
From rejection to praise of irony

Dorota Małowska in her search of “we”

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Abstract: The adventures of Dorota Małowska, experienced between her novels *Snow White and Russian Red* and *Honey, I Killed Our Cats*, show a world where capitalism is the only way of organising reality. At the same time, it is a power affecting all types of relations: among people and between people and the world. The motif connecting Małowska's novels is the pursuit – through one's writing – of liberation from the tools of the capitalist rule recorded and reinforced in language. Attempts at finding ways to cope with this rule, undertaken always as an element of a writer's ethos, are an extremely interesting path from the destruction to the praising of conservatism and from a fight for oneself – a fight defined along Hallwardian lines as an expression of a specific configuration of reality – to the singularity of literary absolute. Taking this path requires a change to the use of two literary categories: grotesque and irony, which remain Małowska's trademarks. At the same time, in her subsequent books grotesque and irony bring a new angle to her polyphonic writing. The author analyses the evolution of Małowska's writing making a (critical) use of the tools of postcolonial theory. She refers to the notions of “singular” and “specific” as used by Peter Hallward in his *Absolutely Postcolonial. Writing between Singular and the Specific* (2001). In his treatise, Hallward presents two trends; a description thereof allows him for “the global and contemporary discrimination of fundamental approaches to our general conceptions of agency and context, self and other, politics and particularity.” Snochowska-Gonzalez refers Hallward's categories to the subject of interest of the postcolonial theory (like situatedness and de-territorialisation, national determination and freedom from it). She develops the method of applying analytical tools presented in her article *Od melancholii do rozpaczy. O prozie Andrzeja Stasiuka* published in *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, no. 2 (2013).

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The adventures of Dorota Małowska, experienced between her novels *Snow White and Russian Red* and *Honey, I Killed Our Cats*, show a world where capitalism is the only way of organising reality. At the same time, it is a power affecting all types of relations: among people and between people and the world. The motif connecting Małowska's novels is the pursuit – through one's writing – of liberation from the tools of the capitalist rule recorded and reinforced in language. Attempts at finding ways to cope with this rule, undertaken always as an element of a writer's ethos, are an extremely interesting path from the destruction to the praising of conservatism and from a fight for oneself – a fight defined along Hallwardian lines as an expression of a specific configuration of reality – to the singularity of literary absolute.¹ Taking this path requires a change to the

¹ The terms “singular” and “specific” as used in this text come from Peter Hallward's *Absolutely Postcolonial. Writing between Singular and the Specific* (Hallward, 2001). In his treatise, Hallward presents two trends; a description thereof allows him to make a “global and contemporary discrimination of fundamental approaches to our general conceptions of agency and context, self and other, politics and particularity” (Hallward, 2001, pp. XII-XIII). Therefore, Hallward presents the limits of identification: the singular and the specific. These are two basically divergent concepts of individualization and differentiation. It is these concept that determine the answer to the questions “What qualities must an individual have in order to remain distinct from others? How does one individual relate to another?” (Hallward, 2001, p. 1). They also largely influence the way we choose to abandon the determination and the essentializing specifying of identity and the position we assume between de-territorialisation and location. The singular trend comes down to exceeding the determined world: in this configuration the subject becomes absolutely free from any identification and any relation. On the other hand, the specific trend is

use of two literary categories: grotesque and irony, which remain Małowska's trademarks. At the same time, in her subsequent books grotesque and irony bring new angles to her polyphonic writing.

The Manichaeism of a specific configuration of reality

According to Peter Hallward (Hallward, 2001), a specific configuration of reality assumes dividing the world into two antagonistic sides. The specific trend demonstrates itself as a juxtaposition of these sides, emphasising the Manichaeism of this vision of the world. The Manichaean division is the existing situation which requires response: a biased, confrontational and militant response.

The works of Frantz Fanon are quoted by Hallward as the best examples of this configuration of reality; in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 2004) the colonial world is divided.

"The colonist's sector is a sector built to last, all stone and steel. It's a sector of lights and paved roads, where the trash cans constantly overflow with strange and wonderful garbage, undreamed-of leftovers. [...] The colonist's sector is a sated, sluggish sector, its belly is permanently full of good things. The colonist's sector is a white folks' sector, a sector of foreigners.

The colonized's sector, or at least the "native" quarters, the shanty town, the Medina, the reservation, is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people. You are born anywhere, anyhow. You die anywhere, from anything. It's a world with no space, people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together. The colonized's sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. The colonized's sector is a sector that crouches and cowers, a sector on its knees, a sector that is prostrate. It's a sector of niggers, a sector of towelheads. The gaze that the colonized subject casts at the colonist's sector is a look of lust, a look of envy. Dreams of possession" (Fanon, 2004, pp. 4–5).

The two sectors do not create a unity of higher rank. No conciliation is possible here. The only places where the colonist's sector and the colonized's sector are in contact are the police station and army barracks. These two footholds of the apparatus of power and repression define the relations between the colonists and colonized.

As a result of the Manichaeism of the division, the colonist's sector happens to revolve around good and the colonized's sector – around evil. The inhabitants of either sector express these values, adhere to them and become the opposites of one another. The

associated with taking stances and promoting some interests or opposing other interests as the only way leading to "situated articulation of genuinely universalisable principles" (Hallward 2001, p. XII). Referring these categories to the subject of interest of the postcolonial theory (like situatedness and de-territorialisation, national determination and freedom from it) makes it possible to adopt a new approach to the theory and, equally importantly, protects from the impasse increasingly accompanying this theory. To Hallward, the titular absolute post-colonialism is a singular trend; a specific trend would rather be represented by the anticolonial. I devoted more attention to the analytical tools applied by Hallward in my article *Od melancholii do rozpacz. O prozie Andrzeja Stasiuka* [From melancholy to despair. The prose of Andrzej Stasiuk], published in *Studia Litteraria et Historica* (Snochowska-Gonzalez, 2013).

more civilised, noble and righteous the colonist is, the more evil, dirty and barbarian the native appears.

“As if to illustrate the totalitarian nature of colonial exploitation, the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil. Colonized society is not merely portrayed as a society without values. The colonist is not content with stating that the colonized world has lost its values or worse, never possessed any. The “native” is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. He is, dare we say it, the enemy of values. In other words, absolute evil. A corrosive element, destroying everything within his reach, a corrupting element, distorting everything which involves aesthetics or morals, an agent of malevolent powers, an unconscious and incurable instrument of blind forces. [...] Values are, in fact, irreversibly poisoned and infected as soon as they come into contact with the colonized” (Fanon, 2004, p. 7).

A polluted world

A result of a similar division – an absolutely evil, deformed, grotesquely horrifying, abnormal world – has been presented in Dorota Maślowska’s first novel. It is evident since the very first pages of the novel, owing to the author’s extraordinary language. *Snow White and Russian Red* has been written “in the Russki language,” meaning that the language of Maślowska is a counterfeit and an amalgamate of all that is inferior. It consists of “poisoned and infected” values: mixed up phrasemes, discourses, slogans, claims, and manifestos. Every word trapped in this language becomes inferior, polluted and bastardised.

In the world described in this manner, everything is mixed up, everything is littered with: unnatural compounds, PVC, CHVDP, CV, asbestos, VTC, plastic and rustling packaging (Maślowska, 2005, pp. 42, 61). *Snow White and Russian Red* becomes a report from such a polluted town. This world is like a huge cesspool, and anything that makes its way there reveals its horrendous, grotesque, fake and contaminated face.

This is what happens subsequently to various languages sucked into Dorota Maślowska’s word grinder: the language of advertising, of blood-sucking capitalism and consumerism, the language of the xenophobic Polish character, Polish bitterness, megalomania and imperialism, the language of anarchist, ecological and feminist leaflets, the language of Polish machos, the language of books from school reading lists, of youth and women’s magazines, the language of avant-garde or decent students, the language of concerned literary critics... They are all spoken by people who cannot use words in the right way. They are not eligible for the right to genuine words. For this reason, all they can do is pretend, deform, passing off as someone else. Their mouths produce made-up words and those uttered by other people; they steal the words to use them in an irresponsible, not originally intended way.

However, Dorota Maślowska’s protagonists do more than misuse words – their entire conduct is improper. Their descriptions are reminiscent of how the orientalist discourse

(cf. Said, 1991) describes natives: aggressive, hyperactive, unpredictable individuals, who cannot control or analyse their emotions, are incapable of higher emotions or enduring relationships, who butcher their language, are infantile, irresponsible, demanding and prone to any possible addictions. Their entire world is a mockery of the civilisation.

The Russki world

Dorota Masłowska's novel reveals the mechanism behind this world. It has been described as "Russki." Why? "Russki" is synonymous with absolute inferiority, imperfection, backwardness, degeneration.

"Smokes her cigs. Bought from the Russkies. False, bogus. Instead of nicotine there's some garbage in there, some unfamiliar drugs. Some paper, sawdust, stuff the teachers wouldn't dream of" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 2).

At the same time, "Russkiness" put in this context exposes itself. When "Russkiness" is talked about "in the Russki language," it becomes a token of stigmatization itself. And of direct violence as "there's a Polish-Russki war with a white-and-red flag, which waves between the native Poles and the Russki thieves, who rob them of customs duties, of nicotine" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 49). The Polish-Russki war is the background of events constituting the novel's plot, the point of reference for all the protagonists' adventures. However, it is very difficult to pinpoint "Russkiness" because it may be concealed anywhere.

In *Niesamowita Słowiańszczyzna* [Uncanny Slavdom] Maria Janion argues that the principal issue dealt with in Masłowska's novel is the Polish Romantic martial myth, which is based on a sense of superiority over Russia (Janion, 2006, pp. 242–243). While this explanation is true, it is also insufficient. Certainly, without that air of superiority and therefore without "Russkiness" as a metaphor of the rejected and scorned, the war in question would not have been such an accurate image. However, if we are satisfied with this explanation, we will find it hard to comprehend why the protagonists of *Snow White...*, constantly on the lookout for the "Russkiness," speak and behave like "Russkies." The "Russkiness," representing inferiority and submission, is ingrained in them.

What do natives do?

Perhaps we will have a better understanding of it if we read Masłowska's novel as a book about natives, inhabitants of a colonised town. A native is a person described by a settler, perceived from the point of view of his or her exoticism and otherness. An orientalist native is a product of the imperial conquest: a justification of the conquest, its apparent reason and actual aftermath.

What do Masłowska's natives do? The main protagonist, narrating in the first person, Nails, follows a path leading to subsequent young women: Magda, depicted in the consumptionist and reproductive contexts; Angela, representing the process of assuming or establishing identity, and Ala who seals it all with her ideal adjustment. Nails transfers himself from a bar to a beach full of sand – that is, of Polish land for sale; then the story is continued on a sofa in Nails's home – a home which starts assuming national colours [“[t]hese white stains on the carpeting are from Magda, when she spit out the toothpaste, and the red ones from Angela, who ran away from me, took a dump” (Masłowska, 2005, p. 109)]. We then move to the city which has also become red and white [“[o]n top a Polish pill, on the bottom Polish menstruation. On top Polish snow imported from a Polish sky, on the bottom the Polish association of Polish butchers and pig-stickers” (Masłowska, 2005, p. 107)]; later on, Nails goes to a fair on the occasion of No Russkies Day, and finally, after a brawl at a McDonald's, ends up in a police station. There he meets Masłowska, the book's author.

Women, land and Poland stuck between the East and the West

The elements forming the “Russki” conglomerate in *Snow White and Russian Red* are not completely random; on the contrary, there are some regularities and recurring motifs. These motifs are related to gender (female), Polish land and Poland's position between the East and the West.

Let me start with the latter motif: hostile forces are everywhere but, of course, the East differs from the West.

“The West stinks, has a polluted environment that litters everything with various unnatural compounds, PCV, CHVDP. [...] There are Jew-killers, prole-killers, murderers who maintain themselves and their illegitimate children by oppression, by selling people corporate shit in the corporate wrapping sold by the McDonald's corporation” (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 42–43).

However, this is not an obstacle to perceiving the West as a symbol of the desired, a recipient of yearning for “those countries where they have these outfits, these cosmetics, creams made from cucumbers, from everything” (Masłowska, 2005, p. 42). On the other hand, the East represents all things “Russki” – fake, stolen, counterfeited. While it is the “Russkies” who sell cheaper items (red and white flags, apples, cigarettes, bicycles, panels) and they are the ones to do business with, a suspicion of “Ruskiness” is the gravest accusation, recorded in police files and penalised by the City Council. As a symbol of purges from the Russki element, the City Council organises No Russkies Day and orders painting all buildings red and white, because “either you're a Pole or you're not a Pole. Either you're Polish or you're Russki. And to put it more bluntly, either you're a person or you're a prick” (Masłowska, 2005, p. 120).

This picture of the location between the East and the West is a reflexion – reduced ad absurdum – of the Polish postcolonial syndrome: a combination of the sense of

superiority over Russia, which is subjected to orientalised to become a symbol of the most despised, with the sense of inferiority to “genuine,” Western Europe, coveted yet demonised as a power striving to imperially dominate Poland. Modern capitalism, presenting itself as the only way, is the essence of the desired Western life and what the unwanted, shameful and prosecuted Russkiness lacks. Commodification of reality accompanies both the willingness to succumb to it and resistance against it.

In *Snow White and Red Russian* Poland attempts to solve this predicament in several ways. First and foremost, Poland declares war against “Russkies” but also offers herself to the West as a product for sale.

“You just have to come to Poland, where there are still beautiful, historic facades in the towns of Wrocław, Nowa Huta, downtown Gdańsk. Which is the best, when it comes to sand by the kilogram at a worthwhile price. And the Western buck flies into your pocket. All the tourists group show up. Chartering the bus – another buck. San and Jelcz, the worst, the cheapest, but exotic, domestic, guests from abroad like those kinds of throwback rides, those old-timey relics, pardon my saying. They go by Jelcz, PKS bus lines from Kamienna Góra, they love it, another buck, more dough. Instant soups, borscht, mushroom, onion, even Oriental – the driver pours it out from a handy boiler – still more bank. The interest blossoms, the register fills up. Get-to-know-you soirées for the tourist group with Bird Milkies on the tables, that’s the culmination of the whole program. The whole stock of Bird Milkies available for purchase. Excursion to the Bird Milkies factory, getting to see how it’s processed. A sham, of course, but the group likes it” (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 84–85).

A product for sale – or for loot – refers not only to “the local natives” and their “old-timey” lifestyle. It refers predominantly to the Polish land. In Masłowska’s prose, it is presented in many forms, the most valuable being sand.

“I imagine that sand, which is made by modern technology, modernly processed, modernly packed in bags, modernly passed on to manual and active distribution. I remember my thought of a truly economic character that could save the country from the very annihilation prepared for the country by the fucking aristocrats, dressed in overcoats, in aprons, who, if only the conditions were right, would sell us, the citizens, to whorehouses in the West, to the German army, for organs, for slave labour. Who finally want to sell our country out, like some old secondhand crap, a bunch of rags and ancient coats labelled Mińsk Mazowiecki, sweaty old belts, if you’ll pardon my saying, because the way I look at it, the only way is to drive them out of their home, to drive them out of the apartment blocks, and to turn our fatherland into a typically agricultural fatherland that produces, even if only for export, normal Polish sand, that would have a chance on the global markets in all of Europe. [...] I see all the sand, which I take for economic squander, which, I must confirm with regret, totally pisses me off. Just gives me a raging case of fuck-off-itis. So when I’m walking and I find a plastic bag, without a moment’s hesitation I fill it with sand. After which I twist it shut and keep it, since in case I’m out of cash, in case the bottom falls out of the market, it could turn out to be a valuable thing, or rather an asset. Then I find two shopping bags from the Hit Market, which also makes my heart ache, this lack of any kind of economy in a country where perfectly good shopping bags are tossed to the ground and left to waste. And first of all to the mercy of the lumpenproletariat. So that [...] I go to get sand. I figure it’s necessary

to collect it all as quickly as possible. Because if it doesn't end up in our hands, that's it. It will all be snatched up by the traitors" (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 20–22).

Polish land is sometimes also black soil and stones. Nails associates the black soil with Magda. Her womb is

"black and tattered. A tear is running through her whole womb. From that womb she'll give birth to some Negro kid, black. Angela, with a rotten face, a tail. She won't get far with that kind of kid. They won't let her into a taxi, they won't sell her white milk. She'll lie down on the black earth of vacant lots. She'll live in greenhouses. Eaten by grubs, eaten by worms. She'll feed that kid black milk from her black breasts. She'll feed it garden soil. But it'll die sooner or later anyway" (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 9–10).

"Her face is rather pallid, anaemic. More like underneath, inside, Magda had garden soil instead of meat" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 40).

Magda represents the traditional femininity propagated by women's magazines, created for consumption purposes. She is consumed ["you all had her before me and now you're all going to have her again, because from this day forward she's yours, because from this day forward she's drunk and open twenty-four hours, eighty-watt bulbs shine in her eyes, her tongue shines in her mouth, her neon nightlight shines between her legs, go get her, take your turns" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 6)], but she also encourages consumption: she steals and buys, she also demands that things are bought. This is what Magda carries around in her handbag; in other words – what she herself consists of:

"with zeal, with rapture, she pours everything else from her handbag out onto the sidewalk. It's mostly chewing gum, various feminine doodads like deodorant, lipsticks, cigarette filters, various beauty products. [...] So she chucks that handbag away and makes use of this new one, tossing into it everything she has, leaving on the sidewalk just the empty dope baggie, gum wrappers. As well as the pen with the inscription *Zdzisław Szstorm*, the herbal sedative tablets that I'd recognize anywhere. Because they stink like chicken shit" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 41).

To add insult to injury, Magda not only litters the city streets with her femininity but also stinks ["of those guys who touch you while you're not looking, and you think you don't know they're touching you" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 3)].

Angela is another heroine in *Snow White Russian Red*. Unlike Magda, who is portrayed mainly in the contexts of consumption, sexuality and reproduction, Angela signals the process of constructing/granting identity. Her claims for authenticity are downright preposterous:

"[y]ou have a cool, interesting style – that way I cut her off right off the bat, straight off, with a compliment. In a moment I see that it delights her, talking about it. To which she answers: What style do you mean? I say right away: Well, you know. Clothes, behavior, way of carrying yourself. She says that that's just the way she is already, that it's not her copycatting someone else, just something she chose. That she carried herself that way her whole life, like me and you, like all of us, but one day she said to herself that she wants to be herself and have her very own inimitable style. Like herself on the inside, gloomy and dark.

I say that that's really interesting and engaging on her part. That it's the most important thing in life, to be yourself, not someone else. She says that she's found that to be the case, too" (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 58–59).

What does Angela have in her handbag?

"She pulls out a photo of a pretty depressing guy. Robert Sztorm – she says and looks at it dreamily. [...] To which she starts to drag out her varied collections of garbage, her letters to a friend from England who never wrote back to her. Because maybe it was the wrong address or the wrong language. [...] This is a leaf from a tree. This is a cornerstone. This is a cigarette butt touched by the mouth of the Lord God. This is her first communion, which she spat out after accepting it and dried it out, which she carries around now for luck. This is her first hair. This is her first tooth. This is her first fingernail, and this is her first boyfriend, Robert Sztorm, in profile with a hunting rifle on an excursion with the Gaming Society" (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 94–95).

(Naturally, a Zdzisław Sztorm pen is there, too). Alternative, "new age" as well as "Young Poland" discourses ["I don't know if you know, but I don't believe in God. There is no God because He sentenced His children to suffering and death. So there isn't a God anymore. Not in church, not anywhere. [...] There's only Satan" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 62)], the discourses brought together in the person of Angela are a dwarfed form of emancipatory discourses aimed at establishing an independent subject.

Both Angela and Magda are equivalent to their handbags where they put rubbish and from which rubbish spills out. Both are loquacious. What is more, Angela pukes. And what a puke: with stones and gravel.

Magda is the black garden soil and Angela is the salt of the earth, i.e. stones. Their Polishness – the compatibility between a woman's body and soul and the earth which they symbolise – is doubted. Not only because Magda's black soil is poisoned and the stones thrown up by Angela are a complete aberration. It is also because

"[a]ll women are a bunch of bitches. [...] Russki droppings. Maybe they are Russkies and they're just euphemistically called women. And we men are going to drive them out of here, from this town, where they perpetrate misfortunes, plagues, droughts, bad crops, debauchery. They ruin the upholstery with their blood, which flies out of them like nobody's business, soiling the whole world with permanent stains. A real River Menstruation" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 102).

Nails also has a mother; he lives in her flat. Izabela Robakoska née Maciak works her fingers to the bone, she is never at home because she supports herself and her son. Therefore, we only know her from Nails's stories. Nails shows his respect for her by keeping the flat tidy (reminds the guests to put on slippers, vacuums the carpeting) and protecting her reputation. An insult to his mother is in his eyes an extremely grave offence.

"Because that toothpaste on the left was an Easter gift. I say to her: If you used it, I'll kill you like a dog. For the insult to my principles, the constitution of my apartment. And for insulting

my mother. Regardless of what she is, good or bad, representing Zepter or PSS Społem. Because a mother's a mother, and I love her because she's mine" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 55).

As a genuine Polish mother, she is a pretext for her sons to spark off various wars on her behalf.

"Communication cancelled – Lefty yells into the handset then – The correct password is: Nails's a motherfucker and his mother takes off her panties for the Russkies.

I can't stand it anymore. I can't stand it, mentally. I'm thinking about killing him. Serious. Because my mother, well whatever, you can say anything about her, but that she'd wear some kind of panties, that's just base slander, she's a peaceful person by nature, of the mother gender, she's not a woman who's been fucked, and certainly not pro-Ruski, and no one's going to say anything perverted about her, and especially not Lefty" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 219).

We happen to know that Nails's mother had Ruski panel floor, ceramic and terracotta tiles transported across the border in Terespol. In Nails' Poland, where women are either sluts or saintly Polish Mothers, "Russkiness" is a trait which describes them all.²

"Either you're a person or you're a..."

"Russkiness" keeps spreading. The notion "Ruski" starts to assume the meaning of a *cwel* in the Polish prison jargon.³ After all, "either you're a Pole or you're not a Pole. And to put it more bluntly, either you're a person or you're a prick" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 120). In prisons there also are persons and punks. A punk is at the lowest end in the prison hierarchy: he is scorned, in a male prison reduced to the role of a woman, sexually abused and isolated lest he passes on his punk nature to others (e.g. by touching their possessions). The word is also the ultimate insult; using the term too freely is paid for

2 There are two more important women figures in the novel. One of them is Natasha Blokus – an impudent, entrepreneurial and strong character. She is the only one who manages to avoid such categorisation and who manages to be pigeonholed along with men. The other woman is Ala, "a girl of the mother-hen variety. She'll tidy up, cook, convert to Catholicism" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 169), a synonym of caution, decency, adaptation and licking the authority's hand. Ala comes more from the saint category ("it'll take some difficulty, some effort, for me to get some, like I'd have to put the moves on my mom or worse: make use of some unidentified domestic fowl, some undercooked poultry" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 176). She oozes bacteria, which discourages Nails from closer contacts with her. His problem seems to be that a person from the slut category is too reminiscent of the saint Polish Mother.

3 Cf. definition of the word "cwel" [translated as "motherfucker" by Benjamin Paloff in his rendering of Masłowska's novel, but actually having the meaning of punk/bitch in prisoners' cant – translator's note] in the *Słownik tajemnych gwar przestępczych* [Dictionary of clandestine criminal subdialects] (Stępnia & Podgórzec, 1993, pp. 82–83): "Cwel // cwel 1. 'a passive homosexual, a man offering sexual services to others, i.e. sexually used by the other inmates, a raped prisoner' [...] Punks are at the lowest level of prison hierarchy. They are individuals with a propensity for homosexuality or who have been raped. These qualities are ascribed by the other inmates and do not always indicate actual inclinations. Homosexual prisoners are divided into three types: inmates with physical or mental defects (frail, low IQ, shiftless, fearful, submissive), the physically fit but with mental defects more prominent than in the former group, and genuine homosexuals looking for partners to satisfy their distinct sexual drive. These are frequently degenerates offering homosexual services in return for cigarettes, food, etc. This type of a punk is discriminated against and despised by others, treated very brutally. They are given female names, are referred to as faggots." This definition could certainly benefit from problematizing the issues of homosexuality and rape and differentiating between a "punk" and a "homosexual," rather than using them like synonyms. The existence of a prison punk revolves around violence, not sex.

in blood. The institution of a punk makes it possible to reconstruct the social hierarchy in a prison, i.e. a place which itself is rated lowest in social hierarchy. This hierarchy is based on pure violence and recreates and reinforces the conditions which send people to prison instead of questioning them.

Who's the boss?

The world of *Snow White and Russian Red* is such a prison. It holds only prisoners and jailers. The first group includes Nails and his male and female friends; the other group consists of policemen. As Nails tends to think, real power is in the hands of Zdzisław Sztorm and Dorota Maślowska.

Zdzisław Sztorm is the president of *Sandworks*, and thereby the owner of Polish land, and the proprietor of Polish Police, Inc., which supervises the land. His name seems to accompany Nails anywhere he goes. As an omnipotent president, Sztorm decides who will be Miss of No Russkies Day and he also concludes peace with Russkies, putting the Polish-Ruski war on hold. Sztorm's son was Angela's first boyfriend; Nails's mother works for Sztorm; all meaningful business is done in different ways with Sztorm.

Nails does not have access to Sztorm: he has never seen him, he only comes across his envoys and representatives. Sztorm's power is legitimised by its secrecy. This is alienated capitalist power which owns everything and everybody but access to which is limited. Sztorm is contacted by Angela who is appointed Miss Public of No Russkies Day in exchange for sex. She may even deserve coverage in *Polish Sand* if she "represents the national right" (Maślowska, 2005, p. 229).

Just as Sztorm does not make an appearance in the book, only leaving traces, capitalist power represented by him is available only as distant reflections and remains. For this reason, while this power is the structure providing framework for all the events in the novel, it also traps the events in a network of a conspiracy theory. The omnipresent name of Sztorm is an epitome of this conspiracy. While the protagonists notice the name-cum-stamp in reality, they cannot say anything about him, even referring to the conspiracy theory. Capitalism becomes an incomprehensible structure that cannot be grasped by words, and is even more difficult to determine and undermine, not to mention control. The incomprehensible nature of capitalism is closely related to its advancement and speed: so frantic that the integral processes and transactions cannot be grasped. As a result, the same object (or person) may take turns being a market player, a commodity and a legal tender. The confusion of the world depicted in *Snow White and Russian Red* demonstrates itself also in the fact that the signifier and the signified are muddled. The crux of the matter has been replaced by capital transferred at breakneck speed – Russki thieves rob Poles "of customs duties, of nicotine" (Maślowska, 2005, p. 49). Thus, the capitalist economy of profit and loss as symbolised by Sztorm, rules the entire world of *Snow*

White and Russian Red and its language. There is a transaction behind every event, every intent is preceded by a cost-benefit assessment. Capitalism is a zero-sum game here. Since access to goods is limited and the demand keeps growing, one needs to fight for them resorting to the law of the stronger.

In the world of *Snow White and Russian Red* amph is the cheapest commodity – anyone can have it (supply problems are rare, like on No Russkies Day). Perhaps the reason why amph is so cheap is that it is “bad shit, impure, cut” (Masłowska, 2005, p. 18). Trafficking and buying amphetamine is the most frequent form of the protagonists’ participation in the money-goods economy, while the protagonists’ amphetamine consumption safeguards the system’s immutability. Women are an equally cheap commodity and sometimes a legal tender.

“Indeed, Kacper took Magda away from me. And although it’s absurd, [...] that’s me and that’s how I’ll get mine and even a little extra. And then I do some calculations on my fingers. He’s waxing Magda’s ass, that’s plus one for him. But Magda gives it up to everybody, that’s minus one and a half for him. I’ll wax his Ala’s ass, though for me that’s minus one on account of her looks. But on account of her not giving it up to some dickhead of two years, plus for the fact that in the course of several days Kacper hasn’t managed to wax her ass even once, for all that, it’s plus three for me”⁴ (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 176–177).

Sztorm’s power exceeds the novel’s reality. Three lines of interpretation

This capitalist rule provides a framework for a majority of interpretations of Masłowska’s novel. They had to refer this way or other to Nails as an exotic native to capitalise on him. I have identified three lines of interpretation: three ways of managing, utilising and taking over Nails’s power.

The first line is indignant interpretation, focusing on a juxtaposition of two worlds: that of decent citizens and the repulsive, overtly aggressive thugs from housing estates. It is based on the Manichean vision of reality divided into the enlightened civilisation and a cesspool which seizes and deforms that light. Masłowska used that vision as material for the novel’s structure. Interestingly, she only needed to deal with the dark side for the civilised part to appear on its own, as statements made by literary critics. For example:

“If people like Nails are among us, then we are facing interesting times, indeed. This will be an era of doped up TV sets: people whose heads are full of video clips, with a train of thought skipping as a tiny little stimulus presses a button on their internal remote control. Their brains are not human organs used to think and comprehend but reservoirs of ideas and emotions, picked up by their senses once upon a time and now bouncing off the skull.

4 It is worth mentioning that Nails’s venture failed – as a result, “fuck if I’m not hundreds of points behind in my calculations, in my scoring, so that now I’d have to screw Magda a thousand times in a row plus Angela as a virgin a few times, too, in order to get back in the black with those points and not lose face” (Masłowska, 2005, p. 200).

Their knowledge is a blend of incomprehensible media slogans and their logic is stifled with the thick fog of an amphetamine high. These humanoids would not be a threat (the world has seen worse freaks) but for the fact that the doped TV sets perfectly fit today's reality: they are wonderfully amoral and truly believe in their right to loot and be happy at someone else's expense. Lately, this attitude has really paid" (Remiezowicz, 2002).

"But why write novels about it?" (Klejnocki, 2002).

Clearly, Maślowska did not need to bother to create a civilised world: she delegated the task to some literary critics, who passed the test with flying colours, as exemplified above. This interpretation proves useful as it confirms the Manichean division into light and darkness. As Fanon put it, the inhabitants of the bright part of the town depend on the medina: without the medina, they would not be who they are and their civilisation would be nothing against the savagery of the colonised. There is more to it than the fact that the very reason behind the colonial meeting is willingness to exploit and make profits. This meeting allows the colonist to consolidate his identity: he is everything unattainable to the native. This profit is hard to underestimate.

Interpretations based on this division in fact reflect the failure to handle the dichotomy of *pan* [master] and *cham* [lout],⁵ as covered by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (Tokarska-Bakir, 2007) and Michał Buchowski (Buchowski, 2006). The critics were in favour of the masters, while in the novel its protagonists are portrayed as terrifying louts. A relation based on this dichotomy resulted in rejection accompanied with repulsion. The reviews of *Snow White...* which I have included into the indignant category deny that the relation between the two worlds can at all be contemplated. "I cannot justify the fascination of a representative of the intelligentsia with a spiritual bum," wrote Jarosław Klejnocki (Klejnocki, 2002). The "Russkiness" of the protagonists is the denied Polish loutishness (Janion's Slaviness?); as long as it is demonised, it will remain demonic.

The use of Nails's otherness could also be of a different nature. The "educational" line of interpretation seems to believe that Nails may be civilised while we, the good masters, may be a part of the process. Very quickly, Maślowska's novel was labelled a "tracksuit novel." It was a reference to the protagonists, the alleged "tracksuit men" or members of the sub-culture of urban and rural louts wearing tracksuits, violent and uncouth as louts are. *Snow White...*, interpreted as a tracksuit novel, was to pose an opportunity to analyse with concern the lost young people spending their time on benches in the housing estates. These reviewers tended to miss two things: firstly, the very ontology of a "tracksuit man" – a product of orientalisation, that is a phantom created by the disturbed, decent citizens. Secondly, the word "tracksuit" is mentioned in the novel only once (Maślowska, 2005, p. 24) and, what is more, it refers to the garment of a completely unimportant figure. Sometimes, however, critics tried to handle the issue:

5 The dichotomy dates back to the 17th-century ideology of land-owning nobility, according to which the noble (*pan*, or master) were descendants of an ancient warrior race, while the peasant population, by then subjugated as serfs, were of inferior Hamite origin (thus the name *cham* to refer to a serf). This deeply-established dichotomy survived the abolition of serfdom in the 19th century. In today's Polish, the word *pan*, apart from its meanings of "master, lord" – is a general (male) honorific, while *cham* in its most basic meaning denotes a lout (Editor's note).

"Four large tracksuit men enter the room. A brawl is imminent. The tracksuit men order beers. Incidentally, one knocks off his glass to the floor. And what does he do? He squats and tidies away. Bartek, an expert in pop culture, comes closer. He looks at the logos on the tracksuits: Metoda, Moro, Etylina. Not Adidas, Nike or Reebok. He sighs with relief: these are not tracksuit men, these are harmless hip hop lovers, skateboard junkies. The next day he calls us at the *Duży Format* weekly: 'The role of the tracksuit in the youth culture has changed. It has become regular garment. Write about it.' We did. Or rather, we put it into rhymes: [...]

Dorota Maślowska, Wejherowo-born
Published last year a novel, sort of a unicorn
A story about Nails, a classic tracksuit king
But Nails does not wear a tracksuit, that's the thing!
The tracksuit is an epitome of an imbecile
Rather than anybody's sense of dressing style!" (Staszewski, 2003).

The tracksuit mentality has become the signifier devoid of the permanent signified, revealing its arbitrary nature of a condemning accusative name. A decent citizen, concerned about the condition of the society, may in his or her turn honestly say that this is not about the class system,⁶ social injustice or inequality in access to representation but about "an epitome of an imbecile" (sic). After all, some tracksuit men have good manners and they clean up after themselves! Some wear tracksuits made not by Adidas, Nike or Reebok but Metoda, Moro and even Etylina! Some of them may even achieve our privileged position in the system while we do not need to make any concessions to them at all.

The third interpretation revolves around distance and irony. Its followers seem to relish the esprit de corps in an exclusive club of people who understand and accept Nails' otherness. This is how Maślowska and her novel replaced the fascinating Stranger and "speaking Maślowska [has come to be] in vogue" (Drotkiewicz, 2004, p. 18).

This line of interpretation is a sort of tongue-in-cheek statement addressed at Nails and Dorota Maślowska.

"I suspect Maślowska of spying for the Russkies. She wrote this book to meander around our Polish reality with impunity and pull wool over our eyes. Never in my life would I like to meet her personally as I am afraid that she will suck from me what is most valuable and will process it in her spy/Russian way. On the other hand, I am very pleased with the book. There is no question here whether this is women's or men's prose: this is a piece of slightly rotten, literary meat and it looks like this interesting thing has been worth waiting for since I was born 40 years ago" (review on page IV of the *Snow White...* cover).

These interpretations as well as the famous Maślowska language vogue somehow invert the indignation with the tracksuit mentality. Individuals adopting this strategy "can

6 The tracksuit is here a gauge of one's attitude towards the notion of social classes. If we adopt Marx's claim that "in so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that cut off their mode of life, their interest, and their formation from those of the other classes and place them in inimical confrontation (*feindlich gegenüberstellen*), they form a class" (Marx, 1974, p. 239), the way of thinking presented by the "educational" interpretation undermines the existence of social classes (and inimical confrontation), suggesting that if everyone can put on a tracksuit, there are no social classes. And if there are no social classes, what is the sense of discussing inequality?

afford the audacious imposture of refusing all refusals by recuperating, in parody or sublimation, the very objects refused by the lower-degree aestheticism” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 61). This is how the hierarchy is maintained: those resenting the tracksuit mentality are classified as avid fans of “lower degree aesthetics” while those rejecting their resentment are taken to the aesthetic heights. At the same time, “speaking Masłowska” or rather “speaking Nails” allows for an ironic attitude towards all these languages which, filtered through Nails, were put to a test and discredited in *Snow White*.... However, this irony is used to mask all the power relations presented in the novel. When Marcin Świetlicki wrote that “there is no question here whether this is women’s or men’s prose” I know very well that he treats *Snow White*... as an example of excellent men’s literature, an example of sticking it to everyone with Nails’s language. I also know that if Marcin Świetlicki uses this language he will also be able to stick it to everyone, remaining immune himself. An ironic use of Nails’s language allows for capturing his power but does not undermine the hierarchies which make him a subordinate. Marcin Świetlicki would rather use it to additionally reinforce his own privileged position by summoning ironic reinforcements from the land of subalterns.

The paradox of irony is that irony can be both a weapon used by the weaker against the stronger (when they can undermine the well-established, violent hierarchies) and a tool by means of which the dominant individual confirms his status quo, allowing the subordinates to use it because it is not going to change a thing, or adopting irony against them on his own behalf.⁷ As a literary trope based on the opposition between what has been said and what has been left implicit, irony always looks not only for the concealed messages but also for intentions, emphasising their antagonistic attitude. It is an ideal literary device for reflecting the tension between the parts of the divided world. The problem is, however, how to understand the meaning of this tension and the opposition of two (or more) voices (worlds). The attempt at providing the answer is testimony to the extraordinary nature of *Snow White*...

How to go outside the novel?

All the above mentioned strategies (indignant, educational and ironic) confirm the division into the two parties of the antagonised world by locking the natives in their contaminated town, at a safe distance from the colonists, who enjoy symbolic profits from the division. Masłowska transferred the relations from the colonised world to the domain of language, exposing their objectifying, specifying nature.

⁷ Przemysław Czapliński and Przemysław Rotengruber discussed both ways of employing irony in *Powaga ironii* (Doda, 2004). In his text “Ironia mniejsza: apokryfy mityczne Zbigniewa Herberta” [Lesser irony: Zbigniew Herbert’s mythological apocrypha] Czapliński focused on using irony with the aim of siding with the weaker party – the person who chooses irony paraphrases the existing stories based on a hierarchical difference; the person resorts to the technique of diminishing inversion, revealing the genuine motifs and results, he/she makes a statement against the violence of a myth (Czapliński, 2004). On the other hand, in his text Przemysław Rotengruber stated that irony is a tool used by dominating groups which stabilise the system resorting to irony and allowing the subordinate to use it (Rotengruber, 2004).

She chose an altogether different strategy. As Małowska, she stepped into her novel and met Nails. As a result of the meeting the readers know that Dorota Małowska had a choice between “a phrase by Świetlicki redone by Dąbroski” (Małowska, 2005, p. 247) and Nails’s phrase. As we know, she preferred Nails’s language and spoke it most of the book.

What is the difference between a phrase by Świetlicki and a phrase by Nails? Małowska could have chosen Świetlicki and then she would have stayed forever among epigones and imitators (provided that she would quote him in good faith). If she had consistently stuck to Nails’s phrase, the only thing she could do with it was exploiting it, taking advantage of her privileged position of the Author, educated and smart, i.e. capitalise on it in any of the three above presented ways. In either case, the phrase becomes a profit and loss system, a capitalist rule of the language. Neither Nails’s phrase nor Świetlicki’s phrase offer a kind of rootedness in language that would allow for transcending this economy. Neither phrase protects from the inability to speak for oneself.

Only who would speak here? Is it at all possible for language to stop being a tool of subjugation and to become a tool of victory in the fight for existence? Is it possible to have such an emancipatory language that offers expression to those who have been denied it?

What to do with the subaltern?

Nails’s meeting with the novel’s author is a confrontation of two parties of the representation process. It is affected by relations of power executed by the representing party over the represented party.

“They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented” – this quotation from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* by Karl Marx became the motto of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Said, 1979). Marx refers these words to peasants, whose support allowed Louis Bonaparte to assume power. Peasants are not capable of creating a sense of community or subjectivity because they do not share an interest or awareness. For this reason, they cannot represent themselves, i.e. present themselves (*darstellen*) or represent themselves in a political sense (*vertreten*). They recognise their representative (*Vertreter*) in the figure of the emperor.

The problem of masses that are not capable of representing themselves, and therefore do not have their own language (someone represents them, someone speaks suggesting that it is on their behalf), is among the more important issues of the anti- and postcolonial schools of thought. Fighting for one’s own representation (political and subjective alike) has always been the key element of decolonisation.

In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak, 1988; text discussed in: Barańska & Snochowska-Gonzalez, 2008), Gayatri Spivak ponders the assumption of subjectivity and the possibility of oppressed masses, i.e. subalterns, to speak for themselves (the term is taken

from Antonio Gramsci, whose *subalterne* are dependent masses devoid of access to hegemonic power; *subalterne* are the product of this power and have no access to the means by which they could control their representations), she also ponders the possibility of hearing their voice and reaching their awareness by a female intellectual from the First World.

According to Spivak, it is a misconception to assume that there is such a thing as a subaltern's awareness, that he/she can speak, that intellectuals can reach and hear him/her. Instead, a transgression takes place, whereby First World intellectuals replace the postulated speech of a subaltern subject with the speech of the apparently transparent First World Subject (of the intellectual), masquerading as the subaltern subject. As an example of such a misuse Spivak refers to a conversation about the 1968 events, held between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze in *Intellectuals and power* (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977), in which the academics state that "[t]here is no more representation; there's nothing but action" (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, p. 206) and an intellectual does not represent the masses because "they know perfectly well, clearly, they know far better than [the intellectual] and [...] they certainly say it very well" (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, pp. 206-207). By reporting the unrepresented subject, Foucault and Deleuze feign transparency and fail to recognise their own position of assessing a specific experience of the oppressed. They also fail to reflect upon the role of an intellectual; what is more, they reject the need of the effort of producing an ideology that would oppose the hegemony. ("Now this role of referee, judge, and universal witness is one which I absolutely refuse to adopt" (Foucault, 1980, p. 65)).

How is then a subaltern's reconstructed speech at all possible? Spivak resorts to the example of manipulating the law on widows in India under the British Empire. This manipulation can be reduced to a dispute between two trends: the British act of 1829 putting a stop to sacrificing widows and the classic, Vedic past of Hindu India as reflected in *Rg-Veda* and *Dharmasāstra*. Following Spivak, this dispute may be captured in two sentences: "White men are saving brown women from brown men" and "The woman actually wanted to die..." (Spivak, 1988, p. 297). Both sentences exist completely without the opinion of the woman concerned; they are equal evidence of epistemic violence. While Spivak has no doubts that the British abolition of the ritual of burning widows is praiseworthy, she also ponders on how a good society is born in an imperial project and how "[i]mperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind" (Spivak, 1988, p. 299). Spivak's conclusion is unequivocal: a subaltern cannot speak effectively, i.e. speak so as to be heard by, for example, an intellectual from the First World. To be heard without the risk of his/her voice being replaced by dominant ideologies.

Spivak's resolution is contradicted by Peter Hallward. In Hallward's eyes, the couple recurring in Spivak's essays: the postcolonial intellectual, always on the move and constantly asking questions about the position she speaks from, and the mute subaltern woman, stuck in the position of powerlessness and no access to subjectivity (and, first and foremost, in the position appointed to her by the international division of labour) is for Hallward an example of building a singular relation of no-relation, based on

renouncing a privilege rather than a fight for universal rights for everyone, a postcolonial intellectual and a subaltern woman alike. As Spivak says,

“[i]n seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* ‘unlearns’ female privilege. This systematic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse with the best tools it can provide and not simply substituting the lost figure of the colonized” (Spivak, 1988, p. 295).

According to Hallward, the emphasis that Spivak places on declining the privilege of representing a subaltern woman accompanied by giving up the belief that she does not need any representation because she can represent herself, leads to ditching the chances for fighting together and building a collective subject of anti-imperialism: “[r]ather than work to include others within this privileged position, Spivak often labours to undo it from within” (Hallward, 2001, p. 31). In this twisted way, she becomes close to the excluded. And when

“she objects to Foucault’s prescription of ‘localised resistance’ (in hospitals, prisons, in the army, in the family for instance), not because it may dissipate and undermine collective action, but because it may ‘accommodate unacknowledged privileging the subject’: resistances of this kind are apparently not disseminated *enough*” (Hallward, 2001, p. 28).⁸

As a result, in Hallward’s opinion, to Spivak any political involvement is contradictory and full of aporia as she does not allow for the possibility of relations (between individuals, between nations) and promotes ethical responsibility instead of collective solidarity.

Let me now relate these considerations to Masłowska’s novel. Nails’s voice is precisely what is heard by anyone who listens intently to the subaltern. His speech becomes like scorched ground, a battlefield trampled by any possible, violence-related discourses: nationalist, capitalist, martyrdom, sexist, racist... As the ultimate product of domination, Nails’s speech is like the Frankenstein’s monster, made of the rejected and the scorned, at the same time including the violence that made him. This is what makes this speech “Russki.”

Masłowska produced a subaltern; as a result, we can check how his voice is used. First and foremost, we find out what Masłowska can do with it. It is an attempt at tackling the double-edged nature of irony and exceeding its limitations.

Masłowska could be accused of consistently ridiculing all the languages traditionally deemed emancipatory, therefore stripping rebellion as well as any subjectivity of any sense of existence. This charge was raised by Kinga Dunin in the portion of her *Czytając*

8 Hallward refers to the charges raised by Spivak against Foucault: “Sometimes it seems as if the brilliance of Foucault analysis of the centuries of European imperialism produces a miniature version of that heterogeneous phenomenon: management of space – but by doctors; development of administrations – but in asylums; considerations of the periphery – but in terms of insane, prisoners, and children. The clinic, the asylum, the prison, the university all seem to be screen-allegories that foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism” (Spivak, 1988, p. 291).

Polskę (Dunin, 2004) dedicated to *Snow White...* and reinforced in her speech “Can you be different? The case of Dorota Maślowska: collaboration or transgression?” delivered at a conference on “The cartography(ies) of literary and other minorities.”⁹ Processed by Nails, these languages: leftist, feminist, alter globalist and anti-capitalist, prove to be gibberish, funny at best.¹⁰ Why then did Maślowska not offer Nails any form of liberation, any emancipation? Or did she? Why does she not let the subaltern speak? Or does she?

In her answer to the penultimate question, Spivak would try to prove that any attempts at letting the subaltern speak end in replacing his voice with one’s own voice, that of an intellectual who believes that he has rejected the power of representation. Spivak suggests an entirely different strategy and a different attitude to subalterns. Her recommendation is: “[t]o confront them is not to represent (*vertreten*) them but to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves” (Spivak, 1988, pp. 288-289).

By entering the novel, Dorota Maślowska decides against capitalising on Nails the subaltern. It is not her intention to take over his power either by means of irony, indignation or condescending fraternisation. She aims at the very category of subordination because this is the only way for her to act for the benefit of the subordinate. She ceases to speak through Nails and exposes herself.

The potential of mocking

Before wondering what this gesture means, before focusing on the relations between Maślowska and Nails and between the parts of “we” – that is the subject from the last part of the novel and the world – let me go back for a while to the issue of ridiculing and mocking, regular features of Nails’s language. This language is a grotesque hybrid, comprising words which belong to a large number of mutually exclusive areas, to opposite fields of culture. This is how the author of *Snow White...* referred to this language:

“[t]his is how I think. There is something wrong with me, too much data I cannot process. I do not listen to the radio at all but I know all the songs by heart, like a hairdresser. And the way I think is this: one third of an advertising slogan, followed by a piece of a poem and a piece from third grade religious instruction. To me, the truth is not a monolith but rather a million of crumbs, which I look for with a magnifying glass in the worst of gibberish. These are frequently mutually exclusive crumbs. This makes my inner life very hard indeed” (Maślowska, 2003).

9 The “Cartographie(s) des minorités littéraires et autres” conference – Paris, La Sorbonne, 18-20 November 2004, cf. Dunin, 2012.

10 “[...] it makes me want to blow the shit out of the hospital. Because of that orthopedera and the other pervers who work here, because of those starched princes among them with rods in hand, with stethoscopes, since as far as expressing opinions is concerned, I’m pretty much on the left. I don’t really agree with taxes, and I propose a government without taxes, where my parents won’t tear their guts out so that all these smock-sporting princes will have their own apartments and telephone numbers at a time when things aren’t like that” (Maślowska, 2005, p. 16).

The phenomenon of hybridity is full of ambivalence. On the one hand, it is what the colonial or imperial discourse dreads most: mixed races, mixed cultures, violated purity, heart of darkness, contravening the hierarchy. On the other hand, some see hope in hybridity as capable of stirring up the oppressive powers.

The protagonists of *Snow White...* resort to elements stolen from various discourses. They act like the natives who want to learn to speak like their white master. They quote from him, but somehow, never entirely correctly.¹¹ Imitation becomes mockery and, ultimately, scoffing and ridicule. The emotions accompanying the reception of the novel, the tension reflected in the three ways of interpreting it showed that the mockery was painfully accurate. Those who assumed the position of the civilised master tried to respond without losing his (respectable) face. The ironic appropriation as proposed by Świetlicki was a tool by means of which being an object of ironic mockery was to be transferred into the irony of mocking someone else.

Beyond irony

We know, however, that Małowska decides against this. She gives up the power that she could assume choosing that path. On the other hand, she does not stop (as Spivak would advise) at speaking to Nails the subaltern, at introducing herself. The conversation that Małowska and Nails have in a hospital (associations with J. Słowacki's *Kordian* are quite apt) is an act of exposing the roles played by Nails and Małowska.¹² Nails ended up in hospital because he decided to check on his own body if the world of *Snow White...* was, as Małowska had told him, in fact a paper stage design. The attempt ended very badly for him and it was not because the artificiality of the world was not confirmed but rather because it turned out that it encompassed Nails, too. This was the beginning of his epiphany: in the conversation he held in hospital with Małowska, they both realise that the artificiality of the world – that is the fact that it has been created by people, is a work

11 Cf. on the subject: Bhabha, 1984. Bhabha introduces the notion of colonial mimicry, which “is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126). Mimicry does not represent but repeats. Colonialists – the parodists of history – “inscribe the colonial text erratically, eccentrically across a body politic that refuses to be representative, in a narrative that refuses to be representational. The desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry – through a process of writing and repetition – is the final irony of partial representation” (Bhabha, 1984, pp. 128–129). According to Bhabha, the double vision of mimicry poses a threat to colonial discourse because “[t]he menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (Bhabha, 1984, p. 129). What is more, “[u]nder cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them. Similarly, mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its ‘otherness’, that which it disavows” (Bhabha, 1984, pp. 131–132).

12 “In the ancient Greek theatre, the parabasis is a gesture of taking off the masks by the choir, suspending scenic illusion and of the blending of facts and fiction on the part of the audience. In a novel, it is the author directly addressing the audience, stepping out of the work, a gesture of de-illusion, which strips a fictional universe of authenticity for the benefit of stressing its created nature” (Mitosek, 2013, pp. 20–21). Of course one can also assume that this is the moment when the author decides to shed the mask in order to “truly” speak, suspending the arbitrary nature of the fictional universe and suggesting that its illusion is being transcended. In my interpretation of Małowska’s works this is how I understand the parabasis she employs.

of construction rather than emanation of some divine nature – does not obliterate the conflicts which define it or the suffering it causes. “You’re looking yourself over, like, as soon as there’s something, you’re yelling right away. Mother, Mother, bring the flyswatter, it’s moving” (Masłowska, 2005, p. 279) – Nails blames Małowska, who is not prepared for this turn of events, who used to be certain of her safe position of the God-Author.

We know that Masłowska decided against capitalising on representing Nails. Where can declining such a privilege lead? Now Nails talks to Małowska:

“Maybe I feel something, too, and since you can’t comprehend that for yourself, pop out to the kiosk for 3-D glasses and then come back, because under my back, a room extends for kilometres into the heart of the earth, tangles of cables and transistors, don’t look because you’ll drown, don’t touch, because you’ll lose your hand” (Masłowska, 2005, p. 279).

Now it is Nails who tests her text comprehension:

“Pay attention, because they’re trick questions: sociopolitical background? Is the Polish-Russki war just a documented historical fact or a set of occasional prejudices? How does that collective hallucination evolve with respect to wars with the imagined enemy – sketch out an appropriate diagram of the function. Is what you’re holding merely a common pen? (Explain the concept aloud: phallic symbol). What kind of significance obtains in its inscription *Zdzisław Sztorm*? (Provide an oral explanation for the term: capitalism, advertising, joint-stock company). [...] At a local disco you meet Satan – what do you say? React spontaneously to the assigned situation.

And now you’re stumped, Małowska. Now it’s already an advanced course, and instead of answering, you’re staring at the radar, maybe they’ve torn out your tongue at last” (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 280–281).

This way we go beyond the repertoire anticipated by Spivak. The subaltern ceases to be a subaltern when the author dares share her privilege with him. This is how the confrontation between Nails and Małowska, in other words, exposing the process of representation, leads to the emancipation of both protagonists of *Snow White*... The emancipation of Nails (unlike Kinga Dunin, I think it does happen) consists in his refusal to be represented: “[a]nd maybe it’s some other way? Maybe what’s lying here in the bed is just *my representative* for Poland, maybe it’s only *my demo tape*?” (italics by C. S. G.) (Masłowska, 2005, p. 279). However, this emancipation is not Masłowska’s actual goal. If Nails can already speak for himself, she can no longer use him in her novel. Putting him to death becomes a way of resetting the situation and redefining the fight being fought and the parties involved.¹³

Why did Masłowska need Nails’s mask to begin with? The answer to this question is given when she decides to take the mask off and give up the protection it provides. In

13 This may be also approached from a different perspective. Masłowska’s novel problematises the attempts at “capturing the native’s point of view,” which typically proves to be a misuse (see the three lines of interpretation) and postulates turning to one’s own point of view. This is a dangerous moment, in anthropology and writing books alike. While reflexion on one’s own point of view is a prerequisite for any thinking, it may mislead one to where there is no place for a native. Masłowska avoids this pitfall by taking off her mask. As a result, she introduces herself as a native girl who fights for her representation.

the last part of the book, the protagonist turns into a two-person girls' collective: female friends deprived of any cover, roaming a monster-like city and fighting death. They let death get close to them and run away from it, face it up and laugh it sneeringly in the face.

"Today the sky has to burst, collapse with a rain of missiles, stones, dead fish and birds, today the sky has to burst. The sidewalk is full of trapdoors, take one step in the wrong direction and suddenly you're in hell, you're frying in red grease, devils are eating you with knives and forks, wiping the corners of their mouths with paper napkins. I say: Please, you can take me, I don't want myself anymore" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 289).

The grotesque, monstrous city, "a repugnant city, a great Dumpster" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 285) is the realm of death and hurting misery: "everything has thorns, the air has thorns, the rain slaps you in the face. The hair braided itself into the bicycle spokes, it's coming out together with the head, do something, take me out of here" (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 284–285). It is a Manichean city: the sparks of good have been scattered and lost so that they are difficult to find among evil, ugliness and suffering.

And yet, the girl-subject manages to find them. Masłowska juxtaposes the city-death with community and fight: this is the actual end of *Snow White*... The female protagonists meet

"two boys cuddled together, they were tiny and Siamese, like little potatoes rolling out of fire. They were grown together at the gaps between their teeth, grown together at their matchstick shoulders, at their squab bellies, they were holding a great ball, they had hats, they had tiny red hands, little pink flame tongues that trailed behind them like flags, flags of a pink state, the kingdom of coloured pencils, and that larger one sang: I love you, friend! They wafted a trail behind them, and we breathed that pink air and we knew that that doesn't happen every day" (Masłowska, 2005, pp. 290–291).

Immediately after that meeting with a small divinity – a loving community which cannot be seized or sold – there is a moment of epiphany and decision:

"[a]nd it's coming violently like a fervent light, like shattering glass, coming back from the park we smell how the Dumpster stink and we suddenly take our lighters in hand, light up that Dumpster, and look at the flames, which, like furious orange flowers, are starting to bloom across the wall, and we run away, laughing aloud" (Masłowska, 2005, p. 291).

The writer's liberation

Is Masłowska's portrayal at the end of *Snow White*... of the Manichean vision of the world a genuine, tactical position-taking or a play-safe escape to a singular, abstracted rebellion, a mutiny without a specified subject, courage for courage's sake? If it is no longer fitting to play ironically with representations, and Masłowska (unlike so many of her book's reviewers) knows it perfectly well – what is there left for her? In my opinion,

she manages to avoid escaping specificity. However, the Manichaeism presented by her has a strictly defined range.

Dorota Masłowska is a writer and this fact should not be forgotten. The imagery she creates at the end of her novel is the evidence of difficulty in putting thoughts into words and naming antagonisms. Most of the reviewers were helpless in the face of the end of *Snow White...* and, if it was at all mentioned, it was typically stated that the ending was “overdone” (Pilch, 2002) or “a stream of consciousness or, in simple language, gibberish” (Remiezowicz, 2002).¹⁴ The lack of balance between the incredible mass of analyses of Nails’s is language and attempts at tackling the last parts of *Snow White...* is striking. However, this does not change the fact that the subject in these parts is a fighting subject. It is a subject who refuses to make his expression a part of the capitalist system of the hegemony of phrase and the subsequent ironic appropriation; this subject exists through relations. It is the girly “we,” the “we” of small, gap-toothed gods against the objectifying, capitalising, Angra Mainyu’s power of death.

The paths of irony

What happened to that “we” in Masłowska’s subsequent books? How did she portray the two parts of the colonial world? How did she portray the relations between them, what values did she ascribe to them? Her play *No Matter How Hard We Tried* (Masłowska, 2008, 2014) published in 2008 and the novel *Honey, I Killed Our Cats* (Masłowska, 2012) from 2012 continue to document the ravaged world. In both works, the author makes different statements about this deprived reality. The change consists also in the way she employs irony and elements of grotesque; as it turns out, this translates into a scope of the polyphonic nature of her works and their potential to revive such a courageous subject as the one presented in *Snow White...*

The irony of *Snow White...* did not only characterise the way in which the novel can be interpreted and capitalised on. By devising Nails’s language, Masłowska herself reconstructed the ironic rule of distance to the quoted language of Nails. “The split of the subject of the statement becomes ironic when the speaker discredits the person making the statement, revealing *doxa* in his/her language” (Mitosek, 2013, p. 83) and this is how Masłowska revealed violence behind all the languages which Nails murders. If she had finished the novel before she stepped into it, she would have stopped at using polyphony in such a way that the relation between the specific voices is actually a lack of relations. They would only have served to emphasise the distance between them and

14 The only attempt at tackling the last part of *Snow White...* that I have come across is that by Kinga Dunin: “At the end of the novel, Masłowska tries to regain language. She starts to speak a language of emotions, of immaturity, of the body, of the overpowering fear of death, of a sense of limitation and alienation from the world. This is an unacceptable language, bordering on incomprehension. A language of a girl who does not have a language. Her position in the system is even worse than that of Nails. Even if he did not have a language of theory, Nails is still the centre of the described world because it is an androcentric world” (Dunin, 2004, p. 236).

the ironic author, creating a novel world from the position of a singular distance. Developing a relation with the created world and entering into a dialogue with Nails allowed her to avoid the trap of irony, which consists in the fact that anyone who is ridiculed may want to turn the tables on the ridiculing party and that of course may lead to a never-ending game of determining the more sophisticated ironist. Masłowska abstained from this use of irony, which characterises a subjective, particular attitude of the subject. More importantly, she also transcended ironic consciousness, interpreted as the attitude of the subject which reveals the world in general as ambiguous and full of aporia. In ironic consciousness,

“[t]he epistemological conviction about the multitude of truths leads to impugning authorities and to tolerance for various visions of the world and their underlying contradictions. Realising this situation produces a distance to one’s beliefs. It changes the position of the ironist from a dogmatist mocking his enemies into an attitude of a person who, mocking the world, becomes the subject of a joke, a tease who is ridiculous himself. It is plain to see that the subject of ironic consciousness, as a person who doubts any specific values, is not prone to gestures of contempt or ridicule” (Mitosek, 2013, pp. 358–359).

This is one side of ironic consciousness; the other side is related to removing any permanent bases for the recognised values or subjectivity in general. In the meantime, the “overdone ending” of *Snow White...* not only presented the cost of this awareness but also proved that Masłowska could show what may follow the catastrophe of losing such bases. She can present the effort of fighting for oneself while the fight is stripped of them.

Irony as the basis, consciousness and a relation

Let us then sum up the ways in which Masłowska uses ironic polyphony in *Snow White...* First, we have subjective irony, defined as a basis revealing the ridiculed object. Second comes ironic consciousness, unveiling the state of the world deprived of the bases, where everything may be questioned and negated. Thirdly, it is a description of Manichean reality, where the specific parts, presented and implicit, establish specific relations and this makes it possible to exceed the aporias of a world out of joint.

In *No Matter How Hard We Tried*, the negativity which can be reached by following the second above-mentioned ironic path proves to be the best way of describing the ravaged reality. This is a grotesque negativity of the anti-world that is Poland, and Poland – that is to say nowhere. In this world, the only certain thing is what exists as negation, contradiction, deficiency.

The play runs in a degraded Warsaw tenement house, whose existence is uncertain – it could have been bombarded during the WWII. “The interior looks as if it were built on a fault-line or were in the process of being bulldozed” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 421). The

drama protagonists come from two groups: the first one consists of three generations of women living in the house: Gloomy Old Biddy, her daughter Halina and grand-daughter Little Metal Girl, visited by their neighbour Bożena. Superimposed on their world is a world of media presentation, represented by the other group of protagonists: Man, Actor, TV Host, Monika and Edyta. The latter, in their turn, process the degraded reality to tailor its nothingness to the tabloidised consumption. Taken together, all characters demonstrate various forms and levels of negativity.

The negativity of Poland, the negativity of the family. „Has Grandma not had her dinner yet?”

Among these diverse forms and levels, the negativity of Poland is most significant. It is a country where everything is not as it should be. Unlike in *Snow White...*, it is compared only with the West, its only point of reference.

““Everybody knows Poland’s a stupid country: it’s poor and ugly. – says Little Metal Girl. – The architecture’s ugly, the weather’s gloomy, the temperatures are cold, even the animals have run off to hide in the woods. The shows on TV are bad, the jokes aren’t funny, the prime minister looks like a pumpkin, and the president looks like the prime minister. In France they have France, in America they’ve got America, Germany in Germany, and even the Czech Republic is Czech, but in Poland all you get is Poland” (Maślowska, 2014, p. 457).

In this comparison, Poland always presents itself poorly because it cannot get rid of its Polish nature which inevitably turns out to be a deficiency and contradiction. It is Poland marked with a syndrome of “underdevelopment, incompleteness, lack of self-containment, arrested development, inferiority and finally [...] social and cultural immaturity” (Sowa, 2012, p. 18) – all the most fitting epithets should start with a negation, a “no.” And “no” occurs in *No Matter How Hard We Tried* exceptionally often.

The axis of the drama are the responses to this picture of Poland as a deficiency and attempts at handling the deficiency that affect the language spoken by the protagonists. Since the language is based on negation, the emphasis is on the distance between those speaking the language and the world they do not belong to anyway. It is

“a language that has become disengaged from reality, a language used not for what it may say; what can be said is of no consequence. Rather, the language is used for what it can show, and that is frequently the very emptiness of language that is at the heart of the experience called ‘the absurd.’ [...] Language can become disengaged from reality in a variety of ways. For instance, negative expressions can be used as if they were affirmatives. [...] This treatment of negatives as if they were affirmative is a calculated misuse of the commonplace called contradictories, and thus points to a whole range of techniques for disengaging language from reality. The deliberate misuse of the tools of logic and rhetoric has virtually limitless possibilities” (Holloran, 1973, pp. 99–100).

The female protagonists of *No Matter How Hard We Tried* respond to the world with a language in which negative sentences are used as if they were affirmative sentences.

“HALINA. Has Grandma not had her dinner yet?

LITTLE METAL GIRL. Gran, have you not had your dinner yet?

GLOOMY OLD BIDDY IN A WHEELCHAIR. What was for dinner?

HALINA. Lecso.

LITTLE METAL GIRL. Lecso. All sorts of gunk with paprika and Hungarian space-jizz. See also: soup of the week, soup of the month, waste not want not, World War II, famine.

GLOOMY OLD BIDDY IN A WHEELCHAIR. Oh, that. No, I haven't.

LITTLE METAL GIRL. Gran hasn't eaten.

[...]

HALINA. Has Grandma not been out anywhere today?

LITTLE METAL GIRL. Me! Me! Me! I didn't take Gran out anywhere.

HALINA. Good. Now I don't have to not take her anywhere, not that I would anyway, because I won't be home from work until 11 pm.” (Masłowska, 2014, pp. 425–426).

Halina, Little Metal Girl and Bożena speak this language because it best reflects their exclusion. The “real” world is something not for them and *Not For You* is the title of a magazine read by the protagonists to confirm their relations with the world. The models presented there – models of modern femininity constructed through consumption – are something they will never live up to, something they can accomplish only by negation.

“HALINA (*fussing around in the kitchen, blending impressive expertise with total futility*). I keep thinking about the holiday I won't be having. I've been reading up on it, and I've finally decided: No way, we're not going on holiday again this year.

BOŻENA. You don't say!

HALINA. That's right! We're not going again this year.

BOŻENA. So where is it you're not going to?

HALINA. Nowhere.

BOŻENA. Naturally, where else? We're not going to the seaside this year. God, it's just so unaffordable! We haven't got the money! Besides, I'm fat as a pig and shouldn't obnoxiously wobble around in other people's field of view.

HALINA. Sure thing, you bet.

BOŻENA. On our way, we'll not stop off in Kobylka, where I've got a cousin, and we'll be going nowhere straight from there!

HALINA. I guess I'll see you there, then – call my lack-of-a-mobile, you've got the number. Nowhere, good old nowhere: All the memories it brings back!” (Masłowska, 2014, pp. 433–434).

Gloomy Old Biddy, Halina, Little Metal Girl and Bożena represent the world of the excluded. Their house is full of remains, leftovers and rubbish. “Wash down what others won't eat with what they won't drink” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 431) – this advice comes from the *Not For You* magazine. All the redundant objects: the bottle of stale knock-off vermouth, the elaborate pyramids of chipped and leftover-encrusted pots and pans (Masłowska, 2014, p. 421), piles of carefully washed used yogurt pots, Tesco leaflets, carefully preserved flyers from language schools, canned-food labels (Masłowska, 2014, p. 424), which end up there like in a landfill, and the excess of nothingness floods the

place so it is difficult to manoeuvre. The same holds true for the protagonists themselves. Bożena the neighbour, referred to as the pig, is so fat that when she sits in an armchair, “everything in the apartment rises by 40 cm” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 431). At the same time, the excess of her body is reversely proportionate to the place and importance that could be attributed to her (her name is not even mentioned in the list of characters at the beginning of the play) and that she could award to herself (nearly all her utterances finish with “I won’t say that, because I’m fat as a pig and won’t go imposing my point of view on people” – Masłowska, 2014, p. 448).

Negating negativity

While Gloomy Old Biddy, Halina, Little Metal Girl and Bożena represent a world revolving around deficiency, the goal of the activities undertaken by the other group of protagonists is distancing themselves from this world and shaking off its stigma by trying to cover it with the pretence of a modern form. Therefore their world – the world of elites and the media spectacle they generate – is also marked with negativity. Man – the first representative of this world who turns up on stage – is busy writing a script for the film *The Horse Rode Horseback*. It is a film

“about present-day Poland and its disadvantage and deracination, its fraying social fabric, poverty, intolerance, unbalanced national identity, and the other dreadful problems that Hoolybeck wrote about so convincingly... – not that I’d know, never read him; that stuff doesn’t concern me” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 455).

The “positivity” of Man, demonstrating itself in the fact that he tries to hide the clutter in the flat of the protagonists under neat Ikea boxes, consists exclusively in it being a negation of their negativity. The most important feature of the “typically Polish: cramped and squalid” reality described by Man in the script (Masłowska, 2014, p. 441) (a reality which is of course an equivalent of the world in which the four women live) is the fact that it always refers to someone else, to subalterns deprived of speech, from whom one can distance oneself without giving up the pleasure of representing them. The protagonists of the first version of the script are those who will never be like him – and he will never be like them. To him, they become the negativity of what has been rejected and what remains in him, all his positivity does not contain anything except for that rejection.

The second version of the script is dedicated to Monika and her life, which is like a picture from an advertising booklet. In a different way, it also offers the Man an opportunity to represent the “others.” Granted, he no longer presents their lives in his script but he is there to represent their interests and dreams: the new version is to be

“a goodwill gesture towards the 4 million punters who didn’t come to see the film, because they wouldn’t fork out 20 zloty for a ticket [...] just to get a glimpse of Dumpsville and

listen to fake barfing in Dolby Surround, as if they didn't get the real thing in Dolby Surround every day. So I had to agree to some minor concessions, a man's got to make a living somehow, I've got a mortgage to pay off too!" (Masłowska, 2014, p. 450).

The interest defended by Man in writing the second version of the script is (on top of his own economic interest) the alleged interest of Polish subalterns, for whom the only available form of liberation may be the opium of the media spectacle – this time in a glamour version.

More importantly, both forms of the false representation, demonstrating themselves in the two versions of the script, reinforce the non-existence of the represented, depriving them of speech. As if the essence of this representation were an absolute lack of relations between the two parties. The world of Man, Actor, Monika, TV Host and Edyta is superimposed on the world of the four women without contacting it. "Life is just so real, injustice is so unjust, the disadvantaged are completely disadvantaged, and social sensitivities are so sensitive" (Masłowska, 2014, p. 448), says Edyta after she has watched the film *The Horse Rode Horseback*. The presenters and the presented remain on their respective sides of the screen. For the former, stepping to the other side would require giving up their privileged position, which of course is not something they would accept. The world of the apparent centre needs to stay enshrined in a solipsistic bubble to protect its own interest, safeguarding the line separating it from the Polish anti-world.

The "positivity" and "modernity" of the world of elites amounts to a negation of the Polish nature, defined as the essence of backwardness and rejection. Monika best exemplifies defining oneself through separation from what is Polish and identifying with Western Europe:

"I was born here as a little baby, entirely by chance. You see, this is where my great-great-grandparents, great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins lived, blown here on the winds of fate, naturally, always longing for the West, whence they came. They say that at first I cried a lot and waved my tiny fists. Even then I wanted to come back where I came from, to the West, that is, but being a helpless infant, I wasn't able to speak a word of Polish, let alone book a ticket. They didn't even have Internet in 1970s Poland. What could I do, I learned Polish willy-nilly and now I speak it without an accent, but still, I can never remember the meaning of certain long words, not that it stops me from saying them. I must also confess that the local water and air disagree with me, I don't like the landscape, the architecture, and I don't like the people, all so glum, unhappy with their lives, and insecure" (Masłowska, 2014, p. 453).

Where does the deficiency come from?

Any notion of deficiency calls for its opposition – an image of completeness and perfection. Therefore, it always arises in a relation to some kind of an ideal. The protagonists of *No Matter How Hard We Tried* (be it those embodying deficiency or those trying

to reject the related stigma) know perfectly well where to look for this standard. “The West” and “Europe” are the navigational landmarks selected involuntarily, even by “helpless babies.” Just like in *Snow White...*, global capitalism, monopolising the criteria of assessment and affecting all comparisons¹⁵ and moral evaluations,¹⁶ is the super-structure which divides the world into the advanced centre and the chasing up, underdeveloped and lacking peripheries (“our homespun ‘the West is there already, and we’re not,’” Masłowska, 2014, p. 442). There are two answers to the question about the origin of the Polish deficiency, so grotesquely presented in Masłowska’s play. On the one hand, the origin of this deficiency can be portrayed as resulting from the development of modern European capitalism and reasons can be presented why Poland is on its peripheries, forever doomed to “catching up,” “meeting the high European standards” (at the same time “maintaining moral superiority”), and so on. Another answer is: the deficiency comes from the fact that the only point of reference taken into account is advanced capitalism with its logic and modes of consumption.

The modes of consumption are determined by the position in the capitalist world. The Biedronka chain shop offers the excluded and marginalised cheap luncheon meat *Ye Olde Poultry Loin*, made from “water (97 percent), pork rinds, dishwashing liquid, window-cleaner, gelatine, spices” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 431). Those who, like Actor, turn their backs to the Polish deficiency and are oriented to the West, after shooting a film “actually [...] in Poland” and staying “in the local hotels” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 443) need to relax – “go to Peru and drive a four-wheel drive through the cradle of our civilization. Then another week on vodka, a week of coke, a couple of days’ detox, psychotherapy, and three days as a tampon in a Hellinger constellation” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 443) eat (like Edyta) “a Lausanne salad, a goat-kid pâté, and a bucket of Parmesan” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 453), or possibly do not eat anything (like Monika). However, the logic of the instruments of capitalism and the divisions it introduces are best demonstrated in the description of how the wine drunk by Actor is produced and in presenting the individuals involved in the process.

“China – little Feng-Shui stands by the production line, making grapes. His serial number in the huge European fruit factory is 1,760,182. [...] He sticks pips into the pulp and wraps it in skin 32 hours a day, in peril of his life, for which he has no break, and no hope.

15 As Aijaz Ahmad wrote about the countries which tried to combat underdevelopment the non-capitalist way: “none of these countries is ever judged on its economic performance in relation to its own past, its inherited environment, its regional location: China is not compared with India, Cuba with Haiti, Bulgaria (once a periphery of the Ottoman Empire) with Turkey (the central formation of that empire). What matters is that Vietnam has failed utterly to become a Singapore, China is not Japan or California, Cuba is not Miami. In other words, it is the superior power of the material productions of advanced capitalism which sets the terms of comparison, in war and peace. The countries which have experimented with non-capitalist paths have thus had to struggle not only with the inherited anachronisms of their own past, not only with the imperialist denial to them of a secure existence, not only with the structural distortions of their own command economies and centralizations of political and administrative powers, but also with a comparison with the consumption patterns of the imperialist countries and the hegemonic assertions of their cultural products and aspirations – a comparison which has been made all the more palpable with each phase in the development and globalisation of the electronics media and the (dis)information technologies” (Ahmad, 2008, pp. 24–25).

16 “Nobody’s talking me into having an abortion! – say Halina. – I would never let them kill the tiny wee babe sheltered in my womb! Where would I get the money?!” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 454).

[...] Meanwhile, and old Indian woman in Delhi [...] [f]or breakfast today, she'll make do with a little curry powder. She hurriedly lowers the branch to bar the door of her car-tire hovel, and rushes to sift grains of sand: Only the roundest and most symmetrical ones can be made into bottles. [...] Now it's time for the Polish economic migrants: Jan from Tłuszcz, with a PhD in social sciences, is shaping soil into lumps and painting them black. Back in Poland he was a jack-of-all-trades. Maria, a downsized weaver from Łódź, is devotedly helping him out. Into the lumps she weaves imitation earthworms, artificial beetle grubs, and roots painstakingly braided around real roots. [...] Meanwhile, political prisoners from Russia are wiping the air clean of exhaust fumes. And children in Uzbekistan are selecting the prettiest sunbeams... [...] And then chop-chop, hocus-pocus, the wine goes onto the racks, into the boxes, crates and trucks. Along the way, several not particularly attractive Bulgarian women by the roadside will manage to fill their pails with foreign condoms, or maybe not. And then there's the checkout girl from Tesco who breaks a bottle and, to pay for it, takes out a loan without guarantees, endorsers, or her husband's consent. Unable to repay it, she hangs herself on her handbag strap" (Masłowska, 2014, pp. 444–445).

The global division of labour indicates the positions of the drama protagonists, allocating exploitation and marginalisation to some of them and the chase of the apparent goods manufactured by them – to others. However, since the story unfolds in Poland, that is on the periphery of modern capitalism, even the latter remain only representatives of peripheral elites, determined by the compulsion of negating deficiency and underdevelopment.

The hierarchy of ironic confrontations

What is the role of irony in this portrayal of the world? What relations does it expose? Creating the drama protagonists, Masłowska also creates an implied subject, who plays a game with the protagonists and the readers and makes them guess the nature of the relations between all these presented and not directly presented individuals. While in *No Matter How Hard We Tried*, unlike in *Snow White...*, Masłowska does not step in, it is still possible to reconstruct the type of involvement selected by the implied subject. It is this involvement that creates tension between the protagonists. The role of irony is to highlight the contradictions between them and to establish relations which will allow for a specific configuration of reality to occur.

Let me sum up the hierarchy of denials (and denial indicates here a relation of confrontational negation) in *No Matter How Hard We Tried*. There are three levels here. The four heroines (Gloomy Old Biddy, Little Metal Girl, Halina and Bożena) have been placed at the base of the fictional universe. They epitomise the world of the excluded and marginalised. It is a grotesque world as best revealed in Halina and Bożena's descriptions. This grotesque nature should be analysed according to Kayser's rather than Bakhtin's theory (cf. Bakhtin, 1984): it contains definitely more of the horrible than the funny and

shows a horror-infested “alienated world. [...] We are so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world” (Kayser, 1963, p. 24). The heroines of this world are its victims and their grotesque appearance, occupations and statements serve to expose the powers that shaped them this way: marginalised, scorned and repulsive.

“Skirt: Tesco, 28 zloty. The grease stain lends it mystique. T-shirt: out of the closet, faded at the tits. Grays, browns and urine yellows, grease stains, and threadbare patches, are all in vogue this season, just like any other season. Sweat stains, our top tip: they’ll show up on their own, sooner than later. Men’s sock – from the Russian Market: 17 pairs for 10 zloty. Shoes – imitation leather. Everything for 5 zloty to 12 zloty. Accessories – plastic carrier bag. One-fifty, Lidl. Huge and hefty; capacity – 10 kilos of potatoes, five bottles of vinegar, chicken feet, yesterday’s issue of freebie Metro daily, with room left over for a little purse. Sink-washable” (Mastowska, 2014, p. 429).

In this description – funny and terrifying alike – the role of irony is to defend the heroines (although they are not promised any other, “positive” subjectivity) and to expose the process behind their world – a world of deficiency and exclusion – defining their identity as the identity of subalterns. The negation on which this irony feeds is therefore equivalent to the intervention of the implied subject, undertaken for ethical reasons. Irony highlights the distance between the subject and the described heroines. The implied subject does not speak “them” and not to them but about them, his opponent being the global capitalist logic which introduces divisions and produces subalterns marked with deficiency. The deficiency itself, personified by Gloomy Old Biddy, Halina, Little Metal Girl and Bożena, becomes a tool of protest. On this single occasion, its significance is close to the significance which Herder¹⁷ associated with deficiency, defined as a feature differentiating man from the animal kingdom. While the play is far from Herder’s optimism of the “happy deficiency,” this specific tool of protest allows man to set himself free from “blindly preoccupied attention” (Herder, 2002, p. 81) so that he “gains [...] therefore more clarity” (Herder, 2002, p. 81).

Another level of denial or, in other words, another type of confrontational negation identified in the play is the attitude to the deficiency on the part of the second group of protagonists. Man, Actor, TV Host, Monika and Edyta deny the existence of the female tenants not only by acting as if they were never there, although they occupy the same space. First and foremost, they hysterically reject the idea of any relation with them, defining their identity as a negation of their deficiency.

“Ohmigod, I was so afraid today when I saw the checkout girl at Tesco. Ohmigod, I was scared to think that someone could let herself go so much. Ohmigod, it scared me; all she needed was a few minor tweaks: a good hairdresser, a touch of makeup and at least five hours’ sleep instead of two, and she’d look like a normal person. Ohmigod, I was scared

17 As a result of this definition of deficiency, man “can become free, can seek out his own sphere, a sphere of reflection, can reflect himself in himself. No longer an infallible machine in the hands of nature, [man] becomes a purpose unto himself” (Herder, 2002, p. 82).

that might not be enough, and she'd still need a hair graft, a face transplant, and possibly a whole new body and personality, a new set of ancestors going back four generations, plus a brand new wardrobe, and she should also change her date and, above all, her country of birth, and she might be able to look like a normal person" (Małowska, 2014, p. 448).

These words, uttered by Edyta, demonstrate a fear stemming from a comparison of herself, a "normal person," and a cashier in Tesco: it does not matter if this comparison would point to similarities or differences, Edyta panics about the very juxtaposition with that woman, even if it is only a mental exercise. Of course the differences between them do not stem from any "natural" reasons: they result from a process which produces the subordinate and the privileged, unevenly allocating a good hairdresser, the right amount of sleep, the right ancestors and the place of birth. What Edyta is afraid of is the artificiality of the division and the fact that some people's privilege is intrinsically related to subordinating others. The cashier would not look the way she looks if she were in Edyta's shoes but then perhaps Edyta would have to take her place because this is a zero-sum game. The more the protagonists from the second group want to confirm their identity of the peripheral elites, the more they need to emphasise their distance and dissimilarity to the protagonists from the first group – their relation bears the features of class antagonism. And since one of the symbols of affinity with the hostile class of subordinates is her Polishness (defined as a deficiency and inferiority), it too needs to be rejected with repulsion and contempt.

The peripheral elites are certain that they are free from being specified as Polish. Their symbolic identification (i.e. the point where they place the ideal "I") is always in the west of Europe. It is from this point that they can evaluate the Polish deficiency as a deficiency. This corresponds with the process of self-colonisation as presented by Jan Sowa (following Alexander Kiossev – Kiossev, 1999). Jan Sowa defines this process as "an inability to identify with other people's values perceived as universal and an inability to reject them for the benefit of one's own values," characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe (Sowa, 2012, p. 19). In the reversed mirror of *No Matter How Hard We Tried*, the inability (on the part of the second group of protagonists) to reject the Western European ideal for the benefit of one's own deficiency is obvious. As for the "inability to identify with other people's values perceived as universal," it demonstrates itself in a grotesque and alarming mockery of their over-zeal in the attempt to face up to "other people's values."

The third type of confrontational negation is the relation between the implied subject and the second group of protagonists. Here, irony is entirely different: it is targeted directly against the protagonists from this group with the aim of revealing their stupidity, hypocrisy, selfishness, greed, cowardice, self-admiration and so on. First and foremost, it is about unveiling their attitude to the Polish deficiency. Bitter criticism accompanies the group's attempts at creating an identity on the basis of denying this deficiency. Complaining about the deficiency, the Polish underdevelopment, inferiority and immaturity is a gesture forming peripheral elites. At the same time, the gesture is boring in its conventionalisation. More importantly, its only sense lies in delegating the responsibili-

ty for the Polish deficiency: the “typically Polish: cramped and squalid” (Małowska, 2014, p. 441) space is so repulsive to the protagonists from the group that they are not able to perceive that they are involved in it, too.

The subjectivity of the protagonists from the second group is created as the denial of the Polish deficiency (with the entire ambivalence of this act, obvious to the readers and described by Kiossev, followed by Sowa, as self-colonisation). This is a singular separation from the world, as if the Polish deficiency were something that could not determine them in any way. For this reason, Man can write scripts both about “disadvantage and deracination, [...] fraying social fabric” (Małowska, 2014, p. 448) and about Monika, who “finds employment in an advertising company as an up-and-coming copywriter” (Małowska, 2014, p. 44). Man’s distance to either subject matter safeguards him from building up any relations with the world he is to present. His insusceptibility to worldly influences is guaranteed by his attachment to the only value – the power of money, a power which, incidentally, is in his disposal. By exposing and mocking his abstraction from the world of the Polish deficiency (shared by the other individuals from the second group), the implied subject attacks their singular pseudo-tie with reality as a tie in fact resulting from economic interest. The singularity of the subjects who are seemingly free from being specified as Polish (“I’m no Pole either, why should I be? That’s a choice I couldn’t make, not even subconsciously. I’m a European” (Małowska, 2014, p. 457), says Little Metal Girl, expressing the ideology of the second group of protagonists to which she aspires) is ridiculed and unmasked – this is the fundamental function of this aspect of confrontational negation and another application of irony.

Another strategy of handling the deficiency

The Polish deficiency remains a problem. As escape into singularity has been mocked, how else can the implied subject handle the situation? *No Matter How Hard We Tried* presents another way of handling deficiency, although at the beginning (and through a bigger part of the drama) it is employed only by Gloomy Old Biddy: dissecting deficiency as a loss of some beauty and good. “O Poland, glorious Poland, I can still see your beauty dying” (Małowska, 2014, p. 457), repeats the Gloomy Old Biddy. What she says is in contrast to what the other protagonists say, from either group. This is a language from before WWII, used to describe the world that no longer exists – out-dated and completely inadequate, as space-out as Gloomy Old Biddy in her stupor, mumbling round and round the same things and not aware that nobody is listening.

The event on which the Old Biddy’s memory is fixed and from which she cannot free herself, is World War Two. It is the disaster responsible for the present, degenerated and flawed state of the world. While in most of the drama, the grotesque character of Gloomy Old Biddy makes us put an ironic distance to her statements revolving around the war (after all, they are presented as products of senile dementia), the final scenes introduce

a brand new perspective. It is the Old Biddy's stories that lead to the final events of this anti-history of salvation: WWII comes in again, Gloomy Old Biddy dies under the debris of the bombed house. In this situation, Halina (Biddy's daughter) and Little Metal Girl (her granddaughter) could not have been born and therefore their existence is purely a phantom.¹⁸ The place where the house once was is taken by Man and his "IKEA pseudo-glitz" (Masłowska, 2014, p. 462), which now owns reality.

Is this a triumph of a polished world of a media staging, a brave new world? The implied subject does not give up on irony. Seemingly, the deficiency has been rectified: what is left of the world of the first group of protagonists is "a heap of pixels sifting around by the garbage cans" (Masłowska, 2014, p. 462). However, this rectification does not seem very certain. Even if the phantom status of Little Metal Girl does not raise any doubts, she does not cease to call "Bread!" like an eager soul. It looks like the Polish deficiency will keep coming back like a fatal force which will not be satisfied with the world as we know it. Is really WWII responsible for it?

Deficiency as a loss of completeness. From applying irony to declining it

It has already been stated that assigning such an important role to the Polish deficiency is in *No Matter How Hard We Tried* a tool of protest, the implied subject's rebellion against the global capitalist logic. However, this is not the final meaning it assumes in the drama. In the light of the return of WWII, the Polish nature of the deficiency is something more than a grotesque face of peripheral life.

First it demonstrates itself as an empty place, a void, something that remains; we know from a radio programme that the Old Biddy listens to that this existence formed over time: once upon a time Poland enjoyed its completeness and the whole world was Poland.

"everyone in the world was Polish. The Germans were Polish, the Swedes were Polish, the Spaniards were Polish, everybody was Polish, simply everybody. [...] We were a great power, an oasis of tolerance and multiculturalism, and everyone not coming here from another country, because, as we've said, there were no other countries to come from, was welcomed with bread..." (Masłowska, 2014, p. 455).

The radio interpretation of the world history shows from entirety – when Poland deserved completeness and nothing non-Polish existed (or existed as negativity) – to the very opposite of the situation, when Poland first becomes "only Poland" and then just a hole. This movement was instigated by foreigners:

"But our nation's heyday eventually came to an end. First they took away America, Africa, Asia and Australia. Polish flags were defaced and painted with stripes, stars and other

18 Bakhtin's pregnant death (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 65) has been replaced by Kayser's the dying unborn.

squiggles. Polish was officially replaced by fancy-pantsy foreign languages that nobody knows except for the people who speak them, so that we Poles don't understand them and feel like right snot-rags..." (Masłowska, 2014, p. 456).

"Until Warsaw was invaded by the Germans who said Poland would no longer be Poland, and that Warsaw would no longer be its capital, but just a rubble-filled hole in the ground" (Masłowska, 2014, p. 457), as we are informed by the radio. The absurdity of this martyrdom interpretation of history is emphasised by juxtaposing it with an equally absurd statement by Little Metal Girl: "That's right, a hole! A godforsaken hole. I hate this city! The Metro goes whoosh, the trams go vroom, the buses stink, and wherever you go, it's always over someone's dead body!" (Masłowska, 2014, p. 457) and this is how self-pity and sacrifice are joined by self-hatred: both approaches to the deficiency are the most important elements of the Polish post-colonial syndrome and both are treated with the same irony.

In the final scene, WWII really starts. The grotesque of the Polish deficiency starts to require verification. The ironic distance between the implied subject and the Old Biddy's statements about the approaching Germans disappears. The war proves an actual horror, something peeking out from the ironic distortion of reality. As if the answer to the question about the Polish deficiency was here and not in the previously mentioned logic of global capitalism. What does it mean? What are the consequences for our understanding of Masłowska's play and the conclusions drawn from it?

The easiest answer would be that it is simply a joke: since the drama was commissioned by Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in Berlin and TR Warsaw, Masłowska, a born oppositionist, had to confront "Germans" and the Warsaw artistic elites and assign them monstrous doubles. This, however, does not explain everything. In order to better comprehend what happened in the final scene of the drama, we need to go back to Peter Hallward's terminology.

The specific and the specifying: two sources of resistance to the singular trend

In order to free themselves from being specified, that is determined, by the Polish deficiency, the second group of protagonists chooses to escape into the "European" ideal and to shed any responsibility for their own involvement in the deficiency. The emergence of the "modern," absolutely post-colonial subjects straight from Ikea, free from the Polish specification, was exposed and mocked by the implied subject. The irony aimed at them was to expose and condemn their singular way of handling predestination. However, the opposition to the singular trend may stem from two things: it may be a result of the specific trend, targeted at developing relationships in a militant manner, but it also may simply be an embracing of the specification from which the singular trend was to deliver. In other words, one can unintentionally shift from the fight against be-

ing specified and determined by the Polish deficiency, a fight that is equivalent to the process of subjectivation, to the rightist accusation of “cosmopolitanism” and to creating various mechanisms aimed at showing this deficiency in a better light or proving that it is not a deficiency at all but rather, a desired essence. The difference between these two various sources of dissent, albeit key, can be difficult to maintain in practice. It is the same difference which affects the nature of nationalism:

“[e]ven if it is *specified* in the same way, nationalism is one thing when expressed by a hegemonic imperial power and another thing altogether when expressed by an embattled subordinate community,”

wrote Hallward, referring to the history of decolonisation. What is of greatest importance in his eyes?

“The critique of nationalism as a general concept is less important than an evaluation of its specific, positioned inflection – the kind of national unification it promotes (or imposes), the sort of position it occupies (or affirms) in the global division of labour, the sort of liberation it offers to its citizens (or neighbours) and so on” (Hallward, 2001, p. 51).

Thus, Masłowska shows two different strategies. The first one consists in tracing the origin of the Polish deficiency back to the logic of global capitalism creating peripheral elites and subalterns (who are waste products of the system) and turning this deficiency into an ironic weapon. The other strategy is resorting to WWII to explain the nagging void.

How does the other strategy work? What antagonism and what “positioned inflection” is at play here? What does WWII annihilate? Could it be the ideal of pre-war beauty and goodness praised by Gloomy Old Biddy and suggesting that the deficiency used to be non-existent and we enjoyed completeness?

Nothingness is most existent

The house where the drama is located is a most peculiar place. It simultaneously operates in many times and dimensions and each layer of operation has a different degree of existence: from the seemingly positive existence of a modern interior filled with Ikea furniture, through the littered abysses of the anti-world of the Polish deficiency, to a ghastly dead body lasagne (“rubble, bodies, dust, bodies, grit, bodies, rubble, bodies” – Masłowska, 2014, p. 460), which turns out to be both a picture of destruction and a secret core of the remaining levels of reality. Ironically, the latter level, most burdened with non-existence, is the most existent. Its emergence in the climax of the story indicates that it is the truth: inaccessible, denied or forgotten on the remaining levels of the fictional universe and at the same time determining its shape.

The concept of the non-site of memory will shed more light on the presented house. This notion relates to sites left after the Holocaust, sites-witnesses of genocide which

have not been commemorated in any way and can be recognised only by the few in the know. The term was introduced by Claude Lanzmann: his film *Shoah* is a trip to such non-sites of memory. Their innate nothingness has two faces. Firstly, it indicates the annihilation of the Holocaust's victims. Secondly, it refers to the local community's refusal to remember what happened there. As Roma Sendyka wrote, "the abandoned, unmarked places of the Holocaust do not serve the local or any other community to anchor their memory" (Sendyka, 2013, p. 279). However, they are not

"permanently forgotten, as Lanzmann suggested with reproach, and doomed only to 'informed visits' paid by the few in the know: there is performatively expressed memory around them that would make them distant relatives of the anti-monuments category but for a dramatically different source of acts administered on them and to them. These places are actively present in the lives of the local communities as they are avoided, **not** named, **not** marked, **not** developed, **not** sowed – like taboo locations. The memory of them is not revealed in the material culture (no plaques are placed there) but in the negation, the turning away, closing eyes, finally – in radical gestures like digging, littering or devastating" (Sendyka, 2013, p. 280).

This is memory unwilling to remember because remembering inevitably leads to confronting a sense of guilt and the responsibility to testify.

Sendyka continues about the acts of active forgetting:

"they seem akin to ritual, magical, primary gestures assigned to cursed spaces, taboo places which in our culture have been related to death and catastrophe at least since the Roman times" (Sendyka, 2013, p. 281).

Introduction of the notion of taboo would be an attempt at attributing a positive, ritual-derived character to activities which revolve around denial and rejection, that is radical negation. This strategy seems inappropriate. The taboo category prevents questions about the actual background, reasons and results of the negation, it makes us blind to its essence. Consider the following conversations:

"[Sandomierz, conversation 1025W]: – that thing, imagine that thing, there was a house, the houses were made of wood or brick, with three families, fifteen people each, and... and they killed ten people and six escaped. [...] [**in a slightly raised voice**] Nothing at all, no houses where [**Jews**] lived. [...] It's like you asked about them and they never existed.

[1037W] – What was it like: did the village people gather one day and murder the Jews, all at the same time...?

– No, it was a silent job. Silent, no traces at all, silent. Only those who did it, later on talked about what they did; it looked like all of them disappeared and they didn't all disappear.

[1029W] – He [**i.e. X, who according to the interlocutor murdered Jews**] had a funny explanation: 'They were here only they are not now, [...] it is good when they are no longer here.' I happen to live next to him and that is all. **He is because he is, because it's his, it must be, and those who used to be are no longer here**" (the last highlighting by C.S.G.) (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008, p. 550).

The non-existence of the omnipresent non-being cannot be defined in terms of safe categories which guarantee ontological order by a discreet reference to providence, a historical necessity or the predominance of the taboo category. Not-being and non-existence emerging from the non-site of memory cannot be appeased with these rationalisations. On the contrary, they force to ask questions and look for answers. They force to look for descriptions and explanations for events like burying the bodies of murdered Jews “haphazardly – under a tree, at a road, in a forest,” disposing of them “at a shrine, at a crossroads that is in places where typically ‘the unbaptised’ and suicides were buried,” “ploughing Jewish cemeteries” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2012, pp. 110, 111). Rather than refer to the taboo category, we can ponder

“how, after hundreds of years of Polish-Jewish neighbourhood, in the new wartime conditions the peasant culture was reorganised and how profound changes occurred in it as a result of exempting Jews from the law and abandoning them by Polish intellectual and spiritual elites” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2012, p. 111).

When Claude Lanzmann refers to the places presented in *Shoah* as “disfigured, effaced. They were ‘non-sites’ of memory (*non-lieux de la mémoire*). The places no longer resembled what they had been” (Lanzmann, 2007, p. 39, quoted in Saryusz-Wolska, Traba, & Kalicka, 2014, p. 272), he does so with a clear intention of opposing this way of treatment. By using the notion of a non-site of memory he assumes that we perceive the denied truth and strive to assign a proper place to this truth. It is an act of opposing nothingness, which is the essence of non-sites of memory, even if it does not transform into an attempt at filling the nothingness. Again, this is deficiency as a tool of protest.

The horror of war as a reaction to a non-site of memory

The house in *No Matter How Hard We Tried* is to operate as a non-site of memory. This is enforced by the very structure of the drama: the scene of bombarding as the climax of the story is to take us back to the denied, to serve as an illumination for the drama protagonists and the audience, an attempt at devising a “we” and an appeal to take responsibility for everything we did not want to remember.

What lurks in the darkness of the denied, unwanted memory is Germans destroying Poland and its beauty during WWII. It is the Poland from the memories of Gloomy Old Biddy, who was on her way back from a stroll along the Vistula river when the war started “[her] eyes still blue from gazing into the sleepy, cool, soapy, limpid [surface]” (Masłowska, 2014, p. 424) (these eyes are like those in Baczyński’s *Elegy about... (a Polish boy)*). This is Poland speaking an elaborate language, the Poland of girls in paisley dresses. Deficiency as an effect of WWII, the deficiency from Masłowska’s second strategy, would therefore be the result of the German aggression on ordinary, innocent Poles, who used to speak an elevated language and now it would be better if they ceased to

exist because that would be “far better for all concerned, especially for all the other concerned” (Masłowska, 2014, pp. 439, 463).

However, the reference to the idyllic pre-war reality and brooding about its horrifying destruction (the more horrifying the destruction the more idyllic the pre-war reality was) has nothing to do with the rebellious recollection of denied memory. The act is as rebellious as is the Warsaw Uprising Museum. After all, the reality beyond the drama is full of traces of such acts, present in numerous Warsaw streets sanctified with the blood of Poles who died for the freedom of their mother country, on the facades marked with the [the underground Home Army's] Anchor emblem right next to football club logos, in squares where the actions of young insurgents are re-enacted today, in the names of groupings and battalions, the names of the commanders and the female paramedics, the names of streets, squares, roundabouts, schools and hospitals. Ironically, in this peculiar way of recalling WWII, deficiency is not used as a tool of protest, it gives completeness both to our times and to the past. The completeness is a story about a celestial, unspoiled, pure beauty of the life before the war. It also results from perpetuating the myth of Poles' heroic fight and martyrdom. It is the Polish variety of the ideal of respectability which, as Bożena Umińska said,

“in the late 19th century and the early 20th century [was] a sort of ideology (largely a derivative of what we call Victorian morality) and therefore was a way of thinking and perceiving, where anything threatening the system's stability is most suspicious” (Umińska, 2001, p. 26).

The essence of this respectability was a combination of the morality of the middle class, its ideals of propriety and good conduct, with nationalism. It was in the context of the ideal of respectability that the stereotypes of a Jew and a woman described by Umińska were forged. Of course, the stereotype of a genuine Pole emerged as an opposition to these stereotypical depictions of the Other. It is their respectability that allows the tormented and murdered Poles who remain at the centre of the image of completeness to avoid the role of passive, pitiful victims (which obviously cannot be reconciled with the heroic myth).

The locations marked with thus presented traces of the war are in no way non-sites of memory; they are covered in a thick layer of national clichés. The potential of the protest is exchanged for the confirmation and approval of these clichés, as if only the Polish national myth offered subjectivity which resists the annihilating powers.

The notion of a non-site of memory requires a complicated logical operation. It consists in reminding about absence rather than presence. Using the notion is like constantly asking a question about the type of non-existence we did not want to remember and about those who were there before the void. The questions need to be answered without avoiding the specificity of the events contributing to the Holocaust. The layer covering a non-site of memory acts like a dam to the memory of absence. A book by Elżbieta Janicka, *Festung Warschau* (Janicka, 2011), is dedicated to the same Warsaw depicted in *No Matter How Hard We Tried*. It shows the automatism with which topics appear that contribute to such a layer covering Warsaw's non-sites of memory. Wherever

something important occurred from the point of view of the history of the Holocaust, a stamp appears to emphasise the site's relation with the Polish-**non**-Jewish history: a commemorative plaque about the hospital of the "Chrobry" Grouping on the Bersohns and Baumans hospital, John Paul II Street traversing the ghetto, the Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East and the Siberian Mother Square in the locations of the most significant battles of the 1943 Uprising. The Polish national mythology makes itself comfortable in every site of Jewish absence. Janicka's titular *Festung* is "a fortress shooting out national missiles against the Jewish ashes on which it is raised" (Keff, 2011, p. 13). Janicka's book exposes the practices of covering, changing names and veiling undertaken with the aim of ensuring that the Warsaw non-sites of memory remain non-sites, that is to make the void slip to oblivion. One can ponder if by introducing WWII to the drama, Masłowska also intended to expose the covering and veiling; wherever we cannot handle the Polish deficiency, we introduce the war myth and we do not need to take care of the void of a non-site of memory. Since the text does not provide enough indications, I assume that Masłowska reproduces this automatism rather than exposes it.

How do you oppose nothingness?

Let me compare the types of subjectivity by means of which Masłowska wants to oppose the powers of nothingness. In *Snow White...* this task was handled by a collective feminine subject which ceased to express itself as part of the capitalist system of the hegemony of phrase, rejected irony and existed as a fighting relation, as the fighting "we." This subjectivity is the best portrayal of the specific trend and it acts like Fanon's subject of decolonisation:

"[t]he actively decolonising subject is not endowed, in advance, with an innate freedom that need only be exposed through elimination of colonial constraints: the subject *qua* subject only comes into being *through* and as a result of the militant process of decolonisation as such. *Despecification* – here the explosion of colonial constraints – *is itself the process of subjectivation*" (Hallward, 2001, p. 50).

The feminine "we" in *Snow White...* has nothing except for its fight. It has nothing because the world has been created by a power which turns all the values into nothingness. However, the fighting subject from *Snow White...* turned this very nothingness into a tool of fight and subjectivation, as if the subject threw nothingness straight in the face of the power responsible for its emergence.

On the other hand, in *No Matter How Hard We Tried* the two strategies bring about two types of subjectivity. The implied subject who emerges in the first strategy (combining the Polish deficiency and the logic of global capitalism), acts like a fighting subject, exposing the powers of nothingness in the making. In the second strategy (referring to WWII) nothingness is opposed to a dream of the lost values: about the Vistula which used to be more than a sewer, about Poland, a most beautiful land, about pure hearts and

very blue eyes and about a piece of bread which sufficed to feed the body and the soul (“A slice of bread in your hand, and off we’d go...” – Maślowska, 2014, pp. 422, 427). By calling out “Bread!” in the last scene of the drama, Little Metal Girl takes over Gloomy Old Biddy’s longing; all the values, so far presented by means of grotesque and distortion, suddenly prove to be a genuine (and only) support; it is their lack that makes it impossible to oppose the powers of nothingness. The resulting subject does not put up a fight, an act which used to be the essence of Maślowska’s writing (and the essence of the literary subject created by her). The fight has been replaced by brooding about a lost world of values. Could the only imaginable liberation be an act of restoration of what was, reaching the lost essence, rather than a process which is incessant gaining anew of a liberty that was never enjoyed? In this interpretation, WWII annihilates what was and therefore will replace the fight for what *never was*. The subject of commemoration will be the lost completeness rather than absence. The response to the annihilating powers will not be a collective fighting subject but a return to a community forming around national myths, which promise to safely fill what is impossible to fill. A return to the specified. A return to what cannot be universalised.

What about irony? In *Snow White...* irony stops where it is no longer proper to play with representations and capitalise on them, thereby giving place to the collective subject of girls fighting death. It is a tool that needs to be rejected because it misleads to the singular; by rejecting it, one steps into the groove of a specific configuration of reality. The situation is different in *No Matter How Hard We Tried*: here, irony peaks in the relations of confrontational negation in which the implied subject and the protagonists presented by it are involved – this of course is a specific trend. However, when the implied subject ceases its involvement in a specific configuration of reality, when she decides to find a haven in a story specified by national myths, irony disappears again. The punch line in both works (in *Snow White...* the “overdone ending,” in *No Matter How Hard We Tried* the re-breakout of WWII) requires taking off a mask and hence is not reconcilable with irony.

Snow White... and *No Matter How Hard We Tried* have a common element, namely a conviction that the most important things (creation of the target type of subjectivity and revealing the most significant thought) necessitate putting a stop to irony, although in both cases employment thereof is very different. The “we” in the works: the “we” of the fighting girls, just like the “we” of the national community, needs to speak an unambiguous language, one not split into the declared and the implied. This way the confrontation can be transferred onto other areas, exceed the literary game towards the real world which the subject is to comment with head held high.

What is the result of such consolidation and exposure of the subject? In the case of *Snow White...* the response was complete incomprehension and disregard on the part of most reviewers. In the case of *No Matter How Hard We Tried*, the comprehension is even too zealous: the national community welcomed Maślowska as its member,¹⁹ for which

19 Cf. articles by: Cieślak, 2008; Cieślak & Maślowska, 2012; „Rozmowa z Dorotą Maślowską”, 2012 (interview).

the writer did not seem completely ready. In the face of these two defeats, in her subsequent novel *Honey, I Killed Our Cats*, the author decided to follow another path: to re-assume the role of an ironist and this way to protect the implied “I.”

A flattened world

In *Honey, I Killed Our Cats*, the plot develops on three planes. One of them is a banal story of the beginning and the end of a friendship between two young women, Farah and Joanne. The second plane is the ocean depth dreamed by the protagonists, inhabited by mermaids symbolising everything exceeding the available reality. The third plane are the confessions of the narrator, a writer plagued by creative impotence.

Masłowska’s previous works were marked with easily distinguished Manichaeism. In *Snow White...* it was created by the world of the native Nails versus the world of civilised critics and the world of the female subject versus the capitalist system of the hegemony of phrase. In *No Matter How Hard We Tried* it is the world of the subalterns branded with the Polish deficiency versus the global capitalist logic, and the memory of Poland – a most beautiful land – versus WWII. The position of the implied subject in both works was clearly indicated. In the fictional universe of *Honey, I Killed Our Cats*, we are dealing with the erosion and flattening of any antagonisms.

The novel’s plot revolves around the centre of the globalised world, a “somewhere” stretching so far that the peripheries are no longer visible. The city where the protagonists live is located “in the West,” in “America,” i.e. in the very stereotype of the global centre. It is completely deprived of local peculiarity. It consists only of elements that the consumption machinery could suck in and which can be transferred to any location.

“Suddenly, she heard a gunshot. This happens, of course, in this city full of nutcases; anyone who lives here, hearing gunshots, starts to yawn instantly because they know it by heart: an ambulance, the pulsing lights, the lookers-on shrugging their arms and cops who, apart from scattering greasy donut wraps all over the place, ‘provide no information’” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 9)

– this description of a city from Joanne’s dream includes exclusively pop-culture clichés from films and TV series watched eagerly anywhere in the world. The same holds true for all the elements of the protagonists’ lives: be it yoga, Buddhism, vegetarianism, shopping in malls, karaoke sessions, treating parasites by means of a turbo trough or vernissages of contemporary art (“I love contemporary art. It is so untypical” – Masłowska, 2012, p. 69) – transferability, applicability wherever it pays off with a complete disregard for their internal content are the most important features of these elements. They operate like capital in the globalised world – their value is in the possibility of putting them in motion, transferring them and making profitable deposits.

What is important, however, is who is behind the transfer, attracting such diverse elements. Of course it is the centre that sucks them up and decides about their value, at the same time benefitting from it (“the West,” “America” – in any case, in the world of the novel people pay with dollars, their names and the names of the streets are English). From the centre’s position, the peripheries are visible only as a source of resources, not as a subject with which one can enter into any relation. This is why in the fictional universe, there is no trace of an antagonism, and any protest will be immediately assimilated and commodified. This will also happen to anything that could be deemed as traditionally opposed to the world of “the West,” to anything that does not measure up to that “West,” that is backward:

“The Pilgrim’s Girlfriend; she stimulates the designers’ creativity in the latest season. Louboutin has launched a series of wacky pumps inspired by orthopaedic anti-corn sandals, while Vivienne Westwood proposes thick male socks to wear with them, bearing images of crossed tennis rackets on the ankle, or simply bare feet, leprous and tied with a checked handkerchief. This season, hair is to be dirty, ‘unattractive,’ make-up definitely ‘greasy,’ lips dry, preferably chapped in the process of kissing the crucifix, slight self-mutilation. From afar you think that these are some off-the-rocker ladies who have come here on their knees from Lourdes to preach the word of Christ but when you look up close, you can see pearl teeth flashing between the polyester lips, worth more than your soul, nay, more than your whole shitty existence” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 44).

Even growing roots becomes a transferable product, as demonstrated by Farah’s friend Go, snobbishly pretending to be Polish:

“I am from Poland. It is a country in the former Yugoslavia, you may have heard. When I was very young, complete communism broke out there. My childhood was therefore pretty weird. Maybe this is why I am the way I am” (Masłowska, 2012, pp. 89–90).

Her alleged East-European origin, mentioning borscht and koplutki (“it’s a traditional Yugoslav dish, I don’t know how to explain it to you. It’s a mixture of dumplings and flakes or... It’s hard to tell, you need to taste them yourself” – Masłowska, 2012, p. 131) is a search for an exotic form which will allow her to create an attractive identity. Of course that “Polish origin” has been completely made up by Go. While it may look like sponging on the peripheries and exploiting their resources, one has to remember that the peripheral mentality is after all a creation of the centre.

Religion can also assume an attractive form:

“[t]he Church, churches are so romantic, wonderfully nonsensical. I am so totally into religion now. I was a Buddhist but isn’t it getting vulgar? Boring, everyone is like ‘I’m going to seclusion, sorry.’ They have turned it into a supplement to colonotherapy. I’m starting to like the Church. That sourness, stiffness, that gilding, awesome. [...] I love the smell of the church; why don’t they sell church-like perfumes? Incense, naphthalene, mildew and an old man’s breath” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 91).

The paradox behind the mechanism consists in the fact that the centre (global capitalist logic, “America,” “the West,” the post-modern society) projects its opposition (religion,

ethnicity, alternative, exotic beliefs) but their juxtaposition does not create any conflict. On the contrary, it leads to enriching the centre. Material and cultural goods, behaviour and elements of the lifestyle chosen by the protagonists and used to create identity – being from Poland, being religious, being a Buddhist, a vegetarian, an artist, practising yoga – these are elements which can be easily selected from the global collection of lifestyles on condition that you accept the rule that it is the centre that gives them value (makes them a fashionable trend) and that you can juggle them fast enough to prevent devaluation. First and foremost, you need to be from the centre.

“Once you drag yourself around to join them, like a sack of unwanted rubbish, don’t count on mercy, they [the daughters of senators and various officials] will show you. First they will say that if you don’t have bread, eat cake; then that if you don’t have cake, eat cream tart with organic raspberries. ‘I don’t have such tart,’ you will whisper, swallowing painfully, ‘Then have it brought by plane from Switzerland.’ Of all things, they hate acquired helplessness most, nobody cared much for them, either. They did not have a home once, so they didn’t whine but bought a palace in Florence. There was a time when they didn’t have a Porsche so they bought a Ferrari” (Maślowska, 2012, p. 45).

The centre’s perspective is the only one available to the novel’s protagonists – there is no antagonism to talk about then.

The elements of the fictional universe are all mixed up but the rules are different than in *Snow White*... There, the various discourses would fall into a shared cesspool where they were distorted and poisoned; the process had the power of exposure. In *Honey, I Killed Our Cats* the matter of variety does not transfer from the centre to the peripheries, from the colonist’s town to the *medina*; it also fails to expose anything. It remains in the global centre, which seems to be boundless; if the peripheral mentality reveals itself, it is only as a projection and creation of yet another product. This also happens to Go’s Polish origin and any other fashionable, alternative trend.

What about the tension that theoretically should exist between the three planes of the novel? Usually in novels the fictional universe, transcendence and the narrator establish relations which become the plot’s driving force. In *Honey, I Killed Our Cats* there is no such thing. The characteristic flattening and banality of the centre go out as far as the other world (the depths inhabited by mermaids) and the narrator who describes everything. The mermaids visited by Farah in her dream,

“consumed by fascination with humans and the human world, [...] every year swim along the entire coast, bringing to their habitats everything that humans throw away, building on the ocean bed peculiar encampments imitating the human world” (Maślowska, 2012, p. 73),

which are reminiscent of slums. In their endeavour to imitate people, they fall prey to addictions and diseases. As a result, their entire supernatural world proves to be rotten to the core. The mermaids stop to operate as delightful, innocent newcomers from another world – they are as degenerated as the human world. They are equally corrupted and the ocean they inhabit has no depth. The mermaids beg, steal and look for drugs rather than

contact the transcendent. Equally flattened is the world of the narrator – a writer who suffers from “most annoying creative obstruction” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 98). Her presence in the novel is brought down to the role of an anecdote teller. As it turns out, her personal confessions and the presented events from Joanne and Farah’s lives are no more profound.

The distance of an ironist

If the most important feature of the fictional universe is its transferability, a possibility of any profitable transfer, it also holds true for the language of the novel. However, there is something fishy here. “The bunnies of dust” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 56), “gnocchi” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 116), “pure happiness” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 35), “Those fucked-up washing machines which ruin my clothes” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 38), “I really appreciate that we were to leave together” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 20), “My ass only dreams of being dipped in the ocean” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 50), “I can’t see why I should stay calm” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 59), “I’m in love with this idea” (Masłowska, 2012, p. 20) – like Google Translate translating from English to Polish as if whatever happens in the centre had to be translated onto the local markets but without paying special attention to the local details.

However, the use of such phrases that are jarring to the (Polish) ear has a very important role to play in the novel. Together with the way of constructing the protagonists: banal, pathetic, uninteresting, shallow, without substance, or in other words – pitiful and mocked, it allows the author (not the narrator who, as one of the protagonists, is treated in the same way) to mark the only distance of importance: the distance between the writer (the implied “I”) and the world she created. The relation between them is of course ironic.

What is the universe created in *Honey, I Killed Our Cats* like? It is a vast world devoid of differences, above which the writer’s implied “I” hovers like a ghost. Writing is the only possible activity by means of which she expresses her attitude to that world;²⁰ even the creative obstruction turns out to be an apotheosis of writing. In the face of the universalising, singularising power of the capital permeating the fictional universe, this is the only tool available to her. However, it is not used to fight, as it was the case in *Snow White...* Fight is not possible because the all-embracing centre does not leave room for anything else that could give ground for any relation or conflict. Writing becomes a singular reflexion of this singular world. Capitalist logic reduces the content of this world to nothing; in the writing project, it is writing and not the content that counts. Therefore, the reflexion bears traces of correspondence rather than opposition: there is only writing just as there is only capital flow. And the only role of the subject is ironic withdrawal: irony creates the subject but the price to pay is singularity.

20 “– What do you do not to go insane with this awareness?
– I write. This is my allotment in the universe. I don’t suppose that I could do anything more sensible for it”
(Kubisiowska & Masłowska, 2012).

Masłowska's writing path leads from rejecting irony as a tool standing in the way of the fight and creation of a fighting subject, through rejection of irony and cooperation with the national myth (albeit disguised as fighting it), to rejecting fight as an activity preventing use of irony. Ultimately, irony becomes a means of transporting oneself to a literary absolute that is separated from the world. At the same time, in *Honey, I Killed Our Cats* it stops being a mask that is taken off at the right moment in order to express oneself and therefore create oneself. It adheres to the implied "I" – becoming a guarantee of breaking all bonds, which are but obstacles to literary freedom, the only good thing one can rely on. The price for this move is atrophy of dispute, withdrawal from the fighting dialogue, armistice.

Why doesn't Masłowska see any other possible function of irony except that of a tool that guarantees isolation? After all, this is not the only way to use it. We know from Cael Perechodnik that irony may be an ultimate, desperate means for contacting other people; it may be a way of constructing a "we," forming alliances and reaching out to others. In a text dedicated to irony as a narrative strategy in the descriptions of the world of the Holocaust, Magdalena Kowalska writes of a use of irony whereby it serves to establish relations between the speaker and the receiver. Irony becomes a means of exposing the world where

"the old God and the old Bible were replaced by the German Satan and a brand new Bible. There is no longer a story about the exodus out of Egypt with God's help. There are stories of people who were saved by a lucky strike, possibly just for a while. The ways of telling about the world as we know them, the familiar narration schemes, became invalid. The world that was behind these schemes, the world that these schemes were used to describe, is no longer there, perhaps it was never there in the first place" (Kowalska, 2005, p. 53).

"The ironic confrontation of the former reality with the time of the Holocaust serves not only to reinforce the horror of the war by means of contrast but also to discredit the former reality" (Kowalska, 2005, p. 55).

More importantly, irony becomes a secret code linking those who experience the Holocaust and those who find out about it. To people who have survived the Holocaust

"establishing relations with the receivers; i.e. pushing through the wall built by Germans – actual and symbolic – and informing the people outside about their experiences, establishing communication with them, is a primary goal and one extremely difficult to accomplish" (Kowalska, 2005, p. 60).

Irony becomes the only suitable means. This way, the ironic implied "I" is replaced with an implied "we."

Masłowska renounces such function of irony that would link her with the community and involvement. This decision is most baffling in the case of *No Matter How Hard We Tried* and the presented impossible relation between the implied subject and the subalterns produced by the global capitalist logic (i.e. that of Gloomy Old Biddy, Halina, Little Metal Girl and Bożena). While the deficiency epitomised by them in the hands of the

implied subject turns into a tool of protest, any dialogue with them is out of the question: mute subalterns cannot enter into a dialogue. This is a limit that cannot be transcended in the book: the protagonists prove to be phantoms, creatures that have never been born (therefore if they were to return and start to speak, we would probably find it too horrible and thus unbearable). What is more, the only community that may claim them is the national community.²¹ Of course, in these circumstances irony is out of the question.

Renouncing the community-forming function of irony is a decision of importance not only to Maślowska. One could say that it stems from the division, typical of the Polish intellectual life, into Gombrowicz's left and Sienkiewicz's right. The left indicates here rather liberal individualists; Gombrowicz's irony becomes to them a means of separating and maintaining a distance. On the other hand, Sienkiewicz becomes a synonym of severity, stateliness as well as collective, national elation and consolation, which do not tolerate irony.²² In other words, irony and community are mutually exclusive.

While this division in itself is reminiscent of Gombrowicz's duel of grimaces, it defines boundaries within which irony can be understood. If, as Bourdieu quoting Proust, we define distinction as "the infinitely varied art of marking distances" (Bourdieu 1984, p. 66), irony will be an ideal manner of expressing it. It will be a manner that validates the differences – naturalised and suppressed, while still determining. The distance (in place of entering relations, that is transcending differences) will allow Maślowska to assume an ideally singular position in the face of a world specified the Polish way. The singularity of this novel is decidedly post-colonial.

Honey, I Killed Our Cats is an absolutely post-colonial novel also for another reason. We can interpret it as a story about what will happen when the dream comes true about leaving behind the determination with the Polish deficiency and entering the Western paradise. As it has already been said, the events in the novel take place in "the West" and in "America," that is in the global centre to which the peripheral countries aspire. That dream has marked the history of Poland after 1989. The yoga, Buddhism and vegetarianism mentioned in the novel have been a Polish dream since the Solidarity times: as Andrzej Leder wrote, "the trade unions were a 'mask' containing everything, from the Jewish Renaissance through proto-ecologists and local authorities to nationalists" (Leder, 2014, p. 189). "The idealistic left was hardly there," adds Leder; idealistic, or one defining the world as a place of fight (class struggle), rather than a domain of singular capital, and assuming a specific position in this struggle. The yoga, Buddhism and vegetarianism from

21 The subalterns cannot speak; therefore, we cannot enter into a dialogue with them; if they start to speak it will be unbearable; we cannot establish a community that would make it possible for them to speak, and act together with us; if at all, only a national community allows for that. The axioms adopted by Maślowska are arranged into a self-justifying structure of a vicious circle.

22 The Gombrowicz – Sienkiewicz pair makes it possible to mark the horizons of the intellectual life in Poland. Interestingly, it was preceded by the Żeromski – Sienkiewicz pair (Żeromski as the one to put salt on wounds and Sienkiewicz to provide consolation and support). What is most interesting, however, is the fact that while everything changes, Sienkiewicz remains a regular Polish point of reference.

the novel together with Leder's Jewish Renaissance, proto-ecologists, local governments and nationalists, have their equal shares in the singular. The former – the singularity of the implied "I," and the latter – that of the global centre joined by Poland.

Rising above the relations between the centre and the peripheries (and other differences touched upon in the works analysed here) is a gesture defining Maślowska's role in the literary field: the role of a writer, an artists, an intellectual. The interpretation of the role changed throughout her writing career, while a conviction that a writer's autonomy and involvement cannot be reconciled remained unchanged. The price of involvement, especially following *Snow White...*, proved too high for Maślowska. Her belief that autonomy and involvement are separate resulted in her withdrawal to the singular world of literary freedom.

"As for my world view, I want freedom. I want to be able to support gay marriages and go to church when I feel like doing it. And I do not want anyone to laugh at me for doing it" (Maślowska & Drotkiewicz, 2013, p. 76). Maślowska adopted this programme after the painful experience of revealing herself as a fighting protagonist of *Snow White...* Freedom defined in such a defensive way, freedom for which one is not willing to pay with involvement, pushes the writer towards the singular Polish post-colonialism. While her first novel was audacious and uncompromising, one cannot help but feel that the project aimed at increasing freedom has in fact restricted it.

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Od odrzucenia ironii ku jej afirmacji. Dorota Małowska w poszukiwaniu „my”

Abstrakt: Przygody Doroty Małowskiej, przeżywane na drodze od *Wojny polsko-ruskiej pod flagą białą-czerwoną do Kochania, zabiłam nasze koty*, pokazują świat, w którym kapitalizm jest jedynym dostępnym sposobem organizowania rzeczywistości, a jednocześnie siłą, która nadaje kształt wszelkim relacjom – między ludźmi nawzajem i między ludźmi i światem. Nic, łącząca powieści Małowskiej, to dążenie do wyzwolenia się – przez własną praktykę pisarską – od zapisanych i umocnionych w języku narzędzi kapitalistycznego panowania. Próby odnalezienia się wobec tego panowania, podejmowane zawsze jako element pisarskiego etosu, są niezwykle ciekawą drogą od burzycielstwa do pochwały konserwatyzmu i od walki o siebie samą, rozumianej po Hallwardowsku jako wyraz konkretnej konfiguracji rzeczywistości, do osobliwości pisarskiego absolutu. Przebycie tej drogi wymaga zmiany w użyciu dwóch kategorii literackich: groteski i ironii, które wciąż pozostają znakiem rozpoznawczym warsztatu Małowskiej, a jednocześnie nadają – w kolejnych jej książkach – inny ton jej polifonicznemu piśmiennictwu. Autorka analizuje przemiany, jakim podlega pisarstwo Małowskiej, przy (krytycznym) użyciu narzędzi teorii postkolonialnej. Wykorzystywane w tekście terminy „osobliwy” i „konkretny” (singular i specific) odwołują się do rozprawy Petera Hallwarda *Absolutely Postcolonial. Writing between Singular and the Specific* (2001). Hallward przedstawia w niej dwie tendencje, których opisanie pozwala mu na „całościowe i współczesne rozróżnienie zasadniczych ujęć ogólnych koncepcji sprawstwa i kontekstu, koncepcji ‘ja’ i ‘innego’, polityki i partykularności”. Snochowska-Gonzalez proponuje odniesienie kategorii Hallwarda do tematyki poruszanej przez teorię postkolonialną (takich jak właśnie zlokalizowanie i deterytorializacja, narodowe zdeterminowanie i wolność od niego). Autorka rozwija w tekście metodę zastosowania narzędzi analitycznych, przedstawiona w artykule *Od melancholii do rozpacz. O prozie Andrzeja Stasiuka*, opublikowanym w piśmie „Studia Litteraria et Historica”, nr 2 (2013).

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Dorota Małowska; ironia; krytyka postkolonialna; pisarski absolut; literatura wobec kapitalizmu.



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