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On the Nature of an Ordinary Bug: A New Perspective on Non-Fiction Research

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During a lecture in 1999, Geert Mak, a well-known Dutch writer of non-fiction, complained that in the complex relationship between fiction and literature, there are two common misconceptions. The first is that all written works of fiction are literature. The second seems to be even more prevalent; it states that all literary texts are fiction. Hence, this leads to the question: what is the status of non-fiction, fact-based literature, literary reportage, and *creative non-fiction*? Mak, quoting Henk J.A. Hofland, a distinguished Dutch journalist, claims that in the eyes of the majority of literary critics and readers, literature (without a modifying adjective) is "a species of higher bug." All other literary composition is destined to have the status of "an ordinary bug."[1] Fact-based literature is a "Cinderella," remaining in the shadows of the supreme genre, the novel.

The Polish reader may regard Mak's opinion as anachronistic. In Poland, literary reportage, this "symbolically-realistic product,"[2] appeared almost at the same time as

1 Mak, Geert. "Enkele gedachten van een lag insect. Over non-fictie in de literatuur." Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde te Leiden. 2009, 17.

2 Zaręba, Maciej. "Dziennikarz jest świadkiem" ("A Journalist is a Witness"). "Conrad Festival," a supplement to *Tygodnik Powszechny*. 23:

the American *New Journalism*, while in the Netherlands non-fiction became wildly popular in the second half of the 1990s. In Poland, non-fiction was a paradoxical by-product of communist censorship:

> Due to the fact that they were not allowed to talk about non-constructive issues, young journalists often constructed their texts like theatrical plays, where only a diagnosis appeared, a twinkling at the meeting points of replicas and authentic scenes. This is how the office of censorship, unintentionally, played the role of matchmaker in marrying reportage, literature and theatre.[3]

Nowadays, many non-fiction writers use narration techniques developed in the field of fiction writing. We are also witnessing a reverse phenomenon where writers of fiction write books bordering on non-fiction. At the same time, an increasing number of published non-fiction books blend the literary style of writing with historical or journalistic content.

However, in his lecture Geert Mak touched upon an important quandary which is still waiting to be resolved by the field of literary theory. He questioned the point of differentiating between fiction and "not-fiction." After all, writers of both genres employ the same elements: they write about people or rather about what happens to them. Should we be concerned with the question of something happening in real life or it merely being a figment of the imagination, if the narration is impressive? Or perhaps, the division into two genres is in their mutual interest?

Let us put this issue aside for a moment and let us begin by explaining the scope of the term "non-fiction literature," which I have been using. A while ago, Małgorzata Czermińska questioned the classification of non-fiction literature into one separate genre. Following other researchers, she distinguished three primary types: fact-based literature (including reportage and its related forms, such as travelogues), "personal experience" literature (coined by Roman Zimand, including autobiography, journal, diary, and memoirs) as well as the essay[4]. Employing this rather reasonable division, I could focus on fact-based literature. The majority of texts covered by the English term *creative non-fiction*

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13 (2009) (a preface to an anthology of Polish literary reportage entitled *Ouvertyr till livet*, published in Sweden).

3 ibid.

4 Czermińska, Małgorzata. "Badania nad prozą niefikcjonalną – sukcesy, pułapki, osobliwości" ("Non-fiction Studies: Successes, Traps, and Curiosities"). *Wiedza o literaturze i edukacja (Literary Knowledge and Education),* edited by Michałowska, T., Goliński, Z., Jarosiński, Z. Wydawnictwo IBL PAN. Warsaw, 1996, 437.

certainly fit within this broad dictionary definition, which in the non-fiction category includes the "contemporary narrative fiction of a documentary character, encompassing genres blending the line between literature and journalism" and "created without a specific literary intention," in which "specific literary quality provides an added value"[5]. At the same time, the author of this definition, Michał Głowiński, notes that in many cases "the lines between fact-based literature and other literary genres are blurred" and he points to the writings of Riszard Kapuściński and Hanna Krall as examples of such genre blending.[6] Despite this example, I uphold the term "non-fiction literature" due to the fact that it seems to me that the separation of contemporary fact-based literature and personal experience literature is rather problematic. The first genre is supposed to aim at being objective, to concentrate on its subject, and to avoid subjectivity. The second one oscillates between "giving witness" (by this it may come close to fact-based literature) and "writing openly about oneself"[7]. Czermińska herself admits that it is impossible to draw, with unwavering certainty, a demarcation line between these two areas of non-fiction literature[8].

Doubts and deliberations about "non-fiction literature," understood as a separate genre that is in opposition to "the novel," stem not only from poetics but also classification dilemmas. First of all, this is supposed to be the answer to the increasingly frequently-questioned boundary between what is real and what is fictional (by this I am returning to the issue raised by Geert Mak). The narrativist turn emphasizes the constructional character of cognitive processes, indirect access to bare facts, and an unavoidable fictionalization of experience. Grzegorz Grochowski noted that increasingly more often "even texts that declare that they are true to the referential pact are treated as stories inevitably infected with the creation and confabulation virus."[9] Hence, from the point of view of the narrativists, non-fiction literature is fiction, which disavows itself, "fiction that is hypocritical, unaware and in conflict with itself." According to the narrativists, "on the other hand" non-fiction is "fiction that, due to absurd self-imposed restrictions, denies itself creative power, which

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5 Głowiński, Michał. "Literatura faktu" ("Literature of Fact"). In: Głowiński, M., Kostkiewiczowa, T., Okopień-Sławińska, A., Sławiński, J. *Słownik terminów literackich (A Dictionary of Literary Terms)*. Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich. Wrocław-Warsaw-Kraków. 2000, 285.

6 ibid.

7 Czermińska, Małgorzata. "Badania nad prozą..." ("Non-fiction studies..."). 438.

8 ibid.

9 Grochowski, Grzegorz. "Pytania o niefikcjonalną prozę dyskursywną" ("Questions About Discursive Non-fiction"). *Polonistyka w przebudowie (Polish Studies Under Reconstruction)*, edited by Czermińska, M. Universitas. Kraków. 2005. 651.

could take it to another level, towards a different form of truth. It is fiction of the worst sort, poor, timid and paralyzed."[10] For the narrativists the concept of literature being fact-based is an illusion because it entails the existence of external truth and of a text capable of reflecting that truth.

The division between real and artistic-fiction texts is of course a rather new peculiarity, which should be associated with modernism. For the romantics and the romantic consciousness it was still irrelevant whether a diary belonged to the genre of artistic writing or whether it was a non-literary text. Both types of text followed the same rhetorical norm. The expansion of nonfiction, assuming "separation of cognitive and aesthetic functions, distinction between a fictional narrator and a real author," presented a contrary trend to "the model favored by modernism, of autonomous literature that constitutes an aim in itself, and is anti-mimetic."[11] However, nowadays, a visible erosion of the above-noted distinctions is taking place; the relationships between various genres are becoming increasingly blurred. Clear oppositions are being replaced by hybrid and transgressive genres. Both writing linked to fiction and that associated with documentarism can be described as a field of "collaboration of the fact-based truth and artistic creation."[12]

Therefore, in contemporary literary theory, non-fiction is often treated as a form of textualization of experience equal to literary fiction. Grzegorz Grochowski writes about the shift of emphasis in research, as follows:

> We can assume then that currently, the dominant trend in humanities discourse is a transition from poetics to anthropology… Very little attention is paid to detailed issues of poetics, such as the way a given genre exists and the theoretical status of typological categories… Non-fiction is rarely scrutinized from its *differentia specifica* side and significantly more often appears as the main topic in monographs devoted to specific themes, cultural formations, historical experiences and processes, or in dissertations dedicated to the works of particular authors… In other words, non-fiction creates a great deal of broad and specific interest, but in most cases not as a subject in itself worth studying, but rather a kind of conduit for issues of a highly philosophical, moral, cultural and ideological nature.[13]

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10 Lejeune, Philippe. *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii (Variations on a Certain Pact: On Autobiography)* Translated by Grajewski, W., Grabowski, S., Labuda, A., Lubas-Bartoszyńska, R. Edited by Lubas-Bartoszyńska, R. Universitas. Krakow. 2001. 4.

11 Grochowski, Grzegorz. "Pytania o niefkicjonalną…" ("Questions About Discursive…"). 652.

12 ibid.

13 ibid, 653.

As an example, Grochowski provides the book, *Formy pamięci: O przedstawianiu przeszłości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej (Forms of Memory: Presentation of the Past in Contemporary Polish Literature)* by Marek Zaleski.[14] It is a work on autobiographical discourse, where the author manages without any genre specifications, while searching for signs of one common position manifested in a similar way in many texts belonging to different genres.[15] Grochowski notices a similar tendency to reject the taxonomical approach to genre research and to embrace cultural context in the works of Polish researchers, such as Adam Fitas (2003), Dorota Kozicka (2003), Maciej Michalski (2003) and Andrzej Zawadzki (2001).[16] All of them point out the progressing subjectification of non-fiction, the infusion of fact-based literature with personalized expression, the relaxation of methodological and factual rigours, and the rejection of classic forms of reportage

> in favor of structural freedom, a multitude of genres and *quasi*-artistic invention… By this they emphasize a creative attitude of the subject to the classification and order of the genre, which has been subjected

14 Zaleski, Marek. *Formy pamięci: O przedstawianiu przeszłości w polskiej literaturze współczesnej (Forms of Memory: Presentation of the Past in Contemporary Polish Literature)*. słowo/obraz terytoria. Gdańsk. 2004.

15 Marek Zaleski, in his book, does not deal with the issue of the referential nature of fiction and non-fiction, despite heralding it in the preface. However, he shares narrativist doubts in the context of depiction of the past. Following in Hayden White's footsteps, he writes: "Hence, that which becomes the past in reference to the present, is not the essence of that which was. In other words, Hegel was wrong when he claimed that 'Wesen ist was gewesen ist' (Essence is what was)" (Zaleski M. *Formy pamieci (Forms of Memory)*, 7). However, these doubts take on the form of an apology of literature, which according to the author, is best suited to render the past most accurately. This is an important position in light of my deliberations on the need to separate fiction and non-fiction genres. For Zaleski, as opposed to myself, similar dilemmas of poetics are not important. He writes openly: "If I had to briefly answer the question what constitutes literature in this book, I would answer that literature is a special kind of repetition: repetition, which aims to become a rendering of reality" (Zaleski, 7). For him, the issue is clear: in a story about "the adventures of mimesis' aesthetics" classification as fiction or non-fiction is of no importance. This article is an attempt to challenge such a formulated thesis.

16 Fitas, A. *Głos z labiryntu. O pismach Karola Ludwika Konińskiego (A Voice from the Labyrinth: On the Writings of Karol Ludwik Koninski)*. Wydawnicto UWr. Wrocław. 2003; Kozicka, D. *Wędrowcy światów prawdziwych. Dwudziestowieczne relacje z podróży (Wanderers of Real Worlds: 20th Century Travel Writing)*. Universitas. Kraków. 2003; Michalski, M. *Dyskurs, apokryf, parabola. Strategie filozofowania w prozie współczesnej (Discourse, Apocrypha and Parable: Philosophical Strategies in Contemporary Prose)*. UG Publishers. Gdańsk. 2003; Zawadzki, A. *Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna w piśmiennictwie polskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku (Modern Philosophical Essay Writing in Poland in the First Half of the 20th Century)*. Universitas. Kraków. 2001.

> to individual revision and transformation, and treated as a handy tool for expressing an individual point of view.[17]

Grochowski, as one of few Polish researchers, asks a fundamental question regarding the threats brought by the turn from poetics to anthropology. Is not focusing one's attention solely on subjective and cultural motivations for writing a path to "a certain type of disorientation in the universe of cultural texts"? He writes:

> The next concern stems from a potential danger to analyzed texts; a danger of completely eliminating literary dimensions and diluting literary knowledge in cultural sociology, when all writing from a given period would be read like travel guides, recipes, cover letters or ethnographic surveys. This concern should not be dictated solely by a tactical intention to defend dogmatically-drawn demarcation lines. Rather, this is about remembering that various text or genre structures (recognisable though poetics, among others) are not merely a natural conduit for positions and points of view, *but that they enjoy a relative autonomy, which ensures that they have a special impact on the character of conveyed meanings*.[18]

The above-highlighted fragment constitutes the essence of the problem, albeit vaguely formulated, that I would like to analyze in detail in this paper. There is no doubt that narration in contemporary non-fiction increasingly more often is complemented by various elements of artistic creation. Its fictionalization is increasingly visible in the area of fact-based literature, which is used to aim towards objectivism, transparency of language and faithfulness to real events. However, in my opinion the problem does not lie in reality being filtered through individual experience (to which authors have an unquestionable right), but in increasingly more frequent attempts to negate or blur the genre affiliation of texts which are offered to readers and are called fact-based literature. I am especially interested in what the outcomes are when authors break the referential pact, i.e. the unwritten agreement between writer and reader? In other words, is the non-fiction writer, who not only "casually crosses the boundary towards literature"[19], but also questions the need for the existence of this boundary, honest?

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17 Grochowski, Grzegorz. "Pytania o niefkicjonalną..." ("Questions About Discursive..."). 654.

18 ibid, 655 [emphasis mine: P.Z.].

19 Pollack, Martin. "Trzy podziękowania i jeden ukłon" ("Three thank yous and a bow"). *Podróże z Ryszardem Kapuścińskim. Opowieści trzynastu tłumaczy (Travels with Ryszard Kapuściński: Stories by Thirteen Translators*). Edited by Dudko, B. Znak. Krakow. 2007. 161.

It seems that honesty does not belong to the repertoire of literary theory terms. However, when we examine non-fiction, especially fact-based non-fiction, in the framework of a text structure, seen as a genre created by an author and received by a reader within a certain scope of expectations, then the voice of the ethical watchdog, employed by Phillip Lejeune in defining the autobiographical pact over three decades ago, will become indispensible. Fact-based literature, as autobiography, is a "contractual" genre. It aims not at straightforward similarity, but at similarity to the truth and it aims not at an illusion of reality, but a picture of reality. Fact-based literature is, as the name suggests, based on facts (for now, I am putting aside the disputable nature of facts), not on a relation to the facts, which lends itself to discussion and gradation. Fact-based literature assumes what Lejeune called a "referential pact," explicit or implicit, which demarcates the area of the investigated reality and also the rules and the degree of the desired similarity.[20] Following Lejeuene, one might claim, with the same earnestness, that the "referential pact":

> is a serious matter. It grounds the text in real relationships with others, it starts the interplay of internal and external forces, of intimate and social; it rests on the notion of honesty (bearing witness), and highlights rights and responsibilities. An individual subject is not an illusion, but rather a fragile reality.[21]

In his book about autobiography, Lejeune references the pragmatics of Paul Ricoeur, who sees the promise of telling the truth as the foundation of all social relations[22]. The pact that the author of fact-based literature makes with the reader functions in the same way; it is a promise of presenting the truth. We may, as narrativists do, acknowledge that the truth is unattainable, but the desire to convey it delineates the area of the pact between the author and the reader. The character of the proof is important for the sphere of non-fiction. The text itself does not have to be true, what counts is the engagement of the author in the promise of telling the truth. Therefore, it seems important to maintain some purity of genre. So let us return to the separation between the novel (the fictional pact) and non-fiction (the referential pact). How should one read the referential pact? When does the author sign a pledge to adhere to it? It is enough to peruse available definitions to find out

20 Lejeune, Philippe. *Wariacje na teamt... (Variations on a Certain...)*. 47.

21 ibid, 285.

22 ibid, 5.

that the discussion on non-fiction writing is dominated by an extraordinary, indeed Pirrandello-esque, ambiguity of terms. The attempt to demarcate the sphere of the genre is not, by any means, meant to discover a magic formula or to put the texts I am focusing on, into Procrustes' bed. It is rather an attempt to develop a model of analysis. It is not a secret – I am freely borrowing from Lejeune's findings on autobiography, incoherent at times and bordering on aporias, but they still fill the existing gaps well.

The difference between fiction and non-fiction is extremely difficult to precisely define. Fact-based literature, for example literary reportage, is a type of creation and construction of narration and because of this, it must include elements of fiction, even if the author's commitment to telling the truth is exceptionally strong. Looking for differences between these two genres inside the text, plot or its narration techniques is futile. Simply put, non-fiction is a particular way of reading, resulting from a bilateral pact made between the author and reader. The author of non-fiction positions himself as a real person with a personal relationship to his subject matter (he is present amongst his protagonists as a reporter, he contacts the informants, and researches a given subject by studying available sources). The reader, when picking up his book, often has some knowledge about the author in advance. The knowledge is based on previous books by this author (also from the genre of fact-based literature) or on reviews and press articles, which place the author's writing in the non-fiction genre. For the reader, this author is a socially responsible person (one that you can trust) and a creator of specific types of texts. Defining non-fiction through the reader has the advantage of freeing us from the difficult (and rather impossible) responsibility of establishing a canon of the genre. At the same time, it is an accurate definition; after all, non-fiction texts have been written for us, the readers, and by reading them we bring these texts into existence.

The pact with the reader is not just the condition of reading, but it is often announced by the author in the initial part of the read text. In this "preamble" of the non-fiction text, the author encourages the reader to join in the game and create the impression of a bilateral pact. For example, one may analyze the beginning of a text to see whether the point of view is that of a protagonist or narrator. The first technique will be closer to the genre of fiction, the second to non-fiction. The reader receives this signal even before he might have any idea about the relationship between the name of the protagonist and the name of the author. However, the reader may read the text differently than the author suggests. Many non-fiction texts also lack a clearly formulated referential pact. Moreover, on the side of the author a discord might exist between the initial intention and the intention assigned by the reader,

> because the author underestimated the effects caused by the type of presentation he chose, or because of other elements standing between himself and the reader; many elements that condition the reading of a text (such as sub-title, genre classification, advertizing, and other information) might have been chosen by the publisher and discussed in the media.[23]

Finally, various readings of the same non-fiction text and various interpretations of the same referential pact might exist simultaneously. The reading public is not homogenous after all. Despite all this, the agreement, the referential pact, the pact of truth, plays a crucial role in the reading process, because non-fiction is like a painting in a museum. "Everything depends on the label. In a museum, people spend more time reading labels than looking at paintings. Admiration is measured in doses, the look is adjusted to the author or the subject."[24]

When researching non-fiction texts, one should start from the reader's reception rather than from the way a text was written. Research should encompass the whole "dossier" of a given author so that one might discern the intentions of an author (e.g. interviews, correspondence, or an author's internet site) or those that express the reactions of readers (e.g. a critical discourse on a particular book, which develops in literary periodicals, magazines and daily newspapers). Opinions about non-fiction and about all books associated with it should be analyzed. It would be useful to note how the pact made with the reader, the form of the text and its contents enter into mutual relationships. The referential pact will play a different role depending on the text; in some texts it will be dominant and in others it will play a secondary role. An analysis of the referential pact should include the conditions of composition and the publication of a text, such as advance dissemination of information about the author (e.g. the attitude of the reader and the reading of the text depends on it), collective conventions between authors and readers (e.g. television and press interviews, the author's comments about his own writing, etc.), the publisher's policy, in which the series the book finds itself, is governed both by its composition and its reading (for example, when a publisher calls a series "Reportage," he confirms his own and the author's credibility to the book-buying public because he ensures that the product meets their expectations, while using and stimulating their attitudes). This last point seems to be particularly important; putting the referential pact in the context of the whole publishing world allows us to examine the genre requirements of contemporary literary production.

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23 ibid, 187.

24 ibid, 206.

By putting forward a new proposal for non-fiction research, I especially wish to draw attention to the emergence of new, hybrid forms; forms that mix both pacts in a conscious manipulation employed by some authors (often encouraged by publishers, because they combine a twofold motivation for reading). My main question will pertain to the pact with the reader. What happens when my gullibility and trust that a real person is telling me a story about reality, which has been researched and lived in, is broken? We can assume that a non-fiction reader is differently active; he first reacts to the type of contact established by the author. "Here a risk, which is not present in fiction, appears: a quiver of permeation…, the immediacy of emotion, and most of all a return to oneself, which is much harder to avoid when we are pretending to believe in fiction. It is a face to face meeting."[25] By protesting the recognition of the non-fiction subject as fiction (or something between fiction and "not-fiction"), I am asking, like Lejeune, and taking an ethical stand: "If I prick you, will this also be fiction?"

Let us see how this problem is dealt with by four different authors: Ryszard Kapuściński, Frank Westerman, Martin Pollack, and Claudio Magris. The choice is not random by any means. Ryszard Kapuściński is seen by the other three writers as a significant benchmark, a mentor of sorts and an inspiration for their own journalistic fascinations. First of all, for me, the issue of separation between fiction and "not-fiction" still remains interesting; the issue, is rather peculiarly understood by Kapuściński, and also referred to by the Dutchman Westerman, the Austrian Pollack and the Italian Magris. I am warning you in advance that (for the purpose of illustration) I have cast the first three writers as blackguards or negative protagonists, who toy with the pact of truth made with the reader, while Magris is an example of a positive character.

Małgorzata Czermińska, describing Kapuściński's writing as "non-fictional narration," points out that he reconstructs past events like a historian (engaging eye witnesses, written sources and other documents), yet, with regard to the way he tells the story, he acts as an omnipotent narrator of a novel, describing a fictional world: "He offers the reader an entry into a pact of suspended disbelief and acceptance of a proposed version of the events as in a classic historical novel, which builds an illusion of things past."[26] Czermińska touches here upon an important problem, although she is careful about giving her opinion.

25 ibid, 15.

26 Czermińska, Małgorzata. "'Punkt widzenia' jako kategoria antropologiczna i narracyjna w prozie niefikcjonalnej" ("'Point of view' as an Anthropological and a Narrative Category in Nonfiction"). *Teksty Drugie* 2/3 (2003): 20.

What Kapuściński offered his readers is not a "pact of suspended disbelief," but a pact of offering the truest truth. He labels all his texts as "true" and then proceeds to construct voluminous fictions. He builds his "ethnographic authority" (to quote Clifford Geertz) with great care repeating on many occasions that he writes "from his travels," that he is not "a confabulator," that he does not describe "some imaginary or personal world," but "a world that really exists."[27] Moreover, he reinforces this authority with assurances of being "an anti-tourist," distinguishing the work of a field reporter from a carefree vacation. "This is a completely different experience and a different way of perceiving the world."[28] I fully agree, however, we should remember that what we receive is not a record of experience (according to the referential pact made with the reader), but a text composed of other texts, an anthology of quotations of sorts, of which the best example is *Imperium*. The Russian critic Maxim Waldstein, who took the referential pact, made by Kapuściński with the reader, at face value and felt he was "pricked" by the truth described in the text,[29] was chastised by a Polish researcher for missing the literary aspect of the book as well as the ambiguity and symbolism associated with it.[30] It is hard to find a more explicit example of breaking "the pact of truth." Critics granted the Polish writer the right to carry two passports, which allowed him to smoothly cross the border between fiction and "non-fiction" without any consequences. In (rare) cases of criticism aimed at the representation of reality sketched by Kapuściński, non-fictionality instrumentally and temporarily gives way to fiction.

In many interviews, Frank Westerman (1964), one of the most important representatives of the non-fiction genre in the Netherlands and author of six books, emphasizes his kinship with the writings of Ryszard Kapuściński.[31] As far as the Dutchman is concerned, the breach of referential pact looks slightly different. While Kapuściński often wrote fiction, but marketed it always as the truth, Westerman does exactly the opposite; he attempts to sell real people stories as literature, although he does not label his products with the unambiguous label of "a novel." He takes full advantage of the fashionable and

27 Kapuściński, Ryszard. *Autoportret reportera (A Self-portrait of a Reporter)*, Biblioteka Gazety Wyborczej. Warsaw. 2008, 13.

28 ibid.

29 Waldstein, K. Maxim. "Observing Imperium. A Postcolonial Reading of Ryszard Kapuscinski's Account of Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia." *Social Identities*. 3 (8). (2002): 481-499.

30 Chomiuk, A. "'Nowy markiz de Custine' albo historia pewnej manipulacji" ("'The New Marquise de Custine' or a Story of a Certain Manipulation"). *Teksty Drugie* 1/2 (2006): 312.

31 Westerman, Frank. "Het hondje van Haile Selassie. Het Scherpe oog van Ryszard Kapuściński 1932-2007." http://www.nrcboeken.nl/recensie/het-hondje-van-haile-selassie. April 2009.

strong trend for books about "the truth" which currently exists on the book market in the Netherlands. At the same time, he can compete with literature, without any need for a qualifying adjective, by applying for numerous literary awards (and receiving them); he, like Kapuściński, wants the luxury of having two passports. Westerman, like Kapuściński, takes great care of his "ethnographic authority." His journalistic past is an intrinsic element of his biography as a writer. It is highlighted in almost all press interviews: work for the Dutch magazines *HP/De Tijd*, *Volkskrant's* Belgrade correspondent, a reporter in Srebrenica, who was surrounded by Bosnian Serbs, and finally, *NRC Handelsblad's* correspondent in Moscow. Westerman's first two books, *De brug over de Tara (The Bridge over the Tara River)* and *Het zwartste scenario (The Bleakest Scenario)*, may be regarded as "classic" non-fiction, sensitive to nuances, the linguistic sensibility of the writer, yet with such attention to detail in descriptions, characteristic for eye-witnesses or historians. However, from his third book onwards, the writer's ego becomes increasingly prominent. Although he still confirms the authenticity of each written scene, he emphasizes that "he staged and spotlighted the collected trophies in such a way that, with their help, he tells *his own* story, like a curator of a museum, who tells a story through his exhibition."[32] On the one hand, Westerman makes a referential pact with the reader (e.g. numerous photographs and maps included in the book, photographs of documents and people he is writing about, and a list of quotations and informants that is always included at the end of the text), but on the other, he drifts increasingly more clearly toward the fictional pact (e.g. numerous mentions of the creative aspect of the described world). In 2005, in his acceptance speech for the "De Gouden Uil" award, Westerman said that he was fed up with his books sitting on the bestseller lists next to products, such as *Lose Weight in Six Steps* or *Windows for Seniors* and he posited a separation of fiction and non-fiction. In place of the Dutch terms *fictie* and *non-fictie*, he proposed a division, which would only take into consideration a qualitative difference between "good" and "poor" literature, and which he labelled *frictie* and *non-frictie*, respectively. *Frictie* surprises, moves, and shocks us; it awakens something within. *Non-frictie* merely describes what we have already known and sensed and does not stir any other feelings apart from an effect of recognition. Westerman claimed that any other classification of literature is redundant.[33] In his last book, *Ararat* (2007), the writer persistently pursues the programme of "having two passports." He still entices readers with his

32 Westerman, Frank. *De graanrepublick*. Atlas. Amsterdam. 1999. 253 [translation and emphasis mine – P.Z.].

33 Ceelen, H. Bergeijk van, J. *Meer dan feiten. Gesprekken met auteurs van literaire non-fictie*. Atlas. Antwerpen-Amsterdam. 2007. 25.

"ethnographic experience" (e.g. information about his journalistic past and methods of collecting information, maps, drawings, and a list of sources and informants), he still publishes with Atlas, specializing in non-fiction (mainly in reportage); however, to the readers that he gained with "the promise of offering the truth"[34], he presents a vague construction, which is not necessarily the truth. He writes: "I like building words from letters and then a story from these words. I do it for the sound, rhythm and the meaning. And for sparks. When you rub two sentences together, you make fire… If you are lucky, a story will be created from loose sentences."[35]

Martin Pollack (1944), a former correspondent of *Der Spiegel* in Poland, like Frank Westerman sees in Ryszard Kapuściński "his literary master and mentor."[36] As the translator of all books by Kapuściński into German, he suspects that "Kapuściński's mastery" greatly influenced his writing technique, although he is unable to say how exactly this influence is manifested. "Others would have to analyze this, however I am assuming that such influence has occurred and still is occurring. It is not possible to avoid it when one spends a great deal of time with the author and is intensely engaged in his work."[37] Pollack calls Kapuściński's books *comfort literature*;[38] literature that is particularly close, having a calming effect (in an analogy to the *comfort blanket* used by little Linus, a character in *Peanuts* by Charles M. Schulz). The Austrian writer stresses that although it is not easy to find a relationship between himself and Kapuściński, it is clear that the Polish author gave him the courage to contribute to documentary literature. In my opinion, their far-reaching kinship lies in an equally carefree attitude to the referential pact, this agreement with the reader, in my opinion, is the most important determinant of non-fiction.

For example, let us examine the journalistic investigation that Martin Pollack conducted into the death of his father, Dr Gerhard Basta, a member of the SS, whom Pollack never met.[39] The German subtitle of the book, *Bericht über meinen Vater*,[40] constitutes an intrinsic part of the pact with the

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34 Lejeune, Philippe. *Wariacje na teamt... (Variations on a Certain...)*. 47.

35 Westerman, Frank. *Ararat*. Atlas. Amsterdam-Antwerp. 2007. 21. [translation mine – P.Z.].

36 Pollack, Martin. "Trzy podziękowania..." ("Three thank yous..."). 162.

37 ibid.

38 ibid.

39 Pollack, Martin. *Śmierć w bunkrze. Opowieść o moim ojcu (The Dead Man in a Bunker: Discovering my Father)*. Translated by Kopacki, A. Wydawnictwo Czarne. Wołowiec. 2006.

40 Pollack, Martin. *Der Tote im Bunker. Bericht über meinen Vater.* Zsolnay Verlag. Wien. 2004.

reader, in a more emphatic way than the Polish translation *(Opowieść…[The story of…])*. However, even the Polish reader is informed of the journalistic past of the writer and his other books belonging to the genre of non-fiction. *Śmierć w bunkrze* (*The Dead Man in a Bunker)* was published by Wydawnictwo Czarne, in the series "Sulina," which includes "historical and anthropological books, travelogues, reportage and essays, i.e. a broadly understood fact-based literature." This note on the inner flap of the dust jacket also belongs to the referential pact; the reader holding Pollack's book in his hands, is reassured from the start that he is not dealing with fiction. From the first day, the pact is also maintained by the author: "At the beginning of summer 2003, I travelled with my wife to South Tyrol, to the Brenner Pass, to find a bunker, where fifty years earlier the body of my father was found."[41] This sentence could easily be the beginning of a novel. However, the author ensures that his kinship with the narrator is gradually revealed (which he highlights in all interviews and meetings promoting the book). The pact is made complete by numerous traces of archival research[42] scattered in the text, such as black and white family photos, citing sources without the filter of free indirect speech, and the closing acknowledgements, which once more confirm "the truth" of the text.

However, the problem is that the scarcity of the source information, which Pollack frequently points out,[43] is supplemented by literary imagination, separation of fact and "the subsequent enhancement of the story, which 'I heard from someone, but am no longer sure from whom,'"[44] becomes blurred. The story told by Pollack is not confabulated, but is not true either. It is a *possible* story. Photographs become the main protagonists of the book; damaged photos with fuzzy contours and discovered traces, devoid of the primary context. These countless photographs are the starting point for *possible* narrations. It is an extremely convenient ploy, because photographic entropy constitutes "a permission to make a false move or a mistake; it is a recognition that there is more beauty in the journey than in the destination. It is a resigned observation: this is better than I could have imagined myself, so I will settle for this."[45] Documents of private memory, family heirlooms, reports, interrogation protocols, and file notes were set free by Pollack, but they conjured up "merely fuzzy pictures, resembling photos taken out of developer prematurely, where

41 Pollack, Martin. *Śmierć… (The Dead Man…)*. 5.

42 ibid, 113, 114, 204, 206.

43 ibid, 136, 140, 145, 176, 178, 241.

44 ibid, 76.

45 Nowicki, W. "Entropia" ("Entropy"). *Tygodnik Powszechny*. 28 (2009): 42.

only contours are visible, but *the rest* is in the realm of the imagination."[46] Pollack spins possible yarns; he often answers: "I don't know," in response to questions he asks of himself. Ignorance is a part of his "factography." Perhaps, it is a justified ignorance, because it pertains to highly personal material, i.e. his own father. But is this really the case? Can a reconstruction of one's own father's character really be free of any constraints? Are devices, such as fact-based literature that smoothly flows into fiction, conjecture, a reconstruction of fiction contained in old photographs or a creation of context for separate artefacts, fully justified?[47] Should not this book be labelled, as is customary for the German publishing market, *"Roman"* instead of "Bericht"?

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46 Pollack, Martin. *Śmierć... (The Dead Man...)*. 234 [emphasis mine – P.Z.].

47 An identical question may be raised after reading Martin Pollack's article *Gdy kobiety uśmiechają się z rowu (When Women Smile from the Ditch)* ("Res Publica Nowa," 2009 no. 8, 60-64). In the article, Pollack describes the business of dealing in historical photographs, which in his opinion is a sign of the "atrophy of shameful feelings in confrontation with the victims of WWII" (60). For the price of €28.50, the author bought two photographs of young Jewish women, taken while they were working in a forced labor camp. He participated in an auction "to find out how such auctions work and how much it costs to buy something like this" (60). A four-page article is an attempt to reconstruct a story based on two photographs lacking a broader context. This technique is a mirror image of the ploy used by Pollack in *Śmierć w bunkrze (The Dead Man in the Bunker)*, which does not necessarily have anything to do with historical truth, but rather pure imagination. (Pollack included the complete description of these "photographic confabulations" in the article *Obrazkowa historia. Fotograficzne znaleziska [A Story in Pictures: Photographic* Finds], included in the volume entitled Dlaczego rozstrzelali Stanisławów [Why Did They Shoot Stanisławów?]. Wydawnictwo Czarne. Wołowiec. 2009. 96-114). The techniques that are used, such as providing details about the size of the photographs, including their reproductions in the book, and a detailed description of the photos are supposed to give the impression of offering objective data. However, when scanning the article quickly, the reader might not notice the simple fact that the story deciphered by Pollack is only speculation and an attempt at a literary reconstruction of events. It is a presumed story; like *Śmierć w bunkrze (The Dead Man in the Bunker)*, it is only a *possible* story. There are multiple question marks in this short text, a "dismal hypothesis about the faith of women," and through phrases, such as "with all likelihood," "one can assume" Pollack speculates about the intentions of the photographer who took the photo of this mildly interesting scene: "Perhaps it was a guard who took pleasure in standing there idly, in a clean uniform, at the edge of the ditch and took photos of young women, possibly of his own age, while they were hard at work uncustomary for them" (61). However, these speculations smoothly turn into accusations, which is no longer fictional or speculative: "It is a form of humiliation, a manifestation of this man's power over Jewish women" (61). This strong accusation is based on "proof," and "the proof" is nothing else but a fruit of the writer's imagination. It is an example of non-fiction, which in its essence is pure fiction, albeit (for the reader) deceitfully labelled "true." I do not doubt, even for a moment, Pollack's good intentions when he questions the motivations of collectors of these types of photographs. Just like Pollack, I can merely speculate about the answer. I am more interested in the concession to construct fictional stories, which have become "proof" of guilt, while they simultaneously critically judge "the dark sphere of desire and pleasure, which

In comparison with the two negative characters who present fiction as fact (Kapuściński and Pollack) and fact as fiction (Westerman), another admirer of the Polish "reportage master," Claudio Magris (1939), is the most honest. Although he regards non-fiction as "the most authentic [genre]" and thinks of Kapuściński as an artist "who dives into reality and presents it with a rigorous authenticity"[48], Magris himself chooses a completely different route. He presents his writing, which pertains to historical research and the quest for the concrete and the scientific, not as fact-based literature, but rather he persistently creates his image as a writer of fiction. Although his novels are based on facts and historical figures, they remain in the realm of fiction. Magris does not make a referential pact with his readers, but a fictional one; by this he avoids the false promise of truth, contrary to Kapuściński or Westerman:

> In *Dunaj (Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea)* or *Mikrokosmosach (Microcosms),* the journey, people, things seen, and stories collected on the way were invented and retold; they became a story of a character, who is mostly fictional. They no longer belong to that journey; they have a different dimension, different time, mixed and irregular, the *time of literature*, which is not convergent with grammatical time nor even with the time of History.[49]

In my opinion, there is a lot of honesty in this resignation from "a promise of offering the truth," honesty of a writer, who in an open way calls the pact made with the reader a fictional pact. Although Irena Grudzińska-Gross writes that Magris "does not respect the division between fact and fiction,"[50] he is not,

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also explains the success of the bloody SS-epic of Jonathan Littell" (63). I understand that for Pollack the fictional memoirs of the SS officer Maximilien Aue, who served on the Eastern front during World War II, are more dangerous than an imagined and *possible* story about victims, which turns into an accusation of *real* executioners. In the name of truth (to use exalted language), I think that it is exactly the opposite.

48 Magris, Claudio. "Podróże bez końca" ("An Infinite Journey"). Translated by Ugniewska, J. *Zeszyty Literackie*. Warsaw. 2009. 16. It is an interesting fact that Magris equally respects Martin Pollack's writing. In the preface to the Austrian edition of *Śmierć w bunkrze (The Dead Man in a Bunker)*, he wrote: "It is a book that draws attention and is balanced at the same time, even reservedly scientific. Most of all, it exudes deep humanism and restrained pain. It is a literary expression of maturity, which is not afraid of the truth and accepts it albeit with a great effort and a child-like sense of shame." (http://www.ksiazka.net.pl/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=6284, August 2009.

49 Magris, Claudio. "Podróże..." ("An Infinite..."). 25. [emphasis mine – P.Z.].

50 Grudzińska-Gross, Irena. "Z ukosa" ("On a Slant"). *Tygodnik Powszechny*. 25 (2009): 31. [A sum-

with certainty, a borderline writer with two passports, who sometimes enters into the sphere of fiction, then into the sphere of fact, depending on momentary whim or potential benefits. "There is no lie here; no lie of the language nor of the form."[51] We should also add that there is no lie of genre. The imagination of Magris as a writer of fiction fulfils our search for the truth, although we (luckily) know from the start on what rules this truth is based.

Therefore, I define a new approach to non-fiction research as the "ethical" framing of the problem; one that examines how the referential pact made between the author and the reader is perceived; the pact, which in my opinion, is the main characteristic of this type of prose. Discussions about the referential pact and its breach become interesting in the case of such non-fiction writers as mentioned above: Ryszard Kapuściński, Frank Westerman and Martin Pollack, who by virtue of their journalistic authority, usurp the genre of reportage to sell their own products as a hybrid genre, bordering on truth and fiction, and to claim the right to be called writers, without a qualifying adjective, ensuring at the same time, that everything that is contained between the covers of their books is not a confabulation (although the "wishy-washy" genre classification assigned by them, implies and allows for confabulation). These writers regard "pure" fact-based literature as being deeply inadequate for their ambitions; they usurp the referential pact, the pact of truth, camping on its territory illegally. These writers openly refer to their experience, are present in their texts under their own names and by this they toy with the curiosity and gullibility of the reader. On the one hand, they invoke their "ethnographic authority," use maps, letters from informants, authentic documents and a long lists of cited sources and, on the other hand, they drift towards fiction. Although they do not label their texts "novels," they openly declare that they move in hybrid territory, which, like all intersections, is conducive to creativity. Thanks to this, they cunningly benefit from the referential pact, without paying any dues. Perhaps it improves their self-worth as writers, but at the same time, it makes them targets for virtuosic exercises in irony.

Translation: Rafał Uzar

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mary of the laudation given on May 19, 2009 in Sejny during the ceremony of awarding Claudio Magri the title of Człowiek Pogranicza (Borderlander) awarded by the Borderline Foundation and "Borderland of Arts, Clutures and Nations" Centre established by Małgorzata and Krzysztof Czyżewski].

51 ibid.