragility of a narrative can be captured and expressed by adding another layer of narrative, but this never protects an individual from the potential horror of everything.

The potential horror of everything can be related to another aspect of cognition - the experience of infinity. Marcin Polak dedicated his book to this experience, called the "Trauma of Infinity". Here

we can discover and experience the fact that we are surrounded by the endlessness. The endlessness is within us, beyond us, independent of us. The endlessness is incredible, inexpressible, it surpasses us in every possible way - it can neither be embraced nor expressed. It is real and potential. It concerns "nature, space, possibilities". It is everything, it is an abstraction impossible to assimilate. In boundlessness, I suppose, Polak sees a metaphysical problem haunting philosophy in the context of the traumatizing awareness of boundlessness - and, consequently, impotence. He defines this impasse as a "disease of infinity". Polak discusses the strategies of dealing with this awareness and attempts to build relations with endlessness that will allow, first of all, to recognize the infinity as sensible, and secondly, to feel comfortable with it. He defines them as "therapeutic projects":

„The faith in divine infinity and eternal reward feeds all three therapeutic projects presented above (Pascalian, Kierkegaardian and Hegelian). Nevertheless, the disease of infinity - in these three different versions - is associated with a sense of misery and insignificance. This is what connects these otherwise different narratives. In each of them, the cure for the overwhelming feeling of one's own nothingness (lack of meaning, adventure, futility of life) is the adoration of infinity. Giving up individualism (Hegel), a pragmatic leap of faith (Pascal), an irrational leap of faith (Kierkegaard) are side effects of this adoration. Out of the local - and long overdue - disputes about who better understood Christianity, who better knew what it meant to be a good Christian, etc., here emerges a common problem beyond all divisions. How to give meaning to human life in the face of the present infinity (nature, space, possibilities)? Religious faith and the related deification of the infinity, carried out by Pascal, Kierkegaard, Hegel and many others, which is supposed to be a desirable antidote to the destructive influence of the silent, indifferent, inhumanly abstract, sensual or simply poor infinity, has entered a phase of crisis with Nietzsche's speech”¹.

Telling stories once again seems like a peculiar method of ensuring survival - but each story eventually loses out to boundlessness. A narrative that turns its back on itself, perceiving its finiteness and inadequacy, may turn out to be more lively, susceptible to distortion. A narrative that takes into account its useful, temporary character may indicate the existence of a mystery, an "unsettled matter". Mystery is neither a metaphysical beginning nor an end, it is - only, or even - a call to attention for the inadequacy of language. The inalienable chasm between the symbolic reality of language and reality exists independently of it.

¹ M. Polak, *Trauma bezkresu. Nietzsche, Lacan, Bernhard i inni*, Kraków 2016, s. 67

The endlessness - understood, among other things, in the context of space - is oppressive, just as its reverse is oppressive. The work of James Graham Ballard often tells of such boundless à rebours: about the cramped cabins of crushed cars ("The Crash"), a self-sufficient mega-tower where housing conditions lead first to acts of violence, then to anarchy and finally to the psychological regression of the inhabitants, ("The Skyscraper") or a world where there is no more free space and buildings rise everywhere or which is grotesquely overcrowded (stories from the "Garden of Time" collection). Ballard's work obsessively returns to the issue of losing or uncovering the lack of control, the façade of the narratives that organize and guide our sense of meaning. He speaks of a world of strange drives and forces controlling the characters outside their "world of everyday human affairs". That's why I think that boundlessness or anti-boundlessness are only one aspect of our contact with mystery. This one will always be evasive, although we can, like Freud in his essay about the Amazing, multiply its qualities endlessly.

Like in the science-fiction short story "The Faith of our Fathers" by Philip K. Dick, the head of state reveals to various people who have experienced the disruption of the broadcast image (or the disruption of the hallucination under which they spend their lives) on television, another terrifying figure of themselves. Their common name given to them by Dick, not only in this story, is entropy. Entropy returns in the writer's other texts, but this kind of intuition speaks to us in other characters. Nietzsche will talk about the will of power and eternal return. Freud will talk about the death drive and the Amazing, Lacan will talk about the Real. Kafka will describe the Castle, Conrad will talk about Kurtz, Lem will describe the living ocean - the planet Solaris, and the Strugatsky brothers - the Zona and the Forest. Lovecraft will create a pantheon of blasphemous Ancient Ones. I realize that each of these notions - as I have tried to present in the previous chapters - does not mean the same thing, just as the plot of "Solaris" is not identical to the plot of "Heart of Darkness" or "Castle". However, I claim that since a certain moment in history - which I identify with the depletion of the Enlightenment narrative - there has been a growing awareness of the sense of own insufficiency, cognitive helplessness, the entanglement in the interpretations that is revealed, returned, tired and persecuted in these and other narratives. This premonition, on a cultural level, cannot be exorcised with any stories. The question remains open, is this awareness becoming more and more common? If so, what will it lead to? A "Gentle" extinction of the species, as in Michel Houellebecq's "Elementary Particles" or a mass coma, as in Ballard's "Echoes of Time"? Or maybe to a technological breakthrough? How long has it been accompanying man? Is it an evolutionary

necessity that will allow the species to jump into the unknown? Will the unknown be better? Different? More stories can be told about it. Nevertheless, the failure of the Enlightenment, the axiological crisis seem to be the key moments here, from the point of view of Western civilisation, as does the existence of Nietzsche's philosophy: civilisation does not provide a single, coherent narrative. The effort to create a story has become an individual matter, the individual has become contact with mystery - boundlessness - horror. This narrative weakness of the times is addressed by extreme ideologies, conspiracy theories, and religions, fighting for dominance not so much in the sphere of ideology but in the sphere of narration, of establishing the meaning and meaning of the world.

The tragedy of the situation is the inability to stand side by side with one another and one's own stories: leaving one leads us to another. Stories in stories: the Platonic cave is in another cave, and the latter in yet another, boundless caves, entanglements, rhizomes. What's worse, it's hard to get caught up in their hierarchy, as long as any hierarchy exists outside our judgments, our hierarchy. Everything is broken down into the fact that we never have such certainty, although we can believe in one or more hierarchies - narratives, treating them as the ultimate truth. Regardless of this, coming out of one cave that we consider a representation of reality does not really lead us to any world (and if it is possible, we know nothing about it). "This time I know something for sure" - the narrative sends us back to language, and in language we discover structural limitations - which, according to Polak, are repetitions, loops. Thus, not only do we always return (we have to return) to the narrative as such, but we return to the exact same narratives. We all tell stories that we already know.

The repetitiveness indicates another kind of entanglement. Not only the narrations, but also the repetitiveness of these. The repetitiveness is, as Nicholas Royle claims, incredible - because it reveals a lack of control. These repetitions, these tiny tics, the sayings, telling ourselves and others the same stories, control us, possess us in control, enslave us. In the repetitions we can experience ourselves as not belonging to ourselves. This is one of the reasons why repetitiveness turns out to be mysterious and dangerous - Nietzsche, Freud, Bernhard, among others, used to break their heads over it. When Nietzsche invented the Great Comeback, he created an instance of the ultimate horror of repetition.

Outside the stories, a reality independent of them exists. However, language separates us from this

reality. The language produces narratives that order the experience, the disturbance of the linguistic structure is the only evidence of the Lacanian Real. We have developed certain tools that allow us to discern ourselves in a world that is not a story - mainly science. However, by using them, the fact we obtain can be mixed with our stories. And what science gives us is drawn into a narrativism that is like a curse on us. The narrative curse of King Midas: everything we touch immediately turns into a story. And so, objectively existing features of the world, which science learns to recognize and distinguish from the non-objective, become the building blocks of a story, the fuel for fantasy. An example of this is a kind of mysticism that has grown up around a popular, unscientific interpretation of the strangeness of quantum physics. Quantum physics may appear as strange, but this strangeness cannot be a basis for teleological theories or practicing a specific philosophy - solving problems with free will. Quantum physics is not a story in itself, but it is willingly used to generate a narrative, for example, of a para-religious nature.

What lies beyond the narrative? Lunacy, boundlessness, everything? Is this a world inhabited by ridiculous machines, animated animal bones, performing senseless, cruel actions - as in the performances of robots created by Survival Research Laboratories group? Whatever it is, the discovery of narrative coercion within it has a destructive power. There is a threat of nihilism. But with this one one has to wrestle.

After God's death, after entering the mature age of our attitude to meaning, we seem to have been left alone with ourselves. We ourselves are responsible for the narrative, for our creation within the narrative. But we do not act in a vacuum. We are subjected to various interactions, being immersed in myths of fragments of the narrative, micronarrations resembling more and more fragmented fragments of plastic. However, unlike this plastic, these increasingly fragmented narratives are not permanent. They are ephemera. They solve the issue of the craving for a narration for a moment, they treat symptoms for a short time, but they never touch the very cause.

We can say after Nietzsche that it is not in our power to free ourselves from the narrative - because it is in our language (in grammar, as the philosopher would like it to be). Analyzing Quentin Meillassoux's philosophy, Polak makes a similar observation. He points out that Meillassoux, like Nietzsche once did, draws up a project to radically reevaluate the notions: in this case, to free oneself from a certain mental trap, called by the French thinker a correlationism. Polak quotes that the pursuit of the French philosopher is reminiscent of how Nietzsche wrestled metaphysics, among

other things, ultimately falling into metaphysics himself. He wrestled with the nihilism of his contemporaneity, finally recognizing himself as a product of that contemporaneity. Similarly, according to Polak, Meillassoux takes the goal of correlationism, its "narrative" detachment from how things are in the real world (what the real world is, is discovered by science): he tries to bring thought closer to being. However, he fails by falling into what it is trying to fight against.

The philosophical parable about chaos, about the accidental nature of everything, which can be read in terms of the ultimate senselessness (or rather "nonsense"), is just another narrative, another myth - hence the title of the chapter in "The Trauma of Infinity" by Polak: "Meillassoux's Chaom mythology". The revaluation of one narrative does not create a narrative vacuum, the void left by one story must be immediately filled by another. However, a certain justice must be done to the French philosopher: the nod proposed by Polak to "mathematicised cognitive successes" of science is also a certain narrative: a narrative that exalts science, perhaps as a certainty, as the only source of some truth. However, this remark is not about the proclamation of indifference; it is not my goal to relativize or diminish the merits of science. I am merely pointing out the narrative compulsion to which we are all subject, as I tried to prove. I am writing this, knowing that I am also writing a "fairy tale", a narrative. And even now, trying to capture this narrative compulsion, I have to write about it "from the inside", from within the narrative. In this sense, indeed, the exact sciences of narrativity win - or at least avoid being entangled in our, human, metaphysical, "unsettled issues" which Baran mentions in "Postnietzsche". The narrative also happens in their context, but it is more about the issues of the environment, scientific paradigms, intellectual fashions, struggle for position, etc. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that every field, every section of society, behaves in a similar way: visual artists, writers, industrialists, philosophers, mathematicians play, and at stake is the position in the field. This is accompanied by myths, mythologies, legends, stories that order this reality - the reality of conflict. What scientists do: first numbers or taxonomies of species or masses of atoms are devoid of narrative. Abstraction is unlike narration, although it can form the basis of any narrative - hence probably the parareligious view (anchored in the misinterpretation of scientific experience) that the consciousness of the observer can influence the behaviour of the molecules, thus shaping the reality. The appeal of science for the profane is not only its independence from the narrative, but also the possibility to tell new, unusual stories. Hence perhaps the shift among philosophers - just to recall the case of Meillassoux or Brassier's nihilistic materialism - towards science. So: science (dealing with abstract concepts) is in itself anti-narrative, but it can be used as a building block for narrative. For example, a narrative about progress, understood as moving towards a better world. This "better world" (for example, a world devoid of events known as suffering in the nervous

systems, which we often recognize as evil within our culture) may one day happen, but they will happen regardless of the narrative of belief in salvific progress or the narrative of the total accidentality of everything. They will simply happen-just like the world that is happening, with or without our stories.

The Enlightenment fighting the dominant narrative did not cure - because it could not - the desire for narrative. These or other "fairy tales" satisfy this need; this need produces subsequent narratives that organize our perception. Not only do they allow us to organize our experience, but they restore a sense of control, power over the world. They allow us to feel a little bit more divine, and alleviate the prospect of sharing the terrible fate of Prometheus. However, one should not fall into relativism here: Nietzsche has already noticed that some stories serve some of our purposes better than others.

As I wrote above, despite the fact that there is no narrative in mathematics, astrophysics or chemistry (in themselves, in their methodology, in the language they use), just as a telephone book does not have narrative features, the sum of scientific discoveries, as opposed to a set of telephone numbers, encourages us to tell a story. What can we do with the knowledge that, at the moment, science indicates that we do not belong to ourselves, we do not decide about ourselves and free will does not exist, or at least, it is not similar to our common perception of it? Thomas Metzinger adds: our consciousness, our sense of being a person is also an illusion. Donald Hoffman, a cognitive psychologist, continues: the world we see does not necessarily reflect the world that exists outside our perception, saying "evolution is not sympathetic to truthfulness or proper perception. These perceptions of reality are dying out". In this context, the experience of the crisis of the Enlightenment as a trauma, about which Richard Sheppard wrote in "Problems of Modernism Literature", has not changed - we do not know, at the cultural level, what to do with these discoveries, contradictory to our intuition and conviction that we know something for sure. But we have to assemble, install and arm our narratives ourselves, otherwise we will remain in the position of souls from Jean Paul's short text, in which the dead Christ announced from the top of the cosmic edifice that there is no God. The reason has failed (or succeeded) in trying to fix itself in various ways with the metaphysical strings of our species (although the same reason is still working, accumulating experience, doing so for an unknown purpose, which is being dispelled by phrases about "progress"): it was not about God, not about religion, but about the need to believe in a story, a story, a fable. The same mind has discovered that we are shaped by things that are completely independent of us: culture, times, accidental events, evolutionary body formation, genes, foetal

trauma - this list can be freely extended. Is it because of this that Bernhard believes that "human existence is a mistake"? In "Modernity and Sovereignty", Paweł Pieniążek points out the failure of Nietzsche's project which ultimately, shortly before he slipped into madness, he himself recognizes the product of his times, his culture against which he has passionately acted. The 20th century, described by Marcin Rychter as "entering the adult age of mankind" in the introduction to the issue of the Kronos quarterly dedicated to nihilism, is a time to discover the drives and ambiguities of our aspirations, our own hidden uncanny. Nicholas Royle says we are haunted. The greatest unknown hovers over all this in the form of the inevitability of death - which, according to the supporters of the Theory of Mastering the Leprechaun (like philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe and writer Thomas Ligotti) is the main driver of our running, dealing with things, telling ourselves stories. Again, science is doubling and tripling to solve this "technical problem". as the death of Yuvel Harrari. The question of whether we will cross death is a topic for a separate work (or a science-fiction story), for a separate narrative. Nevertheless, an interesting question arises: what about our stories then? Perhaps a radical transformation of what a human being is (as long as it is still a human being) will radically change the craving for a narrative, a storytelling mania.

What remains of the horror experience? Both those conceptual, "oversensitive" neuroticists and the most real ones: war, illness or death of loved ones. A humorous info-graphic image circulates the Internet: "Baby's first existential crisis a guide", in which, of course, we will find Nietzsche and Libertinism and Mysticism (this guide lacks proposals to combine these - poor Bataille), religions: Buddhism, Christianity, politics. We get to the point where perhaps the only thing that allows us to survive is the potential encounter with the horror of everything, with the "trauma of infinity", with the world of a dead god, is laughter. Perhaps even if it is the laughter of an individual sliding into madness, into this most authentic affirmation of the inexpressibility of things, of everything, of horror. This, by the way, happens to the main character of the horror film "In the mouth of madness" directed by John Carpenter. The character played by Sam Neil avoids the fatal fate of another hero of the horror film played by the same actor: Possession directed by Andrzej Żuławski. This film ends with a symbolic bombardment scene, therefore: the destruction of everything, the ruin of all hierarchies. It is similar in the case of the desolate world from "In the mouths of madness", but here, instead of horror, we have a new, wonderful life: the life of a wandering madman whose mind turns everything into hysterical laughter. Perhaps laughter and humour in its irrationality allow us to survive. They allow us to rely on potentiality, to experience that in the end "The wind blows where it wants to" even if this wind has nothing of the Christian image of God in

it.

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