

Rétorika úprimnosti
v literatúrach strednej
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The Rhetoric of Sincerity
in Central and Eastern
European Literatures

JAKUB KAPIČIAK
AKVILĖ RĖKLAITYTĖ
(eds.)

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The rhetoric of sincerity in Central and Eastern European literatures

JAKUB KAPIČIAK – AKVILĖ RĖKLAITYTĖ

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To discuss the rhetoric of sincerity, it is necessary to focus on the idea of performing sincerity, that is, on the means that create the effect of genuine and honest disclosures. The current debate moved to the “doing” of sincerity instead of the “being” (van Alphen and Bal 2009, 3), partially because of the postmodern critique of essentialist concepts. Therefore, it is a little paradoxical that sincerity has recently emerged as an important topic in the research of literary and cultural developments after postmodernism. The search for sincerity and authenticity has been identified as a key feature of the next stage of cultural history by many theorists. Sincerity is seen as a counterweight principle to irony or relativism, typically associated with postmodernism. Hypermodernity, performatism, or metamodernism are only a few terms used in this regard. Many of these theories point in different ways to the return of affective and ethical commitments in literature and art. This turn is also widely discussed under the label “new sincerity”, which emerged in the United States and Russia around 1990. Given the current relevance of the concept of sincerity, the topic of this issue of *WORLD LITERATURE STUDIES* explores literary representations of sincerity across Eastern and Central Europe from the late 19th century to the present.

Although today the meaning of the word “sincerity” seems clear enough, its understanding as “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (Trilling 1972, 2) or “that hard-to-monitor virtue of ‘being oneself’ or speaking truly of one’s private feelings” (Rutten 2017, viii) is believed to emerge with the rise of self-awareness of the modern subject and its beginning is often discussed in relation to counter-reformation (Martin 1997; Taylor 2009). One of the most influential accounts of the association between sincerity and the emergence of the self-conscious subject is probably based on Jacob Burckhardt’s historical narrative from his 1860 book *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*.

On the other hand, the presence of what Michel Foucault (1993) termed “the hermeneutics of the self” can be traced back to the Ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia* that refers to the situations when a speaker “does not hide anything, but opens

his heart and mind completely to other people” (Foucault 1999). We can also see the conceptual roots of today’s sincerity in Aristotle’s notion of *aletheutikos*, which refers to the loyalty to truth and truthfulness (An 2004, 158). Literature creates a common ground for an interplay of these notions. It is the ground on which speaking truthfully intertwines with one’s subjectivity, identity, memory, and authenticity (Dufner and Kühler 2019). Such a perspective suggests that sincerity has never been an autonomous concept but is instead shaped by cultural contexts and practices, and it functions as a communicative principle.

It was mainly after Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* (1782) that this principle, based on the idea of correspondence between writing and feeling, acquired strategic importance for many writers and literary critics. During the 19th century, it eventually became a primary criterion for discussing the quality of literature, although it soon turned into a semantically empty term (Ball 1964). Nevertheless, it was during this time that it absorbed different interconnected concepts and started to function as an umbrella term (Rutten 2017, 51).

Literary representations of public disclosures of private feelings and thoughts can be undoubtedly traced back to ancient literature (Allen 1950). Nevertheless, the writing of Ovidius, for example, was not focused on analyzing “his own contradictions” and reaching the “exact correspondence between his poetry and his feelings” (Peyre 1963, 16). It was built on other principles such as “the elegance of distinction” (14).

Moreover, sincerity is often perceived within a binary logic. Typical dichotomies are related to the confrontation between the mind and body or between an individual (often the honest self) and the rest of (often corrupted) society. In more general terms, it means that a subject is often depicted in literature as being trapped in a world that creates obstacles to becoming honest and genuine. We may encounter such a tendency in Molière’s play *Le Misanthrope ou l’Atrabilaire amoureux* (1666).

Our decision to focus on sincerity rhetoric in the literature of the Central and Eastern European region is driven by the fact that it has been researched insufficiently. Moreover, we would like to trace this topic beyond the current debates on “new sincerity” as the new cultural paradigm that challenges postmodernism. We believe that it is worth re-examining sincerity beyond such historical boundaries. For that reason, articles included in the issue focus on different periods and cultures. The contributions to this issue, discussing Bulgarian, Czech, Lithuanian, Slovak, Polish, Romanian, and Ukrainian literatures, demonstrate that sincerity is a context-dependent category.

This context-dependency is well illustrated by two studies from the era of state socialism. In her study, Dalia Satkauskytė shows how sincerity in Stalinist and thaw-era Lithuania functioned as an ideological interpellation shaping rhetorical cliché and cultural inertia that hindered modernist literature. Jakub Mikulecký details how self-disclosure within Bulgarian unofficial culture served as a form of opposition to the communist regime. In these cases, sincerity operates as an ethical, political, and even aesthetic concept.

However, explorations of various literary contexts point out more universal features of the rhetoric of sincerity. Sincerity presupposes an addressee who witnesses

self-revelation, thus the studies by Gertraude Zand and Olha Voznyuk show how this relational dimension of sincerity is shaped. Sincerity, therefore, appears as an unstable but desirable category. Its elusiveness is traced by Marie Zetová, Kristiyan Yanev, Eva Kenderessy, and Šimon Čižmár, whose articles provide close readings of Czech, Polish, Romanian, and Slovak writing.

To conclude, we would like to highlight that this issue aims to showcase new angles of research on the rhetoric of sincerity in Central and Eastern European literatures, reassessing current conceptual frameworks by confronting them with previously unexplored literary milieus and texts.

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Sincerity in Czech literature: Notes toward a rhetoric of lamentation

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Sincerity in Czech literature: Notes toward a rhetoric of lamentation

Lamentation. Rhetoric. Sincerity. Subjective narrator. Expression. Czech literature.

Roman Jakobson considers the anonymous Czech prose dispute *Tkadleček* (The weaver, beginning of the 15th century), the last letters of Božena Němcová (1861) and Jakub Deml's *Zapomenuté světlo* (The forgotten light, 1934) to be the most tragic works of Czech literature. This article shows that the three texts share some characteristic elements: they are written in the first person, they appeal to an imaginary or real counterpart and they are set in the present tense. They emphasize a rhetoric of lamentation, which guarantees the sincerity of the author's statement. Some other factors like repetition and expressive language also contribute to the reader's feeling of being immediately addressed and deeply affected.

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In academic research the question of “sincerity” in literature was primarily approached through poetry, first-person autobiographical narratives, and (intimate) diaries of the 19th and 20th centuries (Peyre [1963] 1969). In more recent scholarship, under the subject of “new sincerity”, attention has also turned to fictional texts produced since the late 20th century.¹ The concept of sincerity in literature has been defined in different ways. Lionel Trilling (1972) understands it as the congruence between an utterance and the actual feeling of the speaker, while Ellen Rutten (2017) characterizes it more broadly as truthful speech about personal, private, or intimate feelings. Both definitions presuppose a correspondence between what is said and what is felt – that is, they treat sincerity as an attribute of the speaking subject. In the context of the present study, however, sincerity is understood primarily as a *rhetorical* effect: It denotes the impression of truthfulness and emotional immediacy that a text produces in its reader by means of specific formal and stylistic devices. The question, in other words, is not whether an author *is* sincere, but how a text *persuades* us of its sincerity. As Henri Peyre (1969, 79–110) has shown, literature’s claim to sincerity is always mediated by conventions and rhetorical strategies; the more recent debate on “new sincerity” similarly acknowledges that the effect of sincere expression is inseparable from the formal means by which it is achieved (Kelly 2024). The present study adopts this perspective and asks which rhetorical devices – specifically those associated with the tradition of lamentation – generate the impression of sincere, unmediated speech across different periods and genres of Czech literature.

The well-known philologist Roman Jakobson declared the following three works to be the most tragic in Czech literature: the Old Czech prose dispute *Tkadleček* (The weaver, beginning of the 15th century), the oeuvre of the novelist Božena Němcová, and the prose text *Zapomenuté světlo* (The forgotten light, 1934) by Jakub Deml.² In all three cases, we are dealing with the subjective, immediate and truthful utterance of an individual in crisis: *Tkadleček*, abandoned by his beloved, voices his distress by challenging a personification of Misfortune. In her stories, Němcová takes refuge in an ideal world; the quality of her life, however, is marked by deprivation and conflict. These she addresses and deplores, bearing authentic witness – especially in her last three draft letters. And Jakub Deml’s *Zapomenuté světlo* is an outcry of abject misery by someone in an existential crisis. The adage of the Czech romantic poet Karel Hynek Mácha, “that pain is the mother of true poetry” (“že je toliko bolest matka pravé poezie”); quoted in Jakobson [1934] 1995, 28) applies to all three authors in equal measure.

LAMENTING TO AN ALLEGORY: *TKADLEČEK*

The Old Czech prose dispute *Tkadleček* dates back to the beginning of the 15th century. Its author is unknown, but he must have been very well-educated and fluent in Latin rhetoric as well as in the art of philosophical and theological reasoning. The dispute between the Weaver and personified Misfortune shares many similarities with the far more widely known work by Johannes von Saaz (aka Johannes von Tepl), *Der Ackermann und der Tod*, also known as *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* (written around 1400, printed 1460; Eng. trans. *Death and the Plowman or, The Bohemian*

Plowman, 1958). Having lost his wife and mother of his children, he denounces personified Death. Just as in this controversy between the plowman and death, the helpless Czech Weaver starts his plaint with rude invectives against his adversary – Misfortune: “Alas, alas, help! Alas, alas, misery, alas, alas for violence! Alas for thee, thou cruel and fierce destroyer of all lands, harmful injurer of all the world, brazen murderer of all good men! Oh, you misfortune, oh be cursed by all creation! God himself hates you!”⁴ (quoted in Dinzl-Rybářová 2006, 237). Like a litany, the lamentation is repeated in many variants.

In everyday language, a “litany” denotes the monotonously intoned repetition of a statement, often in connection with dissatisfaction or lament. In a stricter sense, a litany designates a Christian prayer characterized by specific features that also appear, although modified, in *Tkadleček*. In the religious context, the address is directed to God – typically through repeated supplicatory formulas such as “Lord, have mercy” or “Lord, hear us”; in *Tkadleček*, by contrast, the Weaver appeals to personified Misfortune. Instead of the antiphonal exchange between cantor and congregation customary in the litany, the discourse in *Tkadleček* alternates between the lamenting Weaver and the arraigned Misfortune. Whereas the Christian litany relies upon the mercy of God, Misfortune proves merciless. As in the litany, enumeration (enumeratio) and repetition (repetitio) are of central importance in *Tkadleček*, above all anaphoric repetition, as in the exclamation “Alas!” (“Ach!”). In the course of the dispute, the initially doleful tone of voice gradually changes and the Weaver – like in a case before the Court – proceeds by bringing forward arguments in his defence. The outcome, however, is inescapable: in the end, Misfortune prevails.

In Jakobson’s opinion, literary texts and life testimonies are inherently of equal value. According to him, the relationship between the two forms does not represent a link between “poetry and truth”, as implied in the subtitle of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s famous autobiography *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (From my life: Poetry and truth, 1811–1831; Eng. trans. *The Auto-biography of Goethe: Truth and Poetry* 1848 [vol. 1], 1882 [vol. 2]). Instead we are simply dealing with two different semantic propositions for one and the same experience. Furthermore, Jakobson posits that Mácha would much rather publish his diaries than his poetry, were he alive today (1995, 24–26). Owing to social circumstances, however, it had been unimaginable for Mácha to think of publishing private notes during his lifetime, and even posterity hesitated for a long time before releasing his uncensored diaries.

While Michel de Montaigne had already begun to blur the boundary between literature and personal testimony in his *Essais* (1580; Eng. trans. *Essays*, 1603 – 1991), it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who radicalized this move in his autobiographic *Les Confessions* (1782–1789; Eng. trans. *The Confessions*, 1790), placing the author’s own life – with all its positive and negative aspects – at the very center of the literary work.⁵ Rousseau’s title obviously refers to Saint Augustine’s *Confessiones* (397–400). But whereas Augustine uses his life’s journey as an example to describe a path to God, Rousseau’s candid portrayal and merciless reckoning with his own life forms the chief subject of his book. The author as literary subject stands for himself, with all his positive and negative aspects. In his confessions, Rousseau employs a hith-

erto unprecedented degree of candour and self-criticism. Since Rousseau, sincerity has been associated with an existential pathos that decisively shaped Romantic literature. The paradigm that only an unmediated effusion of the heart is truthful admits neither irony nor cynicism and is accompanied by a general distrust of logic. It remains an open question whether the pursuit of an authentic artistic expression may not itself be insincere, whether it does not endanger the immediacy – and thus the truth – of the utterance (Peyre 1969, 79–110). Whether Rousseau is sincere in *Les Confessions*, that is, whether his testimony matches actual events and affective states,⁶ thereby eludes the control of the reading public.⁷ This, however, only underscores the central insight of the present study: that sincerity in literature is secured not only by verifiable truthfulness, but by rhetorical means.

UNSENT LETTERS TO AN ABSENT FRIEND: BOŽENA NĚMCOVÁ

The work of Božena Němcová, the great Czech novelist of the mid-19th century, can be interpreted in the spirit of the pre-Romantic period. But it cannot be expected that Němcová, in the texts that she intended for publication, drew on the tradition established by Rousseau. Czech culture, which had only just awakened to a sense of national identity, did not provide a sufficiently fertile ground for such an individualistic concept of literature. The opposite applies to Němcová's private letters. Originally, they had not been intended for publication; but today – following Jakobson's dictum – these authentic testimonies can be incorporated into her collected works. In order to gain a better understanding of this oeuvre, an approach which also takes the author's biographical background into account can only be of advantage: With the added awareness of Němcová's personality, her work becomes more accessible. According to literary critic František Xaver Šalda, Němcová's writing is but a surrogate, a corrective, and a postulate for a life which, he declares, was "difficult, distressing, painful, mortifying" ("trudný, strastný, bolestný, pokořující"; 1959, 72–73): "this work is a direct expression of remembrance, dream and longing; it is the poet's refuge and solace from the empirical life over which she creates a beautiful and perfect new world"⁸ (Černý [1963] 1982, 205).

What such a path leading from reality into an idyllic world might look like is demonstrated in exemplary fashion by her last three drafts of letters that were never sent. They were first published in an abridged version in 1920, later in their entirety in the magazine *Literární noviny* (Literary newspaper) in 1995, and also in a volume of Němcová's selected correspondence under the title *Lamentace* (The lamentations). "Lamentace", which derives from Latin, denotes a fierce and persistent lamentation. Němcová's last letters are one single cry of despair, addressed to almost the last of her remaining friends, Vojtěch Náprstek. These letters were written in Litomyšl, where Němcová (then destitute and unsuccessful) tried to prepare her stories for a new edition. Having suffered for a long time from a disease of the lower abdomen, she eventually had to be brought from Litomyšl back to Prague, where she died shortly afterwards.⁹

The first draft is a desperate plaint which erupts from Němcová in an unchecked flow. First she describes the last disastrous evening in Prague before her departure

to Litomyšl, and a violent disagreement with her husband. Then she deplores her poverty and painful memories, for instance recalling some letters from her friend Karel Havlíček, which in times of persecution she had had to burn as a precaution. She also candidly describes her illness and the measures taken by her against the bleeding it caused. In favor of some more positive experiences, these passages are relegated to the margins in the second draft; and in the third, happy memories of recent encounters predominate – in particular, the cordial and deferential welcome she received on the part of friends as she was passing through on her way to Litomyšl. As soon as her thoughts return to the fight with her husband, the letter ends abruptly: the author has come back at the point which she had tried to exorcise by means of her writing. Thus, these last letters afford a unique insight into Němcová's literary working method.¹⁰ They trace the path from subjective, sincere grief to an idyllic narrative and thus confirm Jakobson's theory that life and work form an indivisible whole – they are but two sides of the same coin.¹¹

THE AUTHOR'S ALTER EGO, ADDRESSING A STRANGER: JAKUB DEML

Unlike Němcová, Jakub Deml – at the beginning of the 20th century, the “age of sincerity”¹² – was able to draw on the tradition established by Rousseau, casting himself in the role of the central character of texts which were intended for publication. Inspired by the Czech edition of journals written by the French author and philosopher Léon Bloy, Deml wrote a continuous diary from 1917 to 1941 which he published under the title of *Šlépěje* (The traces, 1917–1941). As primary narrative method, Deml increasingly employed persistent, explicit references to himself as a real person – not just here, but in his whole oeuvre. The distance between author and first-person narrator customarily observed in a text is eliminated in favor of a complete identification of the two. In the words of the French theorist Philippe Lejeune ([1975] 1998), Deml enters into an autobiographical pact with his readers, prompting them to cease differentiating between author and narrator.

We can find a similar pact in the prose of *Zapomenuté světlo* (1934), the experimental text published by the author himself, which Jakobson counts among the most tragic works of Czech literature. It is in the form of a montage of letters, newspaper articles, essays, biblical texts and their exegesis, reminiscences, citations, aphorisms and meditations on God, friends and foes, as well as on the author's situation in life (Wöll and Jiroušek 2020). Formally, the text is conceived as an answer to a letter from a certain Bohumil Malina Ptáček. This man had heard Deml speak in a radio feature and had thanked him for his beautiful and comforting words. Nonetheless, Deml avails himself of this figure by making him the addressee of his fury and lamentation. Like in a litany, he repeatedly invokes Bohumil Ptáček's name in a number of variants, also abbreviated to just his initials: “Mister B. M. P.”; “You, dear Mister B. M. P.”; “You Mister Bohumil Ptáček”; “Friend Bohumil Ptáček” (“Pane B. M. P.”, “Vy milý pane B. M. P.”, “Vy pane Bohumile Ptáčku”, “Příteli Bohumile Ptáčku”; [1934] 1998), and so forth. The formal features of the litany were thoroughly familiar to the theologian, priest, and Baroque enthusiast Jakub Deml. However, he adopts the litany

in a modified, secularized form, invoking not God but a highly indeterminate Mister B. M. P. Here, too, insistent, accumulative discourse serves to intensify affect; it is essentially infinite and, in the concrete instance, comes to a halt only in exhaustion.

Allegedly, Deml wrote the book in a single night in a state of utter desperation, after the death of a woman from the village whom he, a Catholic priest, had accompanied in her last moments. At this time, he had arrived at an emotional low point: He had broken with his best friends, many of his patrons had turned away, his long-standing companion had died, and he had been brusquely spurned by his new love. Deml found himself in a state of absolute desolation and hopelessness. He felt on earth like a light that someone had forgotten to extinguish (hence the title of this text). Finally, Deml also lost his trust in God: “My God, my God”, he laments like Jesus, “why hast Thou forsaken me, my God?” (“Bože můj, Bože můj”, “proč jsi mně opustil, Bože můj?”; 10, 12). In the end, Deml addresses the deceased countrywoman’s dog, who had followed him all the way through the village: “At least you have me, but I suffer infinitely more than you and I have no one at all” (“Ty máš aspoň mne, ale já trpím neskonale víc než Ty a nemám vůbec nikoho”; 115).

Deml’s is a position at the most advanced point in a process of subjectivizing the narrative, which has gained currency in European literature since the Romantic era. This process is described in an exemplary fashion by Lubomír Doležel as the development from an “objective” via a “rhetorical” to a “subjective, personal” form of first- or third-person narrative (1993, 43–54). With her stories, Božena Němcová stands at the first level of this scale; at its other end we find Jakub Deml. In her published work, Němcová is no longer “objective”, but has already moved on to a “rhetorical third-person form”: her narrator not only constructs and controls, but also interprets the narrative – but still remains completely outside the fictitious world. Jakub Deml’s is a narrator who employs the “subjective, personal first-person” form: he makes a subjective statement about himself.

In this context, René Wellek (Wellek and Warren [1949] 2019) applies a simpler terminology than Doležel: He distinguishes between “objective” and “subjective” authors. The type of “objective” poet who had been prevalent far into the Romantic era, disappears as a concrete person behind his work, just like the anonymous author of *Tkadleček*. On the other hand, the so-called “subjective” author “imports” his personality into his writing, wants to express himself and to bear witness. Hence Wellek concludes that, in the case of an “objective” author, it is not considered legitimate to take their personality into account when interpreting a literary text. However – in dealing with a “subjective” author like Lord Byron, who “carries the ‘pageant of his bleeding heart’ around Europe” (59),¹³ such an approach is not just legitimate, but obligatory – even for someone like Wellek who, as a representative of structuralism and new criticism, essentially proclaims the artwork’s autonomy. The “subjective” author must not be ignored in scientific pursuits.

CONCLUSION: SINCERITY AS A RHETORICAL EFFECT

All three texts mentioned above use a rhetoric of lamentation which is characterized by the following typical traits:

1. The narrator is a profoundly shocked and emotionally disturbed subject caught up in a desperate or tragic, seemingly hopeless situation.¹⁴
2. The lamentation needs an addressee,¹⁵ real or fictitious, close or distant, alive or inanimate.¹⁶
3. The instance that serves as the addressee of the lament is invoked in a litany-like manner. The object of the lament is named over and over again. Invocation, enumeration, and repetition function as rhetorical means of intensifying the utterance and lending it credibility.
4. The lamentation takes place in the here and now; it is written in the present tense.
5. The lamentation – the direct speech of a specific subject – is conceived as a verbal utterance.
6. The lamentation is couched in an expressive language; employing empathy and impassioned speech as rhetorical devices.¹⁷

Such rhetorical means lend the plaint an air of authenticity, a sincere expression of the suffering endured by the author-subject. In the current secondary literature, however, the *Tkadleček* is no longer understood in this sense. It is rather regarded as a study and masterpiece conceived by an academically educated author who demonstrates his proficiency in the art of philosophic-theological disputation. A real occasion for the dispute between the Weaver and Misfortune cannot be assumed. As can be demonstrated by the example of Roman Jakobson and the *Tkadleček*, the rhetoric of lamentation nonetheless exerts an enormously strong and powerful influence. The subject matter of the literary lamentation is, after all, of existential urgency: We are dealing with death, illness, mourning, exile or loneliness. By way of an extrinsic lamentation, the reader can – in the sense of an Aristotelian catharsis – vicariously free himself from his own experience of suffering.

The three texts examined in this study share a common rhetorical gesture: a first-person subject, visibly present and emotionally exposed, appeals to an addressee in the here and now. Across five centuries and three genres, then, sincerity reveals itself less as a property of the suffering subject than as an effect achieved by the lamenting voice: these texts do not merely record sincere feeling – they persuade us of it. And it is this rhetorical art, not any provable correspondence between word and feeling, that lends these texts their enduring power to move us.

NOTES

¹ See the latest publications on this topic, Rutten 2017 and Kelly 2024, which deals with fictional texts that have appeared since the end of modernism and postmodernism, i.e. after 1989.

² Jakobson in a letter to Jakub Deml on the occasion of the publication of *Zapomenuté světlo* (cf. Olič 1993, 109; and Deml [1934] 1998, book cover).

³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Czech are made by the present author.

⁴ “Ach, ach, nastojte! Ach, ach, běda! Ach na násilí! Ach na tě, ukrutný a vrucí shladiteli všech zemí, škodlivý škudce všeho světa, smělý morděři všech dobrých lidí! Aj, ty Nešťestie, aj, buď proklato vším stvořením! Buoh sám, ten tě nenavid!” *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* starts in a similar fashion: “Grimmiger Tilger aller Leute, schändlicher Ächter aller Wesen, schrecklicher Mörder aller Men-

schen, Ihr, Tod, Euch sei geflucht! Gott, Euer Schöpfer, hasse Euch, wachsendes Unheil haue bei Euch, Mißgeschick suche gewaltig Euch heim, gänzlich geschändet seid immer!” (Tepl [1963] 1997, 5) In English translation: “Grim Destroyer of mankind, vengeful Persecutor of the whole world, frightful Murderer of all men, Thou, Death, be cursed! May the God who created Thee hate Thee; may harm a thousand-fold meet up with Thee; may misfortune dwell mightily with Thee: Mayst remain dishonored for ever!” (Saaz 1958, 1)

- ⁵ Montaigne’s mode is philosophical self-examination; Rousseau’s is confessional self-revelation, which is what makes it the more direct precursor to the rhetoric of sincerity the study investigates.
- ⁶ See the definition of sincerity as the congruence between an utterance and the actual feeling (Trilling 1972, 2), or as truthful speech about personal, private, or intimate feelings (Rutten 2017, 19–22).
- ⁷ This has been true not only in the neoliberal era, in which market mechanisms shape what one says or feels and how one names and avows it (see Kelly 2024, 1–14).
- ⁸ “toto dílo je přímým výrazem vzpomínky, snu a touhy; je básnířce útočištěm a útěchou z empirického života, nad nímž vytváří krásný a dokonalý svět nový”
- ⁹ The German film director Dagmar Knöpfel based her movie *Durch diese Nacht sehe ich keinen einzigen Stern* (In this night I cannot see a single star, 2005) on the three draft letters (see Němcová 1995).
- ¹⁰ In a detailed study, Jaroslava Janáčková and Alena Macurová (2002) demonstrated how Němcová was able to distance herself from her depressing reality by means of story telling.
- ¹¹ In analogy with Jakobson, one might assume that an author of the 20th or 21st century would have retained the letter in its original version and might even have published it, since an ideal world no longer represents a productive paradigm; the 20th and 21st centuries must dispense with the foil of an ideal world.
- ¹² Peyre points to the exploration of the human psyche and the emerging interest in authenticity in literature since the turn from the 19th to the 20th century (1969, chap. 8).
- ¹³ “The biographical approach now seems easy, for we can check life and work against each other. Indeed, the approach is even invited and demanded by the poet, especially the Romantic poet, who writes about himself and his innermost feelings or even, like Byron, carries the ‘pageant of his bleeding heart’ around Europe. These poets spoke of themselves not only in private letters, diaries, and autobiographies, but also in their most formal pronouncements” (Wellek and Warren 2019, 59).
- ¹⁴ The Weaver has been abandoned by his beloved; Němcová is at the end of her strength; and Deml has lost his trust in people and his faith in God.
- ¹⁵ In *Tkadleček*, this figure appears in the guise of personified Misfortune; in Němcová’s texts, she addresses her last remaining friend, Vojtěch Náprstek, and Deml speaks to an arbitrarily chosen stranger called Bohumil Malina Ptáček, with whom there exists no relationship in real life. In the contemporary debate on “new sincerity”, a similar pattern is observed; however, what is invoked here is the extratextual instance of the reader (see Kelly 2024, 11–12).
- ¹⁶ Inanimate, for example, is the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem which, since the destruction of their temple in 70 CE, serves the Jewish community as a site of mourning and prayer. Incidentally, one of the oldest known lamentations, the Jeremiade, dating back to the 6th century BCE, also refers to the destruction of the Jewish temple.
- ¹⁷ These rhetorical devices range from harmless interjections such as “Alas”, “Misery”, “ei”, “My God!” (“ach”, “běda”, “aj”, “Bože můj!”) all the way to fierce invectives against the perpetrator of their suffering, such as “oh be cursed by all creation! God himself hates you!” (“bud’ proklato vším stvořením! Buoh sám, ten tě nenavid!”).

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(In)sincerity as a narrative strategy in Karol Irzykowski's "Sny Marii Dunin. Palimpsest"

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(In)sincerity as a narrative strategy in Karol Irzykowski's "Sny Marii Dunin. Palimpsest"

Karol Irzykowski. Sincerity. Unreliable narrator. Liar's paradox. Palimpsest.

This article focuses on Karol Irzykowski's novella "Sny Marii Dunin. Palimpsest" (The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest, 1903) in relation to the author's understanding of the concept of sincerity. The novella provides several examples of rhetorical (in)sincerity: the untrustworthiness of the narrator, the liar's paradox, and the motif of the palimpsest-mystification. Drawing on Magdalena Popiel's distinction between intellectual and emotional modernist sincerity, and her assertion that Irzykowski is a leading representative of the former, as well as on Irzykowski's well-documented polemical stance towards the Młoda Polska (Young Poland) movement, the study argues that the novella can be read as an ironic commentary on emotional modernist sincerity and symbolist aesthetics.

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The writer, literary critic, and polemicist Karol Irzykowski (1873–1944) played a prominent role in Polish modernist and avant-garde literary life. His polemic writing was preoccupied with the aesthetic and philosophical concerns of his time, as he perceived literary criticism as “a way to expose the banal artistic solutions, while presenting new literary possibilities”¹ (Panek 2006, 27). One of the targets of his critique was the aesthetics of the *Młoda Polska* (Young Poland) movement, whose “stylistic mannerism”, according to Irzykowski, lay in the excessive use of “metaphors, vagueness, similes, creating an atmosphere of indefiniteness and unwanted ambiguity” (94).

Most English-language scholarship on Irzykowski has focused primarily on the experimental aspects of the novel *Pałuba*² ([1903] 1981), its metaliterary and autothematic elements (see, for example, Pietrkiewicz 1951; Sen 1973; Baer 1984; De Bruyn 2007, 2009), and the author’s psychoanalytical and pre-Freudian concerns (see the Eng. trans. of Dybel 2020; Magnone 2023). This article examines Karol Irzykowski’s novella “Sny Marii Dunin. Palimpsest”, often referred to in English academic texts as “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest”, published as part of *Pałuba*, as an example of an ironic critique of Young Poland’s style. Building on existing Polish scholarship on Irzykowski’s novella and on narrative theories, it synthesizes these interpretations while also foregrounding the role of the unreliable narrator.

KAROL IRZYKOWSKI’S CONCEPT OF SINCERITY

The concept of sincerity played an important role in the literary production of the Young Poland movement (1890–1918). Magdalena Popiel notes that “in the literary prose, the convention of the confession is realized most thoroughly in the diary type of novel and the first-person narration” (2008, 270). Furthermore, she differentiates between two types of sincerity: “sincerity as a language of feelings” and “sincerity as an art of thinking, intellectual sincerity” (272). Popiel identifies Irzykowski as a leading representative of the second tendency.

Several Polish scholars have examined Irzykowski’s understanding and literary representation of the category of sincerity in his numerous fictional and non-fictional texts, written in the last decade of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Jan Jakóbczyk (2005) and Kamil Kaczmarek (2024) analyze Irzykowski’s doctrines of “intimism” and sincerity in his diaries, epistolography, and polemics in the interwar period, pointing out his ever-evolving understanding and reconceptualization of sincerity – a process spanning half a century, numerous literary trends and several artistic generations. This observation aligns with Ryszard Nycz’s conclusion that “Irzykowski does not value (or is unable to attain) a systematic, immanent and logical order in which his own discourse could unfold,” but despite the “changeability” of his formulations there is “a level of continuance, coherence and fundamental stability in both his thinking and his critical style” (2017, 136–137).

Irzykowski integrates his theoretical reflections and metacommentaries in his seminal novel *Pałuba* (1903), where he admits that in the 1890s he and Stanisław Womela came up with the concept of “intimism”, to which he remained “faithful to this day”, even though he finds the intellectual secrets of the Self more important

than sexual ones³ (Irzykowski 1981, 413). In the programmatic essay manifesting his ideas about art “Czem jest Horla?” (What is Horla?, [1896] 1906), drawing inspiration from Maupassant’s short story, he connects sincerity to artistic expression. Furthermore, in *Paluba*, the author reinforces this connection by following the “dictate of absolute sincerity of the writer during the writing process”, which calls for alignment with one’s own personal experience (Budrecka 1981, V). In this complex and multifaceted novel, Irzykowski explicitly proposes “a culture of sincerity”, or “rather, a culture of wisdom”⁴ (Irzykowski 1981, 361–362). At the same time, he employs “the principle of contradiction and misleading the reader” as methods for achieving sincerity, operating with the tools of insincerity and “conventions of game and play” (Kaczmarek 2024, 87), thus showing his nuanced understanding of the notion.

A similar approach can be observed in the novella “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest”. The text was written in the late 1890s, around the same time as “What is Horla?”, but it was published in 1903 as part of the volume containing the novel *Paluba* and three metacommentaries, one of which is titled “Wyjaśnienie ‘Snów Marii Dunin’ i związek ich z *Palubą*” (Explanations of ‘The dreams of Maria Dunin’ and its connection to *Paluba*). Critical evaluations of “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest” range from viewing it as a curious experiment, which pales artistically in comparison to *Paluba*, to considering it an autonomous work of art with its own “complete fabular distinctiveness” (Budrecka 1981, XI). The novella also proposes, as Jerzy Franczak notes, “a game with the architext, with literary conventions and linguistic styles, while at the same time leading to reflection on the (im)possible absolute originality and the necessity of the game itself” (2007, 59). Moreover, it is an example of a rhetoric of (in)sincerity – or rather, of insincerity posing as sincerity – which can be read as an ironic undermining or even a parody of the modernist emotional sincerity Popiel describes.

THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR AND THE CLAIMS OF (IN)SINCERITY

The novella “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest” contains the confessions of the narrator, who during one of his archeological expeditions finds himself immersed in the oneiric world of the titular character and the workings of the vaguely described secret society of the Brotherhood of the Great Bell. As Colleen Taylor Sen briefly outlines the novella’s plot in one of the earlier English articles on *Paluba*, “their lives are dedicated to digging for a bell buried thousands of years ago, for legend has it that if the bell should ever ring destruction and chaos would descend upon the earth,” while Maria Dunin is “their leader’s daughter, a young girl who spends most of her time dreaming of a cruel and mysterious lover” (1973, 297).

Irzykowski regards the fantastic element, from which the novella originates, as less important than its core idea – the conviction that “certain ideals [...] if taken seriously and carried through the end would have to destroy a person”⁵ (1981, 461). Despite (or precisely because of) its fabular vagueness and symbolism, the novella is also playful and ironic, an effect that it achieves through the narration, which

abounds in implicit clues about its own unreliability, as well as explicit hints about its insincerity posing as truthfulness. As a first-person narration with a fictional homodiegetic narrator, Irzykowski's novella can be seen as an example of a story full of plot omissions, logical discrepancies, and manipulative rhetorical appeals to the listener/reader. Thus, the sincerity of the narrator in "The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest" can be called into question, marking him as clearly unreliable (De Bruyn 2009, 104; Markiewicz 2011, 132).

Vera Nünning identifies three key criteria for assessing a narrator's character and trustworthiness: reliability ("the expectation that speakers will act according to their words and manifest intentions"); sincerity ("the belief that someone is giving a truthful account of his or her beliefs, knowledge, feeling and motives"), and competence ("the belief in the ability of the speaker to do what he or she intends"; 2015, 7). Nünning presents three types of clues that signal the presence of an unreliable narrator and which are "employed in structural and cognitive narratology": "text-internal" ("inconsistencies concerning the story and/or the discourse level as well as stylistic features"), "text-external" (general knowledge about the world) and "paratextual" ("such as signals in the title or foreword"; 10).

A paratextual clue, an authorial verdict of the doctor of archeology's trustworthiness, is given in "Explanations of 'The dreams of Maria Dunin' and its connection to *Patuba*", where the narrator is described as someone "with whom the author does not sympathize, on the contrary, he seeks to undermine him"⁶ (Irzykowski 1981, 458). However, in the text of the novella itself, the reader encounters a narrator, who insists on the veracity of his story and protests whenever it is being questioned, claiming that he is both reliable and sincere. The storytelling unfolds according to a rule of three, involving the introduction of a detail, its reinforcement for the audience, and a final resolution or subversion. After an evening in a socialites' salon, the narrator promises to recount an older adventure sincerely, in which he played "a role more difficult than humiliating"⁷ (3). The second time the narrator highlights the nature of his story, it is presented as a written account, for which a reader accuses him of "pushing [himself] into the foreground", while ridiculing Maria Dunin and "leaving her in the shadows"⁸ (23). Despite the discrepancy between the oral and written form, the narrator again underlines his honesty ("the loyalty and reliability of my statements are beyond doubt"⁹; 23). The third time the story is mentioned – at the very end of the novella – the narrator subverts his whole account. He admits its fraudulent nature, confirming the reader's suspicions suggested by numerous clues in the text, and hints at a possible logical incongruity (i.e. a liar's paradox).

The intertextual clues of insincerity and unreliability in Irzykowski's novella are numerous and varied, yet interestingly, they could also be explained as signs of emotional involvement rather than malicious intent. The narrator's (rather brief) romantic infatuation with Maria Dunin, along with his alleged eagerness to help with her mysterious condition and to act as her lover and savior (self-diagnosed as "quixotism"¹⁰; 19) could reflect genuine emotional investment, which in turn might explain the distortions in his account. As Liesbeth Korthals Altes notes, there is not necessarily a clear opposition between sincerity and "other notions, ranging from prudence

and irony to dissimulation or lying” (2008, 109), and that “many of the signals listed for unreliability [...] might just as well be interpreted as stressing a narrator’s or a speaker’s sincerity” such as expressiveness, direct appeals to the reader’s sympathy, emotional involvement, and reflections on one’s credibility (119).

However, the accumulation of suspicious details in the novella begins to cast doubt on any plausible deniability on the narrator’s part. He presents his account with authority, valuing it above Maria’s perspective: “To avoid my lover’s chaotic expressions, I will tell everything myself”¹¹ (Irzykowski 1981, 11). Discrepancies begin to accumulate. His initial reaction to Maria Dunin’s ethereal beauty is soon replaced by ridicule of the conventional depiction of it (see Franczak 2007, 59–60). He makes unsubstantiated claims without prior confirmation (“as I already said”¹² introducing entirely new information; Irzykowski 1981, 15), and often omits crucial details as if to withhold uncomfortable or compromising information: “I recounted it immediately, naturally leaving out the indecent details”¹³ (7); “a letter, reproduced below, omitting words that could be misunderstood”¹⁴ (25). Moreover, he admits to being secretive and deliberately hiding details, albeit for a seemingly noble reason (“a certain holy idea, of which I will reveal only as much as duty allows me”¹⁵; 8), and even acknowledges faking his behavior to suit his plans for (helping?) Maria Dunin: “There were days when I was in a very false position, and often I did not know [...] where pretense ends and love begins”¹⁶ (27).

All those dubious statements, narrative inconsistencies and (semi)revelations are confirmed as deliberate misdirections in the novella’s closing lines. The narrator claims to have distanced himself from the case of Maria Dunin and her tragic fate and admits to having a selective memory of the past (“My mind records only those events that correspond to my principles and I have developed an admirable ability to reject uncomfortable impressions”¹⁷; 41). His last two confessions include revealing his pastime as a royal librarian – introducing fake texts among the old manuscripts – and admitting that “of all these palimpsests this one [i.e. the whole story of Maria Dunin] stands out for its sophistication, for I am the most distinguished member of the Brotherhood of the Great Bell!”¹⁸ (41). All pretense of sincerity is abandoned and the text reveals its true nature – that of a hoax.

THE LIAR’S PARADOX AND THE PALIMPSEST

The famous self-referential statement, known as the Epimenides paradox, named after the Cretan philosopher, asserts that “All Cretans are liars”. “The dreams of Maria Dunin”, however, ends with a logical contradiction resembling John Buridan’s sophism (“What I am saying is false”), described as a “stronger version of the liar’s paradox”¹⁹ (Lehner 2020, 478). What defines the liar’s paradox is its contradictory nature, its reversibility (“When we try to establish 1 as true, 2 becomes true; when we try to establish 2 as true, 1 becomes true, and so ad infinitum”), and self-referential character (“What makes the liar’s paradox unique is that it is taken to say nothing about anything except its own truth conditions”). Lehner even questions whether the reader could imagine a novel “that is as completely consumed in its truth conditions as the liar’s paradox is” (479–480).

It could be argued that “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest” employs the paradox as a narrative device to question the narrator’s motives and to examine the construction of its fictional world. The novella’s last sentence renders it both contradictory and reversible, while also drawing attention to the act of storytelling, because of the first-person homodiegetic narrator. As Lehner notes about Buridan’s sophism, it “somewhat” fulfills the requirement of self-referentiality through the use of “the first-person singular pronoun for the referring element, thereby making the statement’s reference dependent only on the existence of the individual speaker” (479). Aleksandra Budrecka, analyzing the possible logical implications of the liar’s paradox in Irzykowski’s work, argues that “the reality presented in the novella is the narrator, someone who says sentences and then observes their falsehood” and that “the fiction becomes the subject of the narrator’s conscious action. This action is the only fact of the work” (1981, XIX–XX).

On the other hand, Jerzy Franczak points out that Irzykowski questions whether “using the categories of truthfulness and falseness has any sense or only leads to paradoxes” (2007, 58). Franczak contends that “Irzykowski is not interested in finding a way out of the paradox” as he “decides to reject” these categories as elements of what he terms “shells of nomenclature” (58) – the system of notions and ideals that interpret and falsify the world (81).

Dieter De Bruyn also comments on the importance of the “logical paradox of the Epimenides type” in the interpretation of Irzykowski’s novella and follows Budrecka’s line of reasoning about it, adding that “the creative use of the principle of the palimpsest also results in a *foregrounding* of the textual character of *Patuba*. The act of ‘overwriting’ other texts confronts the reader with the finiteness of the visible text as opposed to the infinity of all possible texts” (2009, 105–106).

The palimpsest-forgery appears on both a paratextual level (in the title of the novella), in the text itself (again with three variations, as if the narrator tries to first embed an idea in the audience’s mind, then repeat it with a variation, and finally surprise with the reveal), and in the author’s commentary after the novel *Patuba*. Thus, it becomes a key concept in understanding the novella, or more precisely, understanding its contradictory nature, because, as Franczak claims, “what we initially take as guidepost, turns out to be a trap waiting for us, the depth – a *trompe l’oeil* illusion, and the original – a palimpsest” (2007, 56).

When claiming to seek a remedy for Maria Dunin’s intrusive dreams, the narrator devices a “brilliant trick” to falsify cases and insert fragments in the books she reads about her ailment “as if unintentionally”²⁰ (Irzykowski 1981, 17). When presented with a strange old manuscript, which appears to confirm the fantastic explanation of Maria’s condition, he tries to reject it as fake, claiming that he “was competent in this, because [his] eye had long been accustomed to recognizing old manuscripts”²¹ (21). The third time the palimpsest is mentioned, it is again related to the narrator’s “extraordinary abilities and extensive knowledge”²², which secured him the position of royal librarian. The doctor of archeology, before confessing the fraudulent nature of his whole account, admits that he produces “artificial palimpsests on a large scale”²³ (41).

The palimpsest functions not only as a motif in the novella but it also draws attention to the underlying cultural traditions, textual predecessors, and genre conventions and tropes, which are alluded to and parodied (Maria as a damsel in distress, the castle as a topos, the ominous atmosphere and the secrecy of the Brotherhood, etc.; see Franczak 2007, 61). It acquires an additional meaning in the metacommentary “Explanations of ‘The dreams of Maria Dunin’ and its connection to *Paluba*”, which states that:

Maria Dunin is a palimpsest, that is, essentially a mystification. [...] The author officially expresses certain beliefs, under which one should discern other beliefs of his, often directly opposed to the former. Since at the end the author even places these second beliefs in quotation marks, one can say that *Maria Dunin* is a palimpsest squared.²⁴ (Irzykowski 1981, 457)

Irzykowski adds one more detail, which confirms the notion of the work being “a palimpsest squared”. Despite embedding textual clues (in plain sight) that reveal the narrator’s untrustworthiness and undermine his supposed sincerity, and despite claiming to stand “against the Brotherhood on the side of Maria Dunin”²⁵ (464), the author ultimately declares his allegiance to the Brotherhood. Its function as a metaphorical “safety valve” reflects a “self-preservation instinct”²⁶ in human nature against the perils of taking an ideal to its extreme. Irzykowski goes a step further suggesting that this mechanism concerns those, who “ring the Great Bell the most”, such as poets and thinkers, who “at the decisive moment retreat from the consequences and murder Maria Dunin within themselves”²⁷ (462–463).

CONCLUSION

One might wonder why the proponent of a “culture of sincerity” (i.e. “the culture of wisdom”) would preface his novel *Paluba* with its very opposite – the figure of an insincere and untrustworthy narrator, whose manipulations are both evident in the text and explicitly commented on by the author. In “Explanations of ‘The dreams of Maria Dunin’ and its connection to *Paluba*”, Irzykowski connects the novella to his seminal novel *Paluba*, which is “the realization of a program, the fulfilment of the framework that vaguely took shape” in the previous text²⁸ (Irzykowski 1981, 466), while at the same time diverging entirely from its style and motifs. Thus, the oneiric vagueness and symbolism of the novella give way to the metaliterary commentary and the autothematic technique of the novel, while also parodying the style of Polish modernist works (see Franczak 2007, 12; Jauksz 2015, 60). This ironic and polemic approach is further corroborated by Małgorzata Okulicz-Kozaryn and Radosław Okulicz-Kozaryn’s analysis which interprets the novella as a concealed debate with Zenon Przesmycki, one of the Young Poland movement’s leading authors. This debate – which took place “in secret, using a code, in fact borrowed from the ‘adversary’” (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020, 63) – shows Irzykowski’s ambiguous attitude towards Young Poland’s aesthetics and ideas. On the one hand, as Marcin Jauksz points out, in the 1890s Irzykowski was “not yet the unequivocal advocate of self-awareness and intellectual control” and his writing was showing similarities to other Young Poland’s writers (2024, 45). On the other hand, it can be

contended that Irzykowski “did not see a place for himself outside Young Poland, but he reserved a separate place for himself within it – as a kind of contesteer” (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020, 62).

Considering the novella’s ironic potential and following Magdalena Popiel’s distinction between emotional and intellectual sincerity in Polish modernism, one could argue that the novella’s insincere narration also functions as a form of parody. It targets the emotional and exalted sincerity of many of Irzykowski’s contemporary writers, standing in contrast to the intellectual sincerity advocated in *Paluba*. As the novella’s final twist suggests, sincerity is difficult both to define and achieve, since it can take many forms, even that of “insincerity, as lie is in the service of truth”²⁹ (Irzykowski 1981, 362).

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Polish are by the present author.

² The title of the novel – *Paluba* – has a few different meanings, which are commented on by the narrator in the work itself: “this is the name of a huge wooden ram used to drive poles in the river, or a mannequin used for trying women’s dresses, and the word is commonly used as a contemptuous nickname for ugly, unpleasant women” (Irzykowski 1981, 372). Additionally, the narrator cites in a footnote to this description Samuel Linde’s dictionary, which offers three meanings of the word: “1) a curtain, a covering for a wagon; 2) a stump, the hull (of a ship); 3) an old, malicious woman” (372). Some authors, who refer to Irzykowski’s work in English, use the translation “The Hag”, narrowing its meaning to the last definition; a translation, which – according to Joachim Baer – “is likely to mislead the reader” (1984, 32). Dieter De Bruyn also argues that the polysemic word *paluba* “has produces a heterogeneous novel of the same name” (2009, 124). Thus, in the article the novel is referred to as *Paluba*, its original title in Polish, while the novella “Sny Marii Dunin. Palimpsest” is translated as “The dreams of Maria Dunin. Palimpsest”.

³ “Kierunkowi temu wierny dotychczas zostałem, tylko że zamiast tajemnic seksualnych [...] uznałem tajemnice intelektualne za ważniejsze.”

⁴ “A więc kultura szczerości? [...] Więc raczej kultura mądrości.”

⁵ “niektóre ideały [...] wzięte na serio i przeprowadzone aż do końca musiałyby zniszczyć człowieka”

⁶ “z którym autor się nie solidaryzuje, owszem, stara się go [...] skompromitować”

⁷ “rola raczej trudna niż upokarzająca”

⁸ “że się zanadto wypycham na pierwszy plan”, “zostawiam ją w cieniu”

⁹ “lojalność i rzetelność moich wynurzeń żadnej nie podlega wątpliwości”

¹⁰ “donkiszoteria”

¹¹ “Aby uniknąć chaotycznych wyrażań mojej kochanki, opowiem sam wszystko.”

¹² “Mówiłem już”

¹³ “opowiedziałem go natychmiast, naturalnie z opuszczeniem nieprzyzwoitych szczegółów”

¹⁴ “pismo, przytoczone poniżej z opuszczeniem słów, które by można fałszywie zrozumieć”

¹⁵ “pewnej świętej idei, z której tyle zdradzę, ile mi obowiązek pozwoli”

¹⁶ “Nastaly dnie, w których byłem w bardzo fałszywym położeniu, i nieraz sam nie wiedziałem [...] gdzie kończy się udawanie, a zaczyna miłość.”

¹⁷ “W moim umyśle zapisują się tylko te wypadki, które przystają do moich zasad, a wyrobiłem w sobie podziwienia godną zdolność odrzucania wrażeń niewygodnych.”

¹⁸ “A z owych palimpsestów ten właśnie celuje wyrafinowaniem, bo ja sam jestem najznakomitszym z Bractwa Wielkiego Dzwonu!”

¹⁹ David Lehner (2020, 478–479) provides the schema for this paradox: “1. If the sophism is true, it is false. 2. If the sophism is false, it is true. 3. If the sophism is true, it is both true and false (from 1).

4. If the sophism is false, it is both true and false (from 2). 5. Either the sophism is true, or it is false (principle of bivalence). 6. The sophism is both true and false (from 3, 4, 5)".
- ²⁰ „światny wybieg”, „niby nieumyślnie”
- ²¹ „byłem w tym kompetentnym, bo oko moje od dawna nawykło rozpoznawać stare manuskrypta”
- ²² „Moje niepospolite zdolności i rozległa wiedza”
- ²³ „sztuczne palimpsesty na wielką skalę”
- ²⁴ „*Maria Dunin* jest palimpsestem, to znaczy tyle co mistyfikacją. [...] Autor wypowiada oficjalnie przekonania, pod którymi należy dopatrywać się innych jego przekonań, wręcz przeciwnych tamtym. Ponieważ zaś przy końcu autor nawet i te drugie przekonania ujmuje w cudzysłów, przeto można powiedzieć, że *Maria Dunin* jest palimpsestem do kwadratu.”
- ²⁵ „stoję niby przeciwko Bractwu po stronie Marii Dunin”
- ²⁶ „klapa bezpieczeństwa”, „instynkt samozachowawczy”
- ²⁷ „najwięcej biją we Wielki Dzwon”, „W rozstrzygającej chwili cofają się oni przed konsekwencją i mordują Marię Dunin w sobie.”
- ²⁸ „*Pałuba* jest niejako wykonaniem programu, wypełnieniem ram, mglisto zarysowujących się w *Marii Dunin*.”
- ²⁹ „forma nieszczerości, bo u prawdy jest kłamstwo na służbie”

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Giving an account of oneself through the eyes of the other: On sincerity in Bohumil Hrabal's autobiographical trilogy

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Giving an account of oneself through the eyes of the other: On sincerity in Bohumil Hrabal's autobiographical trilogy

Bohumil Hrabal. Czech literature. Sincerity. Judith Butler. Giving an account of oneself. Autobiography.

The study focuses on the construction of sincerity in Bohumil Hrabal's *In-House Weddings* trilogy (1986–1987). In this prose series, Hrabal recounts several decades of his marriage as seen through the eyes of his wife Eliška, placing her in the position of protagonist and first-person narrator. By staging the text as a meditated confession of this kind, Hrabal not only produces an uncompromising autobiography, but also reflects on the identity of his life partner. To grasp this dialectical aspect of the text, we turn to Judith Butler's concept of "giving an account of oneself". This allows us to see that, apart from serving as a narrative device, Hrabal's peculiar handling of perspective is an expression of a certain ethical stance, underscoring the state of being recognized by another, while also recognizing them, as a condition of a truthful, authentic existence.

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The present study aims to provide a commentary on the role of sincerity within the poetics of Bohumil Hrabal. It focuses on how sincerity is both represented and performatively constructed in his literary autobiography known as *Svatby v domě* – *In-House Weddings*, which consists of three volumes: *Svatby v domě* (1987; Eng. trans. *In-House Weddings*, 2007), *Vita nuova* (1987; Eng. trans. *Vita Nuova*, 2010) and *Proluky* (1986; Eng. trans. *Gaps*, 2011).¹ The individual volumes differ in their style and themes, but what they have in common is the fact that through all three of them, the story is told from the perspective of Hrabal's wife Eliška "Pipsi" Hrabalová (née Plevová). In aesthetic terms, this can be understood as a model example of a defamiliarizing artistic strategy in the sense of Viktor Shklovsky's "ostranenie" ([1925] 1965, 13). However, this narrative choice also seems to have implications that reach beyond the realm of the "merely" aesthetic towards the realm of the ethical, opening questions about the limits and possibilities of understanding the self and the other – and also the question of one's capacity to articulate such an understanding. The author himself, when speaking of the trilogy, even poses the questions about the nature of his work as follows:

Have I surpassed the liminal situation of human existence?... I asked myself the same questions when I finished writing the second part of my trilogy *Vita nuova*... a stream of narration about my life, which, in its flow and lack of punctuation across two hundred and twenty pages, raises the same questions in me: Is this still literature? Is this text still a manuscript?² (Hrabal 1995a, 114)

In order to comprehend the interplay between the narrative and the ethical aspect of the text, we suggest to employ the concept of "giving an account of oneself" as presented by Judith Butler in their eponymous book (2005), as it pregnantly covers the ways of performing sincerity both on the level of the ethics of intersubjective relations, and on the level of constitution of one's own identity – while also addressing the chiasmatic relationship between these two modes of performance.

There is an ongoing debate about the level of Hrabal's "biographical" or "historical" sincerity, as his works notoriously resist being "categorized as either fictional or factual" (Just 2019, 60). Reading Hrabal's literary works through the prism of his life indeed soon becomes treacherous since the many conclusive parallels between them are interspersed with at least an equal number of (un)noticeable discrepancies and literary "mystifications" (Češka 2014, 790–792). The author himself does not provide much guidance either, insisting that in relation to the trilogy "everything is truth" (Hrabal [1990] 2008, 85), while also stating that "[f]iction is sometimes more perfect and realistic than reality itself"³ (1995b, 287).

However, the present article does not intend to join the discourse around the question of the extent to which Hrabal's literary works are grounded in real-life events. We will not approach sincerity within Hrabal's writing in referential terms, as a matter of correspondence between "what happened" and "what is told", or between the presupposed inner state of the writing subject and its actualization in language, but rather as a performance – "a 'doing' instead of a 'being'" (van Alphen and Bal 2009, 3) – which unfolds itself within the text and is constructed by literary means such as narrative voice or focalization. Therefore, the question of the correspondence

between historical and literary events will be secondary to our reading. After all, as Paul de Man notes in his essay “Autobiography as De-facement”, within autobiography, the relationship between reality and fiction is ultimately irresolvable. On the one hand, the autobiographical testimony seems to be the result of the life of the writing self. However, to the same extent, this historical life itself is a product of “the illusion of reference” evoked by reading the text as an autobiographical one (1979, 920). “The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge – it does not – but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization” (922). Therefore, this study will not assess the degree of sincerity in Hrabal’s trilogy on the basis of how faithfully it reports on the author’s life, but on the basis of how transparently it reveals this aporetic nature of the autobiographical genre.

Yet this should in no way deny the significance of biographical inspiration that went into creating *In-House Weddings*. The trilogy belongs to that line of Hrabal’s work which was inspired by his own family, or more precisely, two important female figures: his mother and his spouse, who both entered the fictionalized universe Hrabal had built around the actual timeline of his life. The characters they inspired seem to pose as intertextual doppelgangers of sorts, as the texts in which they appear stand out precisely because of the distinct narrative voice and perspective controlled by the female protagonists.

HRABAL’S WRITING BETWEEN FICTION AND HISTORY

In his earlier prose, when Hrabal draws inspiration for his protagonists among the people who are close to him, the text unfolds as third-person narrative, or it is composed in a “documentary” manner, as if a stream of oral discourse of the main character was just written down – such is the case of the stories narrated from the point of view of Uncle Pepin. But in the 1970s, when he first created his mother’s literary alter ego as the center of his novella *Postřižiny* (1976; *Cutting It Short*, 1994) Hrabal abandons both the style imitating a documentary record and the third-person narrator, assigning the narrative voice directly to the character of his mother.

In the context of his pre-existing poetics, this can be understood as a somewhat surprising and innovative gesture. On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret the new narrative mode as a logical response to the choice of the time period from which Hrabal decided the story of *Cutting It Short* would unfold. The story follows Hrabal’s mother Maryška and her husband Francin as a young, newly married couple. Therefore, it would disrupt the “realistic” effect of the narrative if their (step)son – who was just an infant at the time – was narrating the story from his point of view. What is striking, however, is the fact that any mention of the character of Hrabal as a son of the main couple is omitted from the story altogether as if he was not even born yet. This, of course, is in conflict with actual biographical events.⁴

This suspension of his presence – both on the level of the narrative voice as well as on the level of the characters, can be read as a twofold gesture. In one way, it is possible to interpret Hrabal’s omission of his past self from the story as a narrative vehicle used by an adult writer to rearrange the literary account of his family history

towards its idealized version. In this vein of interpretation, the absence of the character of “the child Hrabal” from the narrative invites the readers to assume that he is simply yet to be born as the biological offspring of the protagonists. From this perspective, the lack of mention of their son can be understood as an auto-fictional act signaling that the author – within the possibilities of the narrative space – wishes to treat the characters of his mother and his (step)father as his only parents. (This interpretation is openly employed in the 1980 film adaptation of the novella by Jiří Menzel.)

Yet the moment we admit Hrabal manipulates history to convey a certain message, the very same strategy can be equally read as a non-idyllic one. The author could have easily changed the course of fictional events so that his literary alter ego appeared in the story as a biological child of the central couple explicitly – which he had obviously chosen not to do. From this perspective, the same narrative element can denote a sense of omission or inadequacy rather than loving parental relationships. Naturally, we can only speculate what various features of the story – or lack thereof – really mean in relation to Hrabal’s biography. Still, this example is an instrumental one as it provides us with a strong indication that the instances of utmost sincerity within Hrabal’s writing are not to be looked for in precise correspondence between fictional and “actual” events, nor do they reside in offering a definite, unambiguous testimony about oneself.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY TOLD BY THE OTHER

Putting aside any guesses about the psychological motives behind Hrabal’s writing, we can note that even though his oeuvre drew on many themes from his family history, up to some point in his career, he had been reluctant to write purely autobiographical prose (Pelán [2002] 2019, 80). While he had previously written texts with some autobiographical features, in these works the depiction of his own self is blurred by projecting his life experience onto a conventionally fictional character – as in *Ostře sledované vlaky* (1965; Eng. trans. *Closely Watched Trains*, 1968); or by filtering it through the childlike perspective of the narrator – as in *Krasosmutnění* (Beautiful sadness, 1979). Hrabal even returned to the formula established in *Cutting It Short* in his novella *Harlekýnovy miliony* (1981; Eng. trans. *Harlequin’s Millions*, 2014), where the protagonist and the narrator of the story is, once again, the character of the author’s mother. Although the time of the narration as well as its tone differ significantly from *Cutting It Short* (the story no longer follows the protagonist in her prime but covers her final years spent in a retirement facility), what remains similar is that the latter text – again – contains very little reference to Hrabal himself as a character.

This tendency, however, seems to have taken an opposite turn with the emergence in the 1980s of a manuscript that would later grow into the *In-House Weddings* trilogy, thematically centered around the author’s marriage to Eliška Plevová. The perspective of the trilogy appears to follow the method established in *Cutting It Short* and *Harlequin’s Millions*. Again, we are dealing with a first-person narrative of the female protagonist inspired by a distinct family member, but this time, the narrative

voice belongs to the character of Hrabal's life partner. Simultaneously, in relation to the persona of the author, we observe a substantial shift from the genre of fictionalized biography towards that of autobiography or autofiction (Tlustý 2018, 86). Since the text is composed as Eliška's account of the history of her marriage to Hrabal, the author – or rather his semi-fictional alter ego – is acutely present in the text as a character, even as a protagonist.

As a narrator, Eliška carefully observes her husband, showing a great deal of empathy and understanding. At the same time, she ironically comments on Hrabal's numerous vices and anxieties, such as his drinking habit, hypochondria or his indulgence in self-pity, while also describing her own inner life, marked by her own traumas and insecurities going back to her Czech-German descent and her previous failed engagement.

Both of these choices – the decision to put Eliška in the position of the first-person narrator and the inclusion of the author's own adult persona into the story – should require our attention at least for two reasons. One of them being, of course, the obvious shift towards a narrative with an openly autobiographical ambition. Yet the biographical dimension of the text with relation to Eliška should also not go unnoticed – if only by virtue of its relative unprecedentedness; despite being married to Hrabal for decades, she had never previously appeared as a major character in any of his stories (Pelán 2019, 79). In this light, Hrabal's decision to give Eliška's persona a central focalizing role within what turned out to be his most extensive text is, at the very least, noteworthy.

Hrabal himself interprets this maneuver with regard to its humorous or parodic potential. In one of his later reflexive essays, he states that the choice of the perspective of his wife was prompted by his encounter with the memoirs of Sophia Tolstaya and Anna Dostoevskaya who both documented the lives of their husbands:

My trilogy owes its style and content to Mrs. Tolstaya and Mrs. Dostoevskaya, who have now published two biographies of their husbands in Prague, praising them so highly in those books that I decided to write my own biography through the prism of my wife's perspective, to whom I was actually Max and Moritz and an enfant terrible, writing not a libel about myself, but rather a little bit about how it was, our marriage, me as the jewel and adornment of our life together. So I turned my wife into a fellow of both Mrs. Tolstaya and Mrs. Dostoevskaya.⁵ (Hrabal 1996, 186)

In this manner, Hrabal is ironically comparing himself to these canonical authors. Simultaneously, he is implying that Tolstaya and Dostoevskaya might be portraying their husbands in a more flattering light than they deserve. This he counters with a statement that he also desires his own biography written from the perspective of his wife, that will be more about "how it was" – and therefore more unforgiving towards him. But since his wife is not a writer, he must write this sincere "biography" himself.⁶

This seemingly ironic figure present in the conception of the text, however, has entirely non-ironic implications for the development of the narrative, which then acquires a complex dialectical structure; in order to attempt to speak honestly about himself, the author must also speak honestly about his wife, who speaks about him, creating "a remarkable mirror-like structure in which the author presents himself

and his views on life and art, but in which he also seeks his true image in the shifting gaze of the other” (Jankovič 1991, 193). In this way, Hrabal’s narrative identity is dependent on that of his wife. But, at the same time, the construction of the narrative identity of Eliška emerges from her discourse about Hrabal as her husband. Thus, the narrative of the trilogy aims not only to paint a sincere portrait of the author himself, but, dialectically, also the portrait of his wife, rendering their identities inseparable.

TRANSPARENCY AND OPACITY

It is probably no coincidence that Hrabal’s trilogy repeatedly touches on the motif of the transparent self – a metaphor associated with the genre of autobiography at least since Jean-Jacques Rousseau declared in *Les Confessions* (1782–1789; Eng. trans. *Confessions*, 1928) that his heart was “as transparent as crystal” (697). As Miloslava Slavíčková (2019, 82–86) notes, Hrabal explicitly builds on the literary tradition of transparency and its employment as a means of performing self-knowledge (and self-exposure), making various intertextual references to André Breton’s semi-autobiographical prose *Nadja* (1928; Eng. trans. 1960), where the motif of glass-like transparency of the self also appears: “I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call, where everything hanging from the ceiling and on the walls stays where it is as if by magic, where I sleep nights in a glass bed, under glass sheets, where *who I am* will sooner or later appear etched by a diamond” (1960, 18). In *Vita Nuova*, the second volume of the trilogy, Eliška observes her husband as he paraphrases these lines to their friend Vladimír Boudník:

And I will live in a glass house where everything will be made of glass and I will see everyone who ascends my glass staircase and I will lie down to sleep upon a glass bed and I will cover myself with a glass sheet upon which a diamond inscription will eventually appear that reads ... WHO AM I ...? My husband went on quietly and his words defused the tension that hung in the air they added sort of magic ... And even I succumbed to the spell and perhaps for the first time to the significance of what my husband was saying and I saw that Vladimír was indeed transparent and that he had revealed himself his crazy heart to us. (Hrabal 2010, 153)

In the thematic plane of the text, the transparency of the self (in this case projected onto the character of Vladimír) is presented as an aspirational state, a “spell” that for a fleeting moment unites the perspective of the narrator with the perspective of her husband, allowing her to see Vladimír the way Hrabal sees him. At the same time, the aspiration towards transparency seems to function as an underlying principle of the entire narrative structure of the prose, governing the interplay between the model author who uses the penetrating gaze of the character of his wife in order to write a transparent autobiography. Yet, for this principle to work, her consciousness must first be made transparent by the discourse of the author – whose fictional simulacrum simultaneously arises from the reflector of Eliška’s mind as a subject of this transparency. Hence, transparency is an aspirational state even within the context of the narrative situation, recurring indefinitely in the process of this intersubjective mirroring, but the point of its definite realization is never reached.

Accordingly, the explicit meditations on transparency appearing within the story are complemented by a polarly opposite symbolism of a mask-like opacity; a motif which Hrabal directly borrows from Roland Barthes, particularly from *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953; Eng. trans. *Writing Degree Zero*, 1970), also referring implicitly to René Descartes (Diamond 1982, 1).

In *Gaps*, the character of Hrabal, speaking to his wife, proclaims: “and like I already told you, like Mr. Barthes says ... Although I forge ahead, I point to this mask of mine, which I wear like an actor who has decided to play the clown, the fool ... so said my man, kneeling before me, washing my feet, and I knew that he was my husband and I was his wife” (Hrabal 2011, 57). The lines quoted are a paraphrase of the following passage from *Writing Degree Zero* by Barthes to whose theses the trilogy also tellingly corresponds also in terms of its chosen narrative situation (Förster 2025, 82; see Meyer 2015): “The preterite and the third person in the Novel are nothing but the fateful gesture with which the writer draws the attention to the mask which he is wearing. The whole of Literature can declare *Larvatus prodeo*, As I walk forward, I point out my mask” (Barthes 1970, 40).

It is worth noting that within *In-House Weddings*, the mask motif is not merely present as a figure of speech, but also as an actual material prop that repeatedly appears throughout the story in the form of Hrabal’s “death mask”, a plaster cast of the writer’s face created by his friend Vladimír. The “death” attribute attached to the mask is also not without significance in relation to Barthes’s essay – where the author famously claims that the traditional novelistic form is itself a form of death, turning “life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientated and meaningful time” (1970, 39).

Regarding Hrabal’s death mask, it is rather symbolically featured in the opening scenes of the first volume when Eliška makes acquaintance with her future husband in his eccentric household in Libeň. In *Vita Nuova*, Hrabal mentions this mask to Eliška (who is now his wife), again, telling her it was lost over time, sinking into the soil of their yard. As a motif, however, it persists until the very end of the story: in the closing lines of the final part of the trilogy, the author’s lost death mask re-emerges from the stream of images Eliška associates with the – both loved and hated – house in Libeň she is about to leave behind: “and I even saw that death mask still hanging here, girdled by tendrils of wild ivy, the death mask Mr. Boudník made of my husband ... I stood here dazzled by those images I thought were long gone and buried in the past” (Hrabal 2011, 130–131). The constitution of the protagonists’ ever-escaping narrative identity then seems to be caught up within this dialectic of the transparency, enacted by autobiographical writing, and the admitted opacity – the mask which, by the very same act of writing, the author points out.

It is probably not arbitrary that the key metaphors of transparency and that of a mask employed here are chosen from the realm of the visual experience. In Hrabal’s oeuvre, the motif of vision, including its intersubjective dialectics (as in “seeing how others see me”), appears to be conspicuously connected to obtaining various kinds of (self)knowledge – an act, which for Hrabal, namely in its specific relation

to seeing, oftentimes presents itself as being closer to mysticism than to any conventional epistemology (Fulka 2014, 181).

AN ACCOUNT OF ONESELF AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN *IN-HOUSE WEDDINGS*

To examine the implications of this narrative cycle marked by transparency and opacity, we can now turn to the concept of “giving an account of oneself”, as Judith Butler formulates it in their 2001 article and subsequent book of that title (2005). Butler is concerned with ethics and subjectivity – and with the ethics of how we narrate our subjectivity to others. They argue that, in fact, the narration about one’s (own) identity can never be fully completed – that an individual can never really give a truthful account of oneself in a definitive way (2005, 79). For Butler, the state of being transparent is unattainable.

In this vein, they critique moral theories, such as Kantian ethics, that assume that the self is fully autonomous and rational. Instead, they draw from the Hegelian notion of subjectivity as always already constituted dialectically within the intersubjective context. According to Butler, the emergence of one’s identity as one’s own is always conditioned by someone or something other than oneself – such as other people, social norms, language, or even various unconscious processes (135). For this reason, we can never fully account for ourselves – there will always be certain opaque, unknowable parts of us, brought about by the inherent strangeness within our subjective constitution.

Butler approaches the question of how we can explain ourselves, if our sense of self is always already shaped by forces that are beyond our control. The solution they provide is an encouragement to keep trying nevertheless, to never cease in the effort to provide an account of our deeds, even if the very project of self-narration is a paradoxical one. As Butler says: “In speaking the ‘I,’ I undergo something of what cannot be captured or assimilated by the ‘I,’ since I always arrive too late to myself” (79). In their statement we can hear the echo of the autobiographical aporia we already encountered in de Man’s essay, as well as an echo of the doubts about the possibilities of writing formulated by Barthes which Hrabal himself reflected upon.

According to Butler, then, the productive ethical position is to accept the fact that our self-narration will always be incomplete. This, in turn, implies that we are not entitled to demand such a definitive account from others, as the same conditions apply to them. After all, it is their recognition what our own identity relies on and where it stems from – so to compromise the right to this indeterminacy within the identity of the Other would always be connected to compromising one’s own (2001, 28).

Referring to Adriana Cavarero, Butler thus asserts that the central ethical question, and a condition of any attempt at autobiography, is not the question “who am I?” – which we encountered in the Bretonian fragment devoted to Vladimír, and which keeps on returning in Hrabal’s later texts (see Hrabal 1989), – but the question “who are you?” (Butler 2001, 24):

I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost

the conditions of address, if I have no “you” to address, then I have lost “myself.” [...] one can only tell an autobiography, one can only reference an “I” in relation to a “you”: without the “you,” my own story becomes impossible. (24)

By the virtue of its intersubjective nature, any attempt at a “fully transparent” account of oneself is always, in a way, bound to fail. Therefore, Butler concludes, we are not entitled to any definitive narrative explanation of others, as this would present a form of ethical violence:

If the identity we say we are cannot possibly capture us, and marks immediately an excess and opacity that fall outside the terms of identity, then any effort “to give an account of oneself” will have to fail in order to approach being true. As we ask to know the Other, or ask that the Other say, finally, who he or she is, it will be important not to expect an answer that will ever satisfy. (28)

Hrabal’s trilogy by its very composition seems to correspond to Butler’s thesis. As we can see, for Butler, the sincerity of one’s own account is not a matter of correspondence between one’s “true” or “inner” identity and the identity they proclaim. What, on the other hand, is fundamental, is to acknowledge that our identities are open and relational – and to speak of them as such.

If we adopt this perspective, it becomes irrelevant whether all the events described in the story of Hrabal’s trilogy correspond to the actual life events of the author and his wife. The sincerity of the text dwells in its narrative dynamics, which, not only despite being a pure artistic fabrication, but precisely because of it, points to the intersubjective foundations of identity, and to the fact that we need others to be able to say something about ourselves.

Clearly, Hrabal as an author is an architect of this narrative situation, but it is important to consider that, as an author, he also stands outside the text. The situation of the protagonists, on the other hand, is a chiasmatic one. The identity of Hrabal as a character is dependent on and co-determined by Eliška’s perspective, while we can also see how his presence affects her identity and her narration. In the following excerpt from the first volume, we can observe how the relational nature of the two selves manifests even through the descriptions of the protagonists’ cognitive processes, their individual sensory and emotional perspectives merging into each other:

At that hour in the morning, as we walked, we said nothing, we simply looked about us, the doctor, happy I saw the same things as he, and I, glad this person I walked with, who buried me in flowers at work, had quickened in me an interest for something besides that torture with my fiancé [...] for the first time I looked beyond *me*, I admired the old trunks on the trees, raised my head and gazed through branches into the sky, couldn’t hold back, and I touched the old bark on the tree’s trunk, I put my arm up to rub my fingers against the leaves ... I saluted the lot, and as soon as I looked into the doctor’s eyes, I saw his face light up, in some way he grew younger on all I was seeing for the first time, and nodded and let go a profound sigh ... (Hrabal 2007, 59–60)

In this manner, the sense of openness and mutuality of the characters and their stories established on the formal level of the text penetrates also the level of the events described in it. Later, the structural openness manifests itself more pronouncedly at

the stylistic level of the prose as well. In the second volume of the trilogy, Hrabal almost completely abandons punctuation. In his commentary, he claims that the lack of punctuation is a means of encouraging the reader to perform what he calls “diagonal reading”. By this method he wants to prompt the recipients to read the entire text not in a linear way, but rather to skip through it and focus only on the parts that strike them as captivating. This way, the intersubjective inquiry contained within the question “who are you?” extends towards the reader as well:

we can all turn a page a minute without losing the thread of a text’s semantic message making diagonal reading a kind of suspended descent of the eyes from top to bottom though the alert mind always spots where to pause in this kind of reading because a higher signalling system says that here is something worthy of the reader’s attention here he must revert for a tiny moment to horizontal reading as if to underline in red a core message and then carry on in the manner of alert subliminal global reading [...] ...by reading diagonally a reader finds [not]⁷ only imprints of himself but also what structures the style of the person who wrote the text... (Hrabal’s foreword to *Vita Nuova* as quoted in Pelán 2019, 86)

Hrabal’s text, therefore, does not aim to provide any definitive meaning in and of itself, but is ready to be understood in multiple ways. Similarly to the account of oneself as described by Butler, the literary text conveys meanings that are hidden and opaque to the author themselves, no matter how open, transparent or sincere they are trying to be. Also, the author has no control over the plurality of interpretations that arise when the text is read by others. To draw this parallel further, an (autobiographical) literary text, like any account of oneself, should be approached with the understanding that its inevitable (and in this case, even admitted) incompleteness is not a weakness, but a sign of its authenticity. The method of diagonal reading proposed by Hrabal addresses this situation and works towards creating a space where such an inherent semantic openness is not merely tolerated but encouraged. Thus, the intersubjective nature of a sincere attempt at an autobiographical account is emphasized by Hrabal through the chiasmically constructed narrative situation as well as the (explicit) invitation to its variable readings.

In *Gaps*, the final volume of the trilogy, the character of Eliška eloquently summarizes this technique as follows: “I looked at that famous book of his, but when I read it, I got the sense that every reader should finish it off at home, [that with my husband’s writing it’s]⁸ like those prepared meals I buy, the ones I have to finish off, tweak a bit, add spice to so they’re whole...” (Hrabal 2011, 12)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Hrabal’s trilogy can be read as a paradigmatic case of sincerity understood not as a referential truthfulness, but as a mode of autobiographical writing that openly admits its own performative and relational nature. Through the chiasmatic construction of the narrative perspective, Hrabal exposes the impossibility of any fully transparent autobiographical account, while simultaneously affirming the ethical demand of striving towards it. In Hrabal’s prose, the act of giving an account of oneself is mediated through the constant attempts at narrative

portrayal of the consciousness of the other – which, by this means, also sheds light on the author's own fictionalized persona arising from Eliška's discourse. The structure of the work thus becomes an enactment of an ethical paradigm, in which self-recognition and self-narration function as inseparable from the recognition of alterity. This is represented, of course, most conspicuously by the central character of Hrabal's wife, but at the stylistic and paratextual level, also through the acknowledgment of the importance of the reader's role. Hrabal's trilogy then ultimately situates sincerity at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics: as an artistic strategy that renders visible the intersubjective conditions of identity, and as an ethical gesture grounded in the acceptance of the inherent incompleteness of any (auto)biography.⁹

NOTES

- ¹ We list the years of the first Czech editions in the order in which the individual volumes of the trilogy were first published by the exile publishing house '68 Publishers, where the chronologically last volume, *Gaps*, was published first. The trilogy could not be officially published in Czechoslovakia until after the fall of the communist regime. However, with help of samizdat publishers Ludvík Vaculík and Václav Kadlec, Hrabal managed to get unofficial transcripts of all three parts into circulation as early as 1986 (Kotyk, Kotyková and Pavlíček 2014, 194).
- ² "Nepřekročil jsem mezní situaci lidské existence?... A ty samé otázky jsem si kladl, když jsem dopsal druhý díl mé trilogie *Vita nuova*... proud vypravení o mém životě, který v proudu a bez interpunkce na dvě stě dvaceti stránkách vyvolává ve mně ty samé otázky: Je to ještě literatura? Je tento text ještě rukopisem?" Unless otherwise stated, the translations from Czech are by the present author and the original passage is cited in the footnote. If an officially published English translation of Hrabal's text is available, we always cite primarily from this translation.
- ³ "Fikce je někdy dokonalejší a realističtější, než sama skutečnost."
- ⁴ Hrabal had been born in 1914 as a child from his mother's previous relationship, while Marie "Maryška" Kiliánová and František "Francin" Hrabal wed in 1916. The author was then adopted by František Hrabal and his surname was changed accordingly (Kotyk, Kotyková and Pavlíček 2014, 6–14).
- ⁵ "Ta moje trilogie děkuje za svůj styl i obsah paní Tolsté a paní Dostojevské, které v Praze vydaly nyní dvě biografie o svých manželech a v těch knihách své manžely tak chválí, že jsem si řekl, že svůj životopis napíši přes prisma pohledu mé paní, jejíž jsem vlastně byl Max a Moric a enfant terrible, že sám napíši o sobě ne hanopis, ale tak trochu jako to bylo, to naše manželství, já jako klenot a zdobnost našeho soužití. Tak jsem ze své manželky udělal družku jak paní Tolsté, tak paní Dostojevské."
- ⁶ Not long after it was first published, Hrabal's trilogy itself has been promptly incorporated into a similar intertextual dialogue by Péter Esterházy who in his *Hrabal könyve* (1993; Eng. trans. *The Book of Hrabal*, 1993) intentionally builds both the plot and the narrative situation as a paean to *In-House Weddings* and *Cutting It Short* and its protagonists.
- ⁷ "diagonálním čtením nachází čtenář nejen otisky sama sebe, ale také stylovou strukturu toho kdo ten text napsal..." (Hrabal 1995c, 182).
- ⁸ "že to je s tím psaním mého muže, jako když nakupuju v Polotovarch" (Hrabal 1995d, 433).
- ⁹ My gratitude goes to my thesis supervisor Jakub Češka; the anonymous peer reviewers, and to the editors of this volume for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

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The cultural and political value of sincerity in the literature of Soviet Lithuania

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Sincerity. Soviet literature. Lithuanian literature. Ideology. Romanticism.
Lyricism.

The concept of “sincerity” held different meanings across periods of the Soviet era, while retaining a shared political dimension. Lithuanian literature, as part of multinational Soviet literature, reflected broader Soviet developments but also displayed distinctive traits shaped by Lithuania’s later incorporation into the USSR, its interwar orientation toward Western culture, and the individual positions of writers. During the Stalinist period, sincerity functioned as a mechanism of ideological control: writers were expected to renounce their bourgeois past, declare loyalty to the regime, and repent previous “insincerity”. In the Thaw period, the imperative of sincerity in both Soviet and Lithuanian literature emerged as a reaction against Stalinist discourse, returning to personal experience and emphasizing lyricism in poetry and prose. In Lithuania, this tendency also meant a return to Romantic ideals, which paradoxically assumed the role of a cultural avant-garde. Yet the late Soviet cult of sincerity in Lithuanian literature also revealed dependence on the system, discouraging modernist and experimental forms that were often seen as alien to the national literary tradition.

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The devaluation of “sincerity” as a critical term was caused by the modernist and avant-garde literary paradigm, which sought artistic effect in ways other than the pursuit of sincerity characteristic of the literature of Romanticism. One of the main themes of Romantic poetry, the impossibility of achieving sincerity (as words cannot truly convey the writer’s inner world) was replaced by the modernist conviction that there is no inner world before it is expressed. According to René Wellek and Austin Warren, “the poem is a sincere expression of the poem”, the linguistic construct shaping in the author’s mind as he writes (1949, 215). Sincerity was considered an old-fashioned term and fell into critical disrepute for a long time (Forbes 2004, 3). New criticism and structuralism challenged sincerity even more profoundly, rejecting the idea of an unconstructed lyric persona. According to Patricia M. Ball, who observed in the mid-1960s that literary criticism since 1930 had increasingly focused on the “gift of the word” and its analysis, resulting in a corresponding shift of the notion of sincerity to an earlier stage in critical reaction (1964, 8). In subsequent decades, deconstructionism and postmodernism denied outright the possibility of a stable self that does not dissolve in language (Goldberg 2023, 10). However, the manifestations of sincerity in literature, as well as its cultural value, have never disappeared. Its rhetoric and reception depend on the literary tradition, the condition of the literary field, and the political situation, and can mean radically different things in different contexts (12).

The Western-oriented literature of the first Lithuanian Republic (1918–1940) began to overcome the syndrome of lateness inherent in small and late-emerging literatures, creating an alternative to the Romantic literary paradigm associated with the expression of feelings. In the 1920s, with the advent of the avant-garde movement, Lithuanian literature turned towards the criticism of Romantic sincerity.¹ One of the most prominent critics of Romantic sincerity in Lithuanian literature at that time was the neo-romantic poet Jonas Aistis (1904–1973), who created theatrical *mise-en-scènes* of sincerity as a manipulation of the reader in his poems and embodied the very idea of the “performance of sincerity” (Taylor 2009, 19). The poet interchanges modes of sincerity and irony, tells stories of masks and the revelation of true faces, and manipulates the reader who expects sincerity. All these layers intertwine in the poem “Evening Came” ([1932] 1988):

Evening came, knitting its eyebrows,
Like a murderer with blood on his hands,
I wandered in my thoughts through that old path of love,
I had the power to say “become!” And it became...

Unfortunately, there was no evening, no eyebrows...
That evening is fake – it’s my creation,
But you will wander through my love’s old paths
After taking the book off the shelf.²

It is not sincerity *per se*, but rather communication and the cathartic effect on the reader that constitute the axis of Aistis’s poetic reflection, grounded in a modernist belief in the power of the poetic world he has created. Nevertheless, the traces of a Romantic tension between language and the inner world remain. Longing for au-

thenticity often glimmers in the performance of emotions, and Aistis uses the figures of mask and face, ink and blood to express the impossibility of their correspondence (“And blood does not drip with black ink”; 1988, 83).³

In contrast, his contemporary Henrikas Radauskas (1910–1970) abandons this tension and turns towards “ink” – irony, intertextual play, and anti-subjectivist poetry. The poetic speaker hardly appears in his poems, and the poet’s inner world can only be reconstructed as an active poetic consciousness that has the power to destroy reality and create a new poetic fabulous world in its place: “And a poem emerges – like the wind – from nothing,” declares the poet in his 1955 poem “Winter Song” (1980, 161).⁴ The antithesis of active poetic consciousness for Radauskas is Romantic emotionality, which he considers passive (for example, in the poem “Romantic Poets”, sleeping poets write a poem about sleep; 191).

However, Soviet occupation interrupted the process of convergence with Western literature and restored the value of sincerity in Lithuanian literature. The process took place not only in Soviet Lithuania, but partly in the diaspora. For example, the above-mentioned Aistis, who emigrated to the USA after World War II, radically changed his poetics, shifting from modernist playfulness to the direct expression of patriotic feelings and open emotional rhetoric, which is traditionally regarded as sincerity (Rutten 2017, 7; Scheer 2020, 142–173; Goldberg 2023, 13). Nevertheless, this was more of a sideline in the development of diaspora literature. In Soviet Lithuania, the pursuit of “sincerity” took a significant place. This article aims to discuss the formation and dynamics of this value in the literature and literary life of Soviet Lithuania, presenting some significant cases.

SINCERITY AS AN IDEOLOGICAL INTERPELLATION IN THE STALINIST ERA

According to Ellen Rutten, sincerity throughout the Soviet period complemented a wider complex of positive emotions and served as the cement of society; however, in different periods, it performed different, though sometimes overlapping, political functions and had varying cultural value (2017, 66). During Stalin’s regime, the demand for sincerity in literature existed primarily as a strategy of the Party’s management of literature, but also as a rhetorical strategy. We can find the requirement of sincerity in the documents of writers’ meetings, the minutes of congresses of the Writers’ Union, and writers’ letters to various organizations, as well as other archival documents. The present study is based on the analysis of a collection of documents, *Rašytojas pokario metais* (Writer in the post-war years, 1991), which represents the management of Lithuanian literature and strategies of its Sovietization immediately after the country’s second Soviet occupation in 1944.

The demand for sincerity or sincerity/insincerity as a modality of action or state, by which the writer’s engagement with Soviet literature is interpreted, is quite common in the documents published in the book. The argument of sincerity is used slightly differently by Communist Party functionaries, writer-functionaries, and writers who were the target of criticism. In all cases, the argument participates in the general theater of becoming a Soviet writer, which consisted of two acts: the unmasking

of the bourgeois identity of a writer and interpellation into Soviet ideology. As Sheila Fitzpatrick argues, such a theater of sincerity was characteristic of Soviet discourse in the 1930s (2005, 13). Lithuania and other Baltic countries repeated it after the second occupation in 1944, with certain modifications.

In the speeches of Soviet functionaries, sincerity appears as a confirmation that the writer is really committed to the system. For example, Kazys Preikšas, the Lithuanian Communist Party secretary for propaganda and agitation, considered the Lithuanian equivalent of Andrei Zhdanov, declared at the Visuotinis rašytojų susirinkimas – General Meeting of Writers (1946): “Thus a large number of writers are sincerely taking part in the creative work of reconstruction of the whole nation” (Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 53). However, the declaration of sincerity can also be interpreted as unconvincing and false: the chairman of the Writers’ Union, Petras Cvirka, states that he does not believe in the sincerity of the poet Antanas Miškinis’s intention to change and become a Soviet writer (Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 109).⁵ Miškinis becomes one of the impostors who, according to Fitzpatrick, are extremely important to unmask as falsely claiming a revolutionary identity (2005, 4).

Sincerity serves as a justification or confirmation of the certainty of repentance regarding the lack of participation in the Sovietization of Lithuanian literature. Declarations of sincerity are usually made by the writers who have been denounced for silence, ideological mistakes, or “bourgeois” aesthetics, as in the above-mentioned case of Miškinis. In his speech at the 1946 General Meeting, the poet Jonas Graičiūnas also uses sincerity as a key argument to convince his listeners of the genuineness of his repentance: “Comrades, yesterday we heard many true words about our mistakes and silence, about our lack of participation in the currently active literary work. *I have never been insincere, nor can I be.* I confess that I am guilty of having remained silent until now and not having dared to return to literature with my original poetry or my spoken word” (Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 91, ital. added).⁶

In the speeches of writers, sincerity is directly (“true words”) or indirectly related to truth, to the congruence between the words spoken and the speaker’s beliefs. However, as Mihhail Lotman argues, sincerity belongs to a category different from truth. On one hand, it is a concept wider than truth, on the other hand, it is narrower than truth (2015, 91). It is rather the modality by which an utterance is given a meaning of truth, or a communicative strategy. Nevertheless, having in mind the historical context (Lotman as well as Goldberg assert that sincerity is always contextual; 2015, 91), it is evident that in all these utterances, one can recognize *ideological interpellation* in the way that Louis Althusser defines it (1971, 174). In his speech, Preikšas uses sincerity as a confirmation of the writer’s acceptance of communist ideology, almost as a trope of religious conversion.⁷ The confession becomes the first step in the ideological interpellation, usually followed by a pledge to follow the right path, i.e., to become a subject of communist ideology, or a Soviet writer.

According to Algirdas Julien Greimas’s model of narrative grammar (Greimas and Courtès 1982, 203–210), the situation of the writer’s confession is a typical example of manipulation (causing to do or, in this case, to believe). In other words, it is the act of persuasion, the success of which does not depend so much on the speaker

as on the decision of those who hold the power. The writers' sincere apologies for past ideological mistakes can be seen as a case of forced confession, structurally similar to the Stalinist trials of the late 1930s, or the witch trials in which people confessed to fantastic crimes (Fitzpatrick 2005, 13; Lotman 2015, 91–96). The only difference is that the torture in these writers' deliberations was not physical but discursive. However, unconvincing sincerity also had real consequences. Writers had to compose "sincere" works in the style of socialist realism; some of them were restricted in their active participation in literature, and some, like Miškinis and Graičiūnas, suffered repression.

It is worth noting that among the many addresses at the General Meeting of Writers that use the sincerity argument, the speech by Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas stands out (Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 100–104). Mykolaitis-Putinas (1893–1966), a poet and prose writer, and former Catholic priest, was a significant figure in interwar Lithuanian literature, and it was important for the Soviet authorities to have a writer of such importance on their side. However, the writer is clearly trying to avoid ideological interpellation. His discourse combines Soviet newspeak ("unhealthy individualism", "abstract aestheticism", "futile formalism") and the theme of inner fluctuation, characteristic of his entire oeuvre, which is expressed by using the motifs of prewar work, such as "between two dawns" (the title of the symbolist collection of his poems), and the aspiration for liberation. The latter is an allusion to the novel *Altorių šešėly* (In the shadow of the altars, 1932–1933), the protagonist of which decides to give up the priesthood. The writer questions the imperative to create Soviet literature by asking if it is possible to reconcile the national literary tradition, its lyricism, and the demands of socialist realism. He considers the fear that socialist realism will kill literature and the writer's creative inclinations to be unjustified ("perhaps sincere, but false"). He asks whether the man of Soviet literature should not be a living person. All these reflections are an extended version of the answer to the *sincere* (the word Mykolaitis-Putinas employs) question: "Am I a Soviet man today?" The short version of this answer is: "I have to say frankly that I am not" (Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 102). The "thunderous applause" at the end of the speech (which is recorded at the end of the script) would confirm that the position of the hesitant writer, who could not unconditionally accept the new demands on literature, was appreciated by many as sincere.⁸

FINDING A "STRONG SOVIET VOICE" FOR SINCERITY

Mykolaitis-Putinas, like many at the congress, begins his speech with a critique of formalism and individualism as inappropriate for Soviet literature,⁹ but concludes with a subtle questioning of some of the principles of socialist realism. Quite boldly in the context of the time, he criticizes the "mechanical" opposition of the good ("militiaman", "settler") and the bad ("bandit", "kulak") as unrealistic, and strongly suggests an alternative: "We have to create a person, to get to know him, to create a person who, when you get to know him, when you read about him, the reader will find a part of himself, and he will say: 'Indeed, this is what I have experienced, this is what I have thought'" (Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 103–104).

Mykolaitis-Putinas raises the question of making Soviet literature more persuasive by drawing on the understanding of aesthetic value that has developed in the modernizing Lithuanian literature. Although he does not speak directly about sincerity, he mentions “the mechanical”, or artificiality, which will be criticized as insincerity in the post-Stalin period. Mykolaitis-Putinas attempts to universalize the concept of sincerity, and his approach is similar to that found in the early 1950s in Russian literature, even though he is speaking a decade earlier.¹⁰

The requirement for sincerity in art appears quite differently in the statements of many other writers, although they often use a similar opposition between formality or artifice and sincerity. Artificiality and its synonyms (such as wooden language, coldness, and falseness) can suggest different things, for example, remnants of the pre-Soviet literary tradition, often referred to as formalism or modernist poetics, implying that only literature written according to the rules of socialist realism can be truly sincere. Sincerity is often defined by its opposite, insincerity, which is characterized by a lack of enthusiasm, passion, and zeal (all of these words are frequently used in various documents), as well as an insufficient commitment to writing in accordance with the new ideological requirements.¹¹ This concept of sincerity is clearly reminiscent of the party slogans in George Orwell’s novel *1984* (“War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength”; 1984, 16), where a subject is referred to as its opposite. In other words, conformity, hypocrisy, lies, and socialist realist clichés are considered sincerity. Criteria for the sincerity of a literary work were applied in a circumstantial way; therefore, it was not easy for the writer to adjust to them. For example, during World War II, lyrical sincerity and lyrical poetry were tolerated in Soviet literature, as in the works of Eduardas Mieželaitis (1919–1997), the future winner of the Lenin Prize. However, in 1946, Preikšas fiercely criticized Mieželaitis’s collection of lyric poetry, *Tėviškės vėjas* (The wind of the homeland, 1946), for its “nationalist drivel”, and the poet sincerely (this word is repeated several times in his apology) repented that he had been unable to rid himself of “old formalism” (Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 83–86, 112).

Perhaps the most interesting case I discovered while analyzing documents on literary management during the Stalin era was the combination of the Romantic notion of sincerity and commitment to Soviet ideology. “After all, it is important that the essence of creation should flow from the poet’s heart and coincide with his heart,” declares translator Valys Drazdauskas at a 1947 meeting of the Kaunas section of the Writers’ Union (Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 130). Aleksys Churginas, poet and translator, speaking at the same meeting as Drazdauskas (both discussing Adomas Lastas’s poems), also uses the argument of sincerity: “Lastas tries to reconcile Soviet themes and a non-Soviet style. The sincerity of the poet’s poems is not at all in doubt. All that remains is to find a strong Soviet voice” (129–130). Churginas’s speech suggests that sincerity alone is insufficient for a Soviet poet when the voice is experienced as interior and simultaneously exterior (Goldberg 2023, 13). The voice must have a regulated exterior, a Soviet expression. Does sincerity understood in this way not become its opposite, artificiality? This question will be addressed quite openly after Stalin’s death.

BACK TO GENUINE SINCERITY

The post-Stalinist discussion on sincerity is generally considered to have begun with Vladimir Pomerantsev's article "Ob iskrennosti v literature" (On sincerity in literature), published in 1953 in the "thick" journal *Novyi mir* (New world). The intelligentsia and so-called common readers discussed the article all over the Soviet Union, and in letters to the journal's editors, they "unequivocally supported" the author's attitude to sincerity as an opposition to "falsity". Denis Kozlov argues that the sincerity imperative in Pomerantsev's article was not radical. Sincerity for him implied harmony not only between inner belief and verbalization, but also among the three components: belief, text, and the greater cause which meant the socialist ideal (2013, 47). Although such sincerity aimed to pursue not only the "truth of life" but also the "truth of party" (Pomerantsev 1953, 220–221), it was perceived by readers as an opposition to the insincerity of the Stalinist epoch, which Pomerantsev identified with falsity, artifice, and the "varnishing of reality".¹² In other words, he employed the same opposition of sincerity/insincerity, but reinterpreted it, shifting the emphasis, especially in relation to the category of truth. What had been considered an expression of sincerity during Stalin's reign came to be called fake and a "lacquering of reality", and what had been called artificiality, formalist leavening, or subjectivity, which hinders "the true-to-life" representation of reality, has come to be interpreted as sincerity, the voice of the inner self.

In Lithuanian literature, the renewal of sincerity manifested itself in various forms. One of them was a shift to the protagonist's inner world. It became the dominant structural element of a poem or short story, and the ideological construction of reality in a novel was partly replaced or supplemented by descriptions of the protagonist's feelings or inner monologue.¹³ The other one was a folkloric lyricism, which, according to Elena Baliutytė-Ryliškienė, "melted the frost of post-war poetry" (2024, 16). This is how a literary critic describes the poetry of Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930–2011). Marcinkevičius is perhaps the most prominent Lithuanian poet of the Soviet epoch, whose relationship with official ideology was controversial.¹⁴ He brings intimacy back to poetry (love lyrics, poems dedicated to his wife and daughters), harmonious experiences of nature, and reflective introspection. However, he also makes Soviet ideology more intimate by comparing the Communist Party to his own mother in the first collection of poems, *Prašau žodžio* (I ask for a word, 1955), or inserting thoughts about Lenin into the everyday routine as in the poem "Šiandien – Lenino gimimo dieną" (Today – Lenin's birthday, 1966, 38–39). The abstract humanism and kindness as fundamental human values in his poetry were in line with the nature of Soviet subjectivity (Pinsky 2017, 461–463).

Janina Degutytė (1928–1990), who belonged to the same generation as Marcinkevičius, expressed sincerity in a different way. Her poems are characterized by intimacy, based on a close connection with nature and other individuals (the structure dominated by the "I" addressing "You"). The mindset of the poetic speaker in her early poetry is romantically maximalist and optimistic ("And I am happy that the rain carries bells to the earth, / Spring water glistens like mirrors in the forest / And that I walk across the wonderful earth, sharing myself drop by drop. / No! Giving myself

completely each time”).¹⁵ The development of Degutytė’s poetry can be seen as a path to revealing her tragic and painful experiences, becoming increasingly explicit in addressing her relationship with her alcoholic and abusive mother. (Šmitienė 2018, 27). Her last book, *Purpuru atsivėrusi* (Unfolded in purple, 1984), could be regarded as a collection of confessional poetry.

Although space does not allow for a detailed discussion of Degutytė’s poetic sincerity and its evolution, her early work and its reception reveal that sincerity is not the truth itself; the effect of truth is created not only by the text, but also by the expectations of readers and the cultural context. Readers and literary critics responded positively to the poet’s first collection, *Ugnies lašai* (Drops of flame, 1959; Russian translation published in 1960 as *Kapli ognia*). The bright emotionality of the poetry, although at times overly forced, the Romantic maximalism, and the subtle experience of nature conveyed in it were perceived as a return to sincerity without an ideological shadow, as in Marcinkevičius’s case. However, as Degutytė herself would later reveal, the emotional content of the poems did not correspond at all to her own emotional state, exposing that psychological verisimilitude in the case of sincerity is both highly subjective and ambiguous in its implications (Goldberg 2023, 13). “Everyone was delighted with the bright mood of the poems, but I was constantly thinking about ending my life. [...] I was criticized for being overly enthusiastic, using a high voice, and being too optimistic. My goodness, I was pulling myself out of the darkness by my hair” (Degutytė 1998, 33). The poet creates the effect of sincerity in her early poems using rather traditional Romantic poetic devices (openly expressing emotion or transferring it to images of nature). Nevertheless, Degutytė offers an entirely different approach to the relationship between sincerity and truth, raising the question of whether the artistic transformation of personal emotions into their opposite can also be considered a variant of sincerity. Is joy in a poem, as an attempt to overcome despair and horror, insincere?

According to diaspora literary critic Rimvydas Šilbajoris, Degutytė’s lyrical poetry does not bring by significant innovation in poetic techniques; however, it was perceived as something new and even avant-garde in the Lithuanian literary process (1992, 527). The return of personal address, the valorization of intimacy, which the reader perceives as sincerity, as well as trust in nature in Degutytė’s work, oppose the discourse of conquering nature, the Promethean humanism of the Thaw period, and therefore gains a political meaning of being non-Soviet.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The concept of sincerity was prevalent in Lithuanian literature throughout the Soviet period. During Stalin’s rule, it was primarily part of the interpellation mechanism, and in the post-Stalinist epoch, the rhetoric of sincerity served as an alternative to Soviet discourse. However, this alternative was only partial. On the one hand, this rhetoric manifested as a return to subjectivity, a renewal of poetics, and a liberation from ideological control of art. Such examples of the rhetoric of sincerity were found not only in Degutytė’s poetry, but also in so-called lyrical prose, characterized by “a sense of the individual world, self-expression, fractures not in the plot or

characters, but in the narrator's consciousness, a poetic transformation of everyday life" (Sprindytė 1989, 24). On the other hand, the rhetoric of sincerity drew close to the official cultural program of the late Soviet period, as seen in the internal monologue novel or in certain parts of Marcinkevičius's works.

However, the dominance of sincerity in Lithuanian literature and prose writing had its "side effects". It hindered the national and political thinking necessary for the novel, as literary critic Liudvikas Gadeikis said at the end of the Soviet era (1988, 171). Even the most progressive and influential literary critics of the Soviet period viewed intellectual prose with caution, often as an experiment that "does little to excite" (Zalatorius 1998, 310), as something artificial, a rational structure which is not "an expression of human life" (Zaborskaitė 2002, 628). They considered the poetics of sincerity, although they did not name it directly, to be the main condition for successful artistic communication. In independent Lithuania, Vanda Zaborskaitė acknowledges that her approach may seem "old-fashioned and provincial" in the context of Western literary criticism, but adds that she still adheres to it (628). This approach can be considered an outline of the conservative cultural and political values of sincerity in the late Soviet period.

NOTES

- ¹ The first wave of the avant-garde in Lithuania began with the movement known as "Keturi vėjai" (Four winds), as reflected in the title of the literary magazine (1924–1928). The participants of the movement ironized Romantic emotionality and claimed to be creators of objects from words. However, their work, especially poetry, contains not only bold, futuristic, and expressionistic experiments but also attempts to establish alternative forms of subjectivity. Instead of Romantic contemplation and doubt, they spoke in the first person, declaring their confidence in poetry as an act and provocatively proclaiming their value as creators ("Labas, jūra! Aš pirmutinis Lietuvos poeta..." [Hello, sea! I am the first poet of Lithuania...], Tysliava [1924] 1967, 97). Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Lithuanian are by the present author.
- ² "Atėjo vakaras, suraukęs antakius, / Kaip žmogžudys krauju rankas sutepęs / Klajojau mintimis tuo meilės sentakiu, / Turėjau galios tarti „tapk!“ Ir - tapo... // Deja, nebuvo vakaro nei antakių... / Tas vakaras netikras – mano sukurtinis, / Bet tu klajosi mano meilės sentakiu / Nuėmęs knygą nuo lentynos" (Aistis 1988, 78).
- ³ In Lithuanian, *sincerity* ("nuoširdumas") means coming from the heart. Blood in Aistis' poetry functions as a metonymy for the heart, with connotations of pain.
- ⁴ It is a quote from Radauskas's collection of poems *Žiemos daina* (Winter song, 1955), published while in exile after the Soviets occupied Lithuania in 1944. However, neither Radauskas's poetic program, nor his stylistics, nor his ironic approach to poetry as an expression of feelings had changed since his first collection, *Fontanas* (Fountain, 1935), published in independent Lithuania.
- ⁵ Miškinis declares: "Dear comrades, here at this meeting, some sincere voices have already echoed. I would like to make my voice as sincere as a poem sometimes sounds" (Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 79).
- ⁶ Speeches delivered at the meeting have been published in Kubilius and Pakalniškis 1991, 43–119.
- ⁷ In her analysis of representations of religious conversion, Jane Taylor proposes the notion of sincerity as a trope of conversion (2009, 30).
- ⁸ This interpretation may seem risky, as not all reactions to the speakers may be precisely scripted. However, Mykolaitis-Putinas was a significant figure in Lithuanian literature, one of the few literary

classics who did not leave for the West. His status likely allowed him to say more, and his speech echoed the fears and doubts of many writers.

- ⁹ The General Meeting of Writers in Soviet Lithuania had to respond to Zhdanov's speech on the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* at the Meeting of Communist Party activists and writers on August 14, 1946.
- ¹⁰ I want to acknowledge the reviewer of the first version of the article for the suggestion that Mykolaitis-Putinas's speech is "fascinatingly in harmony" with the approach to sincerity found in Pomerantsev's "Ob iskrennosti v literature" (On sincerity in literature) and Olga Bergolts's "Razgovor o lirike" (A conversation about lyric), published a decade later; see Goldberg 2023, 144–145.
- ¹¹ Monique Scheer defines enthusiasm as the mediation of conviction through emotion (2020, 201).
- ¹² For more information on Pomerantsev's article, see Goldberg 2023, 144–146; Rutten 2017, 75–76; Kozlov 2013, 44–87.
- ¹³ Authors of the so-called internal monologue (Alfonsas Bieliauskas, Algimantas Sluckis) used a technique similar to stream of consciousness to represent the sincerity of the protagonist, who was usually an active communist. It was an example of the mimetic modernization of Soviet literature: the self-doubting hero never questions communist ideology itself.
- ¹⁴ On Marcinkevičius' place in Soviet Lithuanian literature, see Ivanauskas 2018, 37–55; Mitaitė 2018, 116–137.
- ¹⁵ "Ir laiminga aš, kad lietūs varpelius į žemę neša, / Tviska veidrodžiais miškuos pavasario vanduo / Ir kad aš einu per žemę nuostabią dalint save po lašą. / Ne! Save kiekvieną kartą visa atiduot" (Degutytė 1988, 80). English translations of Degutytė's poems can be found on <https://allpoetry.com/Janina-Degutyte/>; http://www.old.lituanus.org/1984_3/84_3_04.htm; <https://vilniusreview.com/archive/janina-degutyte/>. The first translations of Degutytė's poetry into English were published in the Moscow-based journal *Soviet Literature* (No. 5, 1969), translated by Dorrian Rottenberg, Irina Zheleznov, and Tom Botting. In an article introducing the author, Bella Zaleskaya, the main translator of Lithuanian poetry into Russian, described all of her poetry as "sincere, impulsive, throbbing". According to Zaleskaya, Degutytė's early poetry "seemed inclined to a somewhat ecstatic, elemental, spontaneous expression of feeling" (1965, 125–126).
- ¹⁶ According to Ellen Rutten, sincerity semantically implies a political dimension: "On the one hand, the term 'sincerity' is part and parcel of private conceptualizations of self: the attempt to be true to oneself is an intimate, personal process. On the other hand, inquiries into sincerity's semantic origins immediately lead us into the public, and indeed political, arena" (Rutten 2017, 40).

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The rhetoric of sincerity in Bulgarian underground literature from the 1960s to the 1980s

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The rhetoric of sincerity in Bulgarian underground literature from the 1960s to the 1980s

Rhetoric of sincerity. Bulgarian unofficial literature. Georgi Mitskov. Mehmed Karahyuseinov. Boris Hristov. Emiliya Dvoryanova.

Postwar Bulgarian literature under the communist regime was divided into three currents: official, exile, and unofficial. From the perspective of the rhetoric of sincerity and its literary manifestations, the most relevant object of research appears to be unofficial texts, i.e., those that were published in samizdat or remained in the form of manuscripts or typescripts. This article examines the manifestations of the rhetoric of sincerity in selected underground works and particularly the ways in which it was expressed in poetry by Georgi Mitskov and Mehmed Karahyuseinov, prose by Boris Hristov and Emiliya Dvoryanova, and samizdat almanac *NLO*. Among other approaches, it is based on Michel Foucault's concept of *parrhesia* (free speech), as he understands it in the context of ancient philosophy and literature, and applies it to the situation of state socialism in the second half of the 20th century, in which speakers (or literary characters) express their personal relationship to truth, risking oppression, ostracism, and denigration. The study explores how authors and their literary characters respond to social hypocrisy and insincerity in their efforts to maintain their own human dignity.

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In the postwar period, Bulgarian literature developed under similar sociocultural conditions as literature in the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries. Bulgaria witnessed a complete *Sovietization* of cultural life from 1947–1949 accompanied by the rise of state censorship.¹ To write freely in the People's Republic of Bulgaria was possible only “for the drawer,”² while uncensored publication was limited to *samizdat* – a phenomenon that did not reach a significant scale in Bulgaria.³ Nevertheless, even the officially published literature during the four decades of state socialism was not entirely homogeneous with regard to the ideological boundaries of acceptability. Signs of the rhetoric of sincerity could be found in a whole range of literary works published through official channels, particularly during periods of political thaw: after Stalin's death and the subsequent 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, and during the *perestroika* and *glasnost* of the Mikhail Gorbachev era.

Poetry, prose, and theater began to break free from ideological dogmas during the 1960s and especially in the 1980s, when the writing of some authors became increasingly *sincere*.⁴ Following Ellen Rutten, I understand the rhetoric of sincerity as “the discursive gesture of honest self-disclosure (whether the artist in question is indeed honest is another quest; what matters is her or his insistence on the trope of emotional transparency)” (2017, 9). Rutten also links the rebirth of sincerity in Russian (Soviet) culture with the period of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*. She suggests that the development of the rhetoric of sincerity in literature dates back to the period of the political thaw after Stalin's death (82–83) despite the fact that during that time, the possibility of self-expression still faced the limits of hard censorship. In the 1960s, honest self-disclosure was not permitted to attack the ruling socialist discourse. If such “problematic” texts appeared (particularly if the sincerity of the expression gained political and ideological dimension), the author often had to face sanctions or repressions (e.g. loss of job, loss of Sofia residence permit, and in some cases imprisonment or confinement in psychiatric hospitals).

The issue of sincerity under conditions of unfreedom is connected with the phenomenon of *parrhesia* (“free speech”) as understood by Michel Foucault: “In *parrhesia*, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks” (2001, 12). Foucault also uses the term *parrhesiastes* to designate the speaking subject – that is, the one who practices *parrhesia*. Concerning artistic expression under the unfree conditions of state socialism, Foucault's concept of risk and danger appears to be particularly important, because “the fact that a speaker says something dangerous – different from what the majority believes – is a strong indication that he is *parrhesiastes*” (2001, 15). The situation in the People's Republic of Bulgaria was fairly similar as the sociocultural development of the Balkan Soviet satellite closely mirrored developments in the USSR.

This article focuses on selected unofficial texts that can be retrospectively read as the discursive gestures of honest self-disclosure. First, it concentrates on the unpublished poetry of Georgi Mitskov and an attempt to reconstruct the feelings of non-conformist students at the end of the 1970s, for whom sincerity was a key value that

caused conflicts with the state authorities. Next, it examines the manner in which sincerity, as a discursive gesture, was attributed to the literary characters in the prose of Boris Hristov and Emiliya Dvoryanova. The phenomenon of the youth subcultures in the 1980s appears interesting in connection with the rhetoric of sincerity, because representatives of these subcultures considered themselves bearers of sincerity, as will be illustrated with diary notes by Dimitar Voev. Finally, it outlines how the discursive gestures of sincerity were present in the unpublished poetry of Mehmed Karahyuseinov as an intellectual resistance to the assimilation policies against Bulgarian Turks during the “Revival Process”.

GEORGI MITSKOV’S “MASQUERADE BALL”

A significant case in this respect is the unpublished poetry of the marginalized poet and translator Georgi Mitskov (1921–2002), whose intimate lyricism from the late 1960s fits well into the general effort of literature during socialism to expose the dichotomous model of sincerity versus hypocrisy. Mitskov’s poems explore the eternal tension between the inner feeling and its external manifestation, between the mind and the word, between the soul and the body, and between the individual and the unfree society of the totalitarian state. At present, Georgi Mitskov is cautiously included in the canon of Bulgarian “queer literature”, although such lyricism certainly did not aspire to gain publicity in Bulgaria during the 1960s, and his poetic expression was veiled in a web of metaphors. Mitskov’s love poetry, in its directness and eroticism, collided with the normativity of the dominant discourse of the time.⁵ One of these texts, for example, is his 1967 untitled poem:

And blessed silence.
Only you and me.
An embrace of azure
and light. And there is no me and you.

The forest hid within us,
nobody to be.
Far from the rabble.
And there is no me and you.

The azure wed us!⁶

Mitskov’s love poems are often set in wild nature, specifically in the majestic landscapes of the Bulgarian mountains, which frequently emerge as a free and unconquered milieu in which one can act honestly and without pretense. A person retreating to the mountains thus escapes the dangers lurking in the city or town – far from the society (“far from the rabble”) that seeks to control and direct one’s social behavior. This dichotomy between pure nature and corrupt (evil or bad) society is evident, for example, in another of Mitskov’s poems, “Zaminavane” (Departure), dedicated to the Portuguese poet and writer Fernando Pessoa:

A black wind blows from the pines,
chasing clouds, the moon, and shadows,

once they were my guards
and protected me from the evil eyes,
when they pursued me stubbornly
and wanted to know all about me,
even whom I would love...⁷

Nature protects the subject from the evil eyes of society; perhaps, in this specific case, it relates to the evil eyes of the secret services and their informers, who want to know information about whom the pursued person loves. The speaker of these poems must conceal his feelings, emotions, and social behavior; otherwise, he risks repressive punishment from the authorities. In another poem titled "Na noshtta" (To the night), a life within a hypocritical society is metaphorically compared with a masquerade ball; furthermore, the motif of man as a toy in the hands of unknown forces corresponds to postwar existentialism:

What in fact are we,
reality or fiction,
what a model of Being,
thrown by a blind force
that plays with our fate?
What a masquerade ball,
we dance, play and live
and each day we shove and squash each other,
and each day we kick and bite one another,
like horses in the Augean stables,
but not a thing we know about each other?
What miserable masks we are, alas,
and we want to live forever
in the unsolved riddle of the world!⁸

In the poems of Georgi Mitskov, the lyrical speaker frequently appears in the position of an outsider, an accursed poet pushed to seclusion, as he is not permitted to fully express his authentic feelings. He therefore most often seeks refuge in wild mountain nature; otherwise, he is condemned to remain merely a participant in a masquerade ball, which here serves as a metaphor for a hypocritical society. The lyrical speaker attempts to resist this situation primarily by trying to describe it (although in a metaphorical way); he does it by opposing authentic *modus vivendi* to the hypocrisy of everyday life. In other words, the rhetoric of sincerity here aligns with the concept of alienation.

"SINCERE" WRITING IN STUDENT SAMIZDAT

In the late 1970s, a group of university students in Veliko Tarnovo decided to start publishing a samizdat almanac called *NLO* (UFO), envisioning it as a platform for independent poetry, prose, essays, reviews, and other writing. In total, five issues appeared, and the editorial text from the fifth issue in 1979 emphasizes that the almanac does not aspire to the status of an official journal nor is it based on any unified philosophical or artistic conception. However, by emphasizing ideological diversity and heterogeneity of opinions, the student almanac *de facto* openly opposed the uni-

form culture of Soviet-type socialism. The author(s) of the editorial preface hinted that the possibility of expressing one's opinion is crucial to the concept of their samizdat project. It appears that free expression and refusing any type of censorship were crucial issues for young people from the Bulgarian provinces: "our almanac excludes the possibility of lying, of promoting false, insincere materials written for personal profit or 'at the behest' of the censorship" (1979, 5).

The samizdat project soon attracted the attention of state authorities and the State Security, which subsequently pressured the young publishers to cease all their activities. The fifth issue was the last publicly distributed edition of the *NLO* almanac. This brief operation of the student samizdat from the late 1970s demonstrates that young people in Bulgaria were aware of the situation in the field of official culture at the time. They perceived the official cultural scene as insincere mainly owing to the censorship and self-censorship associated with the production and reproduction of the dominant socialist discourse. This sociocultural situation gradually intensified throughout the 1980s; the final decade of Bulgarian socialism was marked by a clear division between official and unofficial cultures: a dichotomy between public (state-controlled) and private cultural spheres.

BORIS HRISTOV AND *SLYAPOTO KUCHE*

The abovementioned dichotomy manifested in an increasing number of samizdat publications and a rise in literary works written "for the drawer", that is, works whose authors were clearly aware that their writing would not be officially published under the current socio-political conditions (or they did not want it published by official publishing houses). Shortly after the student samizdat interval, in 1980, Boris Hristov (b. 1945) wrote the manuscript of his remarkable novella *Slyapoto kuche* (The mole). One of the main characters of this underground novella, which remained unpublished during socialism, is Lazar the Junkman, a former tailor who decides to gather all the clothes that he has ever sewn to erase all his traces from world history. Lazar is one of the regulars at the peculiar tavern The Old Carriage, which is situated in the suburbs and used as a "shelter" for an extraordinary company of strange and unusual people. When Lazar dies, his friends from The Old Carriage decide to give him a proper burial (in the old-fashioned way, with an Orthodox priest), which goes against the interests of the ruling state apparatus.

In Hristov's novella, the state apparatus is represented by the Funeral Home, a dehumanized, omnipresent Moloch that tries to deprive people of their inherent humanity. The Funeral Home and morgue in the novella are depicted as extraordinarily impersonal, monstrous environments inhabited by perverted attendants with overtly pathological behavior. The final farewell in the institution is understood merely as a ritual serving state propaganda, facilitated by prefabricated speeches and eulogies from the funeral staff, which Lazar's friends try to resist. The Funeral Home (and the entire apparatus standing behind it) can be understood as a symbolic zone of insincerity. The clash with the machinery of the Funeral Home initially appears to be a lost cause, but the crew from The Old Carriage in their genuine desire to bid a sincere farewell to their friend, ultimately overcomes all the obstacles, ensuring

that Lazar receives a dignified burial. Thus, the community of friends from The Old Carriage stands as the last bastion of pure humanity.

The division between the official sphere and the unofficial (independent) sphere became more evident in Bulgaria in the mid-1980s, when Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost were implemented in the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that perestroika was implemented in Bulgaria only halfway and with significant reluctance, the number of samizdat publications began to increase during the second half of the 1980s. These samizdat activities had specific features in Bulgaria, and they were not always openly dissident in nature. Nevertheless, samizdat became an important platform for uncensored and more "open" writing and publishing; authors in Bulgaria felt that the advent of glasnost in the USSR legitimized the development of parallel publishing activities beyond state-controlled structures. These socio-cultural changes made it possible for some authors to escape the fear of direct political repression that would be the consequence of a public expression of a nonconformist attitude. Glasnost enabled a greater degree of sincerity, which was manifested in literature.

KASHTATA BY EMILIYA DVORYANOVA

Emiliya Dvoryanova (b. 1958) wrote the manuscript of her novel *Kashtata* (The house) from 1984 to 1986 (1994, 127), but it was not published during state socialism; it appeared in 1993 after the political regime changed. The main character of this "drawer novel" is the Boy. Growing up during state socialism in a family with an old "bourgeois" background, the Boy has always stood out from the others. Influenced by his great-grandmother (a representative of the old, pre-revolutionary bourgeois elite), the Boy distances himself from contemporary socialist society. He longs to become an artist, and he paints his nonconformist abstract paintings at home, storing them in the basement of the old family house.

When the Boy applies to the academy of arts, he discovers that the academic environment is limited by craft conformity and is far removed from "the true art", which, in his view, stems from creative *arbitrariness* (*proizvol*). Arbitrariness is the key concept of Dvoryanova's novel – a frustrating and unsettling feeling for those around the Boy (mainly for his mother Eliza and the professor at the academy with a large belly, indicative of his status in the system). The Boy's mother, Eliza, represents the principle of the one-dimensional (wo)man (according to Marcuse 1991), that is, the conformity of the mass society, which Eliza tries to instill in her adolescent son. His arbitrariness frightens her as it deviates from the "norm" and the "normal" collective. However, the Boy is devoted to his artistic activities and refuses any type of submission. A personal antithesis to the Boy's creative arbitrariness is also a professor at the academy portrayed in the novel as a *socialist bourgeois* – a representative of the state-controlled, moderated art that must not stray beyond the boundaries set by the apparatus.⁹

The key motif of the novel is the conflict between inner freedom (the Boy's creative arbitrariness) and the external world of the apparatus, which forces people to abandon their desires and true selves. This conflict reaches its peak when Eliza destroys her son's paintings and throws away his brushes and colors to cure him

socially and “bring him to his senses”. However, this only strengthens the Boy’s arbitrariness. It is symptomatic that Dvoryanova argues for this eternal existential conflict using psychoanalytic terminology: the Ego (Ich) is suppressed, and the Id (Es) takes the stage; the Id leads the Boy to his ultimate act of human arbitrariness: suicide. The relationship between sincerity and suicide as a manifestation of spiritual despair would require a separate study. Literary history, however, knows countless such cases; let us mention, above all, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, about whose tragic fate Lionel Trilling writes: “He is in all things the sincere man” (1972, 52).

THE SINCERITY OF COUNTERCULTURE DISCOURSE

Concerning the discursive gestures of honest self-disclosure in unofficial Bulgarian literature from the period of state socialism, other examples include the remarkable nonconformist poetry by Konstantin Pavlov, the atavistic confessional verses of the young rebel Ruscho Tihov, and the distinctive confessional poetry of young poets publishing their first verses within the so-called Ruse samizdat in the early 1960s, which included lyric authors, such as Ivan Tsanev, Veselin Tachev, and Zdravko Kisyov. A common feature among these authors was their enthusiastic desire (almost an existential need) to express themselves through poetic texts. This was a type of confessional lyrical poetry often shared within a small circle of friends, as evidenced by the small number of copies of samizdat. I would also include the artistic activities of the nonconformist group *Kukuv den*. The community around this artistic group organized unofficial apartment carnivals, poetry readings, concerts, and exhibitions, and even produced their own amateur films in the 1980s. Raw confessional poetry also emerged within the circle that testified to the need of young people to communicate with the world, which would likely not have been possible to share through the official publishing channels at the time.

The desire for liberation from state-imposed discourses and dogmas as well as the desire for open self-expression are closely linked to the phenomenon of nonconformist youth subcultures. The punk subculture began to emerge in Bulgaria at the end of the 1970s as a nonconformist ideology, mostly concerned with individual freedom and anti-establishment views. New Wave music was an extremely popular faction of punk subculture in Bulgaria. One of the leading New Wave bands was New Generation, whose frontman and poet Dimitar Voev claimed in his diary notes in 1987:

They hardly ever play our songs on the radio and television. They fear our sincerity. Because it burns and makes you feel uncomfortable. When you are not pure. They say that our songs are dark because of the darkness in their minds due to the closed circle of stupidity and vanity in which they find themselves. They remind me of little people afraid of their lords.¹⁰

These subcultures, inspired by Western counterculture, proved to be expedient ways of shocking and unsettling the conservative society of late socialism, their protagonists often regarded themselves as the bearers of a sincere and authentic revolt against the system.

HUMAN DIGNITY VS. SOCIAL ENGINEERING

One of the key motifs of Dvoryanova's novel *Kashtata* is suicide as an externally materialized manifestation of inner mental pain, despair, and hopelessness. Suicide, as an ultimate act of arbitrariness, associated with the deprivation of the individual, was not limited only to literary fiction but became a broader social issue in the late socialist era in Bulgaria. Some suicides (or suicide attempts) in the 1980s were linked to the so-called Vazroditelen protses (Revival Process, 1984–1989) when Todor Zhivkov's regime launched a campaign of forced assimilation and the mass renaming of the Turkish population. One of the victims of the Revival Process was the poet Mehmed Karahyuseinov (1945–1990), author of the poem "Redaktori" (Editors) from 1976, which was not published until 1999:

Wherever you turn in this city,
editors spring up from everywhere.
They edit your walk, clothes,
speech, gestures, desires,
noses, legs, mouth,
they edit silences...
They'd edit even beauty,
edit humanity even,
and if they had just a little more power,
they'd edit eternity too...¹¹

On February 1, 1985, Mehmed Karahyuseinov attempted to set himself on fire. He did not do so on a busy street or crowded square but rather in the suburban Vladaya district on the outskirts of Sofia. By sheer chance, Karahyuseinov survived his attempt to self-immolate but died in pain from the consequences of his desperate act five years later in 1990 after the failure of the Revival Process and the fall of Todor Zhivkov's regime. In the foreword of Karahyuseinov's posthumously published poetry collection in 1999, Konstantin Pavlov wrote:

Dear reader, the author of this poetry book is no longer alive. He is a precious victim of the Revival Process. He set himself on fire. These poems are the offspring of the agony that lasted for several years. I perceive his suicide as the noblest form of the instinct for self-preservation – you destroy the body to save your soul. [...] He did it quietly without heroic poses. In this time of false heroes and ostentatious gestures, he proves to us that human dignity is greater than a well-calculated bravery. His suicide is not pathology, but the ultimate negation of pathology. Because we lived in a system where the laws for physical survival dictated that you must give up not only your name and heritage but also your own personality. Some welcomed it, others found it torturous, and others yet ... (1999, n.p.)

Karahyuseinov's notebooks represented poetic diaries in which the author articulated through lyrical expression not only spiritual suffering arising from the severe trials of his personal life and from the collective trauma caused by the social engineering of the regime, but also tormenting physical pain, following his suicide attempt. These poetic diaries appear to have served their author with a certain therapeutic function as well, as the lyrical subject of some of the poems stands

exposed before his own conscience in a state of complete vulnerability (1999, 79). Elsewhere, he addresses God directly, as in the poem “Sadba” (Fate) from 1989, written shortly before his death: “Why am I dying so, so slowly? / Stop my heart, Lord, so that I do not suffer!”¹²

CONCLUSION

Under the rule of the one-party state and the existence of censorship mechanisms, Bulgarian literature was confined to a system in which the sincerity of dissenting and unwanted voices could only be allowed if they did not challenge the prevailing political status quo. Many authors and readers increasingly considered the official literature space as insincere (hypocritical) and an integral part of party propaganda. This situation led some authors to believe that authentic writing can only be performed at an unofficial (underground) level during the Communist regime in Bulgaria.¹³

In literature, the rhetoric of sincerity is articulated as the representation of the inner psychological state of mind presented as an inner voice liberated from external (sociocultural and ideological) filters. The desire to express the inner state of mind is manifested on two levels: (1) in lyric poetry, as the voice of the speaker, which often coincides with the alter ego and thus assumes the form of a poetic confession and (2) in prose, where sincerity is ascribed to fictional characters whose authentic volition and conduct bring them into sharp conflict with society, which is conceived as inherently insincere, hypocritical, and even inhuman. The rhetoric of sincerity is also linked to the adoption of countercultural patterns, containing an ideological, aesthetic, and value-based revolt against the existing status quo; during the late Bulgarian socialism, it was the case of the youth subcultures based on punk movement and its derivatives, or in the production of closed artistic groups whose activities took place within the relatively safe milieu of private apartments, far from the watchful eyes of official regime criticism and the rigid creative unions of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria.

NOTES

- ¹ The use of the term state censorship is relevant in the Bulgarian case, as throughout almost the entire existence of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, there were central institutions with supervisory and censorship functions, although their role and names changed over time. Even though a large part of the censorship competences was transferred to the editorial offices of individual publishing houses after 1956, these publishing houses remained state-owned and controlled by the party and state institutions. See Chichovska 1991.
- ² A large proportion of Bulgarian unofficial literary texts did not get to the readers in samizdat form and remained in the form of unpublished manuscripts or typescripts. These “drawer” texts had to wait until more politically favorable times for publication, that is, for the most part until the fall of the Communist regime. In Russian, Czech, Slovak, and Bulgarian contexts the idiom was common (“нucамъ в cмoxъ”, “psát do šuplíku”, “písať do šuplíka”, “лyчeпaмyпa oм чeкмeгжeмo”).
- ³ Tamizdat was a marginal phenomenon in the Bulgarian context too. By the term tamizdat, I understand a text (manuscript or samizdat) that is carried to the West where it is published and then part of the print run travels back to the country of origin, where it is distributed, read, and possibly

reproduced. I consider that the systematic distribution of exile (or tamizdat) publications was not a widespread phenomenon in Bulgaria during the Cold War, but it existed.

- ⁴ In the Bulgarian literary context, this is particularly evident in connection with the theme of the forced collectivization of agriculture; for instance, in 1986, Ivaylo Petrov published his famous novel *Hayka za valtsi*, the novel has been translated into English by Angela Rodel (*Wolf Hunt*, 2017), and into Slovak by Ján Koška (*Poľovačka na vlky*, 1989). The Czech language translation by Ludmila Nováková was never published in book form and remains in typescript form.
- ⁵ Homosexuality was de jure decriminalized in Bulgaria in 1968; nevertheless, repressive measures targeting individuals of non-heterosexual orientation persisted in alternative forms, most notably through their forced relocation from major urban centers (mainly Sofia) and, in certain cases, compulsory confinement in psychiatric institutions. For further details about this phenomenon, see Dimitrova 2021.
- ⁶ “И тишина. Блажена. / И само ти и аз. / Прегръдка от лазур / и светлина. И няма аз и ти. // Лесът се скри във нас, / да няма никоѝ. / Далече от сганта. / И няма аз и ти. // Лазурът ни венча!” (Mitskov 2002, 98) All translations from Bulgarian are by the author of this study, who did not pursue artistic aims; the translations seek to preserve the semantics of the quoted texts. None of the cited works has yet been translated into English.
- ⁷ “От борове те лъха черен вятър, / подгонил облаци, луна и сенки, / те бяха моите пазачи някога / и ме предпазваха от лошите очи, / когато упорито ме преследваха / и искаха за мен да знаят всичко, / дори с кого ще се обичам...” (Mitskov 1990, 19)
- ⁸ “Какво сме всъщност ние, / реалност или фикция, / какъв модел на Битието, / захвърлени от спяна сила, / която си играе с нашата съдба? / Какъв е моя бал маскиран, / танцуваме, играем и живеем / и всеки ден се блъскаме и мачкаме, / и всеки ден се ритаме и хапем / като коне в авгийските обори, / а нищо не знаем? / Какви нещастни маски сме, уви, / и вечно ни се иска да живеем / в неразгаданата гатанка на света!” (Mitskov 1990, 8–9)
- ⁹ In this context, I understand the apparatus as an omnipotent bureaucratic behemoth within which human individuality is lost, and the individual is absorbed by the apparatus, fully subjected to it, and deprived of authenticity. The negative aspects of the apparatus were articulated by Karl Jaspers in *The Spiritual Situation of the Age* (2008). Arbitrariness is linked to a revolt against the apparatus and represents an expression of the sincerity of being and creative freedom.
- ¹⁰ “По радиото и телевизията почти не ни пускат. Страхувам се от нашата искреност. Защото тя изгаря и те кара да се чувстваш неудобно. Когато не си чист. Казват, че нашите песни са мрачни, защото на тях им е мрачно в главите от затворения кръг на глупостта и сметата, в който се намират. Те ми приличат на малки човечета, които се страхуват от господарите си” (Voev 2012, 9).
- ¹¹ “Накъдето се обърнеш в този град, / отвсякъде редактори извират. / Похогката ти, облеклото редактират, / говор, жестове, желания, / носове, крака, уста, / редактират мълчания... / Те биха редактирали и красотата, / биха редактирали човечността, / а ако имаха и още малко власт, / те биха редактирали и вечността...” (Karayuseinov 1999, 11)
- ¹² “Защо толкова, толкова бавно умирам? / Спри сърцето ми, Господи, за да не се мъча!” (Karayuseinov 1999, 80)
- ¹³ See my monograph on unofficial Bulgarian literature before 1989, published in both Czech and Bulgarian (Mikulecký 2021, 2025).

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Experimenting with life: New sincerity in contemporary Slovak poetry

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Experimenting with life: New sincerity in contemporary Slovak poetry

New sincerity. Post-postmodernism. Post-totalitarian literature.
Contemporary Slovak poetry. Experimental poetry. Irony.

This article examines how sincerity operates in contemporary Slovak poetry within the experimental tradition, where irony, authenticity, and experimentation intersect rather than exclude one another. Against the backdrop of post-totalitarian history and global cultural transitions, Slovak poets have renegotiated sincerity beyond reductive binaries of irony versus authenticity. Drawing on “new sincerity” theory (Adam Kelly, Ellen Rutten, Mikhail Epstein) and focusing on Michal Habaj’s long poem “Yangtik”, it argues that sincerity in 21st-century Slovak poetry is a mediated and context-shaped articulation – necessarily “contaminated”. The Slovak case thus contributes to and nuances broader debates on post-postmodernism by showing that sincerity re-emerges from within experimental practice.

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The notion of “post-irony” (Hoffmann 2016; Konstantinou 2016) and arguments suggesting that the rise of author-centered novels signals a movement “beyond the impasse of postmodernism” (Heinemann 2020, 13) are grounded in a view of irony as a defining feature of postmodern culture.¹ However, as Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal (2009, 2) point out, such understandings of postmodern irony are often oversimplified. Common critiques of irony tend to elevate notions of authenticity and sincerity, dismissing irony as politically disengaged or lacking in rhetorical depth. These critiques frequently rest on a reductive binary that opposes sincerity to irony, failing to account for the complexity and nuance of both. In the context of post-totalitarian East and Central European literatures – including Slovak literature – such binaries become even more problematic.

One of the proposed paradigms for understanding the post-postmodern condition – extending beyond literature – is “new sincerity”. David Foster Wallace (1993, 1996) is often seen as a formative figure in the emergence of what has been described as the ethos of “new sincerity”, while one of the most recent contributions to its theorization is Adam Kelly’s monograph *New Sincerity: American Fiction in the Neoliberal Age* (2024). Kelly situates the period of new sincerity between the dominance of postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s and the so-called genre turn of the mid-2000s. Among the factors that, in his view, signaled a radical social change were “the coming of social media, the crystallization of identity categories as the vehicle for both political organization and market segmentation, the waning of American unipolar hegemony, and the shift in the publishing world to the ‘Age of Amazon’” (6).

Literary new sincerity combines elements of postmodern metafiction and genre aesthetics, but unlike those movements, it is not defined solely by form but rather by sensibility or ethos (6). New sincerity fiction is characterized by formal and narrative strategies such as second-person address, sudden shifts in perspective, and “intentional bad form” (Hoberek 2013, 217), which Kelly reads through Hegel as an expression of a striving for dialogicality – a fundamental feature of new sincerity writing (2024, 9). The sincerity of the writers on whom Kelly bases his theory, in his view, centers on cross-contamination – the intertwining of love and money, which “becomes the inescapable condition of writing in a neoliberal age” (34). Literary new sincerity is therefore sincere in a paradoxical way: cross-contamination is not only “the basic threat to a pure sincerity, in life and art” (34), but also its essential tool. Following Jacques Derrida ([1991] 1992, 1–33), Kelly treats contamination as “a necessary condition for existence” (2024, 34). An important metaphor for Kelly in the context of writing in the neoliberal age is the notion of the gift as conceptualized by Lewis Hyde (1983), who “protects a space for art as gift”, but “does not ignore the necessary claims of the market where the artist sells their ‘work’” (Kelly 2024, 32). Kelly argues that this contamination of the author’s sincere intentions to create art by capitalist conditions does not preclude the possibility of the sincerity of the writing and of authorial intentions, since, following Derrida as interpreted by Martin Hägglund (2008), a gift must inevitably be contaminated. Contamination means not only the market conditions, but also the presence of the reader, the writer’s self-awareness, or dialogicality – the necessity of response. In other

words, a true *gift – the text* – arises only when it passes through another person, through economy, consciousness, uncertainty – and precisely because of that, it can carry an ethos.

Although Wallace and Kelly's theoretical framework has gained worldwide influence, the unique historical and cultural context of Central and Eastern European literature calls for approaches that specifically address post-totalitarian experiences. The cultural, political, and aesthetic transitions that followed the fall of authoritarian regimes in 20th-century Central Europe complicate any straightforward reading of irony, authenticity, or postmodernism. In these literatures, the entry into contemporaneity did not simply replicate Western patterns but brought its own negotiations with historical trauma, censorship, and shifting ideological landscapes (Hostová 2020). One productive way to extend this discussion is to consider post-socialist debates on sincerity in the Russian context; Ellen Rutten's *Sincerity after Communism: A Cultural History* (2017) offers a valuable additional perspective. Rutten shows how the question of sincerity is important (also historically) for Russian society (13). At the same time, she emphasizes that reading new sincerity is crucial in the context and in relation to what preceded it – communism (4) and postmodernism (7). The author primarily draws on the work of "Russia's best-known advocate of the trend, the cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein" (9). In the book *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* ([1999] 2016) he states that the new sincerity, although it diverges from strict conceptualism (postmodern Moscow conceptualists), does not abandon its mechanisms:

This "post-postmodern" neo-sentimental aesthetics is defined not by the sincerity of the author or the quoteness of his style, but by the mutual interaction of the two. What is characteristic is the elusive border of their difference, which allows even the most sincere utterance to appear as a subtly quoted imitation, while a commonplace quotation may sound like a piercingly lyrical confession. (543)

In this context, it is thus no coincidence that the concept of post-postmodernism as articulated by Epstein was applied to Slovak literature – and to the very poet to be discussed below, Michal Habaj (Hostová 2014).

Rutten primarily traces the rise of new sincerity in the mid-1980s during the period of glasnost and perestroika (2017, 13), when "Russian creative professionals started to view the Soviet period as a bygone era, they began to persistently frame the category of sincerity as a healing tool" (18). She then examines sincerity after the fall of socialism up to the early 2010s (13), a period associated with the capitalist regime and the rise of consumerism, which relates to "the subsequent need for authors to adopt new socioeconomic survival strategies" (20), making sincerity both a capital and a tactic.

To summarize, the theoretical frameworks outlined above approach concepts such as irony, sincerity, and postmodernism from markedly different perspectives. As a result, irony and sincerity, rather than being mutually exclusive, often coexist or blur into one another, resisting easy classification. The coexistence of these approaches demonstrates that such terms cannot be treated as fixed or universally stable categories; instead, they must be understood in relation to local histories,

cultural memory, and the evolving role of the authorial voice. These nuances challenge the idea that post-irony is a clear break from postmodernism and call for more context-sensitive readings and the ambiguous mutual delimitation and positioning of irony and post-irony (or sincerity). For this reason, it is most productive to examine how these concepts are realized in the context of national literature within the specific textual practices of the poems analyzed in the following sections. Focusing on the experimental-deconstructive strand of contemporary Slovak poetry, I offer a close reading of Michal Habaj's long poem "Yangtik" (2012) to argue that sincerity re-emerges not as a simple alternative to irony but as a mediated, "contaminated" ethos.

IRONY, SINCERITY AND EXPERIMENTING WITH LIFE IN POST-TOTALITARIAN AND CONTEMPORARY SLOVAK POETRY

Like other post-totalitarian European cultural spaces entering the globalized world belatedly in the late 20th century (e.g. Serbia, see Đurić 2024, 374), Slovak culture is characterized by a synchronous accumulation of geopolitical and geocultural space-times. It constitutes a layered palimpsest of ideas, economic transformations, and shifting hierarchies, in which authenticity and radical self-revelation only began to permeate the public sphere during the totalitarian era in the mid-1980s (Hostová 2018). The parallel reinsertion of intimacy into poetry, alongside its rejection after the fall of state socialism – rather than a rejection prompted by oversaturation, which would have been the neutral condition – resulted in diverse poetic realizations of irony and sincerity.

Earnest commitment or sincere poetic testimony was largely taboo among radical Slovak poets of the 1990s – not only because they embraced experiment and irony as mediators between heterogeneous temporalities, but also because literary commitment had been devalued through its prescriptive use under the totalitarian regime of the later 20th century. In a small-literature context where individual poetic modes were less rigidly "encapsulated" and the innovative-traditional divide could be hostile without being structurally deep, such refusals acquired particular force (Hostová 2019, 58). The analysis presented here focuses on Michal Habaj (b. 1974) as a poet associated with a strand in Slovak post-totalitarian poetry that Slovak literary criticism has identified as rejecting lyric poetry as a vehicle of authenticity and sincerity. I focus on this strand because it has been especially responsive to developments in world literature and has, through its own formal modifications, registered and reworked changing approaches to irony. Slovak literary scholar Jaroslav Šrank described this strand as "experimental-deconstructive" (2013a, 380), which includes, among others, Michal Habaj, Peter Macsovszky, Peter Šulej, and Nóra Ružičková (45). He considers the poetics of these authors to be characterized by "the desentimentalization of expression and the thematic de-subjectivization of the text, [...] anaesthetic poetics and the problematic investigation of the nature of the literary work inspired by post-structuralist philosophy"² (382). Often subsumed under the label Slovak postmodern poetry (385), these writers pushed this de-subjectivizing impulse to the point that their work can be captured by Peter Macsovszky's description of his

debut as “an attempt to detach oneself from emotions that are thematized in poetry to the point of exhaustion” (2008, n.p.).

As experimental-deconstructive Slovak poetry has long been influenced by American writing, developments in U.S. poetry provide a useful point of reference for shifts within the Slovak field. Notably, the second decade of the 21st century saw American post-conceptual poetry undergo a marked turn, and Slovak poetry registered its own variation of this shift. In the United States, this turn was associated with post-conceptualism, which reintroduced affect, emotion, and ego (Bernstein 2015; Dworkin 2018), as well as with “experimental confessionality” (Smith 2018). In Slovak literary discourse, it was articulated in debates on subjectivity and emotionality (Rebro 2014; Hostová 2013), as well as on commitment in poetry (Angažovaná poézia... 2014; Biznárová et al. 2014; Biznárová 2015; Rebro 2013). A comparable reconfiguration of sincerity has also been traced in the post-Soviet context. Rutten writes that “Russian discussions on a post or late postmodern sincerity occur in an era of all-permeating internal unrest: that of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath” (2017, 16), and that Russian creative professionals saw the category of sincerity as “a healing tool [...], as an instrument to be used to help cope with the Soviet experience” (18). The Slovak trajectory, however, suggests a related yet distinct path. Slovak radical and postmodern poets addressed the need to come to terms with socialism with ironic detachment. Writers in this strand returned to commitment and more overtly sincere expression only two decades after the fall of the totalitarian regime. In the context of Kelly’s conceptualization of Derrida, this stance can be interpreted as paradoxically sincere: the refusal of literary commitment – motivated by a bitter memory of the discourse’s contamination by communist propaganda – constitutes a markedly authentic gesture, and it raises the question of how sincerity can re-emerge within an experimental-deconstructive poetics. Accordingly, I turn to a close reading of Michal Habaj’s long poem “Yangtik” (2012) to show how sincerity re-emerges within experimental-deconstructive Slovak poetry as a mediated, “contaminated” ethos rather than an alternative to irony.

EXPERIMENTING IN EARNEST

The following analysis reads “Yangtik” through Kelly’s account of sincerity as a “contaminated” ethos-shaped by the gift’s unavoidable passage through economy and response (Kelly 2024, 32–34; Derrida 1992, 1–33; Hägglund 2008) – and through post-postmodern sincerity’s unstable border between confession and quotation (Epstein 2016, 543), asking how Habaj’s paratextual self-framing and fragment form stage that instability. Michal Habaj’s long poem “Yangtik” is a poetic diary composed during a dark retreat (a practice of Tibetan Buddhism) and published in his self-titled collection *Michal Habaj* (2012). Formally, it consists of a sequence of short fragments that can be read as “intentional bad form” in poetry (Hoberek 2013, 217). Its paratext describes it as being “based on an experiment with life, not with text” (263), and while “Yangtik” is not a transcription of real-life enacted confessions like Trisha Low’s section in *Confessions [of a variety]* (2010), which led critic Hazel Smith (2018) to discuss experimental confessionality, it is not far from it either. Experi-

mentation with text, form, and the categories of authorship, subjectivity, and identity have long been characteristic of Habaj's poetry. Emblematic in this regard is his first collection of poems 80-967760-4-5 (1997) – titled after its ISBN – which lacks a unified speaking persona. Instead, the book operated as a self-referential hypertext:

you will get the most benefit from this poetry collection if
you carefully read the verses on the following
pages and if you follow them. this information is
provided to help readers orient themselves in 80–96

7760–4–5, to read as much as possible, and to do so with maximum savings of money, time, and effort. the reader will surely notice that [...]³ (Habaj 1997, 7)

Over time, the tendencies in Habaj's work shifted: while his poetry remains experimental, particularly in form, he also began to incorporate more traditional lyrical devices, most notably a lyric "I".

The collection *Michal Habaj* – whose eponymous title already foregrounds authorial self-presentation – contains the poetic diary "Yangtik" and is presented in the guise of a scholarly publication. It includes keywords, a detailed table of contents, and even a Magritte-like declaration by the author: "This is not a collection of poems" ("Toto nie je básnická zbierka"; Habaj 2012, [7]). The book also contains a section titled "Poznámka k metóde" (Note on a method), which reads:

The rhythm of this book is based on an experiment with life, not with text. [...] I attempted to grasp, reverse and abandon my life methodically [...]. The result is the poems in this book, which, in addition to their documentary function, may serve as a primary source for further research in the human and social sciences.⁴ (263)

It is precisely this gesture of authenticity and openness that invites reading the book through the lens of new sincerity. The self-titling of the collection, together with the life-based experiment, aligns with what Adam Kelly conceptualizes as key conditions of new sincerity writing, above all a high degree of self-awareness (2024, 34). The anticipation of turning himself into an object of inquiry implies a "collapsing of space between writer and reader" (3) and a contamination of the gift – not only because Habaj addresses issues of the capitalist economy in his writing and promotes it in a manner verging on commercial advertising, but also because he is himself a literary scholar, making "research" a potential marker of contamination by dominant discourse. The gift is thus contaminated not only by capitalist power structures but also by academic ones, from which the author cannot exempt himself.

"Yangtik", which is subtitled "Slová z Tmy" (Words from the Dark; Habaj 2012, [161]), documents 14 days of dark retreat meditation, a practice rooted in Eastern spiritual traditions. The sequence opens with a paratextual note: "The author of the text spent the first two weeks of March 2010 in Darkness"⁵ (193). "Yangtik" is composed of authentic notes written by the author during his time in darkness. It bears witness to a liminal situation that dissolves the boundary between life and literature. In the Slovak context, this kind of life-based experiment also has a local prehistory. Habaj's dark retreat implicitly – and perhaps unintentionally – echoes ex-

periments by the older-generation Slovak poet Ivan Laučík (1944–2004), who spent time in dark caves. An inheritor of the experimental impulses of the international avant-garde of the mid-20th century, Laučík was part of a trio of poets – alongside Peter Repka (b. 1944) and Ivan Štrpka (b. 1944) – who emphasized ethics and authenticity as concepts closely bound up with sincerity. This genealogy extends beyond Slovak literature as well: the motif of subterranean isolation recalls the underground experiments of the French geologist and speleologist Michel Siffre in the 1960s and 1970s, which explored the psychological effects of isolation. Reports of these experiments also appeared in Slovak periodicals ([Bt] 1965; [E.M.] 1972) and may have inspired Laučík.

At the same time, “Yangtik” reflects a unique convergence of philosophical and aesthetic frameworks – one that is inseparable from Habaj’s broader practice of life-based experimentation (Hostová 2025, 197). Drawing on the tantric tradition – here in the broad sense of Buddhist and Hindu practices that cultivate presence (Hensey 2016, 5) – the author’s authentic experience of darkness is interwoven with the aesthetic of new sincerity. The dark retreat represents a withdrawal from everyday life, which the author portrays chiefly through the influence of a globalized world marked by power structures, the pervasiveness of consumer society, surveillance, and inescapable interconnectedness. This is demonstrated in the first poem of “Yangtik”, entitled “So Ham”. As Habaj explains in one of his endnotes, *So Ham* “belongs to the simplest and most powerful mantras”⁶ (Habaj 2012, 193). Paradoxically, however, the poem is composed of a playful array of the mantras of the late-modern, material world – media outlets, intelligence agencies, currencies, and chat abbreviations: “BBC / KGB / MI5 / CI6 / TV5 / [...] / KFC / [...] / IBM / USA / USB / USD / [...] / CNN / NBA / NSA / CIA / FBI / WTC / WTF” (165–166). Formally, the mantra is “contaminated” by the lexicon of institutions, media, currencies, and surveillance – an instance of sincerity emerging through the very late-modern materials that threaten it, rather than outside them. Unlike Rutten’s account of sincerity as a “healing tool” in post-Soviet culture (2017, 16, 18), Habaj’s darkness-experiment relocates the problem: sincerity is tested under neoliberal saturation (brands, acronyms, surveillance), not recovered as a post-traumatic remedy.

Habaj’s withdrawal into darkness does not offer escape or isolation from such a world. In his first book, he critiqued capitalism by deploying an absurd image of the commodification, instrumentalization, and marketization of poetry through the then-dominant media register (a “how-to-read” manual), which can be read in the context of Linda Hutcheon’s complicitous critique ([1989] 2002, 97). Such a double-coded mode of criticism is, by its nature, masked. Against this background, the act of withdrawing into darkness marks a deeply introspective space for (re)constructing the subjectivity. In the darkness, the “ghosts” of both individual and societal crises and problems manifest in a much more concentrated, clearer, perhaps even sentimental form: “It teems with ghosts here. / Very, very bad. Fear”⁷ (177). This space, which allows for a tantric focus on the present, thus provides room for reflexivity: “To live in depth, not in breadth”⁸ (180). Such reflexivity emerges from the personally engaged self – the reconstituted literary subject: “Darkness before me / Dark-

ness behind me / Light within me”⁹ (175). This example illustrates the re-emergence of literary commitment in Slovak poetry – precisely within the work of a postmodern author associated with the experimental-deconstructive strand, which in the 1990s positioned itself against sincerity, subjectivity, and commitment.

Habaj, however, does not isolate individual experience (as the experience of staying in darkness might be) from domestic or global events, yet he does not ironize it either; “Yangtik” even incorporates a modified segment from another poem in the same collection, “Idaho, Connecticut”, which connects “the intimate sphere with civilizational reality, which in fact confronts the subject’s spiritual aspirations with the bonds of the material world” (Šrank 2013b, 18):

I cried for 70 hours
and then I went out into the streets

and I was shooting
I was shooting
until all of you
reached heaven¹⁰ (Habaj 2012, 167)

On the other hand, Habaj preserves certain ideological basis or textual strategies that are typical of modern or postmodern literature. For example, the hallucinations experienced in darkness implicitly raise the question of the boundary between fiction and reality: “At night I’m woken by weeping, children wailing. A scream of a woman. / Real – impossible”¹¹ (Habaj 2012, 174). Such manifestations of the author’s poetics should not be regarded as shortcomings or divergences from the cultural tendency within which I aim to present his texts. As mentioned in the introduction, the new sincerity emerging from postmodern literature was also discussed by Epstein, who emphasized the synthetic character of postmodern quoteness and new sincerity ([1999] 2016, 543). Thus, sincerity in Habaj’s “Yangtik” emerges as a mode of radical openness, inseparable from contamination by discourse, form, and history – a sincerity produced through mediation rather than grounded in transparent self-expression.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of sincerity in contemporary Slovak poetry within the experimental tradition reveals a field in which irony, authenticity, and experimentation do not exclude one another but dynamically intersect. Over the past three decades, Slovak poetry has negotiated its own relationship to sincerity against the backdrop of post-totalitarian history and a rapidly globalizing cultural sphere. Within this context, radical writing – exemplified by Michal Habaj – demonstrates how sincerity can re-emerge precisely in practices that appear to reject it, whether through radical self-reflexivity or the appropriation of conceptual and paratextual strategies.

Viewed through the lens of new sincerity, Habaj’s experiments – which short-circuit the division between lived experience and the artifice of writing – demonstrate how sincerity in 21st-century Slovak poetry is inevitably shaped by contamination. In Kelly’s terms, such sincerity operates as a “gift” that only becomes legible through its passage via economy, discourse, and response (2024, 32–34) – conditions that

do not negate sincerity but constitute its very possibility. At the same time, Habaj's writing confirms Epstein's claim that post-postmodern sincerity emerges at an unstable border where confession and quotation continually implicate one another rather than separating into opposing modes (2016, 543). The Slovak case thus contributes to broader debates on post-postmodernism by showing that sincerity is not a simple return to authenticity but a reconfigured ethos, shaped and complicated by specific spatial and temporal conditions.

NOTES

- ¹ The author used AI, specifically ChatGPT and Copilot M365, for copy editing and proofreading. The author declares that all uses of generative AI in this manuscript comply with established ethical standards. This paper is based on a presentation co-authored and delivered with Ivana Hostová on 11 April 2025 at the conference *The Rhetoric of Sincerity in Central and Eastern European Literatures from the 19th Century to the Present* in Vilnius. I am sincerely grateful to Ivana Hostová for her guidance, support, and formative influence on this research.
- ² Jaroslav Šrank likely adopts the term “anaesthetic poetics” from German philosopher Wolfgang Iser ([1990] 1993), but uses it in a partly modified sense. He most frequently describes the term as “texts without primary aesthetic value (philosophical, art-historical, popular-scientific, pseudo-scientific, descriptive and interpretative texts and metatexts)” (Šrank 2013a, 395). The use of the term “anaesthetic poetics” in the Slovak context from the 1990s onwards is analysed in more detail by Tímea Zvolánková (2026). Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Slovak into English are by the present author.
- ³ “najväčší úžitok z tejto básnickej zbierky získate vtedy, / keď si starostlivo prečítate verše na nasledujúcich / stranách a keď sa budete podľa nich riadiť. údaje tu / uvedené majú čitateľom pomôcť orientovať sa v 80-96 // 7760-4-5, prečítať čo najviac, a to s maximálnou úspou / rou peňazí, času a námahy. čitateľ si iste všimne, že [...]”
- ⁴ “Rythmus tejto knihy je založený na experimente so životom, nie textom [...] Pokúsil som sa svoj život metodicky uchopiť, zvrátiť a opustiť [...]. Výsledkom sú básne tejto knihy, ktoré popri svojej dokumentárnej funkcii môžu slúžiť ako pramenný zdroj výskumu v oblasti vied o človeku a spoločnosti.”
- ⁵ “Autor textu strávil v Tme prvé dva marcové týždne roku 2010.”
- ⁶ “patrí k najjednoduchším a najmocnejším mantrám”
- ⁷ “Hemží sa to tu duchmi. / Veľmi, veľmi zle. Strach.”
- ⁸ “Žiť do hĺbky, nie do šírky.”
- ⁹ “Predo mnou tma / Za mnou tma / Vo mne svetlo”
- ¹⁰ “70 hodín som plakal / a potom som vyšiel do ulíc // a strieľal som / strieľal som / až kým ste sa všetci / nedostali do neba”
- ¹¹ “V noci ma prebudí nárek, kvílenie detí. Výkrik ženy. / Reálne – nemožné.”

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Is there “sincerity” in the literary imagery of Mircea Cărtărescu’s novel *Solenoid*?

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Is there “sincerity” in the literary imagery of Mircea Cărtărescu’s novel *Solenoid*?

Mircea Cărtărescu. *Solenoid*. Sincerity. Authenticity. Postmodernism.

Sincerity is a highly esteemed ethical value in contemporary societies. However, it is not to be confused with authenticity, as both have different ethical premises, artistic performances, and social implications. In this article, I try to outline the difference between the categories of “sincerity” and “authenticity” and, on this basis, to present their literary representation in the novel *Solenoid* by the contemporary Romanian author Mircea Cărtărescu. His work, although largely reflexive, is characterized by an immense imaginative, surrealistic interweaving of dream and reality, expressed through an almost “baroque” imagery and a language rich in metaphors. To what extent and in what ways can such a stylized mode of writing express sincerity? In seeking an answer to this question, I also take into account different types of epitexts (the author’s diaries, essays and interviews).

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The Romanian poet and novelist Mircea Cărtărescu, a representative of the Generation '80 and of the literary "Optecism" derived from it, i.e., the Romanian version of literary postmodernism, is the benchmark of this creative modality for Romanian literature. According to literary historians and theorists (Manolescu 2008; Lefter 2000; Iovănel 2021; Terian 2020; Vajdová, Páleníková, and Kenderessy 2017), this is evidenced in particular by his interdiscursive textualist works, in which questions of literariness – "rhetorical sophistication" (van Alphen and Bal 2009, 2) – and the search for the aesthetic as well as epistemological value of literature play an important role. Therefore, the question of why I ask about "sincerity" as depicted in the literary work of this author in the title of the present study is relevant.

I chose Cărtărescu's novel *Solenoid* (2015) for several reasons. The first reason is literary-social, as the novel enjoys popularity in Romania; internationally, it has gained considerable prominence, especially through its Spanish and English translations and their awards.¹ The second reason involves a poetic nature: the novel has a special place in Cărtărescu's work precisely because it renders the subject's rejection of literature as "artifice" and illusion at the expense of an unstylized, authentic (or sincere?) performance of the self; but, paradoxically, this is done through literature. The third motif, then, is implicitly philosophical: among many other aspects, the novel *Solenoid* represents an existential, ontological stance of rejection of literature as an autonomous work of art, for which, so it seems to me, the author has chosen, among other mechanisms, the rhetoric of sincerity.² I will attempt to describe the latter in what follows, once I have outlined the concept of sincerity and its literary representations which form the basis of my approach.

CONCEPTS OF SINCERITY AND ITS LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS

Sincerity is an ethical value or moral ideal that has accompanied, at least, European civilization as a philosophical or theological axiom for a long time, though at different times and in different places with different emphases. Contemporary Western thinking on sincerity, as expressed in literature, however, most often repeats its frequently cited definition – "the congruence between avowal and actual feeling" – by the American literary historian Lionel Trilling, who in his work *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972, 2) described the dynamics of these concepts, especially in literature and philosophy, from the 16th to the first half of the 20th centuries. According to him, while sincerity has grown in value since Shakespeare's time, it was authenticity that rose to prominence with the emergence of the modern subject in the 18th century and onward. This paradigm shift, according to Trilling, was related first to the development of the idea of "self-truthfulness", and later in the 20th century to the existentialist rejection of sincerity.

Although sincerity – whether as a theoretical frame or its artistic representations – has been supplanted by modernist conceptions of subjectivity that emphasize authenticity and personal drama, as well as by postmodernist concepts that relativize

or treat it with irony, literature and its contemporary scholarly reflections demonstrate that it still appears to have persisted and continues to persist in different discourses (van Alphen and Bal 2008, 4ff; Rutten 2017; Kelly 2024).

In literature, modernism, according to Trilling, as well as postmodernism, according to Adam Kelly (2024), increased the distance between artistic and social realities, between authorship and readership with an “aesthetics of impersonality” and, to quote David Foster Wallace, “elevated aesthetics to the level of ethics” (as cited in Kelly 2024, 8). In his book *New Sincerity: American Fiction in the Neoliberal Age* (2024), Kelly describes the turn to the “new sincerity” since the 1990s in the US literature as a reaction to the earlier literature of modernism and postmodernism (but also as a politically engaged stance towards neoliberalism), and he argues that the literature of the “new sincerity” aims not only to establish a relationship of truthfulness to the subject, but is also a way of being true to others, thus having the reader, amongst others, in mind. Sincerity, he argues, has a public moral goal, “as a fundamentally social practice, [...] is not only other-directed but depends for its very possibility on acknowledgment by another, acknowledgment that is in significant part an act of trust” (2024, 3). Thus, in the act of sincerity, the writer’s offer meets the reader’s expectation. And Kelly adds: “‘Real lived life’ is understood to be what the reader wants from fiction, and it is incumbent on authors to cast aside elitist pretensions and meet their reader halfway” (8).

To conclude, I add the view of sincerity and authenticity as philosophical and ethical categories presented by the Romanian philosopher Daniel Nica, who, despite the similarities – as he writes “[t]ransparency, openness, self-knowledge, direct expression, the struggle against artificialized language and the acceptance of the self, [...] here is a linguistic arsenal that can claim to be both a vocabulary of sincerity and authenticity”³ (2018, 522) –, considers the main difference in their social implications. Following Trilling’s approach, Nica finds a distinctive feature between authenticity and sincerity precisely in social conventionality – while authenticity described by modernist (and also postmodernist, in my opinion) literature is, in his view, a polemical and critical concept toward the society which highlights individual desires, pre-modernist literary sincerity, and I would add, in consonance with the “new sincerity” poetics and rhetoric theorists, seeks to remain in a relationship (not only positive) with society’s – and thus implicitly also with the readership’s – values and expectations.

However, I do not want this theoretical basis to imply an evaluative, let alone binary, understanding of the concepts of authenticity and sincerity. I treat them as axiologically complementary categories. As stated above, both can manifest only through self-knowledge and are performatively very similar; what distinguishes them, though, is the degree of the need for social recognition or engagement, which also implies social control: “the moral ideal of sincerity becomes a means by which the community, on the one hand, controls the consistency between our statements and actions and, on the other hand, the alignment between our actions and dominant values” (Nica 2018, 523). A situation may thus arise in which the desire or need for sincerity leads the subject to inauthenticity.

NOVEL *SOLENOID*: THE PROTAGONIST AND HIS AUTHENTICITY

The genre-ambiguous 850-page labyrinthine novel *Solenoid*, which according to several critics, “does not excel in construction” (Crețu 2016, n.p.; Manolescu 2016, n.p.), is, as Andrei Terian puts it, “combining biographical elements with encyclopaedic depth, hyperrealist scenarios with dreamlike imagery, intertextual wit with metaphysical strands – and, taking this into consideration, legitimately classifiable as a maximalist novel” (2022, 327). In line with the classification of *Solenoid* as a post-modern maximalist novel and part of the “maximalist autofiction” subgenre (Mironescu and Mironescu 2021, 68), it can also be described as a philosophical parable, resembling both a Bildungsroman and a psychological drama up to its first quarter, conveyed entirely through the introspection of an autodiegetic, internally focalized narrator. Gradually, epic narratives from the hero’s life, historical digressions, both with elements of fantasy and science fiction, as well as romantic and erotic passages, are added. The construction of a novel of 51 chapters is challenging – the narrator’s recounting often slides into analepses and prolepses, the stories in each chapter weaving in and out of each other through the mechanisms of association. In term of narrative, although the novel resembles a diary – it is a personal notebook –, its content does not reflect the daily routine; moreover, the individual chapters do not even homogeneously describe coherent stories.

The nameless narrator, a young primary school teacher on the outskirts of Bucharest, according to social and material references sometime in the 1980s, and also the main character of the novel *Solenoid* “want[s] to write a report of [his] anomalies” (Cărtărescu 2022, 70). However, he does not intend to use any of the conventional literary genres because “a novel would muddy the facts, would make them ambiguous” (54), and he no longer believes in poetry or other fictional literature because:

The only text that should ever be read are the unartistic and unliterary ones, bitter and incomprehensible books that their authors were crazy to write, but which flowed from their dementia, sadness, and despair like springs of holy water. Issachar. Hermann. Le Horla. Malte. And hundreds of faceless voices whose every page is written with the only word that matters: me. Never him, never her, never you. Me, the section through time of the impossible fourth person. (209)

He thus keeps notes in four notebooks – corresponding to the four parts of the novel – which are not intended for publication because, as the narrator states, “No book has any meaning if it is not a Gospel” (211). He writes something that is not meant to be an ordinary literary work, but an authentic description of subjective reality as perceived and experienced by the protagonist’s self during approximately six years in “his” city called Bucharest, and as it intertwines with the world of his reflections, memories, and with the “reality” of dreams – transcriptions of dreams from earlier diaries that “relate to my nocturnal or phantasmatic or hallucinatory life – [...] more real, however, than reality” (215). In addition to reflective musings, mostly on the subject of literature and the narrator’s role in it, readers learn about his childhood, the loss of his brother Victor, his twin, his fear of doctors and ambulances, his youth, his military service, his time at school, in short, about his

“anomalies”, as Mircea Cărtărescu planned to title this book, according to his diary *Un om care scrie: Jurnal 2011–2017* (A man who writes: Diary 2018, 337, 347, 362, 385), and about Bucharest, a city that “appeared all at once, already ruined” (2022, 25).

The narrator reserves for himself the role of both writer and sole reader of his work:

I will be the only writer/reader of this story, the purpose of which, I'll say for the tenth time, is nonaesthetic and nonliterary. I have no other pretension than being the writer/reader/liver of my own life. It could be the biography of a louse or a mite, but it would still be just as important as my own skin, because I am that obscure creature, the tunnels where I swarm are my own, the excrements: mine, the sensations: mine, the turpitude: all mine. Even if I am no one, I feel pain if I prick my hand, and the pain I feel is mine and mine alone. Even if no one else cares, I do. (116)

In this way, Cărtărescu creates in the opening of *Solenoid* the type of the egocentric or solipsistic hero, for whom the world is constituted only on the basis of his own perception, and mainly through literature and dreams, and for whom the physical and social environment is only a backdrop built exclusively for him, not a reality. His egocentric attitude is disturbed only by an awareness of transcendence – that he is part of something greater he cannot comprehend –, by a fear of failing to grasp the meaning of life and of not finding a way out, an “escape”, as well as by a consciousness of anxiety about his human condition, suffering, and death.

Thus, in this part of the novel, Cărtărescu has brought into existence, so to speak, an “anti-hero”, not in the sense of a negative character with morally reprehensible traits, but in the sense of a negation of the conventional semantic form of a literary hero as the bearer of socially shared, beneficial, and valued ideals or the “morally regulated deviance” (Bröckling 2019, 39). By obscuring the composition and attempting to create a work that does not conform to the conventions of any genre – that is to say, an “anti-novel” – the author in turn tries to achieve a semblance of autonomy from the reader. Based on Trilling’s findings, it could be said that Cărtărescu has succeeded in creating an authentic anti-hero who remains true to himself and embodies the ideal of modernist existential individualism. Indeed, the reader is guided toward this interpretive path also by the paratexts (Genette [1987] 1997) – two mot-tos in the book’s introduction, both drawn from key figures of modernist literature. The first is an excerpt from the Romanian author Tudor Arghezi’s poem “Ex libris”, which metonymically relativizes the epistemic, ethical, and social possibilities of literature.⁴ The second quotes a passage from *The Diaries* (*Tagebücher 1910–1923*) of Franz Kafka: “A fragment of his eye socket was removed. The sun and everyone could see inside. It angered him and distracted him from his work; he was furious that he in particular could not see this marvel” (7). The diary entry, considered by its very epitextual nature to be authentic and perhaps even sincere, is positioned by Cărtărescu in an interpretatively determining role: it suggests to the reader how unreliable the portrayal of the subject proves to be when it comes to the authentic performance through literature.

THE PROTAGONIST'S SELF-REFERENTIALITY AND SELF-DENIAL

If the protagonist, or more accurately the anti-hero of *Solenoid*, is contoured against the background of Cărtărescu's previous works, his diaries and extra-literary statements (e.g., Greceanu and Martin 2025), the reader can perceive him in a strongly self-referential way – he spends his childhood in the same house on the same street, several motifs from his childhood and youth recur, and so on. One could say, as Radu Vancu points out, that self-referentiality in the novel *Solenoid* is a continuation of Cărtărescu's poetics, but only up to the point of the “self-denial”⁵ turn (2016, n.p.). This moment is the narrator's recollection of the trauma of reading his poem “The Fall” in the university literary Circle of the Moon (Cenaclul Lunii), its failure and his rejection from the structures of the literary world by the “Great Critic”:

In that hour of not even ferocious slaughter – offhand slaughter, scornful and smiling – the coin fell on the wrong side, I drew the short straw, and my career as a writer continued, perhaps, within another possible world, wrapped in glory and splendor (but also in conformism, falseness, self-deception, superbia, disappointment), but here all that was left was an unfulfilled promise. (Cărtărescu 2022, 37)

However, as connoisseurs of extra-literary reality, some readers know that Cărtărescu himself succeeded in the literary Monday Circle (Cenaclul de Luni) with his poem of the same name, “The Fall”, which became a stepping stone for him into the literary world.

Narratively, through this denial of his hero's self-referentiality, enacted through both metaleptic intervention and withdrawal from the plot, Cărtărescu relieves the narrator of the burden of a realistic frame of reference, thus essentially giving him the status of an autonomous literary character. As the narrator himself expresses, his story can therefore, through this act of fictionalization (Iser [1991] 2017), leap to the level of “falseness” or of staging the anti-hero's subjectivity uncontaminated by autobiography. After all, even the narrator himself confesses at some point: “I don't want to mystify anything: I remember everything, although it could be a false memory, but I cannot write about it here or now. I have never promised to be completely truthful”⁶ (Cărtărescu 2022, 214).

This Cărtărescu's metaleptic and intertextual “montage” trick clearly belongs to the arsenal of postmodern poetics (Lefter 2000), which he, however, abandons (surely not entirely) at this point in order to play out the narrator's multilayered interdiscursive and surreal narrative of social and historical life. But, at the same time, it provides the key to re-evaluating the self-referential interpretation of the novel's opening section. It thus frees the reader from a single frame of reference that could unnecessarily “contaminate” an overly fictional work that no longer relies on the self-referential nature of the narrative up to that point, linked to Cărtărescu's other literary texts or authorial epitexts (Genette 1997, 351ff).

THE ROLE OF THE FEMALE CHARACTER: THE REQUEST FOR SINCERITY

What has been said so far essentially denies the existence of the category and rhetoric of sincerity in Cărtărescu's novel *Solenoid*. We only arrive at its explicit man-

ifestation through the entry of a female character into the narrator's story. In addition to the figures of other women and their roles – such as the mother, colleagues from the school, shop assistants, nurses, dream creatures from the underbelly of the housing estate, the statue of Damnation (in Romanian it is feminine: “*Damnarea*”) – we also encounter a female partner or, more aptly, a female lover, Irina, in the novel.

Sexuality plays an important role in almost all of Cărtărescu's works. In his poetic volumes and his debut collection of short stories, *Nostalgia* ([1989] 1993), sexuality and the sexual act bring the characters knowledge as essential and transcendent as that of the mind. The difference, however, is that while in the other works sexuality often has (self-)destructive effects on the hero, in *Solenoid* it becomes productive, a driving force not only towards his own pleasure, but also for social and humanistic engagement: towards the subject's relationship to his surroundings, to other beings (manifested even at the micro-level, and thus could be the subject of ecocritical reflection as well) which changes his solipsistic self toward a more empathetic and social personality. *Solenoid*'s narrator places the rational and sexual modes of acquiring subjective experience on the same level, for example, when he describes a human being “with our sex organs that knew as much as our brain” (2022, 176).

It is the narrator's lover, Irina, who reveals in the novel the possibilities of a device – the solenoid – under the narrator's house for levitation during lovemaking, which metaphorically transforms the erotic act into a metaphysical dimension of knowledge, for it is at this point that the narrator comes very close to feeling an “escape” from the limitations of human existence and the human condition, which is in fact a fundamental theme of his anti-literature:

When Irina and I turn toward each other's stomachs, feeding there like lotus eaters with our eyes half-closed, letting the waves of pleasure flow slowly; like thick honey, between us, floating with each other's hips held tightly between our hands, forming a ring of melted gold, a knot of arms and thighs of melted gold glowing in the dark room, I feel so good that the rest of the world becomes nothing but wind and dreams; I feel that escape – our lives' only goal – is near, is at the door, is here. (428)

About a quarter of the way through the novel, Irina asks the hero existential questions, including the well-known ethical paradox of what he would save from a burning house – a work of art or a child. And she asks him in a suggestive way: “you just have to answer honestly⁷...” (254). This question and request may seem almost naïve within the broader epic and ideological narrative up to that point (and all the more so in Cărtărescu's entire oeuvre), and yet they redirect the narrator's thinking towards sensitizing himself to the same authentic being and the fate of others (again, on various micro-, macro-, and trans-levels of not only human existence), who has nothing in common with the arts, but with the “real” social life of the hero. And this knowledge Cărtărescu's narrator does not reserve for literati and artists, but, on the contrary, for common people and so-called “dilettantes”:

Only the amateur, who doesn't even know what he will do with his manuscript, who doesn't even know if it really exists [...]; all these nutcases, who can't put a sentence together, who are ignorant of high culture, who make art out of patches, trash, and nothing, only they know the best-kept secret of any art: the blind man's battle and the lame man's

ters and the fictional world, the narrator also includes the writer and the reader in the enumeration, thus indicating an extraliterary ethical stance toward the social acknowledgment of his gesture.

It is also noteworthy that the author later returns to this passage in his diary *Șapte ani stranii: 2018–2024* (Seven strange years, 2025), writing: “That cry for help, spanning ten pages – my most hallucinatory and truthful pages [...] [w]as not a literary cry, but my physical cry for help, emerging from my throat, shaped by my tongue and lips. Not a single person who has read this book said anything to me about this message, about the true message of the book and of my life”⁸ (2025, 120–121). Even though Cărtărescu has repeatedly expressed rejection of a self-referential reading of his works (for example, Kasarda and Cărtărescu 2020) – even his own diaries, which he nevertheless writes with the awareness they will be published – in this way he “metatextually” (Genette 1997) encourages the reception of the novel *Solenoid* in the spirit of the rhetoric of sincerity. However, it also demonstrates a lack of perceptiveness, or perhaps the readers’ bewilderment, regarding the author’s shift in rhetorical register, as they had long been accustomed to his “rhetorical sophistication” and the performance of an untrustworthy postmodern and rather authentic than sincere subject.

The uniqueness of the novel *Solenoid* within Cărtărescu’s body of literary works is demonstrated, for example, by another text, this time poetic, a collection of poems with the telling title *Nu striga niciodată ajutor* (Never cry for help, 2020): from the projected perspective, it appears to be an obvious expression of this dissatisfaction, with the poetic subject presenting him/her/itself in philosophical and ethical contrast to the narrator of *Solenoid*, again in his/her/its supremely authentic, and solitary role as a solipsist who is convinced that his call to “the other”, i.e., society or simply “no one”, will not be heard (5).

CONCLUSION

Based on Trilling’s diachronic perspective on the moral ideals of “sincerity” and “authenticity” as depicted in literature, and inspired by the current discourse on sincerity and its rhetoric, this study sought to highlight the portrayal of this subject and its development in Mircea Cărtărescu’s novel *Solenoid*. Compared to the author’s previous works, the protagonist can be seen as a denial of the preceding, often self-referential narrator, who rejects the role of literature at the expense of (societal) life. Within *Solenoid*, there is thus a noticeable shift from writing about oneself solely through the lens of self-knowledge to writing about oneself through the prism of a shared condition, whether in a broader existential sense, not limited to the human, or in a narrower local historical context. It can be said that the novel *Solenoid* combines the postmodernist aesthetics of authenticity with the ethics and rhetoric of sincerity. Although, on the basis of the reception of this novel and the author’s later epitext, one might doubt whether the protagonist’s sincerity was described with sufficient and convincing authenticity, I agree with Radu Vancu (2016, n.p.), a Romanian literary theorist and historian, who wrote of *Solenoid* as not only Cărtărescu’s most humanistic work, but one of the most humanistic works he knows.⁹

NOTES

- ¹ In addition to the FIL Prize from the 2022 Guadalajara International Book Fair, Cărtărescu, together with the English translator Sean Cotter, won the Dublin Literary Prize in 2024, and in 2025, *Solenoid* was on the longlist of the International Booker Prize.
- ² This motivation resonates with the author's later statement, which presented the inspirational background of the novel *Solenoid* to the worldwide audience of The Booker Prize as follows: "*Solenoid* is also my human and literary testament: everything I have ever wanted to say to my fellow human beings. [...] It is not only an aesthetic writing, but also an ethical one, because it shows my love for people, for truth and social justice" (Cărtărescu and Cotter 2025, n.p.). As I will discuss later, it is specifically this ethical dimension and the social implications or empathy present in a literary work that prove decisive for understanding it in terms of "sincerity". The fourth reason I chose the novel *Solenoid* as the object of the analysis is personal: I translated this novel into Slovak (Cărtărescu 2020a).
- ³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations into English are by the present author.
- ⁴ The original Romanian version: "Un om de sânge ia din pisc noroi / Și zămislește marea lui fantomă / De reverie, umbră și aromă, / Și o pogoară vie printre noi. // Dar jertfa lui zadarnică se pare, / Pe cât e ghiersul cărții de frumos. / Carte iubită, fără de folos, / Tu nu răspunzi la nici o întrebare" (Cărtărescu 2015, 7). The English translation: "A man of blood takes clay from the peak / And creates his own ghost / From dreams, scents, and shadows / And bring it living down to us. // But his sacrifice is pointless, / However charming the book's speech. / Beloved book and useless, / You will answer no question" (Cărtărescu 2022, 7).
- ⁵ Vancu uses the Romanian term "negarea eului" and also the theological term "kenosis".
- ⁶ However, the word "truthful" in the Romanian original is "sinceritate", i.e. sincerity.
- ⁷ Again, in the Romanian original, Cărtărescu uses the word "sincer".
- ⁸ "Acel strigăt de ajutor, întins pe zece pagini, cele mai halucinant de adevărate pagini ale mele [...] [n]u era un strigăt literar, ci strigătul meu fizic de ajutor, ieșit din laringele meu, modelat de limba și de buzele mele. Nici un singur om care-a citit cartea asta nu mi-a spus ceva despre acest mesaj, mesajul adevărat al cărții și-al vieții mele."
- ⁹ I want to express my sincere gratitude to the colleagues at the Institute of World Literature (Slovak Academy of Sciences), especially Jana Cviková, Judit Görözdí, and Ján Živčák, for fruitful discussions on the topic, Adam Škrovan for his help with the language aspects of the study, the editors of this issue for their support, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

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Sincerity in poetry amid Russia's war against Ukraine: *Svidchennia* of Victoria Amelina

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Sincerity in poetry amid Russia's war against Ukraine: *Svidchennia* of Victoria Amelina

Sincerity. War. Literature. Russia's war against Ukraine. Ukrainian female poetry.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significantly reshaped contemporary Ukrainian literature, which has increasingly foregrounded war-related themes, as well as the articulation of collective trauma and the atrocities of armed conflict. Within this context, poetry has emerged as a particularly powerful genre, offering a medium through which the emotional and experiential dimensions of war can be communicated to a broader audience. War poetry plays a crucial role, enabling it to convey the depth of collective trauma while bearing witness to the human suffering engendered by war. In her poetry collection *Svidchennia* (Testimonies, 2024), Victoria Amelina foregrounds the narrative of collective war trauma experienced by ordinary people, generating an effect of sincerity grounded in testimony. Amelina's work particularly articulates the female experience, a perspective that is frequently marginalized or overlooked in traditional war literature. By centering these voices, *Svidchennia* not only bears witness to the everyday realities of war but also contributes to a broader understanding of the social and emotional dimensions of war, highlighting resilience, loss, and the ethical responsibility of remembering.

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Russia's war against Ukraine, which began in 2014 and escalated to a full-scale invasion in 2022, has become one of the longest-running military conflicts in Europe since World War II and remains ongoing. It has profoundly reshaped everyday life in Ukraine as well as its cultural and literary landscape, which reflects these societal transformations. Since 2022, Ukrainian literature has increasingly reoriented itself toward documenting and articulating experiences of war, emerging as a distinct body of "war literature" (Mymruk 2023). In this context, poetry becomes a medium through which the emotions, trauma, and often inexpressible grief of war are rendered into textual form. Antony Rowland, in his book *Poetry as Testimony: Witnessing and Memory in Twentieth-Century Poems* (2014), contends that trauma is often most effectively communicated through poetry, as its distinctive form enables the articulation of witnessed traumatic experience. He further argues that readers should remain "hyper-attentive" to the presence of traumatic, or, as he terms them, "metatextual", events that shape poetic expression. In the case of collective trauma, such as war or other crises, the act of narration depends on how the author conveys these "metatextual" events and on the perceived authenticity and emotional implications of that representation. In Ukraine, social media enable immediate readers' reactions to poetry reflecting the wartime experience. Moreover, many Ukrainian poets have increasingly published their poems on social media platforms after Russia's full-scale invasion (Riazantseva and Kanchura 2025, 60–72).

In this regard, the voices of Ukrainian women writers have become particularly prominent, reflecting shifts in the social roles of women under wartime conditions. Ukrainian women have obtained increasingly active positions in society, contributing to defense and resilience efforts while also embodying broader social and cultural transformations. Many have joined the Ukrainian Armed Forces, engaged in volunteer work, or taken on leadership roles within their communities. This cohort includes numerous women writers, both those who began their literary careers before the war and those who began during it. Notable examples include Yaryna Chornohuz, Oksana Rubaniak, Olena Herasymiuk or Valeriia Burlakova.

Kate McLoughlin (2011) claims that female authors were struggling to be accepted as writers of literature devoted to World War II. Unlike then, Ukrainian women writers are nowadays recognized both within Ukrainian and in international literary spaces.¹ From this literary-sociological perspective, the voices of women poets have attained increased visibility and resonance. In doing so, they enhance the global visibility of Ukrainian culture while also accruing social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1996). Taras Pastukh (2022) states that the woman's voice in Ukrainian war poetry is currently solely dominant since many male writers have gone to the front-line. In wartime, as the conventional structure of the literary field becomes destabilized, new imperatives emerge, most notably the demand for authentic testimony and affective credibility. Under these conditions, symbolic capital accrues to those able to articulate their positions on the basis of direct, lived experience. The female perspective on witnessing the realities of war is also represented in the first and, tragically, last poetry collection of the prominent Ukrainian writer Victoria Amelina (1986–2023), who was killed in a Russian missile attack on Kramatorsk. This article

examines the communicative function of wartime poetry through Amelina's poetry collection *Svidchennia* (Testimonies, 2024), which is based on her documentation of witness accounts of atrocities committed during Russia's war against Ukraine since 2022. It focuses on how poetry generates an effect of sincerity grounded in testimony, truth, and emotional openness, which enhances its communicative power.

SINCERITY AND WAR POETRY: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

In the context of war, poetry has emerged as one of the most immediate forms of emotional expression, facilitated by its rapid dissemination via social media and the prompt responses it elicits from readers. It enables a swift engagement with unfolding events, while simultaneously preserving their memory and transforming experiences of danger, death, and uncertainty into textual form. On this basis, poetry may be understood as a communicative category that articulates personal experience while simultaneously contributing to the construction of a broader societal narrative of trauma. In this regard of the importance of literary texts in the construction of narratives of war trauma, Mihhail Lotman emphasizes that a "fact is not a given, elementary unit of the world, rather, it results from efforts to reconstruct it" (2015, 86), and that facts "must be reconstructed on the basis of texts" (87). Consequently, texts that represent war experiences function as a medium, establishing a dialogue between an author and a reader in which the latter might "verify" the sincerity of the statement. This mode of communication between a poet and a reader reflects the notion of sincerity articulated by Lionel Trilling (1972, 2). He conceptualizes sincerity as a correspondence between expressed statements and genuine feeling. The text thus operates as a medium between a writer and a reader, with the author assuming the role of interlocutor. At the same time, the reader's perception of sincerity is shaped by cultural and historical context, which in turn influences the interpretive framework through which texts are evaluated. Regarding this understanding of sincerity as a form of communication and dialogue, Adam Kelly (2024, 7) also emphasizes that sincerity constitutes a social act grounded in trust.

Pastukh confirms that poetic discourse gains symbolic capital in war circumstances, describing it as "a voice emerging from the depths of the language that reveals a distinctive way of perceiving the world, its cultural particularities and universal truths, a sense of personal dignity, and a reverence for freedom" (2022). Following this, Ukrainian poet Yuliya Musakovska claims in "Slova" (2022; Eng. trans. "Words", 2022) that during a war the figure of the poet and writer is one that represents the voice of the nation in collective literature trauma (Voznyuk 2025, 49). Similarly, Deborah Forbes asserts that "a sincere poet is someone who attempts to engage and connect all of her/his faculties, who works either as if head and heart, and the aesthetic and the moral, are indistinguishable, or as if it is possible and necessary to make them so" (2004, 14). Following this, poets in wartime are expected to carry out their responsibility to act as society's voice, "discovering what is important to humankind in general" (15). During wartime, poets capture societal transformations and articulate collective experiences of trauma, grief, and hope, bearing an ethical responsibility to faithfully convey the emotional and moral realities of affected communities.

This study employs close reading, contextual analysis, and examination of figurative language to explore the rhetoric of sincerity of Victoria Amelina's war poetry, revealing its emotional depth, thematic complexity, and significance as a medium for communicating traumatic narratives.

VICTORIA AMELINA'S CULTURAL LEGACY

Victoria Amelina was a well-established and award-winning Ukrainian writer whose debut novel *Syndrom lystopadu, abo Homo Compatiens* (The fall syndrome, or Homo Compatiens, 2014) was included in the top ten books of the LitAccent 2014 ranking and shortlisted in 2015 for the Valeriy Shevchuk Prize. Her following book *Dim dlia Doma* (Dom's dream kingdom, 2017) was shortlisted for the UNESCO City of Literature Prize, and the European Union Prize for Literature in the same year.

Amelina was also known as the founder of the "Niu York Literature Festival", based in the small town of Niu York in the Donetsk region, which engaged local young people to create and discover poetry despite living near the frontline. Following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the festival was suspended, and the team launched the "Fight Them with Poetry" initiative to show support to the Ukrainian Army units defending the region. Amelina had also joined the human rights NGO based in Kyiv "Truth Hounds"² in 2022. She was trained as a war crimes investigator and worked in the liberated territories of eastern, southern, and northern Ukraine, collecting testimonies of atrocities committed by Russian forces, but she died due to injuries sustained in a Russian missile attack on a restaurant in Kramatorsk on June 27, 2023.

Amelina's only book of poetry, *Svidchennia* (Testimonies, 2024), was prepared by her friends and published after her tragic death. Posthumously, she was also awarded the prestigious UK Orwell Prize for her book *Looking at Women, Looking at War: A War and Justice Diary* (2025). Amelina started to write this book in English, devoted to the life of women during the war who volunteer to document the atrocities committed by Russia's soldiers. Sadly, the book was not finished because of Amelina's sudden death, but her colleagues finished the missing sections, adding information from Amelina's working material (Cooke 2025).

The Ukrainian PEN, in collaboration with the Ukrainian Media, has launched the project "People of Culture Taken Away by the War"³ to commemorate cultural figures who have been killed in Russia's war against Ukraine, aiming to preserve their memory. The name of Victoria Amelina is placed among hundreds of other Ukrainian cultural figures, whom I refer to as the "missiled generation". This term encompasses not only those who have been killed on the frontlines but also Ukrainian writers, artists, musicians, and other creative professionals who have been targeted by missiles and drones in the rest of the country.

THE LANGUAGE OF SINCERITY IN AMELINA'S WAR POETRY

In *Svidchennia* (2024), Amelina demonstrates how war has influenced the lives of ordinary people and what they prioritize as a result. The poet also gives voice to feelings and experiences that defy verbal expression yet must be articulated to con-

vey this profound tragedy, shifting the focus from the battlefield to those enduring the hardships of war in the rear, revealing the intense fear, loss, and resilience that characterize civilian life. Amelina communicates the experiences and trauma of witnesses, giving them voice in her poetry. According to Olha Derkachova, *Svidchennia* presented “a literary form of documentary realism that balances lyricism and factuality, revealing pain and lived experience”⁴ (2025, 15) of people who try to survive amid the war and continue their lives after the air alert ends and they leave the shelters.

Victoria Amelina pointed out the importance of language and the role of the poet during the war. As Amelina wrote in the poem “Ne poeziia” (Not poetry, 2024), she was forced to switch to poetry due to the war circumstances, as only poetry provides that spectrum of tools that allows one to reflect feelings of loss and grief. In this poem, she states that the reality of war has changed everything and has influenced not only life, but language as well:

I don't write poetry
I'm a prose writer
it's just that the reality of war
devours punctuation
the coherence of the plot
coherence
devours⁵ (17)

The language she employs in her poetry underscores the expressive power of words, even beyond fully formed sentences, in conveying emotion and communicating personal experiences of tragedy. The author does not seek to document facts, as she did for the project of “Truth Hounds”; rather, she foregrounds the role of affect and emotion as means of revealing the realities of individual trauma and of contributing to the construction of a broader collective trauma narrative. Here, the concept of sincerity in trauma narratives occupies a central position, encompassing both the testimonies of witnesses and their poetic representation, insofar as it constitutes a key mode of articulating and transmitting traumatic experience. Although punctuation is largely absent in the lyric poetry, this does not constrain narrative development. On the contrary, it may be interpreted as a fuller and more direct articulation of feeling. This shift in literary form also reflects transitional processes in the Ukrainian language during the war:

as if a shell
hit the language
the fragments of language
look like poetry
but it isn't⁶ (17)

Here, language is unable to reflect the reality of the war and the events unfolding within, as it is shattered into small fragments by the war itself. However, even in that case, language plays a crucial role in the literature of war, as Kate McLoughlin claims that “the language of war can be *simultaneously* emancipatory and disciplinary, that it obfuscates even as it aims to illuminate, and vice versa” (2011,

20). In the Ukrainian context, language assumes an additional,⁷ deeply symbolic significance, functioning as a medium of resilience and a marker of freedom.⁸

TESTIMONIES AS A CONDITION OF SINCERITY

Amelina collected testimonies from individuals affected by Russia's atrocities, a practice grounded in the principles of sincerity and trust, which are essential for both recounting and documenting such experiences. In her poetry, she emphasizes that these testimonies were originally gathered by journalists, prosecutors, investigators, or archivists to preserve historical records for the future. Drawing on dialogues with witnesses, she transforms this material into poetic form, conveying the traumatic experiences to the reader. However, the poet remains the only one who can express the feelings of that memory, to bring the individual experience of trauma to the collective one, as it is mentioned in the poem devoted to Mariupol "Dyvne pekuche lito" (A strange, burning summer, 2024). The only thing that remains for the inhabitants of the city who were lucky enough to escape is their memories:

a strange burning summer
full of people from the sea
their memories are taken apart
for souvenirs
photographers from German newspapers
journalists from the *Times*
prosecutors
investigators
archivists
of the future museums of the City
of which only the sea remains
and here are these people
whose memories are taken apart
for souvenirs⁹ (32)

These memories extend beyond the people of Mariupol, appropriated by international media as symbolic material and often reshaped into narratives that prioritize storytelling over individual grief. Personal testimonies are frequently reduced to illustrative "souvenirs" for a global audience, stripped of their emotional and cultural specificity, and instrumentalized in ways that obscure the profound loss experienced by those displaced by the war. This dialogue between the poet and the witness constitutes a foundational element in the articulation of personal truth, which is subsequently integrated into the broader collective narrative of war trauma in Ukrainian literature.

Another example of the poetry amid the war is the title poem "Svidchennia" (2024, 47–48; Eng. trans. "Testimonies", 2023), which demonstrates how the author communicates the testimony of the witness and reveals the feelings of the women who are ready to talk about the atrocities. In this poem, the speaker emphasizes that most Ukrainian women are willing to reveal what they witnessed of the Russian army's atrocities towards civilians:

in this strange city only the women testify
 one tells me about the child that disappeared
 two talk about people tortured in the basement
 three say they didn't hear about the rapes and avert their eyes
 four talk about screams coming from the headquarters
 five about people shot in their yards
 six speak, but it doesn't make any sense
 seven are still counting their food reserves out loud
 eight say I'm lying and that justice does not exist
 nine talk amongst themselves on the way to the cemetery (n.p.)

The poem's references to varied individual responses to a shared experience invite reflection on the dynamics of trauma and its diverse modes of articulation. Here, women are foregrounded as those most willing to share their personal experiences of war in dialogue with the poet, thereby generating an effect of sincerity and fostering the perception that their statements are authentic and credible.

In Amelina's collection, the figure of the woman functions as a collective symbol, representing the suffering of all Ukrainians under Russia's aggression. Each personal account of war, articulated through these women figures, contributes to a larger collective narrative of trauma, memory, and resilience. The sincere dialogue lies at the core of this narrative, ensuring that the portrayal of pain and loss is both authentic and ethically grounded, allowing readers to engage with the human dimensions of conflict beyond abstract statistics or distant reports. At the same time, the poetic speaker merges with the people and becomes a textual voice that testifies:

I'm going there too
 for I already know everyone in this city
 and all of its dead are my dead
 and all the survivors are my sisters (n.p.).

This poetry is the voice of women, who are "carrying memories in a suitcase, defending [their] home and life, experiencing loss and longing, [their] pain and helplessness. They are sisters, connected not by blood, but by suffering and loss" (Derkachova 2025, 20). By channeling this shared experience, she transforms collective grief into a form of resilience, fostering both survival and the continued act of testimony. In doing so, the poet ensures that stories of loss and endurance are preserved and transmitted to future generations, imbuing memory with both ethical and generational significance.

FAITH AND WAR

Survival is one of *Svidchennia*'s central topics: the women who bear witness are not heroines, they are trying to survive for their relatives on the frontline, for their children and parents, for everybody who needs their help. Here, Amelina asks the question of who we should trust amidst war, because the atrocities cannot be explained from the point of view of humanity. As she points out in "Ale Boh je" (But God exists, 2024), we can only trust God:

But God exists
 He was the only one who passed the filtration camp¹⁰
 The only one who survived in that camp
 He left the city
 He returned from the other side
 From the mission
 From the encirclement
 He came back
 He got out
 After the reports of his death
 in *Ukrainska Pravda*
 and in the *New York Times*¹¹ (29)

The profound disillusionment with the injustice of war and the intolerability of its atrocities has foregrounded themes of fairness and justice in Ukrainian war poetry, particularly in the work of Amelina. She also engages with questions of religious belief, reflecting on the seeming unfairness of war, yet for Amelina, God remains the force capable of overcoming death. In her poetry, the image of God is often evoked through the figure of a Ukrainian soldier “returned from the other side / From the mission” (2024, 29) who overcomes all obstacles to defend his home, family, and country against the Russian aggressor, even in the face of reports of his death. This imagery also alludes to early media claims that Ukraine would capitulate within “2–3 days” of the invasion, a prediction belied by the continued resilience of Ukrainian soldiers who are still defending the country after years of war.

In this context, Amelina also ironically alludes to the postwar European motto “never again”, revealing the downfall of this concept on Ukrainian (European) soil in “Znovu” (Again, 2024):

Again
 on the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation
 air raid alert
 take shelter, Ukrainians
 everyone else may continue¹² (16)

As Amelina observes, the honesty of this phrase can no longer be taken for granted, as the repeated atrocities of war have revealed its limits. Once intended to signify a universal commitment to preventing violence and safeguarding human life, the motto now risks appearing hollow in the face of ongoing suffering, prompting a critical re-examination of how Europe remembers and responds to injustice.¹³

LIFE ON THE BORDERLINE

The borderline between life and death becomes unclear during the war. This uncertainty intensifies emotions and clarifies the values and priorities that guide human existence. In “Tryvoha” (2022; Eng. trans. “Sirens”, 2022), Amelina emphasizes that during an air raid, everyone experiences the immediacy of death and the omnipresence of danger. It is only after the alert has ended that a person realizes their survival, recognizing the fragile contingency of life in the acknowledgment that “this time not you” (n.p.). Through this depiction, Amelina captures the profound psychological

and existential tension of wartime life, where fear and survival are intertwined, and human vulnerability becomes starkly visible:

Air-raid sirens across the country
It feels like everyone is brought out
For execution
But only one person gets targeted
Usually, the one at the edge

This time not you; all clear (n.p.)

By depicting life on the threshold between death and survival, the poet foregrounds the lived realities and emotional states of Ukrainian civilians subjected to daily attacks by the Russian army. The author obtains the role of a narrator empowered to bear witness and to disclose truth through the mediation of affect and lived experience. In the confrontation between life and death, the need for honesty and sincerity is intensified.

The vision of the future is one of the most powerful during this time, as it helps one to go on. As mentioned in “Slovo u slovnyku. [Maibutnie]” (A word in the dictionary. [Future], 2024), the belief in the future gives hope to survive. The sincerity and immediacy of the radio provided crucial hope at the onset of the full-scale invasion. In Amelina’s work, the media functions as a narrative tool, with the author selecting only those broadcasts deemed trustworthy and capable of conveying reality.

A woman looks at me.
I look beyond her, toward where everything
I speak of so confidently
and life-affirmingly,
is supposed to be,
like Ukrainian
“Suspiľne” radio.
And surely it must exist somewhere.
Somewhere it has to be –
the future¹⁴ (9)

Thus, the search for the future reflects a hope that the war will soon come to an end and that this envisioned future will ultimately become a tangible reality. However, the author underscores the credibility of this future by invoking the role of Ukrainian public broadcasting, such as “Suspiľne” Ukraine, which has been reporting and informing the public since the earliest hours of Russia’s full-scale invasion. This gesture highlights the idea that narratives of personal trauma are integrated into a broader collective trauma narrative and, in doing so, contribute to its ongoing formation and articulation.

LIFE AFTER LOSS IN THE WAR

A significant aspect of Amelina’s poetry is her exploration of life in the aftermath of war. She gives voice to the silent suffering of mothers, wives, and fiancées who have lost loved ones, emphasizing that the consequences of conflict extend far beyond the battlefield. Through her poetic lens, post-loss life is depicted as deeply fractured,

characterized by enduring grief, emotional devastation, and a profound sense of absence. She evokes a sense of sisterhood, forging connections among women awaiting news from the frontline. This bond embodies a collective experience of survival and shared longing, grounded in sincere emotions and lived experiences during a time of crisis.

In “Ja maju syna, i vona maje syna” (I have a son, and she has a son, 2024), Amelina depicts the life of a mother who lost one of her two sons on the battlefield. She refuses to accept the death of her son, who continues to live in her mind and memory every day, so that “she still has two sons”:

I have a son, and she has a son
She had two before the war
I always had only one
And try explaining to anyone
that she still has two sons
that the blue-eyed one didn't die, didn't vanish
She gives birth to him every day with a scream
but it's the scream of a woman not a newborn
And the boy still won't cry, not at all
though she gives birth to him day after day¹⁵ (39)

The daily ritual of remembering a fallen soldier-son is captured through the metaphor of his rebirth. The verse “it's the scream of a woman, not a newborn” (39) reflects the mother's unbearable grief. Despite her pain, she symbolically renews her son each day, highlighting the sincerity of emotions tied to the immense losses suffered by Ukrainian society. At the heart of Amelina's collection is the woman who witnesses, endures, and waits for loved ones from the frontline, serving as the primary source of authentic and sincere representation of wartime tragedy.

CONCLUSION

Victoria Amelina's collection *Svidchennia* focuses on the lived experiences and emotional realities of ordinary individuals who struggle to survive within the conditions of war while striving to protect their loved ones. Confronted with constant air-raid alerts, irreparable losses, and the deaths of family members, these individuals nevertheless attempt to sustain life and move forward. Amelina collects their testimonies, emotions, and stories and mediates them through her own empathetic and ethical sensibility, thereby transforming individual and collective trauma into a sincere, testimonial narrative of war. The poet is using the communicative strategy in two ways. She gathers the information from the witnesses and narrates their traumatic experiences to the readers.

The sincerity of Amelina's poetry is particularly evident in her use of figurative language, where the poetic speaker and the narrative voice converge to reconstruct collective war trauma experienced by ordinary people. This burden is further reflected in her linguistic choices, such as the deliberate absence of punctuation in the original Ukrainian text, fragmented syntax, and evocative imagery, which shape a poetic narrative that conveys the intensity of wartime experience. Yet, Amelina also

acknowledges that language can falter under the weight of war, struggling to capture the scope of pain and suffering fully.

Her poetry demonstrates that language, despite these limitations, unites individuals in shared suffering, mediates collective trauma, and offers a thread of hope and resilience that sustains life amidst devastation. In this sense, sincerity in Amelina's work is not merely a stylistic or ethical choice – it is a fundamental mechanism through which trauma is both documented and transmitted, bridging the gap between personal testimony and collective memory.

Amelina constructs a war narrative that aims at the experiences, suffering, and resilience of predominantly women protagonists, thereby giving voice to women whose perspectives are often marginalized or rendered invisible within dominant global war discourses. Her narrative reveals the feelings and experiences of witnesses through a dialogical engagement with them grounded in trust and sincerity, particularly as the information is collected for documentary purposes. Through this communicative strategy, the author gives voice to traumatic affect, foregrounding the emotional dimension of trauma narratives in literature, where language itself acquires expressive and constitutive power.

NOTES

- ¹ See the international prizes in poetry and literature for Halyna Kruk (<https://griffinpoetryprize.com/poet/halyna-kruk/>); Yuliya Musakovska (<https://mezha.net/eng/bukvy/ukrainian-poet-yuliya-musakovska-wins-the-asian-prize-for-poetry-2025/>); Yaryna Chornohuz (<https://kyivindependent.com/in-every-woman-there-is-a-soldier-yaryna-chornohuz-the-brave-poet-fighting-russia/>), etc.
- ² See more about the organization here <https://truth-hounds.org/en/homepage/>.
- ³ See further about this commemorating project here <https://theukrainians.org/spec/peopleofculture/>.
- ⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Ukrainian are made by the present author.
- ⁵ “я не пишу поезію / я прозаїк/просто реальність війни / з’їдає пунктуацію / зв’язність сюжету / зв’язність / з’їдає”
- ⁶ “наче у мову/ влучив снаряд/ уламки мови/ схожі на поезію/ але це не вона”
- ⁷ For more about the role of language during Russia's war against Ukraine see Shumytska and Krouglov 2025.
- ⁸ As the research demonstrates, Russia's war has triggered a significant linguistic shift in eastern Ukraine, from Russian to Ukrainian, with Ukrainian increasingly functioning as a marker of safety, identity, and freedom.
- ⁹ “Дивне пекуче літо / повне людей із моря / їхні спогади розбирають / на сувеніри / фотографії німецьких газет / журналісти Таймз / прокурори / слідчі / працівники архівів / майбутніх музеїв Міста / від якого лишилось море / і ось ці люди / чиї спогади розбирають / на сувеніри”
- ¹⁰ Filtration camps are created by Russian forces during the invasion of Ukraine, serve to register, interrogate, and detain Ukrainian citizens in occupied regions before transferring them to Russia, and are sometimes also used as a part of forced population transfers to Russia.
- ¹¹ “Але Бог є / він єдиний пройшов фільтрацію / єдиний вижив у тому таборі / вийшов з міста / вернувся з тамтого боку / із завдання / з оточення / Повернувся / вийшов / після повідомлень про смерть / в «Українській правді» / І в New York Times”
- ¹² “Знову / з днем пам’яті та примирення / повітряна тривога / пройдіть в укриття, українці / всі інші можуть продовжити”
- ¹³ See more about the concept “concerned Europe” in Voznyuk 2025.

- ¹⁴ “Жінка дивиться на мене / Я – поза неї, туди, де має бути все те / про що я говорю так впевнено / й життєствердно, як українське / Суспільне радіо. / Та й воно ж все одно десь є. / Десь воно має бути: / майбутнє”
- ¹⁵ “У мене син і у неї син / у неї до війни було два / у мене завжди був один / і спробуй комусь ще поясни / що в неї і досі ще два сини / що той ясноокий не вмер, не зник / вона його родить щодня під крик / але крик жінки, не немовля / а хлопчик усе не кричить ніяк / хоча вона родить його щодня”

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Flesh-witnessing and the testimonial imagination: Ukrainian women's poetry and diaries in wartime

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Flesh-witnessing and the testimonial imagination: Ukrainian women's poetry and diaries in wartime

Ukrainian women's poetry. Testimonial poetics. Flesh-witnessing. War
diaries. Affect theory. Vernacular archive.

This article examines the emergence of a distinct testimonial poetics in contemporary Ukrainian women's writing during the Russia–Ukraine war. Drawing on Yuval Noah Harari's concept of *flesh-witnessing* and recent scholarship on citizen media, I argue that Ukrainian women poets and diarists have developed a literary mode that fuses embodied experience, civic participation, and documentary precision. Their work – circulating in print, online platforms, and volunteer networks – constitutes a vernacular archive of wartime life grounded in affective states, sensory immediacy, and the ethical imperative to bear witness. Through close readings of poems, diaries, and digital testimonies produced since 2014 and especially after the full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022, the article demonstrates how women writers have assumed the role of citizen-participants who chronicle war in real time. This testimonial poetics departs from pre-war metaphorical abstraction, foregrounding concrete imagery, emotional lexicons, and the phenomenology of survival. I propose a theoretical framework for understanding these texts as epistemological instruments that resist cultural erasure, preserve memory, and articulate the lived experience of war.

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WOMEN'S VOICES AS WARTIME EPISTEMOLOGY

The Russian war against Ukraine has generated an unprecedented wave of literary testimony. Among the most compelling contributors to this emergent field are Ukrainian women writers whose work documents the war's impact on bodies, homes, language, and memory. Their writing is not merely reactive; it is constitutive of a new cultural formation in which literature becomes a mode of survival, resistance, and ethical address. This article argues that contemporary Ukrainian women's wartime writing develops a distinct testimonial poetics, a set of aesthetic and ethical practices that transform lived experience into a shared affective archive.

Ukrainian women writers navigate the fraught terrain between witnessing and staying alive, between the urgency to articulate and the weight of trauma, between the intimacy of private grief and the demands of collective responsibility. Building on key insights from testimony studies (Felman and Laub 1992; Agamben 1999; Bollinger 2010; Bickford 2008, n.d.; Webb 2019; Mazzi 2025), affect theory (Ahmed 2014; Cvetkovich 2003), and feminist analyses of war writing (Sjoberg 2014; Whitlock 2007), I argue that their texts form a distinct affective archive – a living, continually expanding repository of embodied knowledge, emotional labor, and ethical self-positioning. Although the concept of testimony is deeply rooted in Holocaust studies and trauma theory, Ukrainian women's wartime writing both inherits and unsettles this lineage. Unlike retrospective survivor accounts, these works are composed in the midst of danger – under shelling, during displacement, or within occupied territories. They function not only as records of injury but also as acts of agency, solidarity, and civic participation, thereby challenging the temporal, generic, and epistemological assumptions that have long structured Western understandings of testimony. Crucially, these writers foreground the gendered conditions of witnessing, reclaiming domestic spaces, caregiving practices, and embodied vulnerability as legitimate sites of wartime knowledge.

Moreover, Ukrainian women's wartime writing foregrounds the gendered dimensions of witnessing. Scholars of feminist war studies have shown that women's experiences of conflict are often marginalized or instrumentalized within national narratives (Sjoberg 2014). Ukrainian women writers resist such erasure. Their work reclaims the intimate sphere as a locus of historical and political meaning, expanding the scope of what counts as war literature.

Through close readings of poetry, diaries, and essays by Victoria Amelina, Olena Astaseva, Larissa Babij, Svitlana Didukh-Romanenko, Inna Honchar, Halyna Kruk, Natalka Marynychak, and Lyuba Yakimchuk, this article demonstrates how testimonial poetics operates across genres to foreground vulnerability, relationality, and the materiality of war. Ultimately, Ukrainian women's wartime writing offers a transformative model of literary testimony that expands the boundaries of world literature and redefines the cultural work of literature in times of crisis.

The Russia–Ukraine war therefore has produced not only geopolitical rupture but also a profound transformation in the cultural and literary landscape of Ukraine. Among the most significant developments is the rise of women poets and diarists who challenge traditional hierarchies of war literature. As Victoria Amelina writes

in her poem “Svidchennia” (2024; Eng. trans. “Testimonies”, 2023): “I already know everyone in this city / and all of its dead are my dead / and all the survivors are my sisters” (n.p.). This articulation of shared vulnerability and collective responsibility encapsulates the ethos of contemporary Ukrainian women’s wartime writing. Their literary production constitutes a new epistemology of war grounded in embodied experience, affective precision, and the urgency of testimony. Their texts function not merely as artistic expressions but as historical documents, ethical interventions, and acts of civic participation. They record the war from within – through the body, through daily routines disrupted by violence, and through the emotional states that accompany survival. In doing so, they challenge the assumption that literature must retreat in the face of atrocity and demonstrate that writing can become a vital instrument of resistance, memory, and truth-telling.

The argument unfolds across seven sections. It first revisits the theoretical distinction between *eye-witnessing* and *flesh-witnessing*, drawing on Yuval Harari’s work on modern war culture (2008; 2009), then examines the rise of citizen-poets who document war through literary and digital forms. Subsequent sections trace the evolution of wartime poetics from the linguistic disintegration of 2014 to the consolidation of civic authority after 2022. The analysis of the role of diaries and digital platforms¹ in creating a vernacular archive of wartime life is followed by a discussion of the new affective lexicon emerging in poetry and non-fiction. The article concludes by proposing a theoretical framework for understanding testimonial poetics as a crucial epistemological resource in Ukraine’s ongoing struggle against cultural erasure and genocidal violence.

FROM EYE-WITNESSING TO FLESH-WITNESSING: RETHINKING TESTIMONY

The conceptual foundation for this study rests on the distinction between eye-witnessing and flesh-witnessing that has shaped modern understandings of war testimony. In his work on military history, Harari (2008; 2009) argues that modern war narratives increasingly privilege the embodied, sensory, and emotional dimensions of combat over detached observation.² Eye-witnessing, associated with factual reporting and visual perception, gives way to flesh-witnessing, which foregrounds the internal, affective, and transformative experience of war. This shift reflects broader cultural movements – from Enlightenment sensibility to Romanticism – that valorize individual emotional experience as a source of truth.

Harari’s insights are particularly relevant to the Russia–Ukraine war, where civilians – not only soldiers – have become primary witnesses to violence. Women poets and diarists exemplify this expanded category of flesh-witnesses. Their testimony is grounded not in strategic overviews or military analysis but in the lived experience of war as it unfolds in physical and digital spaces. Their writing captures what Harari describes as the *privileged authority* of embodied experience (Harari 2009, 217; 2010), authority that cannot be accessed through distant observation alone.

Recent scholarship on citizen media further illuminates this shift. Lilie Chouliaraki and Omar Al-Ghazzi (2021; 2023) argue that user-generated content – videos,

posts, and images created by civilians – constitutes a form of “media witnessing” that appeals to global publics through its authenticity and moral urgency (2021, 1). They describe this content as grounded “onto the body as an existential dimension of ordinary testimonies of conflict” (6). Their framework provides a crucial bridge between Harari’s concept of flesh-witnessing and the literary testimonies produced by Ukrainian women. While Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi focus on digital media, their insights can be extended to poetry and diaries, which likewise emerge from the embodied experience of war and circulate through social media posts, volunteer networks, literary platforms, public readings, and international cultural events, often long before they are published as standalone books. Extending the concept of flesh-witnessing to the experience of civilians and the domain of citizen media is essential for understanding Ukrainian women’s wartime writing.

This article proposes the term citizen-poet³ to describe Ukrainian women writers who document war through literary forms that merge personal experience with civic responsibility. Their poems and diaries function as vernacular archives of wartime life, since they write not from a position of retrospective distance but from within the temporal and spatial immediacy of war. Their testimony is therefore both literary and documentary, aesthetic and historical, personal and collective.

CITIZEN-POETS AND THE RISE OF VERNACULAR WAR DOCUMENTATION

Beginning in 2014 and accelerating dramatically after February 24, 2022, Ukrainian women poets and diarists assumed roles traditionally associated with journalists, historians, and public intellectuals. Their writing constitutes a decentralized yet cohesive archive of wartime experience. This phenomenon can be understood as the emergence of the citizen-poet, a figure whose literary production is inseparable from civic participation and whose testimony is grounded in the immediacy of lived experience.

Women poets such as Yakimchuk, Kruk, Marynchak, Amelina, and many others (see, for example, Voznyuk 2025), as well as war diarists such as Iryna Feofanova (see Hajduk 2025), Yaryna Chornoguz (see Romanenko 2025), and others, have become indispensable chroniclers of the war. Their poems and diary entries document not only the events of war but also the emotional and ethical labor of survival. Their texts are shaped by the rhythms of air-raid sirens, the uncertainty of displacement, and the grief of loss.

This new testimonial landscape is exemplified by the All-Ukrainian Academic and Artistic Forum “Muses Are Not Silent!” held in June 2022. The forum brought together scholars, writers, and artists to reflect on the role of culture during wartime. Its outcome – the almanac *Vichnist’ tryva tsei den: Khudozhni khroniky viiny* (This day lasts forever: The artistic chronicles of war; Zhulynskyi 2023) – is emblematic of the collective commitment to documenting war through literature. The volume includes poetry, short prose, dramatic works, interviews, and other materials developed during the forum. In the accompanying literary essays, the editors examine the role and significance of artistic literature during times of genocide. The almanac’s

cover, illustrated by Kharkiv artist Dariia Khrysanfova, features ripe apples, a symbol of resilience and the fragile persistence of life amid destruction.

The rise of citizen-poets is closely linked to the proliferation of digital platforms. Social media has become a crucial space for the circulation of poetic testimony, enabling writers to reach audiences far beyond traditional literary circles. Many women poets have effectively taken over the journalistic function of recording history as it happens, posting poems, reflections, and participant/volunteer accounts in real time.⁴

This hybridization reflects broader shifts in global media ecology. As Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi (2021) argue, user-generated content has transformed the landscape of war reporting by foregrounding the voices of ordinary individuals. Ukrainian women poets extend this logic into the literary sphere, producing texts that function as both artistic expressions and urgent appeals for global attention. Their writing embodies what Chouliaraki and Al-Ghazzi describe as “media witnessing”, but it also exceeds it by drawing on the resources of poetic language, metaphor, and narrative structure.

The testimonial authority of Ukrainian women writers is grounded in their status as citizen-participants. Their testimony is therefore both embodied and ethical. As Svitlana Didukh-Romanenko writes in her untitled poem, cited here by its opening line, “We were told: ‘Take only the most valuable!’”, “We are witnesses of war crimes”⁵ (2024, 5). This declarative statement encapsulates the civic dimension of contemporary Ukrainian women’s writing. Ukrainian poetry did not vanish with the onset of Ukraine’s own Auschwitz; rather, it underwent a transformation.

THE POETICS OF DISINTEGRATION: LANGUAGE UNDER SIEGE (2014–2022)

In comparison to pre-war poetics, wartime poetry made a shift from symbolic metaphors to affective immediacy. This shift marks a departure from pre-war poetic traditions, which often favored intellectualist, metaphorical abstraction. The war forced poets to abandon symbolic distance and confront the raw materiality of violence. In broader terms, this is the collapse of traditional metaphors, which is not a failure of imagination but a cultural event, marking the transition from symbolic representation to testimonial immediacy; the collapse of symbolic language under the pressure of real violence.

The first phase of contemporary Ukrainian wartime writing, beginning with Russia’s hybrid war in 2014, is marked by linguistic fragmentation, existential disorientation, and the collapse of familiar symbolic structures. This period produced a poetics of disintegration⁶ in which language itself becomes unstable, mirroring the physical destruction of occupied territories and the emotional dislocation experienced by internally displaced persons.

The poem “Rozkladannia” (Decomposition, 2014) by Lyuba Yakymchuk (Lyubov Yakymchuk), who was herself displaced from Luhansk, captures the breakdown of language, identity, and geography. The final stanza reads (in the translation by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky):

I stare into the horizon
it has narrowed into a triangle
sunflowers dip their heads in the field
black and dried out, like me
I have gotten so very old
no longer Lyuba
Just a -ba (Yakimchuk 2017, 153)

The poem's visual structure – descending like an inverted staircase – mirrors the speaker's psychological and linguistic collapse. The fragmentation of the name “Lyuba” into “ba” symbolizes the erosion of personal identity under the pressure of war. The decomposition of language parallels the decomposition of cities, homes, and bodies in the Donbas region. The poem thus becomes a site where linguistic form and wartime experience converge.

This poetics of disintegration reflects a broader cultural moment in which the war destabilized not only physical spaces but also linguistic and symbolic frameworks. The hybrid war of 2014 produced a sense of uncertainty and confusion that permeated literary production. Writers grappled with the challenge of representing a conflict as Russia's war against Ukraine that was both visible and invisible, both acknowledged and denied in the West. The ambiguity of the early war years is reflected in the fragmented, impressionistic, and often surreal quality of the poetry produced during this period.

The linguistic decomposition observed in Yakimchuk's poem can be understood as a form of affective rupture. War disrupts not only the external world but also the internal structures through which individuals make sense of experience. Language, as a medium of meaning, becomes strained under the weight of trauma. The breakdown of syntax, the fragmentation of words, and the collapse of metaphorical coherence all reflect the difficulty of articulating experiences that exceed the limits of representation:

there's no poetry about war
just decomposition
only letters remain
and they all make a single sound – rrr (Yakimchuk 2017, 152)

This early wartime poetics stands in stark contrast to the literary production that emerged after the full-scale invasion of 2022. The poetics of disintegration (2014–2022) forms the necessary precondition for the testimonial poetics that emerges after February 24, 2022. While the early period is characterized by fragmentation, disorientation, linguistic breakdown, affective rupture, and the collapse of symbolic frameworks, the shift from disintegration to consolidation marks the emergence of a new civic muse⁷ and a new testimonial authority. Halyna Kruk's 2022 Berlin speech crystallizes this transformation signaling a profound shift: metaphor no longer mediates experience but is replaced by direct articulation of affective states grounded in lived reality. She explains the inadequacy of traditional metaphors in the face of atrocity, unimaginable in the pre-war time: “We will always have a gaping wound from

the loss of these people – in our souls, in our culture, science, economy, industry, society. This is not a metaphor” (n.p.).

The devastating loss of civilian lives and the destruction of human and natural environments caused by Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine demand that memory take precedence over imagination. The restorative and transformative power of testimonial poetry – as a form of witnessing the war crimes committed in Ukraine – runs through Kruk’s verse, where she often adopts the collective *we* to articulate shared suffering. This communal poetic persona becomes a conduit for expressing collective trauma and hope, as in the poem titled by its opening line: “we will come out of what has happened different, we will come out” (2024a). What distinguishes these works is their reliance on a plural speaker, through which individual experience is absorbed into a broader social narrative. This strategy may be understood as a form of narrative volunteering, in which the poet, as a citizen-participant, steps forward to speak for those whose voices are silent, muted, or dispersed.

AFTER FEBRUARY 24: CONSOLIDATION, AUTHORITY, AND THE NEW CIVIC MUSE

“The Muses Are Not Silent” remarkable consolidation of literary authority and civic purpose after 2022 is not merely psychological; it is aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological. Women poets, in particular, emerged as central figures in articulating the stakes of survival. This transformation is evident in the shift from metaphorical abstraction to testimonial clarity. Inna Honchar’s poem “Musy ne movchat” (2022; Eng. trans. “The Muses Are Not Silent”, 2024) captures this new sensibility:

The last pics in someone’s camera –
are not a metaphor anymore.
Messages
homelessly silent
unable to get through voice,
to traverse the abyss,
the shell crater...
Poetry
exists (4)

In Ukrainian, this poem was published as an epigraph to the article “Kil’ka shtrykhiv do suchasnoi liryky pid obstrilamy” (A few touches to modern lyrics under fire) by literary critic Yuriy Kovaliv (2022).

Honchar’s insistence that “this is not the place for poetry / (as commonly believed)” (Honchar 2024; see Kovaliv 2022) reflects a widespread sentiment in the early days of the invasion: that the enormity of violence rendered traditional poetic forms inadequate. Yet the poem ultimately affirms poetry’s persistence – not as aesthetic ornament but as testimony. The muses do not fall silent; they “scream beneath the rubble”, as Honchar so powerfully observed (2024). Poetry becomes a mode of survival, a means of recording what cannot be forgotten.

The civic muse is not a distant observer but an active participant in the war effort – volunteering, documenting, witnessing, and grieving. Didukh-Romanenko artic-

ulates this civic role of poetry with stark clarity: “each of us is now a hard disk, / Data carrier, a memory card for hundreds of terabytes, / Which cannot be formatted by daily bombardment” (2024, 5). This metaphor – of the body as a memory device – captures the epistemological burden borne by civilian witnesses. It also exemplifies the shift from symbolic metaphors to affective metaphors, grounded in the materiality of war.

The declarative force of the above lines signals a new understanding of poetic vocation. The poet is no longer a contemplative observer but a civic actor whose testimony carries moral and historical weight. The authority of the poet derives not so much from literary tradition as from embodied experience – from the fact of having lived through bombardment, displacement, and loss.

Few poets embody the civic muse as powerfully as Natalka Marynychak, who continues to live and volunteer in Kharkiv. Her untitled poem dated March 9, 2022 (Zhulynskyi 2023, 174) opens with the line: –“and each of us will have a separate war” (2024, n.p.). This line encapsulates the individualized yet collective nature of wartime experience. The poem concludes with a declaration of emotional metamorphosis:

I now have a heart
of reinforced concrete
it knows neither pity
nor comfort (n.p.)

Marynychak’s lines capture the psychological metamorphosis and the phenomenology of survival wrought by war: the hardening of the self, the recalibration of emotional registers, the emergence of a new affective vocabulary. Her poetry embodies what might be called the civic muse – a figure who speaks not only for herself but for a community under siege. Marynychak’s poetry exemplifies the new affective lexicon of wartime Ukraine – one in which emotional states are articulated through concrete, bodily imagery.

The consolidation of literary authority and collective testimony after February 24, 2022 is also reflected in the proliferation of public events, anthologies, and cultural initiatives such as the already-mentioned All-Ukrainian Academic and Artistic Forum “Muses Are Not Silent!” (June 20–25, 2022). Emerging from this forum, the almanac *Vichnist’ tryva tsei den* (2023) stands as a collective chronicle of the war’s early months. The ripe apples on its cover symbolize not only the persistence of life and hope amid devastation but also the almanac’s dual function as artistic expression and documentary record. Its contributors include both established poets and emerging voices, united by the urgency of testimony.

This period also saw the publication of another almanac, *Neskorena Ukraina* (Unconquered Ukraine) – a three-volume poetic chronicle that stands as one of the most ambitious collective literary projects of the war (Shavarska 2022–2023). The almanac includes poems about escape from occupation, such as Mila Soniachna’s “Dovelosia but’ boiahuzkoiu...” (I had to be cowardly, 2022, 88); internal displacement, for example, Zhanna Dmytrenko’s “Pereselentsi” (The displaced, 2022, 29); symbolic spring imagery juxtaposed with destruction, as in Halyna Slyvka’s “Snihom kvit-

nevym byntuiut'sia rany..." (Wounds are bandaged with April snow..., 2022, 85); poems about murdered civilians, such as Oksana Handurska-Pavlenko's "Chervonyi manikiur zavmer na asfalti..." (Red manicure froze on the asphalt, 2023, Book II, 24); and memorial poems, for instance, Iryna Rodchenko's "Serezhky na snihu. Fre-ska pam'yati" (Earrings in the snow. Mural of memory, 2023, Book II, 78). This documentary impulse marks a decisive departure from pre-war poetic traditions. While the almanac includes male voices, women poets are notably more prevalent. Their poems document escape from occupation, internal displacement, volunteer work, and the daily realities of survival. Many poems reference specific individuals, cities, and events, creating a mosaic of wartime experience that is both personal and collective. This consolidation of literary authority is grounded in embodied experience, civic participation, affective precision, and a documentary impulse. Together, these elements constitute the foundation of testimonial poetics.

POETRY AS CHRONICLE: DIARIES, DIGITAL PLATFORMS, AND THE ARCHIVE OF THE EVERYDAY

Alongside poetry, wartime diaries have become a crucial medium for documenting the lived experience of war. These diaries – often written by women – record not only events but the emotional and ethical labor of survival. Their testimonial value lies in their immediacy, their attention to detail, and their capacity to capture the affective texture of wartime existence.

Two diaries are particularly significant: Larissa Babij's *A Kind of Refugee: The Story of an American Who Refused to Leave Ukraine* (2024) and Victoria Amelina's *Looking at Women, Looking at War: A War and Justice Diary* (2025). Both authors write from within the war, documenting their experiences as civilians, volunteers, and witnesses.

Babij's diary is notable for its reflections on the shifting threshold of the "unimaginable". She writes: "There is a difference between 'I cannot imagine' and 'unimaginable.' Russia's unjustified invasion and ongoing brutal assault of Ukraine [...] has drastically moved the threshold for what can be called 'unimaginable'" (2024, 65). This distinction underscores the epistemological rupture produced by war. The diary becomes a tool for recalibrating perception, for making sense of a world in which the boundaries of the possible have been violently redrawn.

Babij also emphasizes the importance of maintaining "touch with the war". She writes: "There are two ways to lose touch with the war: one is by feeling safe and comfortable [...] while the other is by entertaining threats and potential dangers [...] so that your senses become garbled and clouded by fear" (66). This reflection highlights the delicate balance required to remain grounded in reality. The diary becomes a means of sustaining this balance, a practice of attentiveness that resists both denial and panic. Wartime diaries are epistemological instruments of keeping "touch with the war", avoiding both an exaggerated sense of security and an exaggerated sense of danger. This balancing act – between denial and panic – defines the epistemological labor of wartime diaries. They serve as anchors of reality, grounding the writer in the present moment and resisting both numbness and hypervigilance.

Amelina's war diary *Looking at Women, Looking at War*, which was not finished at the time of her tragic death in 2023,⁸ offers a complementary perspective. Her writing foregrounds the ethical dimension of witnessing, particularly in relation to women's experiences of war. Her reflections on gender, violence, and justice expand the scope of wartime testimony, highlighting the intersections of personal vulnerability and civic responsibility.

Digital platforms play a crucial role in the circulation of war diaries and poetic testimonies. Social media enables writers to share their experiences in real time, creating a decentralized archive of wartime life. This archive is characterized by its immediacy, its emotional intensity, its accessibility, and civic urgency. It includes poems, diary fragments, photographs, volunteer reports, and eyewitness accounts. Together, these materials form a rich tapestry of wartime experience that challenges official narratives and preserves the voices of those most affected by violence.

The testimonial function of poetry and diaries is further reinforced by the proliferation of anthologies, online publications, and cultural initiatives. The almanac *Neskorena Ukraina* (Shavarska 2022–2023), mentioned earlier, is particularly notable for its chronological structure: each poem in the first and second volumes is dated, creating a collective diary and transforming poetry into a chronicle. The almanac includes poems devoted to specific individuals such as Lidia Ryzhkova's poem "Pershoprokhodets'. Balada z ukrains'koho zhyttia" (Trailblazer. A ballad from Ukrainian life), referencing volunteer Mykola Nazarovets' (2023, Book II, 75–77), specific cities, e.g., Oksana Dnistran's poem "Izium" (2023, Book II, 33), specific atrocities and specific memorial objects, e.g., the previously mentioned poems "Red manicure froze on the asphalt" and "Earrings in the snow", creating a mosaic of wartime experience that is both personal and collective.

This emphasis on specificity – on names, dates, places, and events – reflects a broader shift in wartime literature toward documentary precision. Poetry becomes a form of chronicle, a means of recording history as it happens. Diaries become repositories of affective knowledge, capturing the emotional states that accompany survival. Together, these forms constitute a "vernacular archive" of the everyday, an archive that preserves the lived experience of war in all its complexity. The concept of the vernacular archive – a decentralized, grassroots documentation of war through everyday writing practices, including poetry, diaries, and social media posts – is pivotal to understanding testimonial poetics. This archive resists erasure by preserving memory, asserting civic agency, challenging official narratives, and foregrounding marginalized voices. It is a form of cultural resistance, grounded in the everyday labor of writing, witnessing, and remembering.

EMOTION, METAPHOR, AND THE AFFECTIVE LEXICON OF WAR

One of the most striking developments in contemporary Ukrainian wartime literature is the emergence of a new emotional lexicon – an affective vocabulary shaped by the unprecedented conditions of Russia's war against Ukraine. Traditional met-

aphors, once central to Ukrainian poetic expression, have lost their explanatory power, as Kruk stated in her Berlin speech (2022). This transformation is vividly illustrated in Olena Astaseva's "A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War" (2023), a work that catalogues complex emotional states through diary-like entries. Each entry – panic, fear, hunger, betrayal, guilt, choices, time, weather, de-realization, among others – functions as what T. S. Eliot once called an "objective correlative", a concrete image or situation that evokes a particular emotional state.⁹ Yet Astaseva's entries go beyond traditional correlatives: they operate as absolute metaphors,¹⁰ terms that do not merely describe emotions but create new affective categories shaped by wartime experience.

Kathrin Bethke's work on emotion metaphors provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding this phenomenon. Bethke argues that poetic metaphors can "capture affective states that have no stable place in the English emotion lexicon" (2021, 15). In the Ukrainian context, Astaseva's dictionary performs precisely this function. Her entry on "de-realization", for example, redefines a psychological term associated with dissociation. In psychology, derealization refers to a dissociative state in which the world feels unreal or dreamlike. But Astaseva radically redefines the term. Rather than detachment, Astaseva's "de-realization" signifies the painful contrast between peaceful European landscapes and the brutal reality of war in Ukraine. She writes of encountering "a fake world filled with toys [...] sweet little houses" in Western Europe while simultaneously thinking: "Are there still women and children in Kyiv? I thought there were only soldiers there. I don't watch the news anymore. It's too hard" (2023, 57). This juxtaposition creates a new affective category: the pain of inhabiting two incompatible realities at once – one peaceful, one genocidal. Astaseva's entry "de-realization" thus works as an absolute metaphor.

This redefinition exemplifies how wartime literature reshapes emotional vocabulary. Words that once carried neutral or familiar connotations acquire new meanings rooted in the phenomenology of war. Emotionally neutral terms – weather, time, cleaning – become metaphors for survival, loss, and endurance.¹¹ Conversely, traditionally charged words – fear, hatred, bitterness, despair – expand to encompass new shades of meaning shaped by the daily realities of bombardment, displacement, and grief.

The emergence of this affective lexicon reflects a broader shift from conceptual abstraction to experiential immediacy. Wartime literature no longer relies on symbolic or allegorical frameworks; instead, it foregrounds the sensory and emotional dimensions of experience, when "fire" no longer signifies symbolic passion; it signifies literal bombardment. For example, in Astaseva "cleaning" becomes a metaphor for the compulsive need to impose order amid chaos, even though cleaning turns into "the wasted effort" in a time of war, and "weather" becomes a metaphor for emotional volatility, when shells explosions can be mistaken for thunder in someone's sleep.

This shift marks the collapse of what Edward Said calls "old-style metaphors" (2004) – metaphors that belong to the symbolic space rather than the real space

of war – and simultaneously it aligns with Harari's concept of flesh-witnessing, which emphasizes the epistemological value of embodied experience. In the context of Ukrainian wartime writing, emotion becomes a form of knowledge, a way of understanding and conveying the reality of war that cannot be captured through factual reporting alone.

The affective lexicon also plays a crucial role in preserving memory. As scholars of trauma have long noted, emotional states often serve as anchors for memory, shaping how individuals recall and interpret past events. In Ukrainian wartime literature, emotion metaphors function as mnemonic devices that encode specific episodes of war. Each entry in Astaseva's dictionary, for example, is tied to a particular moment, place, or encounter. These entries form a constellation of affective memories that collectively document the lived experience of war.

This emphasis on affective states challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge. In wartime, emotional responses are not merely subjective reactions but essential components of testimony. They reveal the psychological and ethical dimensions of survival, offering insights into the human cost of war that cannot be conveyed through statistics or military analysis. By foregrounding emotion, Ukrainian women writers assert the legitimacy of affective knowledge as a form of truth beyond the reach of military analysis, political commentary, or journalistic reporting.

Finally, the affective lexicon is not only personal but collective. Kruk's Berlin speech articulates a shared emotional reality: "This war is killing us all, [...] we move in short jogs through life now, [...] our little children, who have experience sitting in basements under fire, do not cry out of fear. Even at such a young age, they understand that crying can cost lives. And this is not a metaphor either" (2022). Kruk's poetry presents the civilian woman's body as an archive of wartime violence and human fragility, often through a single, sharply observed detail. In one poem, the emergency backpack becomes a metaphor for the gradual depletion of physical needs as the body adapts to the quotidian pressures of war. The opening lines read: "with each passing day of the war / my emergency backpack became lighter and lighter" (Zhulynskyi 2023, 132). In another poem, "tudy i nazad" (to and back), she replaces direct descriptions of what she witnessed with the stark naming of medications required to dull the pain: "I rode there on sedatives, back on painkillers; there were no other routes" (Kruk 2024b; Torkut 2023, 48–49). These embodied, affective details – rooted in shared experience – form the emotional foundation of testimonial poetics.¹²

TOWARD A THEORY OF TESTIMONIAL POETICS IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINE

As outlined above, the convergence of embodied experience, civic participation, affective precision, and documentary impulse in contemporary Ukrainian women's writing points toward the emergence of a distinct testimonial poetics. This poetics is not merely a stylistic development but a new mode of literary epistemology shaped by the conditions of war. It reflects a shift in the function of literature from aesthetic

contemplation to ethical action, from metaphorical abstraction to embodied testimony.

Several key features define this testimonial poetics:

1. Embodied testimony (flesh-witnessing)

Ukrainian women writers ground their testimony in the body's encounter with war. Their poems and diaries document sensory experiences – the sounds of explosions, the smell of burning, the physical exhaustion of displacement, the bodily fear of bombardment, the tactile routines of survival – that convey the immediacy of violence. Embodied testimony thus becomes a primary epistemological mode that aligns with Harari's concept of flesh-witnessing, which emphasizes the epistemological value of sensory and emotional experience.

2. Civic participation (citizen-poets)

The testimonial authority of Ukrainian women writers derives from their status as citizen-participants. Their writing is inseparable from their civic engagement – volunteer work, activism, community support. This fusion of literary production and civic responsibility challenges traditional distinctions between art and politics. The poet becomes a chronicler, a volunteer, a witness, and a cultural defender. The term citizen-poet encapsulates this role. Didukh-Romanenko's lines, cited earlier, exemplify this civic dimension of the poet as a repository of memory.

3. Affective precision (emotion lexicon)

The emergence of a new affective lexicon reflects the centrality of emotion in wartime testimony. Emotion metaphors function as epistemological tools that capture the nuances of wartime experience. This affective precision distinguishes contemporary Ukrainian wartime literature from pre-war poetic traditions, which often favored metaphorical abstraction. Astaseva's "A Dictionary of Emotions in a Time of War" exemplifies this shift. Each entry functions as an absolute metaphor, creating new affective categories. This affective lexicon is epistemic. It encodes memory, articulates trauma, and preserves emotional knowledge.

4. Documentary impulse (chronicle and archive)

Poetry and diaries document events, record emotional states, and preserve memories. This documentary impulse is evident in the proliferation of almanacs, anthologies, online publications, and social media posts. The chronological structure of works like the almanac *Neskorena Ukraina* (Shavarska 2022–2023) underscores the archival function of poetry, transforming literary texts into historical documents. As a prime example, this three-volume poetic chronicle includes poems about escape from occupation, internal displacement, murdered civilians, memorial objects, destroyed cities, and daily survival.

5. Ethical urgency (the imperative to speak)

Testimonial poetics is driven by an ethical imperative to bear witness. This urgency is evident in the declarative force of lines such as "We are witnesses of war crimes"

(Didukh-Romanenko 2024, 5). Kruk's Berlin speech articulates this ethical imperative to bear witness: "The war makes everything unambiguous to such an extent that there is practically no room left for poetry. Just for testimony" (2022, n.p.). This ethical urgency is not optional; it is existential.

Drawing together all these elements, testimonial poetics can be defined as a literary mode in which embodied experience, civic participation, affective precision, and documentary impulse converge to produce ethically urgent testimony that preserves memory, asserts agency, and articulates the lived experience of war. Together, these features constitute a new literary paradigm that challenges traditional understandings of poetry and testimony.

This theoretical framework also has broader implications for the study of war literature. It suggests that civilian testimony – particularly women's testimony – should be recognized as a central component of wartime epistemology. It challenges the privileging of soldier narratives and highlights the importance of everyday experiences, emotional states, and domestic spaces in understanding the impact of war. It also underscores the role of digital platforms in shaping contemporary literary production, suggesting that the boundaries between literature, journalism, and activism are increasingly porous.

CONCLUSION

Women's war writing demonstrates that literature is not merely a medium for reflection but a vital instrument of resistance, memory, and survival. Through embodied testimony, civic participation, affective precision, and documentary impulse, Ukrainian women writers have developed a testimonial poetics that challenges traditional hierarchies of war literature and redefines the epistemological function of literary expression.

This testimonial poetics emerges from the convergence of several forces. First, the embodied experience of war – what Harari terms flesh-witnessing – provides the foundation for a mode of testimony grounded in sensory and emotional immediacy. Second, the rise of the citizen-poet reflects the fusion of literary production and civic responsibility. Third, the emergence of a new affective lexicon underscores the centrality of emotion in wartime testimony. Emotion metaphors function as epistemological tools that capture the nuances of wartime experience, encoding memories and articulating psychological states that cannot be conveyed through factual reporting alone. Fourth, the documentary impulse evident in poetry and diaries transforms literary texts into historical documents. Almanacs function as collective chronicles of the war, preserving names, dates, places, and events. Finally, the ethical urgency that drives testimonial poetics reflects the imperative to bear witness in the face of genocidal violence. As Kruk states, "the war makes everything unambiguous" (2022, n.p.).

In this context, literature preserves the voices of those most affected by violence, asserts the truth of their experiences, and challenges the forces that seek to erase them. Ukrainian women's wartime writing demonstrates that poetry, diaries, short prose, and verbatim pieces can function as powerful tools of cultural defense, ar-

ticulating the emotional, ethical, and political stakes of survival. Their work ensures that the war is not only recorded but understood, felt, and carried forward as part of Ukraine's collective memory. Testimonial poetics as a new epistemology of war offers a new framework for understanding the cultural and ethical significance of Ukrainian women's wartime writing – and a new lens through which to view the role of literature in the context of Russia's war on Ukraine.

NOTES

- ¹ Before appearing in print, numerous poems, short stories, and diary fragments circulate on social media platforms – most commonly Facebook and Instagram – as a space for initial sharing and reader engagement.
- ² Harari's distinction between eye-witnessing and flesh-witnessing is particularly useful for analyzing civilian testimony because it foregrounds the sensory and emotional dimensions of experience that are often marginalized in traditional war historiography.
- ³ The term "citizen-poet" emphasizes the fusion of literary production and civic responsibility, highlighting the role of poets as active participants in the documentation of war rather than passive observers.
- ⁴ See Facebook accounts of Natalka Marynychak, Halyna Kruk, and many others.
- ⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Ukrainian are made by the present author.
- ⁶ The poetics of disintegration should not be understood as a failure of language but as a deliberate aesthetic strategy that reflects the psychological and social fragmentation produced by war.
- ⁷ The term "civic muse" highlights the fusion of artistic expression and civic responsibility, emphasizing the poet's role as a cultural actor in times of crisis.
- ⁸ Since 2022, Amelina has been working with Ukrainian teams to document Russian war crimes and make sure the international community holds the Russian Federation and its troops accountable for the crimes they have committed on Ukrainian soil. On June 27, 2023, she was deadly wounded in a rocket attack on Kramatorsk by Russian troops.
- ⁹ T. S. Eliot used this phrase to describe "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion" that the poet feels and hopes to evoke in the reader (Eliot 1920, 92).
- ¹⁰ The concept of absolute metaphor was theorized by Kathrin Bethke (2021).
- ¹¹ Emotion metaphors in wartime literature function not only as descriptive tools but as epistemological instruments that encode and transmit the lived experience of war.
- ¹² Testimonial poetics should be understood as a dynamic and evolving literary mode that reflects the changing conditions of war and the shifting role of literature in society.

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ADAM KELLY: New Sincerity: American Fiction in the Neoliberal Age

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Nedávna publikácia írskoho amerikanistu a komparatistu Adama Kellyho predstavuje literárnohistorickú analýzu amerických „dlhých deväťdesiatok“, ktoré môžu byť stále pocitované ako súčasnosť aj v dôsledku globálnej hegemonie neoliberálnych politík. V úvode knihy *New Sincerity: American Fiction in the Neoliberal Age* (Nová úprimnosť: Americká fikcia v dobe neoliberalizmu, 2024) Kelly vymedzuje svoj prístup ako pokus o prepojenie rozboru prozaických textov s analýzou diskurzívnych, resp. materiálnych (spoločensko-ekonomických) podmienok vzniku a obehu týchto textov. Zároveň veľmi presne definuje literárnu generáciu, ktorou sa zaoberá. Nazýva ju post-boomerským pokolením autorov a autoriek narodených medzi rokmi 1957 a 1972. Za sociálne spojivo považuje ich dospievanie a život po vlne radikálneho boja za rovné občianske práva, presadzovania emancipačných politík a experimentov na poli umenia a estetiky (4). Týmto sa však špecifikácia skúmaného materiálu nekončí, textový korpus tvoria prózy vydané v období vymedzenom rokmi 1989 a 2008, ktoré označuje za obdobie normatívneho neoliberalizmu, resp. kapitalistického realizmu. Z poetologického a literárnohistorického hľadiska ide podľa neho o obdobie, keď sa formuje „literárna nová úprimnosť“. Tá na jednej strane pracuje s „výdobytkami“ postmodernej estetiky a poetiky, no súčasne sa kriticky vymedzuje voči niektorým vektorom postmoderného myslenia. V prvom rade proti sociálnej a politickej indiferencii manifestovanej aj nadužívaním irónie. Literárnu novú úprimnosť považuje Kelly za

estetický fenomén konštituovaný v dialógu s postmodernou metafikciou aj so žánrovou literárnou produkciou. Základný aspekt odlišujúci literárnu novú úprimnosť od postmodernej beletristiky a žánrovej literatúry je podľa Kellyho jej výrazný etický akcent.

Bližší pohľad na východiskové aspekty tohto výskumu ukazuje, že namiesto univerzalistickej koncepcie novej kultúrnej postmodernej paradigmy, ponúka autora koncepcia rozbor literárneho fenoménu charakteristického pre relatívne úzky dejinný úsek, osobitú skupinu spisovateľských osobností, a to všetko v americkom kontexte. Vďaka tomu sa Kellymu darí vyhýbať symptomatickému čítaniu literatúry.

Na základe vyššie uvedených východísk sa dá v Kellyho prístupe identifikovať vplyv kultúrno-materialistických či (post)marxistických metodológií, v ktorých jadre (okrem iného) leží výzva Fredrica Jamesona „Always historicize!“ z úvodu knihy *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Vždy vnímajte veci v historickom kontexte!; Politické nevedomie: Naratív ako spoločensko-symbolický akt, 1981; prel. J. K.). Z teoreticko-metodologického hľadiska možno vidieť príbuznosť s tým, ako editorský kolektív Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons a Timotheus Vermeulen používa termín metamodernizmus v publikácii *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism* (Metamodernizmus: Historicita, afekt a hĺbka po postmodernizme, 2017). Problematiku post-postmodernej kultúry uchopujú aj pomocou konceptu „structure of feeling“ (štruktúra prežívania), ktorý pôvodne rozpracoval britský marxis-

tický kultúrny teoretik Raymond Williams, no používal ho aj Fredric Jameson a týka sa vzťahu žitej skúsenosti a konkrétneho historického kontextu, pričom literatúra preň môže slúžiť ako médium. Na rozdiel od Kellyho monografie však v publikácii o metamodernizme nie je tak precízne vymedzený historický kontext a autorský kolektív zdôrazňuje, že ich cieľ je skôr heuristický (hľadajú vhodný jazyk pre opísanie súčasnej kultúrnej produkcie).

Kelly sa usiluje o integráciu analýzy literárneho poľa a textovo orientovaného rozboru. Z tohto hľadiska sa dá jeho prístup zasa porovnať s badaním Raoula Eshelmana, ktorý prostredníctvom konceptu performatizmu rozpracoval primárne textovo orientovanú interpretáciu post-postmodernizmu v dvoch samostatných knihách *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Performatizmus alebo koniec postmodernizmu, 2008) a *Transcending Postmodernism: Performatism 2.0* (Prekonávanie postmodernizmu: Performatizmus 2.0, 2025).

V čom však spočívajú charakteristické črty literárnej novej úprimnosti podľa Kellyho? Vzhľadom na už vyššie uvedený etický akcent autor za kľúčový prvok považuje dialogickosť. Spája ju so snahou vyjsť za hranice literatúry a ustanoviť vzťah medzi autorom, resp. literárnym textom a čitateľstvom. Ten sa pritom neobmedzuje na akt prečítania textu, ale môže mať podobu aktívnejšej čitateľskej angažovanosti na tvorbe významu diela, čo môže viesť aj k posilneniu pragmatickej roviny literatúry. O týchto aspektoch Kelly premýšľa v nadväznosti na postuláty Andrewa Hobereka o „zámerne zlej forme“ textov, keď autor nevystupuje v role vševediaceho guru, ale zrovnoprávňuje čitateľskú a autorskú pozíciu. Nadradenú pozíciu autorského subjektu teda nahrádza rovnocenným modelom dialógu. Toto je, koniec koncov, spoločná črta rôznych koncepcií post-postmodernizmu, ktorú identifikoval aj Raoul Eshelman v úvodnej kapitole vyššie uvedenej monografie.

Kellyho však v jeho analýze poetiky novej úprimnosti zaujíma aj to, ako sa etický dô-

raz manifestovaný v dialogickosti prepisuje do naratívnych techník a iných aspektov literárnej formy. Dialogickosť môže znamenať striedanie perspektív, čo sa často dosahuje pomocou polopriamej reči alebo priameho oslošovania čitateľstva. Tieto formálne prvky sa sémantizujú rôznym spôsobom vzhľadom na ich prepojenie so špecifickými témami a motívmi produkovanými diskurzívnymi formáciami neoliberalizmu.

Pri definovaní úprimnosti Kelly nadväzuje na klasické dielo Lionela Trillinga. Trillingova výstižná definícia úprimnosti ako súladu (kongruencie) medzi pocitmi a slovami z publikácie *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Úprimnosť a autentickosť, 1972) sa objavuje v takmer každej štúdii o literatúre a úprimnosti. Pre Kellyho však majú Trillingove úvahy význam aj preto, lebo boli založené najmä na reflexii americkej kultúry.

Kellyho analýza sa teda zameriava na to, ako sa úprimnosť v zmysle súladu medzi vnútorným prežívaním a jeho komunikáciou navonok zobrazuje v americkej próze 90. a nultých rokov v kontexte príbehov zasadených do neoliberalných spoločenských súradníc. Okrem úvodu monografia obsahuje ďalších šesť kapitol a záver. Každá z kapitol sa zameriava na vybrané spisovateľské osobnosti a podrobnú analýzu ich vybraných próz. V prípadových štúdiách Kelly osvetľuje rôzne špecifiká poetiky novej úprimnosti v implicitne politickom kontexte.

V prvej kapitole na tomto podklade interpretuje zdanlivú formálnu nedokonalosť, resp. nezavršenosť analyzovaných próz Davida Fostera Wallacea prostredníctvom motívu hľadania východiska z neoliberalného solipsizmu a nadviazania dialógu. V druhej kapitole zasa prózy Dava Eggersa *A Heart-breaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) a *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002) skúma vo svetle aktuálnych koncepcií dlhu a zadlženosti, ktoré rozpúšťajú temporálne hranice, čo sa v prózach zhmotňuje v autorovej štylistike zdôrazňujúcej neustály pohyb. Na príkladoch románov Jennifer Egan *The Invisible Circus* (1995) a *Look at Me* (2001) sa Kelly zasa podrobnejšie zameriava na feno-

mén mediatizácie a s ním spojené hranice priameho a autentického sebauvyjadrenia. V štvrtej kapitole na príklade tvorby Colsona Whiteheada si kladie otázku, ako sa rasový útlak prelína so sociálnym a ekonomickým znevýhodnením a formuje rozdvojené černošské vedomie, ktoré sa pod vplyvom normatívnych očakávaní belošskej hegemonie prispôsobuje, no súčasne sa usiluje hľadať vlastný protismerný pohyb. Práve z rozdvojeného vedomia vychádza literárna tradícia afroamerickej tvorby oscilujúca medzi ironickým a úprimným módom. V piatej kapitole si Kelly na príklade tvorby Georgea Saundersa a Helen DeWitt všíma, ako ich fiktívne postavy zápasia s vlastnou pozíciou komplicov neoliberalnej logiky neúprosnej konkurencie a diktátu trhových princípov. Ukazuje napríklad, že úprimnosť a pravdovravnosť nemusia byť v tomto systéme len morálne hodnotnými vlastnosťami, ale aj nástrojom pritakávania logike trhu, zameriava sa preto najmä na postavy podnikateľov a zamestnancov. Na základe svojich analýz dochádza k záveru, že tieto diela sú síce kritikou kapitalizmu, no súčasne nekonštruujú žiadne alternatívne východiská. V šiestej kapitole Kelly nazerá na romány Susane Choi, Dany Spiotty a Ben-

jamina Kunkela ako na otvorene politické romány. Všíma si literárne modelovanie rebelov usilujúcich sa o (násilné) podrývanie kapitalizmu a analyzuje, akým spôsobom sa ich vlastná identita formuje pod tlakom morálnych dilem.

Z tejto stručnej charakteristiky jednotlivých kapitol je zjavné, že problematika úprimnosti v literatúre sa spája so širokým spektrom motívov, ktoré Kelly vo svojej knihe postupne mapuje. Jeho monografia je podnetná v teoreticko-metodologickej rovine aj v rovine literárnovedných rozborov konkrétnych próz. Vzhľadom na to, že ide o úzko špecializované analýzy, je podstatné si uvedomiť, že tento prístup nie je mechanicky prenosný na iné kultúrne prostredie. Niektoré podnety sú však adaptovateľné, čo platí práve o teoreticko-metodologických postupoch, ktoré by mohli tvoriť pôdu pre ďalšie komparatívne analýzy próz z rôznych národných literatúr.

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CAROL MARGARET DAVISON (ed.): Gothic Dreams and Nightmares

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The genre of Gothic fiction has had a long relationship with dreams and nightmares. The collected volume *Gothic Dreams and Nightmares* (2024), edited by Carol Margaret Davison, focuses on these developments from the 18th century until present-day Gothic media, whether film, literature, or even video games. Featuring twelve chapters, *Gothic Dreams and Nightmares* is divided into four coherent, historically defined sections. The first of these sections advances the theoretical base and sociocultural investigation of the climate of the 18th and 19th centuries and looks at the theological theories in which dreams are seen as communion with the heavens and hell, on the influence dreams had on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his own personal writing, and on the way Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels employed dreams in their writing. To Marx and Engels, the working classes had been robbed of sleep and dreams by the advent of industrial lighting, which enabled night shifts in factories. The following sections are all conceptualized historically, starting with the 18th century and Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764), then focusing on the Victorian period and 19th century Gothic, eventually shifting the focus from literature towards film and video games. The closing chapter is an analysis of the role of dreams in the video game *Bloodborne* (2015).

According to Davison, the subject of dreams is under-represented in Gothic scholarship. Her aim, then, is to address this gap “from a variety of critical perspectives and ranging across literary forms and media,

examine the aesthetic, cultural, didactic, and ideological implications of diverse cultural treatments of its subject from the eighteenth century through to the present day” (30). This historical approach can be greatly appreciated by the readership, for the structure of the volume allows the reader to be taken on a journey across time and to gather the necessary context to understand dreams not only as narrative devices, but also as a cultural milieu in which theology, philosophy, and proto-psychology mix to create a truly remarkable experience of the sublime.

One of the re-emerging elements featured in the volume whose importance cannot be overstated is Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare* (1781). It is constantly present and functions as a thread by which the chapters are bound together, a continuation of a tradition and a visual source of inspiration for the Gothic authors to explore the sublime landscape of dreams, demons, and parasomnias. The little imp, or a demon, sitting on the chest of a sleeping woman influenced many authors discussed in the volume, from Walpole through Mary Wollstonecraft to Edgar Allan Poe, and the painting made its way onto the big screen through the poster for the film *The Night Walker* (1964) by William Castle. Despite the fact that many chapters are seemingly separated from one another by time and space, this motif of the imp squatting on a woman's chest appears repeatedly. It showcases the way through which the Gothic worked with the conception of dreams from a number of perspectives, and how the visual arts had a tremendous influence over the Gothic.

But this relationship of influence is not unidirectional. In the same way that the Gothic was influenced by the visual arts, the Gothic in turn influenced other spheres, such as proto-psychological research. This dialectical feedback loop is explored in Alice Vernon's chapter on the Society for Psychological Research, which, between the years 1889 and 1892, aimed to explain the causes of hallucinations and released a census to which the respondents could freely answer. What Vernon's exploration shows is that the answers closely mimic the Gothic elements present in the stories by Poe and other authors. One of the important observations is that the census answers often describe these hallucinations as being accompanied by "enveloping white mist". This white mist might have served as an inspiration for Bram Stoker and his Count Dracula, as Stoker was almost certainly aware of the research. Tied to the previous observation is an aspect highlighted by Vernon, which is that the culture of today parallels the census in the way people often describe their nightmares as being abducted by aliens.

The closing chapter of *Gothic Dreams and Nightmares* is James Aaron Green's analysis of the video game *Bloodborne*. Compared to the rest of the edited volume, this chapter focuses on a medium that has a far shorter tradition than literature and film, yet many video games were influenced by the Gothic in a more direct fashion than it might seem at first glance. Video game series such as *Castlevania* (1986) or the *Resident Evil* series (1996) take inspiration directly from the Gothic aesthetic of cathedrals, castles, and abandoned mansions. Since *Bloodborne* wears its inspiration most proudly on its sleeve, Green examines the myriad ways this inspiration is represented in the video game, helping the reader to understand its dream-like logic. There are many dream-or nightmare-themed locations that are "real" playable locations the player can freely explore and interact with. This analysis can be read alongside one of the earlier chapters on Samuel Coleridge by Kirstin A. Mills. Both of

these analyses stress the importance of reading dreams as a semi-physical space, which can be freely traversed and used as a place of communion with higher powers.

Gothic Dreams and Nightmares is an important exploration of the myriad ways in which dreams and nightmares have entered the Gothic tradition, how they shaped this tradition and how the tradition actually shaped the understanding and representations of dreams in the broader cultural context. Davison's volume opens up a systematic inquiry into one of the most important aspects of the Gothic, yet one that, until now, has not received enough attention from Gothic scholarship. With dreams as the primary focus of the research, the Gothic opens itself up to psychoanalytic readings. Some of the chapters included rely too heavily on this reading, which makes their conclusions somewhat predictable (dreams as the representation of the repressed). This puts these chapters at odds with Davison's stated aim for the edited volume, since they focus only on the representation of dreams through a single lens. As Davison writes in the introduction: "In the case of analysing representations of dreams and nightmares in the Gothic, this includes simultaneously considering such phenomena as implied models of subjectivity in cultural productions alongside those theorised in the mental sciences, particularly as they exist in relation to contemporary and relevant philosophical and medical discourses about dreams and nightmares" (7).

This interdisciplinary approach, when applied to the analysis of dreams and nightmares in the Gothic, is the volume's biggest strength, and it solidifies the volume as one of the most comprehensive and detailed explorations of the multifaceted relationship between dreams, literature, culture, and other media.

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MAGDOLNA BALOGH – ADAM BŽOCH (eds.): A „világirodalom” a „kis” irodalmak perspektívájából: Tanulmányok / „Svetová literatúra” z perspektívy „malých” literatúr: Štúdie [“World literature” from the perspective of “small” literatures: Studies]

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In recent decades, discussions of world literature have been shaped predominantly by theoretical models developed from the perspective of major literary languages. The volume under review, edited by Magdolna Balogh and Adam Bžoch, offers a valuable Central European vantage point from which to reconsider how smaller literary cultures participate in global literary circulation. The collection of texts, originally written in Hungarian and Slovak, accompanied by translations into the other language, makes a significant contribution by foregrounding literatures that occupy peripheral positions within the global literary system. Rather than merely applying established theories of world literature to the Central European context, the volume examines how these theories appear when viewed from within smaller literary cultures themselves.

This shift in perspective constitutes the book's principal contribution. In contrast to the abstract formulations that often characterize debates on world literature, the essays collected here demonstrate that the participation of smaller literatures in transnational circulation depends on historically contingent networks of translation, institutional mediation, and intellectual exchange. Focusing primarily on Hungarian–Slovak relations and their broader European connections, the volume shows that literary circulation in Central Europe frequently follows lateral trajectories between

comparable literary systems rather than the vertical center–periphery pattern presupposed by much theoretical discourse.

The first part of the volume comprises studies of a synthetic character that examine the historical conditions of literary transfer. Particularly significant is their implicit critique of the assumption that geographical proximity necessarily produces cultural openness. The case of Hungarian–Slovak literary exchange demonstrates instead that translation flows may be shaped by ideological tensions, cultural asymmetries, and changing political frameworks. The history of these exchanges reveals that neighboring literatures may remain surprisingly opaque to one another when symbolic boundaries are strongly guarded by national cultural institutions.

The volume thus draws attention to a phenomenon that merits more sustained theoretical reflection: the coexistence of linguistic proximity and cultural distance in Central Europe. As the editors note in the introduction, the book seeks to explore “the possible relations between national literature, regional (especially Central European) literature and world literature” (11). This proposition provides an important conceptual framework for many of the contributions. The region's multilingual historical environment often enabled readers to access neighboring literatures directly, without translation. This circumstance complicates the view of world literature as a system organized primarily

through translation and suggests that literary circulation often develops through historically layered cultural contact rather than simplified global pathways.

The volume is divided into two sections. The first presents historically oriented studies addressing broader patterns of literary transfer; the second contains case studies devoted to specific texts and translation processes. This structure proves effective, linking systemic reflection on intercultural exchange with detailed textual analysis.

Judit Görözdi offers an illuminating account of the reception of Hungarian literature in Slovak translation. Rather than presenting a solely descriptive survey, she reconstructs the ideological and institutional conditions that shaped the translation and reception of Hungarian works from the 19th century onward. She demonstrates that literary exchange between neighboring cultures cannot be explained simply by geographical proximity. As Görözdi argues, the dynamics of intercultural literary relations depend on how a given culture conceptualizes both its own national literature and its position in relation to world literature (19). The selection of translated works reflects changing cultural hierarchies and political frameworks, revealing the complex interplay between literary value and national cultural agendas. At the same time, the study raises the broader question of how such asymmetries in literary exchange may be conceptualized within existing models of world literature.

Jana Truhlářová's contribution examines the reception of 19th-century French literature in Slovak critical discourse. By analyzing responses to writers such as Gustave Flaubert, Émile Zola, and Guy de Maupassant, the study shows how the emerging Slovak literary sphere interpreted foreign literature through normative expectations concerning its moral and social function. Truhlářová thus demonstrates that reception is shaped not only by aesthetic criteria but also by overarching ideological frameworks.

Adam Bžoch addresses the broader problem of international literary visibility

through the case of Dutch literature. His analysis considers the conditions under which works from relatively small linguistic communities achieve recognition beyond their national contexts. By emphasizing both textual features and institutional mechanisms – publishing networks, translation practices, and cultural mediation – Bžoch situates the discussion within debates on global literary circulation. His argument also invites further reflection on the role of cultural institutions in shaping the international visibility of literatures written in less widely spoken languages.

Magdolna Balogh explores the methodological potential of regional literary historiography. Drawing on the history of Central European comparatism, she argues that regional literary analysis may function as an intermediate level between national and global perspectives. Her discussion suggests that literary relations in Central Europe cannot be adequately understood solely through center-periphery models, since the region constitutes a network of historically interconnected literary cultures. The chapter, therefore, implicitly questions the assumption that literary influence necessarily flows outward from cultural centers.

The second section offers case studies that illustrate these broader processes. Magdalena Garbacik-Balakowicz analyzes two Polish translations of Sándor Márai's poem "Halotti beszéd" (Funeral oration, 1951), focusing on the role of intertextual references in shaping translation strategies. Her comparison demonstrates how translation functions as an interpretive act that recontextualizes the original text within the cultural memory of the receiving literature.

In the following study, Szilvia Szarka employs the concept of transference to examine the representation of cultural identities in Central Europe. By interpreting Péter Esterházy's historical drama *Mercedes Benz* (2014) as a space in which competing historical narratives intersect, she highlights the complex relationship between literary form and regional memory.

Anita Káli's contribution situates László Krasznahorkai's novel *Satantango* (1985) within a intertextual network that includes 19th-century Russian literature. By identifying parallels with Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoevsky, the author demonstrates how motifs and narrative structures travel across linguistic and cultural boundaries, creating unexpected connections between literary traditions.

From a methodological perspective, the volume benefits from its combination of historical scholarship and theoretical reflection. The contributors employ diverse approaches – including reception studies, translation theory, and comparative literary analysis – while remaining grounded in close textual interpretation. This methodological plurality reflects the complexity of literary relations in Central Europe. From an editorial standpoint, the volume is coherent and carefully structured despite the diversity of topics it addresses. Particularly noteworthy is the way in which the individual studies remain grounded in detailed historical material while engaging broader methodological debates. The bilingual framing of the book also reflects the project's intercultural orientation, emphasizing the dialogic character of the research collaboration from which the volume emerged. Such cooperation between Hungarian and Slovak scholars offers an important example of how regional scholarly networks can contribute to the field of comparative literature.

A more critical observation concerns the conceptual cohesion of the volume. Although the individual contributions are consistently well researched and intellectually stimulating, the theoretical implications of their findings are not always explicitly integrated. Several essays implicitly challenge dominant center–periphery models of world literature, yet the volume stops short of articulating a fully developed alternative framework. As a result, the reader occasionally senses a productive tension between empirical richness and theoretical synthesis. A stronger conclusion drawing together

the methodological insights of the individual chapters might have made the book's contribution to world literature theory more explicit.

A further possible criticism concerns the relatively limited engagement with recent transformations in the global literary marketplace. While the historical analyses offered in the volume are illuminating, the discussion of contemporary literary circulation remains somewhat underdeveloped. Questions related to digital dissemination, international literary prizes, and the role of global publishing conglomerates might have added another dimension to the exploration of how smaller literatures enter the space of world literature.

These reservations do not diminish the scholarly value of the collection. Its principal strength lies in the historically grounded perspective it brings to questions that are often discussed in highly abstract terms in world literature studies. By tracing the concrete mechanisms of translation, reception, and institutional mediation in Central Europe, the volume demonstrates how literary circulation takes shape in a region marked by linguistic diversity and long-standing cultural interconnections. For this reason, the collection *A „világirodalom” a „kis” irodalmak perspektívájából: Tanulmányok / „Svetová literatúra” z perspektívy „malých” literatúr: Štúdie* will be of particular value to scholars interested in the dynamics of literary transfer in Central Europe, as well as to researchers working more in comparative literature and translation studies. From this perspective, the essays gathered in the volume suggest that the experience of Central European “small literatures” can enrich current debates on world literature by drawing attention to the historically layered and regionally embedded nature of literary exchange.

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JANA TOMAŠOVIČOVÁ – BOGUMILA SUWARA (eds.): Literature in Bioethics and Bioethics in Literature

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The essays in the collective interdisciplinary volume, *Literature in Bioethics and Bioethics in Literature*, show how bioethics provides topics and dilemmas to explore in literature, and how literature offers a narrative space to reflect upon these topics and dilemmas. The contributors include philosophers and philologists from Comenius University in Bratislava, the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, and the Institute of World Literature, Slovak Academy of Sciences. This collection builds upon previous work carried out within a joint project, including the thematic issue of *World Literature Studies* (2/2024) devoted to this topic, which was also edited by Jana Tomašovičová and Bogumiła Suwara.

The first article, Ivan Lacko's "The Ethics of Care and Consequence: A Bioethical Reading of Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*", aims to use Picoult's 2004 novel as a bioethical case study. One of the central observations Lacko makes in the article is that the ethical systems themselves contradict each other, as they are rooted in their own argumentation and/or value systems. This poses a challenge to resolving complex bioethical dilemmas, as answers based on various ethical systems and subjective, personal morals present clashing values and arguments rather than a universally accepted resolution.

Tomáš Károly's article, "Machines Like People in Healthcare: From Science Fiction to Reality", explores the intersection of science fiction narratives and real-world technological development. Discussing the

relationships between robots and humans, the author poses a question whether robots can be trusted, for example, in healthcare or friendships, and presents both positive and negative examples of bonds between humans and robots or AI. Károly discusses the inevitable inclusion of robots in healthcare and the need of patients to come to terms with this reality, but also the issue of the anthropomorphic fallacy.

Adam Škrovan, in his study "Beyond Genetic Enhancement in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*", aims to broaden the novel's interpretive framework by examining the enhancing (or "lifting", as termed in the novel itself) process from a bioethical perspective, drawing attention to the enhancement as opposed to the usual focus on artificial beings. The author argues that by leaving out the specifics of the lifting process, Ishiguro allows for multiple interpretations of its ethical significance. Škrovan draws on other literary depictions of human bodily transformation, such as *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) by H. G. Wells and reflects upon the public acclaim of and skepticism towards genetics and bioethics and its technologies, such as CRISPR. He also argues that as our real-world technology catches up to sci-fi, its depiction in the works of fiction changes as well. Škrovan approaches some of the most important bioethical questions: the line between therapy and enhancement, the question whether to enhance or not to enhance and also if such procedures risk redefining what it means to be human. Apart from the

purely bioethical issues, Škrovan also examines the social dimension of such issues, such as the possible gap or tensions between the lifted and non-lifted, loss of individuality or the possible exploitation of the procedures by the wealthy.

Bogumiła Suwara's article, "The Diversity of Life and Its Finitude in Selected Works", examines the denial of death in the "systems of death", established in all cultures, and the resolution of unbearable pain through euthanasia or palliative care. The literary landscape through which the author discusses these phenomena consists of Edson Oda's film *Nine Days* (2020) and Mateusz Pakuła's work, *Jak nie zabiłem swojego ojca i jak bardzo tego żałuję* (How I didn't kill my father and how much I regret it, 2022). Suwara discusses the problem of euthanasia in the systems of dying and analyses the boundaries of the Western model of death. One of the key questions in the article is that of viewing euthanasia either as suicide or as natural death. The analysis of the film *Nine Days* also draws on Martin Heidegger's idea of harmony with one's essence and the authentic experience of being.

Peter Fraňo's chapter "Two Cases of Suicide in Roman Literature and the Issue of Assisted Death in Bioethics" discusses the phenomena of suicide and its depiction in ancient literature. He conducts two case studies: one on Cicero's friend, Titus Pomponius Atticus from *On Famous Men* (*De viris illustribus*, c. 35 BCE) by Cornelius Nepos, arguably an Epicurean suffering from long term unbearable pain; the other on Tullius Marcellinus from Seneca the Younger's *Ad Lucilium epistolae morales* (*Moral Letters to Lucilius*, c. 65 CE), suffering from an unspecified yet curable illness, and most likely a Stoic. Fraňo discusses the paradox of the Epicurean suicide itself, and also describes other cases or attempts at suicide, comparing the role of a philosopher present at the scene of a suicide to that of a grief counsellor or psychologist.

Matúš Porubjak's article "Was Hesiod's Pandora a Posthuman?" analyses the most

relevant myths concerning Pandora's creation, Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* (both c. 700 BC), in order to interpret the first woman as the first posthuman as well. Porubjak focuses on the following aspects of the myths: first, the "posthuman" gifts that the gods bestowed upon Pandora, and secondly, how the human world changed after her arrival. One of Porubjak's observations is the change of social order after her arrival – the need of men to provide for their wives (as a part of Zeus's scheme to prevent men from further pacts with gods), as well as establishing the institution of marriage and sexual reproduction. Lastly, Porubjak uses Nick Bostrom's definition of the posthuman to reach the conclusion that Pandora meets at least one criterion and thus can be considered as one.

Denisa Mišinová's article, "Dystopia as a Moral Experiment: The Educational Potential of Literature", aims to analyze and critically evaluate the potential of dystopian and young adult literature as a tool for shaping the moral values of young readers. In her opinion, dystopias can play a role in ethical maturation and presents recommendations for effective use of young adult dystopias in the education process. The author states that while 20th-century dystopias were more concerned with the critique of totalitarian regimes, 21st-century dystopias reflect such topics as technology and the climate crisis. Mišinová discusses the dynamics of biology, free will, and the influence of media on human morality to answer her question of whether morality can be shaped by reading and education.

The last chapter, Jana Tomašovičová's "Narrative Abilities and Moral Competencies: Inspiration from the Works of Martha C. Nussbaum", discusses the connection between strengthening narrative abilities and increasing moral competence. Tomašovičová describes the mutual influence of literature on bioethics and vice versa. Another argument of this study is the interaction between ethical expertise and moral competence: for example, in medical scenarios the reliance

only on ethical expertise is too abstract, risking the loss of complexity and specificity provided by the judgement of experienced healthcare personnel. In Tomašovičová's view, Nussbaum argues that literature deepens complex moral situations and its narrative methods prompt us to judge based not only on abstract ethical rules, but to include emotions in the equation – adding the dimension of vulnerability.

Jana Tomašovičová and Bogumiła Suwara's volume *Literature in Bioethics and Bioethics in Literature* provides the reader

not only with a thematically diverse series of individual studies, but also with a publication that critically examines the core topic from various viewpoints.

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ZVONKO TANESKI: Súčasná chorvátska poézia. Vysokoškolská učebnica pre študentov slovanských filológií

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Vysokoškolská učebnica literárneho vedca, básnika, prekladateľa a skúseného univerzitného pedagóga Zvonka Taneského *Súčasná chorvátska poézia* je výstupom grantového projektu „Súčasná chorvátska literatúra pre Slovákov, vysokoškolské učebnice pre študentov slovanských filológií (2024 – 2026)“. Približuje najnovšiu chorvátsku poéziu slovenskému čitateľstvu. Autor ponúka vybrané kapitoly o chorvátskej poézii približne od 50. rokov 20. storočia po súčasnosť, pričom akcentuje možný kontakt tohto literárneho kontextu so slovenským kultúrnym priestorom. V teoretických kapitolách sa snaží charakterizovať a definovať pojmy modernizmus a postmodernizmus v chorvátskej poézii, opisuje poéziu 50. – 80. rokov 20. storočia a reflektuje tiež obraz občianskej vojny (1991 – 1995). Slovensko-chorvátske literárne vzťahy sú v publikácii zastúpené prostredníctvom analýz chorvátskych básnických antológií obsahujúcich kľúčové texty sledovaného obdobia a výberové interpretácie ich prekladových variantov. Osobitnú časť učebnice tvoria interpretačné sondy do textov súčasných chorvátskych básnikov a poetiek s ukázkami básní v origináli aj v preklade. Publikáciu dopĺňa aj bohatý prehľad zdrojových dokumentov a bibliografických údajov, ktoré sú nevyhnutnou súčasťou slavistického štúdia.

Úvodná kapitola, sumarizujúca druhú polovicu 20. storočia a úvahy o definovaní postmoderny v chorvátskej literatúre, je vystavaná na analýze tvorby básnika Slavka Mihaliča (1927 – 2007) a ponúka rôzne prístupy k autorskej poetike aj dobovej literárnej kri-

tike. Prehľadovosť učebného textu dotvára charakteristika poetiky na pozadí dobového historicko-spoločenského, politického a kultúrneho diania, ktoré do veľkej miery ovplyvňovali vágnosť a mnohodimenzionálnosť sledovaného literárneho obdobia.

Od 80. rokov 20. storočia, ktorými sa končí prvá kapitola učebnice, autor prechádza k problematike občianskej vojny v 90. rokoch, čo je dôležitý inšpiračný prameň a periodizačný medzník v chorvátskej literatúre. Syntézu modernizmu a postmodernizmu Taneski opisuje ako napodobňovanie a miešanie existujúcich štýlov a v učebnici ju systematizuje na základe teórie chorvátskeho literárneho vedca Sanjina Sorela, ktorý v roku 2023 vydal monografiu porovnávajúcu prvky modernizmu a postmodernizmu. Typologické charakteristiky chorvátskej poézie 20. storočia dopĺňa o prehľad autorov, v dielach ktorých môžu jednotlivé znaky koexistovať (od roku 1945 do súčasnosti).

Osobitnú časť učebnice tvorí kapitola zameraná na panoramatický prehľad a hodnotenie chorvátskych básnických antológií približne od druhej polovice 20. storočia. Autor akcentuje najmä zostavovateľov jednotlivých publikácií, ale tiež upriamuje pozornosť na jedinu z nich, ktorá bola preložená do slovenského jazyka – zbierku *Útecha chaosu* (zostavil Miroslav Mićanović, preložil Karol Chmel, 2022). Všetky kapitoly obsahujú v závere úlohy pre študentstvo vo forme otázok, ktorými sa overuje porozumenie prečítaného.

Dalšiu časť recenzovanej publikácie tvoria interpretačné sondy zamerané na tvorbu dvoch súčasných chorvátskych básnikov

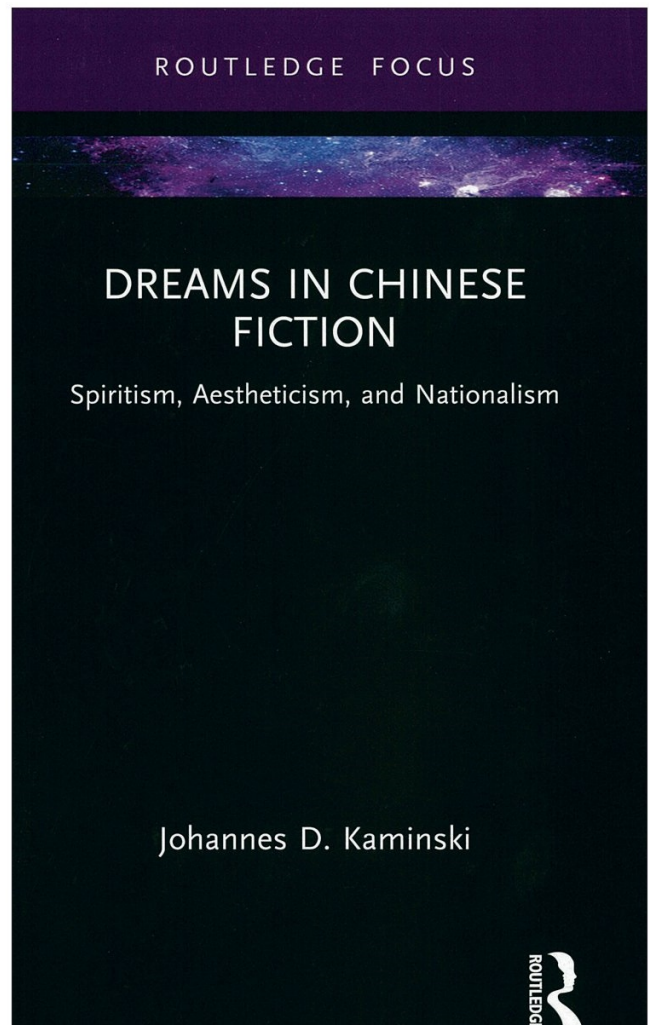
a jednej poetky. Výber interpretovaných tvor-
cov je zostavený na základe autorových pre-
ferencií. Úvodná stať analyzuje tvorbu naj-
staršieho z týchto troch autorov Danijela
Dragojevića (1934 – 2024), ktorý sa považuje
za jedného z najznámejších chorvátskych
poetov a esejistov, čo tiež prispelo k tomu,
že interpretácia je vystavaná na množstve
relevantných zdrojov a kritických hodnotení
básknikovej tvorby. Súčasťou podkapitoly je
rozbor štyroch Dragojevićových básní, ktoré
sa v učebnici uvádzajú v origináli i v preklade
do slovenského jazyka (Karol Chmel). Ďalej
Taneski predstavuje Dortu Jagić (1974), vý-
ber z jej tvorby bol taktiež vydaný v sloven-
skom preklade Karola Chmela (2014). Reli-
giozitu a filozofiu básní tejto poetky Taneski
analyzuje na základe troch textov, uvedených
v originálnom aj slovenskom znení. Tretia
interpretačná sonda sa zameriava na tvorbu
Branka Čegeca (1957), predovšetkým na slo-
venské vydanie jeho zbierky *Shopping terapia*
(2012). Poetika cestopisu a denníkových zá-

piskov je čitateľsky pritažlivá a dotvára obraz
o individuálnych črtách v súčasnej chorvát-
skej poézii.

Vysokoškolská učebnica *Súčasná chor-
vátska poézia* Zvonka Taneského predstavuje
aktuálnu literárnu tvorbu, čím môže účinne
pomôcť zaplniť biele miesta a prispieť k efek-
tívnemu vzdelávaniu študentstva slavistiky
a prekladu, vrátane rozvoja schopnosti kri-
tického čítania. Ostáva len dúfať, že takéto
publikácie budú pribúdať aj vo väčšom roz-
sahu, pretože sú vhodným materiálom na
rozšírenie obzorov o tzv. malých literatúrach
i pre širšiu odbornú verejnosť a v podobe vý-
beru interpretovaných básní aj tipom na ďal-
šie objavovanie chorvátskej kultúry.

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JOHANNES D. KAMINSKI: *Dreams in Chinese Fiction. Spiritism, Aestheticism, and Nationalism*. New York: Routledge, 2024. 132 pp. ISBN 9781032772172 (print), ISBN 9781003481881 (online). DOI 10.4324/9781003481881.



V monografii *Sny v čínskej literatúre. Špiritizmus, esteticizmus a nacionalizmus* skúma Johannes D. Kaminski súčasný politický koncept „čínskeho sna“ v kontexte zobrazovania snov v čínskej literárnej tradícii od staroveku po súčasnosť. Čínske literárne a filozofické texty zachytávajú široké spektrum významov a podôb snov: od slávneho Zhuangziho (slov. aj Čuang-c') motýlieho sna, ktorý predstavuje raný príklad inverzie reality snívajúceho, až po znepokojujúce vízie duchovného sveta. V klasickej dráme, románoch a príbehoch o duchoch sny zobrazujú stret pozemského sveta s vyššími rovinami bytia. V snoch sa snívajúcim plnia ich túžby po zmyslovej rozkoši, no duchovné bytosti ich zároveň neúprosne oberajú o životnú energiu. Sny sľubujú duchovné osvetlenie len preto, aby zanechali snívajúcich v stave úplnej zmätenosti. Na začiatku 20. storočia je tradičné chápanie snov nahradené freudovským pohľadom, ktorý ich interpretuje ako prejavy potláčania sexuálnych túžob. V tomto kontexte sa objavuje kolektívny národný sen ako nečakaný výraz túžby trpiaceho človeka po národnej obrode.

This book considers the contemporary political formula of the “Chinese Dream” in the light of the treatment of dreams in Chinese literary history since antiquity. Sinic literary and philosophical texts document an extensive spectrum of dream possibilities: starting with Zhuangzi’s eminent butterfly dream, an early example of the inversion of the dreamer’s reality, through to confusing visions of the spiritual realm. In classical dramas, novels, and ghost stories, dreams see the earthly realm enter into conflict with higher realms of existence. They indulge the dreamer’s quest for sensual pleasures, but then spiritual beings relentlessly harvest the dreamers’ life energy. Dreams promise spiritual enlightenment – only to abandon the dreamer in a state of utter confusion. In the early 20th century, traditional dream knowledge is abandoned in favour of Freudian episodes of sexual repression. In this context, the collective national dream emerges as an unexpected vehicle of the pained individual’s hope for national rejuvenation.



Ak chceme diskutovať o rétorike úprimnosti, je nevyhnutné sa zamerať na prostriedky, ktoré vytvárajú efekt autentického a otvoreného (seba)odhaľovania. Téma tohto čísla skúma literárne reprezentácie úprimnosti v strednej a východnej Európe od konca 19. storočia po súčasnosť. Štúdie zaoberajúce sa bulharskou, českou, litovskou, slovenskou, poľskou, rumunskou a ukrajinskou literatúrou ukazujú rôzne spôsoby, vďaka ktorým verejné vyjavovanie súkromných pocitov funguje ako silný komunikačný princíp. Zároveň presahujú bežné spájanie úprimnosti so súčasnými post-postmodernými paradigmami a skúmajú ju ako nestabilnú, vzťahovú kategóriu do veľkej miery závislú od kontextu.

To discuss the rhetoric of sincerity, it is necessary to focus on the means that create the effect of genuine and honest (self-)disclosures. This issue explores literary representations of sincerity across Central and Eastern Europe from the late 19th century to the present. The articles, dealing with Bulgarian, Czech, Lithuanian, Slovak, Polish, Romanian, and Ukrainian literatures, demonstrate how the public disclosure of private feelings functions as a powerful communicative principle. Moving beyond its common association with contemporary post-postmodern paradigms, they explore sincerity as an unstable, relational, and highly context-dependent category.