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LITERATURE IN/OF THE CITY – INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Abstract

The article attempts to describe a variety of possible ways in which literature makes itself present within the space of the city. It assumes two basic perspectives to investigate the issue. First of all, the article analyses how the city and its multiple institutions support the literature's circulation and availability for the readers. The city offers a number of venues for writers to present their works and promote them through precisely targeted events and literary festivals. The city is seen as a stage or background on which literary works and events can become fully available. Secondly, the article analyses how literary critics or more broadly philosophers and sociologists interested in urban studies use literature to understand and describe the city in its artistic and everyday dimensions. The fruitful collaboration between city as an active factor shaping artistic imagination and writers leads to developing new forms of expression as well as formulating new ideas about art. It also offers a possibility to communicate with readers in ways which are better accommodated to modern visual imagination and different forms of everyday activity.

Key words: literature, space of the city, literature's circulation, urban studies,
new forms of expression

The city – an area of literary explorations

Long present in literary studies, urban research is now approached from novel angles (e.g. Rybicka 2003; Rewers 2005 and 2010; *Miasto w sztuce...* 2010). Despite the fact that considerable attention is still devoted to traditional analyses of the motif of the city in literature (confer, for instance:

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Miasto, kultura literatura... 1993; *Obraz stolic europejskich...* 2010; *Literackie i nieliterackie obrazy miasta...* 2011), many scholars examine the identity-shaping, social, historical, political and cultural aspects of urban spaces depicted in literary works (e.g. Suchojad 2010, Adamczewska 2011) and investigate the ways in which urban aesthetics contributes to the development of new artistic solutions. Although the city is not always placed at the centre of consideration, it often accidentally becomes the subject of attention, as in the case of a review of Steve Sem-Sandberg's novel *The Emperor of Lies* (2011): "The novel has many narrators, who gradually fall silent [...] What remains in the end is the city – an empty artifact observed through the eyes of one of the few dwellers who hide in it" (Krzymianowski 2011; emphasis added). Another telling remark in this respect concerns Piotr Paziński's literary debut and can be found in an interview with the writer: "One could expect that an admirer of Joyce and Dublin would write an urban novel rather than a story set in a manor in the midst of woods", to which the interviewee responds: "Citiness is indeed very crucial to me. Outside the city I go insane. I feel bad in the countryside. I could live in Manhattan or in Paris. I've never enjoyed visiting my friends' summer houses. You never know how to get out of such places" (Paźniewski 2010: 48)¹.

It is symptomatic that literature and literary studies nowadays uncover the ways in which the image of the city encoded in various texts tends to be conditioned, for instance, by post-dependence (e.g. *Narracje migracyjne...* 2012), postcolonial, gender, or ecocritical discourses. In an attempt to decide whether and what changes taking place in the structure of cities find a reflection in literature, literary scholars take part in various inter- and trans-disciplinary projects inspired by the topographical turn in cultural studies (e.g. *Miasto między przestrzenią...* 2010). Besides, *spatial turn* and *place studies* or *urban studies* constitute crucial points of reference in geopoetics, geocriticism, literary geography and humanistic geography – dynamically developing theories that also constitute a methodological background for contemporary urban research in the field of literature (Rybicka 2008; 2011, 2012b). What seems equally crucial in this context is the problematics of literature in/of the city, which in Poland so far has not been comprehensively explored, although it has been introduced in dictionaries (Potrykus-Woźniak 2010: 126–136) and in popular magazines (e.g. Kazimierczyk 2010).

¹ These issues also echo in the final questions of the interview: "Do you already have any ideas for new novels? [...] Are you going to write anything about the city?" (Paźniewski 2010: 48).

It seems that the urban ways in which literature functions can be narrowed down to two aspects. These can be described by means of the following comprehensive formulas: "literature in the city" and "literature of the city". The former applies to a situation in which the city serves as a background for the literary and literature-related activity and as an arena for literary works and other forms of writing. The latter emerges when the city, its distinctive elements and its information layout are considered in terms of a (para)-literary message. The so defined subject matter covers very specific activities which consist in "reading/writing" or "textualizing" the city; various forms of "spatial narratives"; the case of *architecture parlante* ("speaking architecture"); potential literary determinants of urban epigraphy which serves both commercial and non-conformist purposes; as well as all events, campaigns, shows, happenings and other actions that evoke certain associations with various forms of writing. Still, what seems conspicuous about the above approaches is the vagueness of the very category of literature, which functions as a term open for interpretation, frequently used in an arbitrary way.

Literature in urban space

The existence of literature and literary facts in urban space can be to a certain degree described with terms, such as distribution, promotion, reception or the so-called "applied literature", which are well-known in literary studies. One aspect of such a broadly defined field of research is the exploration of the ways in which the city creates an institutional background for literature. The city can be perceived as an abode and a generator of the most important institutions of literary life, such as cafés (Fitch 2006), cabarets and literary museums, book institutes, writers' houses, artists' retreats, libraries, bookstores, publishing houses, community centres, artists' associations, foundations, clubs, festival centres (such as Biuro Literackie in Wrocław) or literary magazines. Their role is to stimulate and create rules that govern the circulation of art. Furthermore, they frequently search for new forms of literary activity in the city and aim at activating urban audiences. Therefore, these institutions are largely responsible for the development of typically urban ways of popularizing and promoting literature (also in an unintended fashion, since sometimes the very fact of the existence of institutions organizing literary life stimulates the development of grass-roots initiatives that challenge the official channels of

culture). Contemporary initiatives promoting and popularizing specific authors and their oeuvres include: anniversaries (e.g. in Poland 2004 was announced the Year of Gombrowicz, while 2011 – the Year of Miłosz) and literary festivals (e.g. the Conrad Festival, the Czesław Miłosz Literary Festival in Cracow, Tyrmandiada – the Leopold Tyrmand Festival in Warsaw, or Mironalia organized in Warsaw to celebrate Miron Białoszewski's oeuvre), or Bloomsday and other such festivals of writers. Furthermore, there is a wide range of projects promoting books and readership (Kazimierczyk 2010), such as *bookcrossing* or the Bibliometro, the latter functioning in Chile and, since recently, in Spain (small library desks where books can be collected or retained by the underground users) various forms of happenings and flash mobs (like, for instance, the “Czytaj na Centralnym” flash-mob, which took place on 24 September 2011 at the Central Square in Nowa Huta, the actions in the Tri-City organized by Zjednoczenie Czytelnicze (Readers' Union), an informal group of people who once in a while gather at one place to read books in silence for a couple of minutes, e.g. on 18 September 2010 on the Sopot Pier as a part of the “Molo Książkowe – czytamy od deski do deski” project). Similar one-time or cyclic events in Cracow are organized under the auspices of such organizations as Strefa Wolnego Czytania (Free Reading Zone – www.strefawolnegoczytania.pl), which marks reader-friendly places with special labels and organizes books exchanges, family picnics with a book and events such as “Cała Kładka Czyta” (people reading books together in the middle of a day on the Footbridge of Father Bernatek), “wielkie leniuchowanie” (set in the fresh air, comfortable sofas with the organizer's logo invite to relax with a book), and “literary graffiti/typomural” workshops (as a part of the project, a mural depicting a shelf with recommended books was painted on the wall of a block of flats in Traugutta Street). What serves as an excellent example of a contemporary attempt to reorganize urban space in such a fashion is the contest announced in 2012 by the organizers of the Conrad Festival:

Are you creative? Do you like designing? Do you have interesting and unconventional ideas? And above all – do you love books? If so, then the *Think: Literature!* competition is perfect for you! In connection with the 4th edition of the Conrad Festival (the 22nd–28th of October), we would like to encourage all artists: let's take books to the streets together, in order for them to be associated with something more than just libraries. We are waiting for designs of original installations inspired by books and feasible in the public space. We will present the most interesting ideas during the festival on the streets of Krakow and in the festival bookstores. (<http://www.conradfestival.pl/en/4/1/338/think-literature-and-design-a-book-installation>; accessed: 31.08.2012).

One should also mention here another example of this kind, namely reading literary works aloud in public space (e.g. reading Joyce's works during the Cracow Bloomsday or reading Adam Mickiewicz's epic poem *Sir Thaddeus* on 8 September 2012 in various cities in Poland as a part of the "Narodowe Czytanie *Pana Tadeusza*" project) or presenting them on murals and billboards or in various public means of transport (in trams, in the underground, in trains ...); for instance, during the fourth edition of the Conrad Festival in 2012, every day throughout the week at 8 p.m. poems by Piotr Sommer were displayed on the Town Hall Tower in Cracow. The *Rain of Poems* project, initiated in Chile by the CasaGrande artist collective, has gained an international dimension. It consists in dropping leaflets with poems from a helicopter over cities that have experienced aerial bombing in the past (such as Santiago de Chile, Dubrovnik, Guernica, Warsaw and, in 2012, London). Since 1986 London has been the site of the *Poems on the Underground* project, which involves displaying poems on advertising boards in the London Tube. The poems to be presented in this way are selected about three times a year by Judith Chernaik, Cicely Herbert and Gerard Benson. Chernaik, an American writer and the initiator of the project, explains that she wanted to bring poetry to a wider audience, who would encounter it in everyday, unexpected and accidental situations. While choosing poems, what matters is their relevance to contemporary events or to the general direction of civilization changes. The jury also considers whether they harmonize with the urban iconosphere and toponomastics. Liberated from the confines of book covers, poems lead a new life, entering unexpected interactions with the citizens of and visitors to London and the informational and commercial ornamentation of the city. The result of these undertakings is also anthologies published in a traditional, printed form, which collect the texts that have earlier been shown to the public. The initiators of similar projects all around the world (e.g. in Poland the *Wiersze w Metrze* project has been in operation since 2008 – see: www.wierszewmetrze.eu) use both canonical and more contemporary texts. It is also a common practice to present commissioned works which have been written specially for a non-standard distribution in urban space. What may serve as a Polish example of this tendency is *Miejska Powieść Odcinkowa* (The Urban Serial Novel), run by Nowy Teatr (New Theatre) in Warsaw in collaboration with the Ha!art Corporation and the Kultura Gniewu publishing house. In the first three months of 2009 a booklet containing a new episode of a novel was distributed free of charge at railway stations as well as in trams, busses and other public facilities in Warsaw, Cracow, Poznań, Wrocław and Bytom. Each subsequent episode of the novel was written by different authors

and comic book creators (among those involved in the undertaking were, for instance: Sylwia Chutnik, Jacek Dehnel, Sławomir Shuty, Adam Wiedeman, Natasza Goerke, Wojciech Kuczok and Ignacy Karpowicz, and such comic writers as Krzysztof Ostrowski, Maciej Sieńczyk, Przemek Truściński, Agata "Endo" Nowicka, Tomek and Milena Leśniak, Michał "Śledź" Śledziński and Jakub Rebelka). The initiators of the project stress that "The Urban Serial Novel aims not only to add colour to the cultural landscape of Warsaw, but above all to bring the novel to random audience who do not read books on a daily basis" (<http://www.ha.art.pl/prezentacje/29-projekty/128-miejska-powiesc-odcinkowa.html>). Still, such actions, in fact, focus on the needs of a particular group of addressees who are willing to take up reading in unusual situations and who are familiar with contemporary conventions of artistic communication.

Another issue in this area is the specific, urban reception of literature, which covers a variety of actions initiated by cultural animators; these include, for instance: *urban gaming* (*Warszawskie gry...* 2009; Nowakowska 2011), *questing* (a form of sightseeing, during which a participant follows a new, unmarked trail and solves rhymed riddles), or different forms of literary tourism, such as literary tours in the footsteps of writers or tours into the fictional worlds they have created. One may, for instance, explore the city of Prague seen through the eyes of Franz Kafka, the Lisbon recommended in Fernando Pessoa's guidebook *Lisbon – What the Tourist Should See*, the Barcelona described in Carlos Ruiz Zafón's novels or the Dublin known from the biography and works of James Joyce. Such tours can also be inspired by popular bestsellers; one could mention, for instance, guided city walks based on fashionable crime novels and their film adaptations which have recently gained popularity (Reijnders 2010). At the same time, we observe a growing demand for books and travel guides depicting various places through the prism of literary references; for example, in Joanna Orzechowska's guidebook *Podwórka Piotrkowskiej (The Backyards of Piotrkowska Street)* the exploration of the immediate vicinity of the main street in Łódź is organized on the basis of quotations taken from literary works (Orzechowska [2011])².

There is yet another way to saturate urban space with literature-inspired activities. For instance, what contributed to the growing number of love inscriptions in Reggio di Calabria in Italy (Piaśtowska 2008) were

² Literary testimonies are also used by, for instance, the authors of the monograph on Chłodna Street in Warsaw (Piotrowski 2007; Nadolski 2008). Also confer guidebooks of Karpacz, Sosnowka, Jagniątków, Szklarska Poręba and Jelenia Góra addressed to children (*Bajkowa...* 2010; *Bajkowy przewodnik...* 2008, 2009, 2010).

two popular novels for teenagers authored by Federico Moccia. Both novels, *Tre metri sopra il cielo* (1992) and its sequel *Ho voglia di te* (2006; *I Want You*), were adapted to film, which only stimulated the desire of teenage audiences to imitate the characters and the way they confess love through texts inscribed on walls (using a secret code, Moccia's protagonist composes a short text which alludes to the intimate relationship with his lover; he writes it in black paint on a bridge so that his beloved can see it every day on her way to school). Furthermore, the novel *Tre metri sopra il cielo* has contributed to the popularity of love padlocks in Italian and other European cities, where one observes a revival of the custom of affixing locked padlocks with engraved initials or names of couples, their important dates and sometimes love confessions in public places, usually bridges (the key to the padlock is intentionally thrown away, which is supposed to seal the relationship and highlight its permanence)³.

Furthermore, literature frequently serves as an incentive for visual artists, which is conspicuous in their proposals for the management of public space. A characteristic example of what may be referred to as the contemporary "well art" is Max Sauk's work of 1986 made in Hannover. It is an "interpretation of Kurt Schwitters's poem – *Anna Blume*. The text of the poem is engraved on a well. Anna Blume, depicted as hybrid of a woman and a flower, gushes water into a marble pool "(Wolting 2005: 203). In the 2011 Cracow "4P – Pisarz/Poezja/Proza/Przestrzeń Publiczna" ("4P – People of Letters/Poetry/Prose/Public Space") project, launched during the ArtBoom Festival of Visual Arts and as a part of the celebrations of the Year of Miłosz, the organizers presented works of art depicting various allusions to literature embedded in urban landscape that had won a special contest (e.g. at the windows of a tenement house curtains covered with Bohdan Zadura's poems were hanged, in St. Gertruda's Street excerpts from Jan Brzechwa's poems were displayed on illuminated coffers, while

³ The custom of expressing one's love in this form has a long tradition. It has its source in a Florentine legend. However, its contemporary popularity is stimulated by the popular novel addressed to young readers. In Poland, love padlocks can be found, for example, on the Footbridge of Father Bernatek in Cracow, on the Tumski Bridge in Wrocław, on the Holy Cross Bridge in Warsaw or on Bishop Jordan's Bridge in Poznań. This social phenomenon and its literary connotations have recently become the subject of media reports and analyses in the press (cf. e.g. Rzepka, Bugaj 2011); love padlocks also have a separate entry in Wikipedia (cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_padlocks; accessed: 15.12.2012; http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C5%82%C3%B3dka_mi%C5%82o%C5%9Bci; accessed: 15.12.2012).

Miłosz's neighbours recited poems of the Nobel Prize winner through their intercoms at the given hour). Moreover, literature has frequently served as a source of inspiration for Jenny Holzer, an artist who interferes in the urban landscape by means of, for instance, electronic streams of text projected onto the walls of buildings. In her projections she used sonnets and other poems by Henri Cole and passages from Elfride Jelinek's prose works. In 2011 in Poland she projected Wisława Szymborska's poems on the facades of Stary Browar (the Old Brewery) and the City Hall in Poznań; she also ornamented Wawel and a part of the bank of the Vistula river in Cracow with quotations from Czesław Miłosz's poetry, displayed after dark (*For Krakow* project). Such a non-standard form of distributing traditional poems aims at their reinterpretation and actualization in new social and cultural contexts.

What may serve as a unique example of the urban reception of literature are works of architecture, such as those designed by Daniel Libeskind, who declares that his ZŁOTA 44 apartment tower in the centre of Warsaw (commonly referred to as the "glass sail") was largely inspired by the poetry of Wisława Szymborska, Czesław Miłosz and Adam Zagajewski. Working on a project entered for a contest organized by The Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, he took inspiration from Bruno Schulz's works and, in particular, Schulz's concept of "the book" and his short story under the same title. Although without the author's commentary the sources of allusions remain in such cases rather difficult to trace, they deserve our attention as examples of the ongoing presence of the given writer's oeuvre in the contemporary artistic consciousness and as a non-standard expression of a search for the visual equivalents of words, especially that the phenomena of this kind are becoming increasingly popular and are not limited to architecture.

Cecylia Malik's performance *365 Trees* is a curious example of a project alluding to literature. It was inspired by Italo Calvino's novel *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*). Its main character, a rebellious twelve-year-old boy, decides to climb a tree after a quarrel with his father and remain there for the rest of his life. Every day throughout a year Malik, each time dressed in a different fashion, climbed a carefully chosen tree in the city and documented her project on photographs (Malik 2011; also see: <http://www.cecyliamalik.pl/?t=365>). These photos evoke associations with Pippi Långstrump, another protagonist in children's literature. It is conspicuous that in such projects artists use concepts deeply rooted in the collective consciousness not so much through the agency of literature, but thanks to the unlimited recycling power of mass culture.

Another example of this phenomenon is the *Géant tombé du ciel* (*A Giant Fallen from the Sky*) show (a mobile art installation?) of the French Royal de Luxe company, which is a travesty of the story of Gulliver and the Lilliputians known from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, much indebted to the depictions of this motif in popular culture (Féral 2012: 109–111). Furthermore, mass culture also develops and imposes its own standards on the urban reception of literature. In contemporary times one comes across various souvenir stalls and gift shops offering t-shirts, bags, pins, mugs, stickers and other gadgets, with, for instance, literary quotations or portraits of writers. Nowadays the function of a medium for literary or literature-inspired content is also performed by the human body, which is visible in the growing popularity of tattoos with excerpts from literary works, portraits of writers, or visual renderings of literary motifs⁴. This controlled form of the reception of literature aims, above all, at a commercial success and can be seen as an act of imposition rather than promotion of writers' achievement. Still, this shows that the dynamic perception of literary texts is deeply rooted in the contemporary consciousness. Such an active approach informs a number of activities whose goal is to popularize the art of letters. The need for experiencing literature in a non-traditional way is conspicuous in the actions performed as a part of the Miłosz Wyzwolony (Miłosz Liberated) project in Cracow in 2011; for instance, dressed in t-shirts with random excerpts from poems of the Nobel Prize winner, young people searched for each other in the streets and via the Internet, making acquaintances and trying to reassemble the fragments of the texts. The poems of Miłosz were also available in cafes and pubs on napkins, coasters, or even sweets.

Moreover, there is a wide variety of spontaneous, purely urban forms of literature. This refers both to the presentation of occasional and utilitarian texts to the public and all the unconventional forms of the literary activity of writers who use non-standard artistic media. The city has long been the natural domain of so-called "applied literature", which is accurately illustrated by the popular phenomenon known as "street literature". Leslie Shepard, one of specialists in the field, applies this term to such examples of applied art as broadside ballads, chapbooks, proclamations, news-sheets, election bills, tracts, pamphlets, cocks, catchpennies and other ephemera, in other words: to everything that can be observed

⁴ See e.g. <http://www.contrariwise.org/>; <http://pulowerek.pl/2010/10/literackie-tatuaze/>; <http://ksiazki.wp.pl/gid,14655106,tytul,15-najlepszych-tatuazy-literackich,galeria.html>; <http://reniferu.pl/59855/literackie-tatuaze/>. Also confer: Drozdowski 2009: 141–171.

in the streets and that can be easily popularized (Shepard 1973). Scholars are also attracted to other unique forms of communication in urban space; for instance, in his monograph *Wiersze z cmentarza (Poems from the Cemetery)* Jacek Kolbuszewski investigates transformations of epitaphs. He considers the way they manifest themselves in the form of grave inscriptions or other public inscriptions, such as commemorative plaques, as their generic feature (Kolbuszewski 1985). Another example of this kind of occasional poetry are poems distributed in Manhattan in New York City after the September 11 attacks on the WTC in 2001 (Fraenkel 2010: 64–65, 74)⁵, and in Poland after the 2010 Polish Air Force Tu-154 crash in Smoleńsk or, more recently, after the tragedy in Sosnowiec (the death of the six-month-old Madzia, whose story of alleged kidnapping was covered extensively in the media at the beginning of 2012). The immediate nature of such forms of expression is closely connected with the need for making them public, which illustrates a wider phenomenon of the engagement of local communities in topical events. These events tend to produce specific narratives, such as, for instance, *urban legends* (Barber 2007; Czubala 1993, 1995, 2005; Rok 2011; Potrykus-Woźniak 2010: 96–98). Treated as sociological and ethnographical phenomena, urban legends tend to be considered as “literature” rooted in the urban consciousness.

At the same time, numerous authors who consider themselves writers make use of the contemporary forms of presenting their achievement offered by the city; for instance, Juliusz Erazm Bolek designs posters put up at bus and train stops and in the streets. Already in the 1980s, Bolek distributed his poems on miniature stickers. He also presents them on table-cloths and napkins. Furthermore, Bolek takes pride in developing in 2004 a new poetic medium – the *bodybook*, a miniature book to be worn on one’s neck on a specially designed lanyard (Dunin-Wąsowicz, Varga 1998: 17). Michał Zabłocki’s *Multipoetry* project is realized in an equally consistent way, through writing poems on pavements or as a part of the *366 Poems in 365 Days* campaign (every day since 24 October 2002 a different poem by Zabłocki was displayed on the facade of a tenement house in Cracow and in Warsaw), advertised as the “Word Premiere of the First

⁵ After the September 11 attacks, Adam Zagajewski’s poem “Try to Praise the Mutilated World” gained popularity among the citizens of New York City. First it was published in *The New Yorker*, but later it was many times republished and spontaneously distributed in public places, stuck on car windows and passed from hand to hand. It was considered that the poem perfectly conveys the moods and emotions of the New Yorkers and that it can “endure the tension of mourning” (Zagajewski 2002: 1).

Poetic Book on the Wall!" (http://poemat.com.pl/?page_id=76; accessed: 12.09.2012). Zabłocki is also the initiator and coordinator of the *Poems on the Walls* project (every day after dark a poem written by a user of the poetic social networking service Emultipoetry.eu is projected on the facade of the tenement house located at 1 Bracka Street – until recently in two, Polish and English, language versions). The project has been permanently in progress since 1 November 2010. Yet another example is Gerard Jurgen Blum-Kwiatkowski, who in 1997 launched *Das Offene Buch (The Open Book)* project in the German town of Hünfeld. It consists in displaying works of various concrete and visual poets from all around the world on the walls of buildings (Dawidek Gryglicka 2005: 132–134).

Urban public space seems obligatory for the existence of numerous contemporary events that tend towards literary forms (events that show such aspirations or are perceived in this fashion by observers and commentators). These are, for instance, poetry slams, which combine elements of recitation, improvisation and performance and take place in pubs, clubs or other urban venues where young audiences meet (it is conspicuous that the first poetic slam in Jarosław in September 2012 was organized with the motto: "Poezja na ulice" ("Let's Bring Poetry to the Streets") – <http://slam.art.pl/>; accessed: 17.09.2012). The city is a medium not only of literature but also of literary gestures, which materialize in the urban landscape they match so well. This is perfectly illustrated by performances of avant-garde artists (who are frequently the patrons of literary projects performed in public space). In a similar way, one may perceive, for instance, literature-inspired dandyism, which can be successful only in the urban context. It seems conspicuous that Jacek Dehnel, who nowadays promotes such an attitude, presents himself to the public on photographs in which he is depicted in his elegant frock with a top hat and a cane, walking in a dignified manner along the streets, against the background of city walls, pavements, park benches and avenues.

Even such a brief overview of the most representative forms of the existence of literature in urban space gives the reader a general idea about the regularities of phenomena taking place in this sphere nowadays: on the one hand, we observe an increase in all kinds of activities that promote literature and facilitate its materialization in the city; on the other, it is visible that the sanctioned, traditional orders are overlapped by new/additional/more intense forms of the participation of literature and literariness in the urban landscape. This happens not only through the agency of artists themselves, but also thanks to the contribution of scholars who study various aspects of citiness.

Literature and the literariness of urban space

Evidently, nowadays it is not only literature that is becoming increasingly urban, but also the city seems to be more and more literary. In other words, its concrete characteristics can be perceived through the prism of features typical of the art of letters. Scholars have been long stressing the fact that literariness is one of the aspects of the city, and thus the city can be read and perceived like a work of literature or a literature-related genre. This is the source of such popular metaphors as the city as a text, the city as a book, the city as a palimpsest, or the city as a stage – a metaphor that has recently gained more recognition due to the performative turn (Rybicka 2012a: 29). These approaches have a long-standing tradition, since they derive from such classics of urban literature as the works of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin or Franz Hessel (Molisak 2004: 623–635). Already in the 1920s Hessel firmly stated: “a street is a unique kind of text. Read it” (Hessel 2001b: 161). Contemporary academic discourse frequently employs this concept⁶ and advocates analyzing the city’s information layout with tools developed by poetics and the theory of literature, for instance, using such figures of speech as palindromes, oxymorons, anagrams, anacoluthons, synecdoches, asyndetons, catachreses or onomatoids (pseudo-names) (Rykiel 2008: 142–143). “The city – by nature a work in progress – is aimed to be de-re-constructed in its different plans and on a number of levels” (Zeidler-Janiszewska 1997: 8), at the same time encouraging us to decode the multiple meanings it contains in a literary fashion.

Advertising is nowadays often considered within the literary category of “the operating manuals of reality” (Krajewski 2005: 161). Tomasz Stępień, for instance, perceives the escalation of advertising as an ironic implementation of the postulates put forward by avant-garde artists, whose works were realized in and through the city and needed the city as a platform of communication:

The dreams of the early 20th century avant-garde artists have been made true in an unexpected way. In the streets we are surrounded with a colourful hubbub of texts clashing with one another. Walking, driving or strolling leisurely, we pass by texts, we read texts and we are read by texts. Everything is a text; everything can be art;

⁶ For instance, in the accounts of her walks around the city of Milan, Małgorzata Bogunia-Borowska acknowledges her indebtedness to Hessel (Bogunia-Borowska 2009: 71). Also confer: *Pisanie miasta – czytanie miasta* (1997); (Frydryczak 1998).

everyone can be an artist, though (s)he may not be aware of this – of post-modernism and the total commercial anesthetization of everyday life. The phantasmal hyperreality of the texts-simulacras around us constitutes a homogenic mass of people and objects, advertising, art, politics and religion (Stępień 2002: 106).

Writing about the labyrinthine space of Westin Bonaventure hotel in the centre of Los Angeles, a well-known construction designed by John Portman, which belongs to the architectural canon of postmodernity (Jameson 1991: 38–45), Wiesław Godzic mentions curious behaviour of his American friend, which he found even more fascinating than the building itself:

A professor of literature told me that he often visits this place in order to lose himself in the chaos of contemporaneity. Tired of wandering, he finally finds Virgil (the ghost of Virgil – he corrected himself), who directs him to one of the exits. Till now I am not sure whether he was joking when he said that what helps him in this are advertisements of his favourite cigarettes (Godzic 1996: 212).

If “the contemporary reception of advertising is to be understood as an inalienable element of spatial imagination in the post-modern world” then advertisements can be considered, following, for instance, Jean Baudrillard’s diagnosis, as “a new public space, imitating the theatre of social life” (Godzic 1996: 213), in which literary thinking plays a part.

Scholars also find a literary potential in the specifically urban phenomena associated with the nonconformist culture, such as *subvertising*, *adbusting*, *culture jamming*, *brandalism* or various forms of street-art such as stickers, graffiti or murals (Stępień 2002)⁷. These practices are often treated as a reflection of the need to saturate the urban tissue with literary gestures and the writing impetus: “Young people cover the walls of cities with a web of meanings, in this way creating a peculiar journal of reality. [...] Filled with writing, the walls of tenement houses turn into palimpsests” (Piastowska 2008: 21). Urban inscriptions are a reaction to topical events, a form of protest, a sign of resistance and negation, and, at the same time, a universal commentary on reality. Considering “the use of writing in public space as an act of non-conformism” (Araya 2010: 95), one should pay attention to its graphic, pragmatic and illocutionary power (Araya 2010: 98–99) as well as its literary subversiveness. A need for a literary translation of such phenomena is increased by the fact that they are easily decontextualized. These phenomena break away

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of this subject, see: (Klein 2000); (Drozdowski 2009: 87–139); (Żakowska 2009: 117–123); (Bińczycki 2010: 14–18); (Lamireau 2010).

from their origins and the ideas that they were initially determined by, which indicate their considerable susceptibility to multiple readings and interpretations. This is, for instance, the case with the famous “Kilroy was here” inscriptions and in Poland the inscriptions referring to “Józef Tkaczuk”. Disliked by the pupils, Tkaczuk was a caretaker in a grammar school in Warsaw. His name started functioning as a recognizable logo “a name-catchphrase, a magical formula »stolen« from the official structures and transformed into a secret code of the alternative world, into a peculiar »contemporary myth«” (Sulima 2000: 90). A similar role was played by the famous inscriptions on Parisian walls and banners in May 1968. Curiously, these inscriptions also invaded literary space, since they have been frequently catalogued in books, for instance, in the anthology “*Les murs ont la parole*”. *Journal mural Mai 68, Sorbonne, Odéon, Nanterre etc...* (1968; 2nd edition: 2007). Referring to this type of urban “signs of opposition” and “eruptions of spontaneous writing”, whose first large-scale manifestation were the Paris student riots (Petrucci 2010: 184), paleographers often use the term “graphic-literary »genre«” (Petrucci 2010: 181).

The possibility of shaping reality through “exposed writing [*écriture exposée*]” seems attractive to people of letters (Araya 2010: 95). Analyzing its role as a tool of opposition against Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile, Pedro Araya accentuates the fact that the Vanguard Scene (*Escena de Avanzada*), supported among others by writers, played a considerable role in the protests against censorship and the oppressive ideology. Through their projects, often performed in urban space, the members of the movement deconstructed “traditionally sanctioned literary and artistic ideologies, focusing mostly on revolutionizing the artistic language and its applications in the social context” (Araya 2010: 100). Writers (the novelist Diamela Eltit and the poet Raúl Zurita) were also members of the *Colectivo Acciones De Arte* (CADA), an activist group promoting “acting through art” and aiming at the transformation of the city into a metaphor” (Eltit 2000: 158; quoted in: Araya 2010: 100).

Of course, one should not consider all the spectacles of meaning performed in urban space (not only those that make use of the written word, but also dramaturgical and narrative intervention actions) in purely literary terms. Still, it is conspicuous that such (often metaphorical) categorizations are frequently employed by the interpreters of these phenomena. The term “visual poem” is, for instance, often applied to the strategies of resistance used by such activists as the participants in Occupy Wall Street (Ogrodzka 2012: 4). In 1991 the Polish Pegasus prize was awarded

to a Łódź artist, Cezary Bodzianowski, whose “performances discover poetry in everyday prose”. As further stated in the verdict,

Cezary Bodzianowski moves gleefully through the world as if it were a story [...] Fragments of reality become cues for narratives of his own. [...] Narration is a way of exploring the world of fiction. Bodzianowski constructs his stories using various methods, most of them tested beforehand. He uses disguise and deception, shifting meanings between domains, employs elephantine associations based on semantic similarity and contiguity. Infrequent forays into parody [...] usually pale before his propensity for poetry. [...] Bodzianowski builds his statements around linguistic associations, restoring the figurative nature of language. Some actions illustrate figures of speech [...], showing the potential of semantic associations with breath-taking legerdemain (Mytkowska 2003: 183–185).

The case of the “speaking architecture” may also be treated as an attempt to create a different pattern of communication using the art of letters, which is best illustrated by the architectural concepts of Bernard Tschumi (Rewers 1998: 96–100; King 1996: 170–171; Hays 2010: 160). During Tschumi’s seminar in the 1970s, his students designed projects of buildings inspired by the works of such writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Franz Kafka or Italo Calvino, while Tschumi himself suggested applying the narrative structure of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* to the new spatial organization of the Covent Garden in London, so that the district would gain a specific “incidental” quality (the project was never put into practice, yet one may get insight into the ideas behind it, investigating Tschumi’s documentation).

Such projects aim at “textualizing” the urban tissue (Gądecki 2005) and show a possibility of considering it from the rhetorical, persuasive, narrative and literary perspectives. Similar categorizations are not so much a result of a conviction that the above phenomena allude to the traditionally-understood literature (which is not always the case) or of the involvement of writers in them (which frequently takes place, yet not as a rule), but, above all, they are a consequence of the functions they perform, since literature is understood in this context as acting with and through words (Fraenkel 2010: 79). Therefore, what comes to the fore are the performative and pragmatic aspects of literariness, whose essence, in this context, resides in the ability to unveil the unsatisfactory order and in motivating the addressee to rearrange or even radically challenge the *status quo*. Such a perspective provides legitimate grounds for the use of the term “literary event”, whose role is to communicate and influence reality.

The indispensability of (urban) literature

The proposed overview of literature in/of the city still seems far from exhaustive. Thus it is difficult to draw any unequivocal conclusions. Yet it is already noticeable that the discussed phenomena cannot be easily generalized in literary terms. Of course, the analysis of the above examples with the standard descriptive language can be useful if one aims at indicating the traditions of such forms of presentation and the basic social dimension of the functioning of literature. At the same time, however, if we attempt to capture the contemporary essence and semantics of these examples, our efforts appear to be bound to failure. The nexus between citiness and literariness leads to the production of new qualities or, at least, meanings unique to the discussed phenomena, which can only be activated in a concrete spatial configuration. Let us, for instance, consider how Bloomsday is described by one of Joyce's scholars, who assumes such a perspective:

the contemporary commemoration of *Ulysses* allows Joyce's novel to recode the city, charging its everyday sites with esoteric significance, producing a surfeit of meaning that hovers just out of view, traceable only by the costumes going through the motions. Of course, the production of multiple, unsuspected levels of significance for the apparently quotidian also characterizes *Ulysses* itself, where everyday actions flip into Homeric counterparts. Doubling this effect, Bloomsday has transformed Joyce's book into an epic subtext for the real (Brooker 2004: 211–212).

As highlighted by the scholars diagnosing the changes that have been taking place: "Instead of questions [...] about the meaning of space and the ways it produces meaning, what comes to the fore nowadays is the question who inscribes space with the given [in this case, literary – M.L.] meanings and what for" (Grochowski 2008: 9). From such a perspective, the urban tissue seems to be a result of various literary conceptualizations as well as a factor stimulating further literary explorations in the field of not only the (re)distribution of literature and the ways of preserving it, but also literary gestures and events. At the same time, the following questions remain open: does literature creatively absorb the city? Or does it adjust to the city (and in this process even loses its autonomous character)? Does literature gain a new identity in the light of these practices? Or perhaps these practices only legitimize ideas already present in literature, which were earlier less visible and less accentuated?

Instead of offering any conclusive answers to the above questions, one should postulate introducing a new discourse to describe these practices. In this respect, one may, for instance, take recourse to media studies

and the idea of convergence they propose, with particular emphasis placed on assimilation, combining media, multimediality and the culture of participation (Jenkins 2006).

The specific codes of access to literature, also in its proliferating urban and spatial forms, show that what matters nowadays is not only the message, but more importantly its desired and programmed impact (what is important is not the aesthetics or the aestheticizing aura of the message but the possibility to memorize it). At the same time, this situation, associated with the redistribution of literature and literariness and their impact on urban space, shows that spectators, tourists and participants in communal cultural practices are nowadays becoming the typical addressees of art. Such an addressee as a participant, consumer, spectator or passer-by, an addressee shaped by the verbocentric models of communication is the target of the contemporary authors, who cherish the assumption that the addressee may not necessarily crave for books or reading experience, but he/she still needs some kind of literature. And let us conclude with this optimistic note.

Translated by Katarzyna Ojrzyńska

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