

# The Experience of Urbanity in Contemporary Polish Literature<sup>1</sup>

**Katarzyna Szalewska**

Department of Polish Studies, University of Gdańsk

Wita Stwosza 55, 80-952 Gdańsk, Poland

Email: k.szalewska@ug.edu.pl

**Abstract** The presented reflections constitute an attempt to decipher the 20<sup>th</sup> century history recorded in written statements by one chosen aspect of the (post-)war trauma, that is, architecture and related spatial practices. The objective of this articles is to depict main models of perception and the description of urban spaces, as well as models recorded in contemporary literature and those that are a textual formula for the experience exceeding beyond the architectural-aesthetic dimension towards a political, cultural and social reflection. The reading of contemporary Polish literature leads through a matter from which the textual description of cities is built to an actual matter — to the building material of both the 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural and historical landscapes. The culture of burghers, which has introduced the tenement house life (including that fictional) into the Polish experience so late and for such a short time, has soon found an epilogue in the shape of a brick torn from a building and the (anti-) aesthetics of post-war ruins. The trauma (also the spatial one), the annihilation of cities, including the most significant — Warsaw, is verbalized in anti-fictional forms of anti-diaries, whose authors often are residents of symbols of reconstruction, socialism, and oblivion, erected after the war — districts of slab block housing estates that “block” with their cement weight the access to what is hidden beneath the lawns — the trauma. The author proposes to specify out of the former century three types of urban perception, treated here conventionally, whose symbols are: a tenement house/ruin and the construction material characteristic of Polish dilapidated buildings, i.e., a brick; post-war complexes, both institutional and residential, constructed from giant concrete slabs; lastly, stones of Western Europe seen with the eyes of a “barbarian” from beyond the Iron Curtain — a synonym of aesthetization of the observed reality.

**Key Word** surban studies; history of architecture; urban anthropology; the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience; contemporary Polish prose

If one was to seek a synthetizing perspective for the reading of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish

literature, he would consider as the most significant matter World War II with the resulting tragedies, among all, the Holocaust, but also with its political and spatial consequences, such as totalitarianism and deportations. All the remaining issues accompanying a reading of written statements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience are connected in one way or another to the historical borderline of war that ends the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. This experience affects all subsequent models of creating identity narrations in Polish literature. This paper is an attempt to decipher the 20<sup>th</sup> century history recorded in the written statements through one chosen aspect of the (post) war trauma, that is, architecture and related spatial practices, the latter being used here in the sense given by Michel de Certeau. “Spatial practices” are therefore all sorts of actions taken by a passer-by in a city, individual “[...] deviations relative to a sort of ‘literal meaning’ defined by the urbanistic system” (Certeau 100, Lefebvre). Obviously, a synthetic view on the record of the rich historical experience of such an exceptional time as the former century is beyond both the competencies of the author and the formula of a singular depiction. Hence, the objective shall be the depiction of main models of perception and the description of urban spaces, models captured in contemporary literature and those that are a textual formula for an experience that exceeds beyond the architectural-aesthetic dimension towards a political, cultural and social reflection.

The most thorough combination of architecture and the concept history can be found in works of Walter Benjamin. His monumental and never-finished book titled *The Arcades Project*, a summa of Paris as the capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is above all an application of a particular method of studying the past based on deciphering the city like a historical record. Benjamin “tried to represent the nineteenth century as ‘commentary on a reality’ [...], rather than construing it in the abstract. We can put together a kind of ‘catalogue of themes’ from the ‘First Sketches’ about the *Passagen-Werk*. The catalogue shows us what the work was supposed to treat at this level: streets and warehouses, panoramas, world exhibitions, types of lighting [...]” (Tiedemann 932), reading from those petite elements of urban space the spatial practices characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisians. Analogously, one could begin reading the 20<sup>th</sup> century texts with a “catalogue of themes” classified according to modifications of the urban landscape, each time connected to the political-social changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience. Drawing inspiration from the quite peculiar method of the author of *The Arcades Project*, one could specify in the former century at least three types of urban perception,<sup>2</sup> treated schematically in the book. Their symbols are: a tenement house/ruin and the construction material characteristic of Polish dilapidated buildings, i.e., a brick; post-war complexes, both institutional and residential, constructed from giant concrete slabs; lastly, stones of Western Europe

seen with the eyes of a “barbarian” from beyond the iron curtain — a synonym of aesthetization of the observed reality. This classification is not precise, and due to its general and “Marxist” character (on the part of the connection between the matter and the cultural text formed out of it), it ought to be perceived solely as a reading metaphor. Therefore, when exploring this risky analogy between urban building material and urban literature one should note not only the abundance of urban subject in modernist writings,<sup>3</sup> the experience of the urban space regarded as a kind of a lens that concentrates within itself matters far beyond the narrow “motivology,” but also from the spirit of the 19<sup>th</sup> century observation of how the social aspect influences the subject’s identity.

Supposedly, the most famous description of a space that is an equivalent of a drama taking place within it begins de Balzac’s *Père Goriot*:

The lodging-house is Mme. Vauquer’s own property. It is still standing in the lower end of the Rue Nueve-Sainte-Genevieve, just where the road slopes so sharply down to the Rue de l’Arbalete, that wheeled traffic seldom passes that way, because it is so stony and steep. This position is sufficient to account for the silence prevalent in the streets shut in between the dome of the Pantheon and the dome of the Val-de-Grace, two conspicuous public buildings which give a yellowish tone to the landscape and darken the whole district that lies beneath the shadow of their leaden-hued cupolas. [...] The most heedless passer-by feels the depressing influences of a place where the sound of wheels creates a sensation; there is a grim look about the houses, a suggestion of a jail about those high garden walls. A Parisian straying into a suburb apparently composed of lodging-houses and public institutions would see poverty and dullness, old age lying down to die, and joyous youth condemned to drudgery. It is the ugliest quarter of Paris, and, it may be added, the least known. (Balzac 6)

This well-known passage, a description of a Parisian space, in fact, not only does build a background for the forthcoming events, but also becomes a medium of the symbolization of the city, a unit of the Balzacian Parisian text.<sup>4</sup> The separation of a borough out from the city center, color and light manipulation, the topology of death, the juxtaposition of the ill “texture” of residential buildings with the monumentality of pantheons — all this enables an interpretative movement from the urban space functioning as a local color, carried here by description, to the analysis of textual records of the urban experience, with a novel as its equivalent. This genre comes alive together with the bourgeois lifestyle, the problems of a tenement house space, the urban experience and its influence on the subject. Analyzing the bourgeois

groundings of the birth of the genre in *Puissances du roman* Roger Caillois states, that there is only one subject of a novel, namely, a man's life in a big city and his realization of limitations resulting from the social character of such life (Caillois 24–26, Lukács). Hence, a search for an appropriate discursive form for rendering the situation of being-in-the-city occurs here, which leads to an analogy between urbanity and a literary genre, that is, a novel. If, metaphorically, we would consider a novel a textual equivalent of a bourgeois tenement house, a question regarding the 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural forms and the corresponding models of literariness arises. This broad problem shall be presented here on representative, yet individual examples that certainly would not exhaust the matter, on instances close in their nature to models of literary spatial depictions schematized for the study.

### **Brick — the Figure of Ruins**

In the light of the Balzac's novel quoted above the difference between spatial practices of pre- and post-war times is even more vivid. If anchoring is the most desired spatial experience, understood as being in a given place separated from the space (according to Tuan, "When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place" — Tuan 73), offering a feeling of safety, then the basic spatial situation of the time of war is dislocation (also in the meaning of war and post-war deportations, refugeeism, forced and voluntary emigration, etc.). Returning to the analogy between urban building material and a literary text depicted in the introduction, if a novel was a form of urban modernity coming to life, then the experience of World War II invalidates this genre in its original form. Balzac writes *Père Goriot* in 1835, whereas in Polish literature almost fifty years later, that is, in 1897–1898, Władysław Reymont publishes *Ziemia obiecana* [*The Promised Land*] — an anti-urban image of Łódź, the industrial-financial center in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a result of a search for a form, that carries this subject of urban experience. No later than in 1935 Zofia Nałkowska writes *Granica* [*The Frontier*] — a modern novel employing the Balzacian-like figure of a tenement house as a spatial sign of social problems in the interwar period. The publication of *Granica* and the events described in Miron Białoszewski's *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* [*A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*] are separated only by 9 years. This text, though written in a considerable period of time after the war, is a testimony of life in the war-torn Warsaw of 1944.<sup>5</sup> Białoszewski, who witnessed the Warsaw Uprising, wrote his *memoir* no sooner, than in 1967. According to Mieczysław Dąbrowski, who called this work "a late war speech," one may assume, that the texts that have not emerged soon after the war and which depict certain events (the uprising in the Białoszewski's work, the life of the Varsovian ghetto in Wojdowski's, the Ukrainian-Polish conflicts in Odojewski's) aim to tell it in a special

way, different to that of all the other texts written just after the war (Borowski, Nałkowska, Herling-Grudziński). This “special way,” as strongly indicated by Białoszewski, pertains to language. Each of the three mentioned writers create his own kind of a “final dictionary” (Dąbrowski 327–238). In the Białoszewski’s work this dictionary is based on urbanism, the grammar of the city. The “finality” is fulfilled in the topography, the deconstruction of map as a spatial dictionary. The space of middle-class tenement houses and working-class yards, present in Nałkowska’s works, transforms in the eyes of the narrator of *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* into a ruin. In the course of bombardments a bourgeois tenement house is replaced with a singular brick, and the novel genre — with anti-categorical forms that are an attempt to find a form for the description of an untold trauma. A ruin becomes the basic spatial figure of the times of war, which signifies on both urban and textual level the collapse of the world of tenement houses.

A particular fascination with the material which the pre-war city was built from, not revealed until the cataclysm, is characteristic of the literature that employs the anti-aesthetics of ruins. An analysis of the rubble as a visible signs of the former life makes one read the city on the one hand as a body that was severely wounded in the war, and on the other — in a textual metaphor — as a palimpsest, whose individual layers of text conceal former inscriptions.

Białoszewski’s Warsaw is indeed a ruin, a rubble full of secrets, both materialistic and historical. The former reveal the matter Warsaw was built from, the latter show the layers of its past. The destruction of war discloses a blend of these two substances, therefore Białoszewski uses a repetition when listing planks, bricks, reeds, the Saxons, the House of Vasa, etc. (Janion 120). The construction materials juxtaposed with the figures of Polish kings reveal this odd dependence between the building material of history in its material dimension, urban experience, and cultural record. The decay of historical buildings becomes in this context a ruin not only in the urban sense, but also in the symbolic sense — a ruin of the history of the city, the nation, and the individual who is experiencing it.

In *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* (Białoszewski 55) not only the city and its building material undergoes a deterioration, but also the literary form. The entire work is a continuous swerving, back and forth, among ruins. Białoszewski’s book is a manifesto of the inability to exist of a rhetorical order when the accompanying spatial order is annihilated. Białoszewski depicts then not only the chain of events, swiftly altering scenes, that — having been reconstructed in the reception — form the history of the Warsaw Uprising, but also creates a sequence of places that do not share any simple causal connection. A matter decomposition finds its equivalent in the syntax of ruins, the substitution of sentences with elliptical constructions and intentional

grammar distortion.

Białoszewski reminds, that the Church of St. Lazarus in Warsaw (just like many other buildings in the capital he writes about) exists only in reconstruction, without its unique character, transforming into a palimpsest covered with numerous layers of the history of Warsaw. The heterotopias (Foucault 22–27), i.e., the city torn by war, another different space where rules characteristic of other places blending right into the linguistic order are not binding, is in Białoszewski's writing also the inability of a grammatical order to exist. Here the spatial aspect (dominated by history) is most tightly bound to the aspects of discourse and identity. Piles of bricks are fascinating as an element of the pre-war world, but also as a building material of the subject's identity. A ruin is a wound on the city's flesh and a hole in the autobiographical narration of its inhabitants at the same time. In the impossible novels of the time of war description boils down to talking the trauma away. Lawns in the city center conceal rubble (Baranowska, *Pamiętnik mistyczny* 83), of which one may read in *Pamiętnik mistyczny [A Mystic Diary]* of a Varsovian poet Małgorzata Baranowska, who gives the post-war childhood experience a unique poetic form. The difference between ruins and rubble is brilliantly depicted in her writing. Ruins are a relic, a keepsake with its own philosophy and aesthetics. Artificial ruins used to be built in romantic parks due to a lack of the true ones, providing picturesqueness and Gothic atmosphere. However, no one has ever constructed rubble, it was solely a result of demolition, abundant not in upper-class parks, but on every ordinary street of the post-war childhood (Czermińska 175).

The figure of a post-war ruin reveals its aesthetic potential, based not on artificiality, but on the traumatic reality of the material, which unmask the city, suddenly exposing the shameful urban anatomy, unveils the scandal of a historical break between the past and the present. Lastly, it deprives the subject of the space-time grounds. One cannot reside in a heterotopia, no map is able to depict the piles of bricks. Still, an aesthetic event results also from a breaking of the linearity, first of all, in the sense, that — as Baranowska notices — a person is unable to comprehend the present events when facing a demolished stairway because of the lack of association between individual elements, the lack of purpose, so favored in the linear time (Baranowska, *Pamiętnik mistyczny* 70–71). Second of all, a brick turns into a building material of a new spatial organism, and this material recycling provokes a thought of the alternative of history, the coexistence of temporal layers in the urban space. Other Varsovian writer, Magdalena Tulli, realizes this phantasm in a suggestive spatial image of attentive citizens of Warsaw, who must pay attention not to sit on a formerly demolished balcony, not to hit long gone walls with their heads in longing for what has passed (Tulli 78–79). Lastly, to name one more contemporary

attempt to rework the Varsovian trauma in Polish literature, bricks come to life, becoming a history medium. In Elżbieta Janicka's *Festung Warschau* one may find a passage significant in the context of these "urban-constructional" reflections, pertaining to a wall separating the Varsovian ghetto from the "Aryan" part:

It's hard to keep up with the wall [a wall as a construction characteristic of the times of war — Author's note]. Notices in three languages, two of which I don't understand. Plates. Signboards. Made of brass or other kind of bronze. On polyurethane. On acrylic glass [bronze as a monument material juxtaposed with modern and functional acrylic glass — Author's note]. Something appears. Something else disappears. Two bricks — probably from Bogumił Schneider's brickyard in Jelonki [a district of Warsaw — Translator's note] — taken by air to the Holocaust Museum in Washington. To give authentic power to its permanent exhibition. (Janicka 36)

### **Concrete — the Figure of Amnesia**

While in the 1970s Miron Białoszewski recalled the dust from the demolished Warsaw crunching between his teeth, according to Baranowska (Baranowska, *Wracam na Ochotę*. 11), he would be happy to eat a Varsovian brick — one cannot grow attached to a concrete slab. It is noteworthy, that it was the author of *Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego* who was one of the first Polish poets of bleak block housing estates trying to find the form for a life lived within a huge slab.<sup>6</sup> The latter, compared to a brick as a building material of the pre-war city and the ruins of the times of a cataclysm, becomes in the official discourse of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a symbol of the post-war socialistic reconstruction of the People's Republic of Poland, whereas in the literary register — a sign of the urban and cultural amnesia and unification. According to Leder, the slab block buildings are an omnipresent element of the Varsovian landscape. Seemingly exuberant, they are in fact rickety in their frugal choice of materials. A question arises: what are these buildings actually blocking? Without them, the city would be filled with a void, unhealed ruins confined here and there with preserved constructions (Leder as cited in: Janicka 35–36, fn. 36). The slab block constructions block — that is, conceal — the trauma, yet it is a flimsy architectural bandage that does not heal, but only covers the festering spatial wound instead. The act of pouring concrete onto former ruins and erecting on such a foundation new cultural-spatial forms had to end up in a psychological disaster, an urban neurosis.<sup>7</sup> After all, a psycho-analytical reading of this kind (and especially that of Warsaw) eventually revolts in the post-memorial output of young authors, where

in the foundations of slab block estates — against the “blocking” force of concrete — the memory of the war is stored. Forgetting is just one of the aspects connected with the experience of the post-war concrete space. Brodski used to compare the author of the idea of the machine-like residential buildings to Luftwaffe regarding the losses caused in the European space. Apart from the aesthetics, concrete binds in the cultural study with the discourse of power (the association with the Polish phraseological construct *beton partyjny*, literally “partisan concrete,” is not accidental), which denotes a fraction of a ruling party exceptionally resistant to changes). Architectural wounds on the city’s flesh as a souvenir of the time of socialistic dependence prevail in the space of many Polish cities, especially vivid within the boundaries of block housing estates and in the very shape of public buildings. A notable example in the Polish context is the Palace of Culture and Science.<sup>8</sup> Tadeusz Konwicki’s *A Minor Apocalypse*, published in 1979, begins with a description of the Palace of Culture which is depicted as an enormous spiked building that used to awake fear, hatred and horror in the citizens, yet, after long years is nothing more but a forgotten “barrack” devoured by mold and fungus, an old skeleton. The author notes the construction to be courting him with a repulsive intimacy.

The novel, a political grotesque on the 1970s, an apocalyptic vision of the moral downfall of the nation, is also a record of imprisoning power inside the city, as the figure of Warsaw turns out to be for Konwicki particularly useful for both observing and discoursing individual and collective identities, and seeking forms pertaining to phenomena of the Polish dependence (also architectural) to the Soviet Union. With his fictional journey through the city, Konwicki’s protagonist, seduced by a disgustingly cozy “barrack,” aiming to self-immolate in a gesture of a political rebellion gives a proof of the inability to hide from the unwanted and questionable coquettishness of the statue of confinement, overseeing the main character’s horizontal path. The private topography is here entirely owned by the collective topography. The spatial practices of the Warsaw of the 1970s that determine the nature of the city are manifestos, processions and parades, limousines of the Polish United Workers’ Party on the Varsovian streets. The invasion of authorities takes place also in the audiosphere — megaphones, “groaning” bands and military drums become the sounds of Warsaw. In reference to the notion of “soundscape” popularized by R. Murray Schafer, one may additionally reflect on the exceptionality of this “sound-landscape” in a city determined by politics. In the Schafer’s concept, “[...] soundmark is derived from landmark and refers to a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specialty regarded or noticed by the people in that community” (Schafer 10). Though in Schafer’s reflections sound-marks constitute sounds worth recording and preserving, a cultural legacy of a community, in case of a totalitarian

city these signals sent and received by the protagonist become yet another sign of the oppression, a sound signal at this time. Though the subject of a sound experience of a political oppression (after all, used also in the popular culture in the form of already iconized megaphones) deserves a more scrupulous insight, which cannot be provided by the short form of this article. It is important, though, that the Varsovian soundscape in Konwicki's vision harmonizes with the decomposition of the topography, the totalitarization of the urban map. In a city subordinate to the discourse of authorities and the drunken majority of the society, any individual spatial practice, any swerve from the main road towards the less trodden paths, one's own places, become impossible. Konwicki's protagonist does not have any such private place, being shown by guides to the place of self-immolation. Interesting is, that in the context of the above, the individual piece of space found by the protagonist required for the intimacy of a sexual contact is a concrete ruin. The main character compares remains of walls and ceilings in a devastated building of editorial office to a creation of a romantic architect (Konwicki 138).

Konwicki returns in his depiction to the 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics of ruins. The concrete space in *Mala apokalipsa* [*A Minor Apocalypse*] is condemned, contrary to the properties of the building material, to be decomposed — fungus and mold cover the Palace of Culture, and both Warsaw and its citizens, and lastly — the entire nation represented by the inhabitants of the capital — are decrepit in the novel. The apocalypse stands for returning to the biological forms, razing to the ground, destroying the cement. It does not bring, however, any hope in the story for bringing the memory back, reaching to its deep-settled layers hidden beneath the foundations of buildings. The silhouette of the Palace, like a Big Brother, traces the citizens, visible from every spot in the space — it does not allow them to forget about the eye of the authority and to remember the other past of Warsaw, meaningfully inexistent in the novel. After all, the figure of concrete as an end of history is also amplified in the novel by the construction of time, as none of its characters knows the current date. Konwicki's protagonist compares the Palace of Culture, his future "tomb," to a gigantic fish whose stone scales are flaking off. As Adrian Forty notes in his monograph *Urban Memory. History and amnesia in the modern city*, "[...] concrete has [...] been so generally associated with the erasure and obliteration of memory. Concrete makes everywhere the same. It cuts people off from their past, from nature, from each other. This sense that concrete is a symptom, if not a cause, of alienation has been around since the early 1960s, if not for longer. Take, for example, J-L. Godard's 1966 film *Two or Three Things I Know about Her*, in which lingering shots of concrete being poured on the construction of the Paris périphérique are accompanied on the sound track by musings on the city's loss of meaningfulness, its

demise as a communicative medium. Or another French example, Henri Lefebvre's 1960 essay *Notes on The New Town*, where, despite the absolute clarity and legibility of the functions of the concrete buildings, the result is an utterly impoverished environment: "Here I cannot read the centuries, not time, nor the past, nor what is possible. [...]. All this is nicely summed up by graffiti sprayed onto a multi storey car park in Marburg in Germany in 1992–3 — 'Beton ist Koma', 'Concrete is Coma'" (Forty 75). In his grotesque-apocalyptic vision Konwicki leaves no illusion as to the possibility of waking up.

### **Stones of the West**

Finding in Polish literature a writer who would combine the visible and the form in which it is described (as well as equally sensitive to the building material of the city, its texture, color and influence made on the passer-by) as firmly as Zbigniew Herbert does, is difficult. While Warsaw is asleep under the ideological concrete quilt, that is deconstructed in Konwicki's vision, Herbert seeks the roots of Europeanness, reflecting in the cities of France, Greece, the Netherlands and Italy upon the matter the culture of Europe is built from. In a collection of essays by Herbert titled *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie* [*Barbarian in the garden*], published in 1962, the author states, that the preparation of the mortar, the understanding of brick walls and the proper painting process are all of equal importance. The undercoat lime has to be cured for a long time before it may be mixed with washed fluvial sand. Meanwhile, lime is being warmed in the sun to be further mixed with colors (Herbert 70). The work is based on noting the experience of visiting places and depicting their histories, filling the gaps left by chroniclers with hypotheses, suppositions, interpretations, micro-narrations of a passer-by that fictionalize the history, gain a great *fortia de expression* owing to the replacement of the strictness of academicians with a detail spotted by a *flâneur* — a leisurely passer-by introduced into the literature in Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life*.

A *flâneur* is, shortly speaking, a saunterer who slowly (the pace plays an important role here) strolls the city streets with no purpose, making insightful observations of the urban space and turning them into art — an art of designing and aesthetizing the encountered individuals, situations, eavesdropped conversations and views recorded in the *flâneur's* memory. The history of this anthropological figure is long and became overgrown with numerous interpretations (see, for instance, Benjamin 1999, Benjamin 2002, Hessel, Baudelaire, Buck-Morss). Herbert himself uses the term *flanowanie* [*flâneuring*] to refer to the manner of perceiving European cities characteristic of his works (and of his many continuators in Polish literature<sup>9</sup>), the manner whose principal feature is the aesthetization prevailing in Herbert's

writings. As an intrinsic and lasting value, art determines the spatial experience in the Herbert's essay writing, which, hence, may be compared to textual arcades (Szalewska) — a genre congruous to this type of city-experiencing, that is a discursive equivalent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian arcades — the natural habitat of leisurely passers-by. The city exists here as a space dominated by the museums, cathedrals, monuments and paintings present within it. When depicting the town of Orvieto, a “supplement” to the cathedral (Herbert, *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie* 67), Herbert notices, that even when circling around the town for a long time, the feeling of having the cathedral right behind your back, its overwhelming presence, erodes all other feelings (Herbert, *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie* 67). This over-existence of art overlaps the landscape, diminishes the city to a role of a background, the space seems to be a Benjaminian aura enabling us to see the work of art in its natural context. However, the city transforms into an object of aesthetic experience not only owing to the beauty borrowed from museums; as an architectural group of buildings, the city may become a work of art itself, whose construction material is also included in the contemplation process. It requires the element of individuality that decides on the unique character of the city, expressed in Herbert's writing through colors and the specificity of the material. In his opinion Italian cities and towns differ in color: Assisi is associated with the light red color of sandstone, Rome with a terracotta on a green background, whereas Orvieto is of a golden-brown color. This realization comes to mind when standing in front of the Roman-Gothic Palazzo del Popolo — a huge matt copper cube with a wide balcony, flat roof bristled with merlons and beautiful windows with columns and volutes, which hides a fiery memory of lava inside (Herbert, *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie* 66–67).

Through the act of transforming the city into a work of art<sup>10</sup> a history spatialization takes place — the history of art and the history of the city, whose following depictions in arcades remind of notes in a *flâneur's* private guide book. The aesthetization of the city is here a contribution to historiosophical reflections, which prepares a foundation for equally subjective history writing by organizing and selecting the space. Here a specificity of textual arcades as a different essayist genre (popular in Polish literature) of a modernist form shows, as arcades are the written form of the city understood as an experience of history. Hence the figure of a museum, particularly favored by Herbert. The museum organizes discourse in arcades on the level of a description of a stroll in the urban space, determining the subject matter (a visit in a museum as a subject, a textogenic factor) and the form (the aesthetization of the urban space as a determinant of the construction of descriptive pieces of text, an ekphrasis, portraits, biographies and other micro-genres of historical narration). His power is best visible when he moves from the level of description, a

rhetoric ekphrasis, to a factor determining the essayist's world view. Herbert admits, that it is hard not to digress into the subject of legends and history when writing on the landscape (Herbert, *Labirynt nad morzem* 82), to verbalize the liking of the past, characteristic of the leisurely passers-by. The historical narration is one of the basic modalities of the discourse in textual arcades, in Herbert's essay writing strongly vivid in the search for the stone, depicted along the lines of a romantic ruin, that keeps within a trace of the European past (*n.b.* different to the aesthetics of the Varsovian rubble). One of the continuators of Herbert's idiom, Wojciech Karpiński visualizes in his collection of essays *Pamięć Włoch* [*The Memory of Italy*] invisible strings that connect all people of the European culture with the stones of Rome (Karpiński 190). Herbert's interest in the building material of Italian cities and French cathedrals is an escape from both Poland — the ruin of the times of war — and Poland — the concrete of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is, however, also an escape from the present into the aesthetization, a search for his own genealogy, the European birth certificate of a "barbarian." In a post-mortem publication (2000) titled *Labirynt nad morzem* [*Labyrinth by the Sea*] Herbert writes about Greece, recalling his eagerness to wipe off the dust of history, when the boundaries of time, the past and the present began to blur, since only in this two elements a man can live a full life (Herbert, *Labirynt nad morzem* 54–55). Herbert aesthetizes the matter, swallows Cretan stones, thereby bearing witness to the experience Białoszewski dreamed of, thinking of the act of eating bricks, and which Konwicki's protagonist could not have experienced in the concrete Warsaw.

Reading contemporary Polish literature through the matter that forms the textual description of cities leads to the real matter, the building material of the 20<sup>th</sup> century landscape, architectural and historical, at the same time. The bourgeois culture, which has introduced to the Polish experience the life (also fictional) in a tenement house so late and for such a short period of time, has soon found an epilogue in the form of a brick torn from a building wall and the (anti-)aesthetics of a post-war ruin. The trauma, also the spatial one, the annihilation of cities, including the most significant — Warsaw, is verbalized in anti-fictional forms of anti-diaries whose authors often reside in the symbols of reconstruction, socialism and oblivion, erected after the war — districts of slab block housing estates "block" with their cement weight the access to what is hidden beneath the lawns — traumas, that yet start to get "to speak" in the more contemporary literature of these residential buildings (*nb.* it is a voice of authors from a generation that finds developments of this kind a natural environment of its daily existence). While Konwicki sees in the apocalyptic vision a moral downfall visualized in the physical decay of the city, numerous writers retreat from the concrete

coma into the illusion of the inaccessible matter or grieve after that nonexistent one. Herbert's essay writing, with his files of aesthetization of the reality and the search for the universals among the Mediterranean stones is just one of many aspects of this architectural escapism. Other dilemmas are introduced to the above context by elegies for the lost cities, filled with a longing for the cobblestones and bricks of Lviv and Vilnius (numerous other examples of these cities can be found in Polish literature, just to mention Czesław Miłosz's *Zaczynając od moich ulic* [*Beginning with My Streets*], Józef Wittlin's *Mój Lwów* [*My Lviv*], and many, many others). To sum up, in order to complete the complicated image of the construction material circulating in the palimpsest-like space of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the reverse side of the elegy for the lost Kresy ought to be recalled, i.e., the aesthetically disturbing surprise of the encounter with the German matter in the prose of Gdańsk, Szczecin or Silesia in Polish literature, the search for one's own spatial practices on the traces of those of the former inhabitants. Not discussing these threads well-identified in the Polish literary studies, I shall end these architectural-literary analyses with a quotation from a text highly significant in this view, *Dwa miasta* [*Two cities*] of Adam Zagajewski, in which the lost matter of Lviv touches upon the alien matter of Gliwice, and where the childhood spatial experience and the emigrational spatial experience of the adult writer overlap: "[...] I was thoroughly convinced, that when walking on the streets of Gliwice, among Prussian Art Nouveau tenement houses ornamented with heavy granite caryatids, I am actually there. Still, my grandfather, though walking by my side, at that very moment used to move to Lviv. I was strolling the streets of Gliwice, whereas he was strolling the streets of Lviv" (Zagajewski 15), writes Zagajewski, sitting "[...] at the table in a room on the sixth floor of a monstrous concrete slab block building situated on the outskirts of Paris" (Zagajewski 46).

## Notes

1. The publication was supported by the Foundation for Polish Science.
2. See also perception models of a city in contemporary Polish literature, based on other classification (connected with the poetics of description) — perceptual poetics, constructivist poetics, parabolic poetics, constructivist poetics, parabolic poetics, and social documents — Rybicka.
3. One does not have to look far for its representation — it is enough to instance the canon of texts created at that time. Cities like Paris, Vienna, Prague, London and New York have become protagonists of modernity, whereas their heroic history written down by accurate chroniclers — Apollinaire, Musil, Whitman, Kafka, and many others — not limiting themselves to the role of a building material of the literary space, they turn into a mirror of an anthropological identification. In one of numerous (now) works reflecting upon the relations between modernism and the city titled

*Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art* one may read, “For this identification, the facts of development of the city into the metropolis are basic. We can see how certain themes in art and thought developed as specific responses to the new and expanding kinds of nineteenth-century city and then, [...], see how these went through a variety of actual artistic transformations, supported by newly offered (and competitive) aesthetic universals, in certain metropolitan conditions of the early twentieth century: the moment of ‘modern art’” — Timms, Kelley (15). Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris*, Mann’s *Death in Venice*, Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the Prague of Kafka’s writings, the Dublin of Joyce, and many other examples of modern literature testify with no doubt to the promotion of the city to one of the most important issues of modernist and subsequent literature.

4. I have used here the term “Parisian text” in analogy to the Saint Petersburg of Vladimir Toporov, according to whom it might be defined as a particular heterogeneous text of a particular meaning allowing a particular sign system, realized in the text, to be reconstructed. A text that preserves signs of its extra-textual substrate and which, in turn, requires from the user an ability to regenerate a bond with the external sphere, with extra-textual phenomena for each and every “node” of the Petersburgian text. Hence, the text teaches how to move beyond its boundaries. This bond keeps alive the very Petersburgian text and those, to whom it appeared as a reality that has not been reduced to the objective-material level (Toporov 73).

5. The Warsaw Uprising began on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1944 and was directed against both the German occupiers and the Stalin’s political game. It is difficult to summarize the causes, the course and results of the Varsovian revolt in such a short footnote form. The uprising, which fell on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1944, has brought massive casualties and political loss, and has turned Warsaw into ruins. However, it has also given birth to disputes over the sense of initiating armed struggle, as well as artistic realizations of the theme of uprising, which has become a popular symbol of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Polish history. Warsaw, a city-wound after the historical experiences of the former century, has come to take on particular significance. The losses suffered by the city during the struggle grew over the post-rising period. According to Davies, districts on the west coast of Vistula were being devastated for over three months after the fall of the rising. Despite the fact, that every single man was needed in the desperate defense of the Reich, thousands of Nazi soldier were carrying orders of *Führer* in the ruins of Warsaw in order to wipe it off the surface of the earth. Varsovian buildings and monuments, though already plundered and ruined, were further destroyed with flamethrowers, dynamite and heavy equipment, one by one (Davis 573). Walter Benjamin wanted to describe Paris building after building, street after street — *rue par rue, maison par maison*, similarly Białoszewski recorded the disappearance of Warsaw.

6. A giant slab is a constructional element used in the building of, most of all, slab block residential buildings. Its characteristic feature, that influences also the aesthetics of residential complexes built in this way, is modularity, since it is a prefabricated element applicable in multiplication. Giant slab buildings were raised in Poland from the 1950s to the 1990s (the peak of its popularity being the

1970s), transforming urban landscapes into deserts of concrete facades (though today renovated and aesthetized), which have become a symbol of the proverbial grayness of the time of the People's Republic of Poland, understood in a political, social, economic and aesthetic sense). Miron Białoszewski sought that poetic form for expressing spatial experiences of living in such a huge slab, and, longing for the brick, created an "epic poem" of the *mrówkowiec*, as he used to call a slab block building, in form of numerous short compositions (especially, *Chamowie* and *Odczepić się*).

7. I make use here of Andrzej Leder's term (Leder), who finds in psychoanalysis an inspiration for reading the space, where an irritatingly non-existent artifact overgrows with events that are to connect its nonexistence with the surrounding structure. Yet, since in Warsaw this structure is exceptionally weak, it is the phenomena formed out of the posttraumatic, post-war fever, that give the space its character. They are, literally, a cover of the concealed memory of trauma concealed after a trauma (Janicka 21–22, fn. 5).

8. The Palace of Culture and Science is situated in the very heart of Warsaw at Parade Square (*Plac Defilad*), overlooking the capital both in terms of architecture and symbolism, being a characteristic element of the Varsovian skyline. Elevated as a gift from the Soviet nation, initially it was named after Joseph Stalin. The construction works were completed in 1955. To this day the building provokes many disputes between the enthusiasts of its demolition as a symbol of Poland's dependence to the USSR and those regarding the Palace a historic building worth preserving (since the Palace has been listed on the Register of Historic Monuments in 2007, it is, therefore, a historic monument).

9. The idiom of the Herbert's stroll reminds of essays of such writers like, among others, Adam Zagajewski, Jerzy Stempowski, Józef Wittlin, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Czesław Miłosz, Mieczysław Jastrun, Zygmunt Kubiak, or Jan Parandowski.

10. To learn more on this subject, see: aesthetic analysis of a city as a work of art — a project by Georg Simmel — Simmel (301–310).

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