

WHEN RYLSKI MEETS NABOKOV... (A LITTLE GIRL FROM THE ‘EXCELSIOR’ HOTEL AND THE NYMPHET PHENOMENON)

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Polish writer and literary critic Marek Bieńczyk – while reading *Pupilla* by Katarzyna Przyłuska-Urbanowicz – makes the following observation in a semi-ironic, semi-nostalgic tone:

We are moving further and further away from Stendhal (and so many others), who openly spoke of his love for an ‘incredible nymphet’; fortunately, the prohibitions are being internalized, the Internet and the press are vigilant, and we may hope – on behalf of the children - that presidents will stop stroking children’s heads and kissing them on the cheek when greeting them. The protection of their rights, which has been going on for years, is accompanied by an artistic, and especially literary, impoverishment of the motif of the nymphet; writers have to look for other areas of risk.

However, in literature of the past this motif hit the eyes like a neon sign. Not only Stawrogin, not only Carroll, Petrarca or Byron; when Słowacki describes his mystical ecstasy when seeing a shepherdess from Pornice, it is easier and safer to think about his mystical breakthrough and *Król Duch*, which he will soon begin to write, than about his insatiable, impudent gaze (Bieńczyk 2013: 23; emphasis mine – B.P.J.).

The above statement made by a well-known literary historian and writer serves as a good pretext to return to Eustachy Rylski’s short’ story entitled *Dziewczynka z hotelu ‘Exclesior’* [*A Little Girl from the ‘Excelsior’ Hotel*]. This work, included by the author in the volume *Wyspa* [*An Island*, 2007]

twenty years after it was written¹, deserves attention for many reasons. First of all, it depicts an ambiguous and intriguing female figure, which is quite rare in Polish prose. To be more precise, the figure of a woman-girl, a nymphet, known from the 1950s as 'lolita', i.e. since the publication of Vladimir Nabokov's scandalous novel². Secondly, the ambiguity of the title character of the short story allowed Rylski to subtly undermine the status of the presented reality, brimming with interpretational consequences. As a result, the seemingly trivial story of an aging man's erotic fascination with a teenage girl – told in a way that presents a range of attitudes, characters and 'gadgets'³ characteristic of the trivial, everyday life of the People's Republic of Poland – eludes the frames of commonly understood realism, appeals to the reader to review the actions motivating the events and to reach to the treasury of images preserved in the memory of culture. Thirdly, Rylski's story can be considered as a Polish variation on Nabokov's *Lolita*, which makes it even more interesting...

A Little Girl from the 'Excelsior' Hotel has many satirical accents. It can also be interpreted in relation to Charles Taylor's concept of modern identity: as a work about the crisis of subjectivity in a time of devaluation of fundamental values and a loss of the sense of generational community⁴.

¹ In addition to the extended version of *A Little Girl from the 'Excelsior' Hotel* and the title work, the volume also includes the following short stories: *Dworski Zapach* [Courtly Scent] and *Jak granit* [Like Granite].

² The English version of *Lolita* by Nabokov was published in Paris in 1955, but it became particularly popular after the American edition (1958) and its subsequent numerous translations.

³ To name but a few, there are references to the shortage of supplies and motifs such as lemonade in plastic bags, 'superbistor' clothing, bribery, cheap, fake petrol, Russian perfume and 'Brutal' deodorant, MO (civic militia) headquarters, the figure of a holiday animator.

⁴ See. Piętka 2013: 13-29. The author of the book looks at the protagonist of *A Little Girl from the 'Excelsior' Hotel* and sees certain similarities with Kafka's protagonists: 'Man, digested by the system, is only a cog in the great self-propelling bureaucracy machine. Like a machine, he performs the work he hates, every year during the holidays he goes to the same place by the sea, he conducts conversations devoid of any content, he lives with a woman he probably does not love. The accountant is a man burned out, distorted by the system in which he has

These traces, though difficult to ignore, remain on the side-lines when one looks at Rylski's text through the prism of the underage seducer, which we are encouraged to do by the title of the story itself.

The motif of a nymphet with a peculiar name, Inte, focuses the interpreter's attention on existential issues. The main character of the story is a man in his fifties, an accountant on vacation, immersed in marital hell and depressed by the growing dysfunctions of his own body. His mood is determined by a feeling of overwhelming fatigue, burnout, emptiness and impotence, but these states are accompanied by a considerable amount of self-ironic distance. (For example, the protagonist describes the so-called 'transition period' in which he finds himself as a 'descension' period, [Rylski 2007: 26]). Introducing the figure of a 'strange girl' into such a context becomes a way to present the close encounter between youth and maturity (if not old age) - and thus, to a certain extent, to dwell upon Gombrowicz's theme. The use of the phrase 'to a certain extent' seems justified because of the features of the literary construction of Rylski's protagonist, which clearly differentiate the artistic visions of the authors of *Pornography* and *A Little Girl from the 'Excelsior' Hotel*.

In short, according to Gombrowicz, the opposition between old age and youth translates into a dichotomy of weight and lightness. Youth is the primary source of salvific amorality, 'the divine element in the face of an eliminated God', it is 'the only hope, the only beauty, the only renewal' (Sanavio 1991: 32). This is what the author of *Ferdydurke* said when reflecting about his own work:

What I wanted to show was the crisis of ideology, the same problems, the crisis of the human form, revolution, camouflage... and finally the triumph of youth as an eternal renewal: but not in the sense of *naïveté*, ordinary, natural man, sincere and so on. (...) This does not exist (...). In my opinion, youth is not so naive. But it seems to me that the only thing we have left is youth: the divine element. God has been eliminated. Morality no longer exists. We enter a world in which personality is lost, everything is broken

lived for such a long time; he cannot be anything more than his profession, his life is deprived of any chance for change. He has become a victim of totalitarianism, which deprives people of their subjectivity, making them shapeless and impersonal masses of multiplicity and identity (...) (ibid.: 26).

down into pieces, but there is always this charm, born at the very core, the ever-renewing biological power of humanity. That is why I put emphasis on this particular subject. Youth becomes the only hope, the only beauty, the only renewal (ibid.: 32).

In the case of the protagonists of *Pornography*, written in the spirit of Nietzsche, the need to ‘immerse in youth’ can hardly be reduced to the desire to satisfy lustful urges or a desire for an imaginative return to the past; youth fascinates the perverse ‘old men’, Fryderyk and Witold, above all as an aesthetic phenomenon and a ‘secret relieving alchemy’, which is the mother of carelessness and primordiality (see: Pawłowska-Jądrzyk 2002: 16-23). The figures of the aging men created by Gombrowicz are those of manipulators who direct situations and events, saturating themselves with the charm of youth.

The story *A Little Girl from the ‘Excelsior’ Hotel* depicts a different type of relationship and thus demands a different interpretation. First of all, the figure of the title character of Eustachy Rylski’s work – both in terms of internal and external appearance – is marked by an almost phenomenal heterogeneity, constantly balancing between extremes. This feature is most visible in the description of the character’s appearance, presented consistently (which is worth remembering) from the point of view of the main character:

He looked at the girl. She could have been twelve, maybe thirteen years old. There was as much of a child in her as there was of a woman. Her face was small. Her features were complete, her nose, long and narrow, slightly crooked at the end, like in the case of predatory old women from the south. If we add a high forehead and concave cheeks, the whole appeared too ascetic, not in harmony with the rest, affirming life, beauty, youth. But her lips, full and intricately outlined, shiny, blue eyes, shadowed with eyelids with long, seductive eyelashes and thick hair complemented the suspicious austerity of features with an appealing aura of girlhood. Her body was dark, long and thin, with boyish hips, convex, beautifully shaped buttocks. Her legs were thin, but not skinny, as is often the case with girls of this age, with clearly marked thigh and calf muscles. Her hands, on the other hand, were flaccid and thin like ribbons, spread out on the hot sand. Her arms, slightly raised, with protruding collarbones, made her resemble a bird (Rylski 2007: 11; emphasis mine – B.P.J.).

For the nameless protagonist of the story, who initially succumbs to holiday boredom and the stagnation of a seaside resort, the young temptress appears to combine, in an almost grotesque way, the features of a young girl and an old woman, or as a creature living 'beyond time' (ibid.: 11). The man perceives Inte as a little woman who is both appealing and untrustworthy, her gaze concealing 'a second gaze, truer than the first one' (ibid.: 16). As the plot develops, the antagonistic features of her character are revealed: the girl's nature seems to combine innocence and calculation, sincerity and lies, maturity and childishness (e.g. Inte's statement that her dog Maka 'must have had a go' in the forest because once she gave birth to puppies, another time foxes, and yet another time to a badger...).

When analyzing the presentation of the characters in the story *A Little Girl from the 'Excelsior' Hotel*, it is worth noting that Rylski used animal motifs, even insect motifs, when describing title character. During their first meeting, Inte draws the man's attention by resembling a dragonfly (ibid.: 5), and then reminds him of a bird (ibid.: 11, 28) or a cat (ibid.: 54, 56). Although comparisons of this kind are not further developed in the text, they are not insignificant from the point of view of the aesthetics of imagination and the position of Rylski's work in the network of intertextual relations, especially when one considers images reflected in various forms of art other than literature, such as paintings or sculptures (e.g. harpies). In addition, animal motifs are sometimes used as symbols of erotic emotions, instincts and passions in cultural texts of certain epochs, which is significant from the point of view of the discussed topic (see: Gutowski 1993: 121-138).

It is worth mentioning that literary critics point to the significant role of 'butterfly' motifs in Vladimir Nabokov's oeuvre, also in *Lolita*. As Teresa Dobrzyńska (2003: 51-52) puts it, the butterfly:

(...) provides an ontological model for the protagonist of the novel and is, in a way, her symbolic *alter ego*: Lolita-the nymphet is an analogy of a pupa transformed into a butterfly, and the Latin word for pupa is *nymph*. This motif is an indication of the metamorphosis, announcing and expressing the changeability of the forms of existence, which defines the dynamics of the plot – aimed at stopping transient things in time. It symbolizes the main message of the novel, presenting the illusion of stability, the fallibility of conclusions and expectations, the possible changeability of things, similar to the change of a butterfly.

Rylski's nymphet, on the other hand, can be seen as a subtle stylization of a mermaid – half-woman, half-bird (according to Greek mythology) or half-woman, half-fish (according to Roman tradition), dangerous for men. Such an interpretation seems justified as, apart from what has already been mentioned, there seems to be a special relationship between Inte and the sea⁵ and her extraordinary swimming skills, as well as her role in the tragic development of events. In the final scene of the story, the man, encouraged by Inte to take a swim, drowns after an intimate intercourse on the beach, which also brings to mind another variant of the *femme fatale*⁶: the 19th century phantasm of a woman-mantis.

It should be noted, however, that the work also contains motifs that allow us to go beyond this kind of qualification of the title character. The uncommon behavior and peculiar statements made by the underage protagonist of the story (for example when she says that someone is always next to her, even when she is alone, or that she does not know how old she is) create an aura of uniqueness and mystery around her, connecting her with the hidden dimension of existence. (The same is true of the children characters in Henry James's micro-story *The Turn of the Screw* – to refer

⁵ See, for example, the following dialogue between the two main characters in the story:

'(..) He asked in a different tone:

- Were you sleeping?
- No, I was listening.
- To what?

She looked at him with distraction, shrugging her shoulders, as if surprised that he could ask such a foolish question.

She said emphatically, firmly, categorically:

- To the sea!
- You can't hear it – the man said slowly and hesitated.
- There is no wind, no waves, it is quiet, you can't hear the sea.
- I can hear it, always - she sighed and lowered her head on the sand again' (Rylski 2007: 13-14).

⁶ See the discussion of this issue in the context of cinematography in: Hadamik 2003: 114-139. It is worth noting that in the film adaptation of Rylski's short story (1988, directed by Antoni Krauze) Inte is practically devoid of sexual appeal and a demonic aura.

to an outstanding piece of work from the treasury of world literature [see: Budrecki 1959; Janion 2001; Mitosek 2003]). What is more, the Inte's character also introduces the motif of a drowned man into the story (the girl tells the man about the macabre visions of her father-mariner, who supposedly drowned during one of his sailing expeditions). Numerous motifs of this kind, like the picture of a dead seagull brought by a wave (Rylski 2007: 21), anticipate the death of the admirer of the young coquette, and thus serve as a prefiguration in the plot (see: Pawłowska Jądrzyk 2011: 102 et seq.). Such a construction of the story introduces an additional note of anxiety to the work, raises questions concerning the hidden sense of reality, the destiny of man, the purposefulness of fate.

The ending of the story makes the figure of Inte seem particularly unreal. She appears as a mediator of the transition, guiding the man, who is tired of life, into death and, in a way, becoming a guardian of the hidden order which, as we begin to suspect, does indeed exist. In the final scene on the beach, Rylski provides the underage seducer with an attribute well-known from horror literature (e.g. from Edgar Allan Poe's short stories)⁷:

⁷ See e.g. the following fragment of the famous short story *Ligeia* (Poe 1838): 'For eyes we have no models in the remotely antique. It might have been, too, that in these eyes of my beloved lay the secret to which Lord Verulam alludes. They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race. They were even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad. Yet it was only at intervals --in moments of intense excitement -- that this peculiarity became more than slightly noticeable in Ligeia. And at such moments was her beauty -- in my heated fancy thus it appeared perhaps -- the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth -- the beauty of the fabulous Houri of the Turk. The hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black, and, far over them, hung jetty lashes of great length. The brows, slightly irregular in outline, had the same tint. The »strangeness«, however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression. Ah, word of no meaning! behind whose vast latitude of mere sound we intrench our ignorance of so much of the spiritual. The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it -- that something more profound than the well of Democritus -- which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What was it? I was possessed with a passion

with unusual eyes – neither animal nor human – that seem to reflect light coming from an unearthly source:

She looked him in the face. He noticed a certain light reflected in her eyes, like in two mirrors.

The pier? – he thought. But that was impossible, they were behind a barge, the city lights were nowhere to be seen, and stars reflected light in a different way, and besides, there were no stars. But there was light in her eyes, and it was reflected. (...)

– Let's go now – he said with conviction, but he did not move.

The girl did not react to his words. She just looked at him, as if through him, and her eyes became bigger and bigger in the darkness, like the eyes of a cat, when it looks at something attentively, though thoughtlessly, and you stop seeing anything but the eyes, and everything in the cat becomes this one single gaze (Rylski 2007: 53-54; emphasis mine – B.P.J.).

Shortly after this conversation, the man reluctantly agrees to take an evening swim, and finally 'moves to the side of eternal darkness', without losing his sense of security, conditioned by the presence of the girl, or the sensations associated with the closeness of her body, 'still deprived of any signs of femininity'. Dying becomes almost a pleasure for him: it seems that death allows him to possess the beautiful temptress forever, and at the same time to return to the beginning of his own life – escape from the 'tainted world' (see: the motif of stinking water, also important for Tomasz Mann in his famous *Death in Venice*) towards the idylls of childhood.

Mario Vargas Llosa, while looking for an explanation for the scandalous phenomenon of *Lolita* (Nabokov's novel was adorned with the halo of a 'cursed novel', but essentially it was devoid of erotic literality), comes to the conclusion that the story told by the protagonist- narrator Humbert Humbert...

to discover. Those eyes! those large, those shining, those divine orbs! they became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers'. I develop the issue of the relation between the indicated motifs in works with a metaphysical aura in: Pawłowska-Jądrzyk 2011: 127-151.

(...)is scandalous, above all because he himself perceives it and presents it this way, always emphasizing his 'idiocy' and 'monstrosity' (these are his own words). It is precisely this criminal consciousness of the protagonist that gives his adventure an unhealthy and morally unacceptable feature, much more so than the age of his victim, who is only a year younger than Shakespeare's Juliet. His antipathetic and arrogant attitude, the contempt he seems to have for the people around him, including those 'half-mature animals' who are the object of his desire, also contributes to the deepening of his guilt, depriving him of any sympathy on the part of the reader (Llosa 1997: 138; emphasis mine – B.P.J.).

It would be difficult to look for an element of scandal in *A Little Girl from the 'Excelsior' Hotel*, not only because the narrative is conducted in a different way than in the case of Nabokov's *Lolita*. Eustachy Rylski's story provides numerous indications that the erotic adventure with the young girl, whose name means 'nothing' in Swedish, is only a product of the protagonist's imagination, a projection of his desires and fears, intensified by an existential crisis, deteriorating health and the closeness of death. The eroticism of the story, based on the traditional synthesis of Eros and Thanatos, is presented in a transgressive and somewhat amoral way.

Inte is always described from the point of view of the protagonist, we never see her talking to other characters. At the beginning of the peculiar romance the man has a fever and experiences an overwhelming feeling of absence and separation from his surroundings (Rylski 2007: 12)⁸. The story also deals with the problem of illusion and reality, reality and dream, truth and fantasy (see: the man's phantasms connected with the paintings gallery and the get to know each other evening⁹, the significant title of the press

⁸ The same situation occurs in *The Seven Year Itch* by Billy Wilder (1955). See: Durys 2011: 85-86; Llosa 1997: 140-141.

⁹ 'At some point the man seemed to see the shadow of the girl from the hotel, cast on the wing of the wide white door, as if it was falling from the corridor. He was pleased with her presence, although he did not expect her here. He did not want the shadow to be real. This form of her presence suited him. After a while he had an impression that she had inaudibly walked through the dance floor and disappeared behind an open window, so he thanked her, with a sly smile, for her generous discretion' (Rylski 2007: 38; emphasis mine – B.P.J.).

article¹⁰ or the press note invented by the hero about discovering the body of a middle-aged man in the sea). In this context, the fact that the girl allegedly lives in a hotel which, as it turns out, does not exist, is of particular importance.

* * *

Eustachy Rylski's story may well be interpreted as an example of psychological prose with clear existential features – as a literary study of alienation, aging and gradual loss of connections with life. There is a temptation to look at the work as discreetly referring to the outstanding achievements of Polish prose (such as Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's magical *Tatarak* [*Calamus*])¹¹ and world prose (such as *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Miriam* by Truman Capote and even some of Edgar Allan Poe's works)¹². The uniqueness of Rylski's story seems to be based on the transformation of various ideas related to the phantasm of a *femme fatale* (including the image of an animal-woman, characteristic of Young

¹⁰ 'WHAT IS. WHAT MAY BE. WHAT WILL NOT BE' (ibid.: 32).

¹¹ At first glance, *Calamus* falls into the realistic convention, but it is difficult to grasp the multitude and depth of meanings of this masterpiece of Polish novellarism without seeing its mythical or even irrational elements. One of the interpreters point out the magic atmosphere that prevails the world created by Iwaszkiewicz: '(...) in this seemingly simple work there are many mysterious things (...). Mrs Marta sensed that the price for her inappropriate love would be death. She knew that she was terminally ill, that she would soon die, but at the same time she was convinced that she had cast some terrible spell on the boy: that she had infected him with death. In a magical sense, prevailing throughout the story, she is the cause of the tragedy' (Melkowski 1997: 114-115). On the other hand, Eugenia Łoch (1978: 29-32) sees *Calamus* as the archetype of fatal love and perceives Marta as one of Iwaszkiewicz's *femmes fatales*, just like Malwina from *Brzezina* [*The Birch Wood*], Zdanowska from *Młyn nad Utratą* [*Mill under Utrata*], Ignasia from *Słońce w kuchni* [*Sun in the Kitchen*], and the heroines of the following works: *Matka Joanna od Aniołów* [*Mother Joan of Angels*], *Powrót Prozerpiny* [*Proserpina's Come Back*], *Opowiadanie szwajcarskie* [*Swiss Stories*], *Kochankowie z Marony* [*Lovers from Marona*]. See also: Pawłowska-Jądrzyk 2013: 173-179.

¹² Incidentally, Rylski (2009) mentions writers such as Iwaszkiewicz and Capote as his artistic idols.

Poland's art [Gutowski 1993]), the figure of the nymphet and the 'strange child' and introducing them into the caricatured scenery of the reality of the People's Republic of Poland. From the perspective of the broad intertextual context, one can easily see in *Inte* a 'beautiful temptress', but also an ordinary 'little whore' – something more than a literary manifestation of misogyny, a contemporary crisis of masculinity (see: Melosik 2006) or a battle between the sexes.

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Summary

The author of the article, interpreting the story of Eustachy Ryłski *Dziewczynka z hotelu ‘Exclesior’* [*A Little Girl from the ‘Excelsior’ Hotel*], recalls, among other pieces of art, the famous novel *Lolita* of Vladimir Nabokov. It proves that the uniqueness of the work of the contemporary Polish writer is based on the transformation of various ideas related to the phantasm of the *femme fatale* (including the image of an animal-woman), the figure of the nymphet and the ‘strange child’ and introducing them into the caricatured scenery of the reality of the People’s Republic of Poland. This allows you to read this intriguing story as a literary stage of alienation, aging and gradual loss of connections with life.

Keywords: psychological prose, Polish prose, Eustachy Ryłski, Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, the motif of the nymphet, *femme fatale*