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Reymont's "The Vampire" : the beginning of infernal doom

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Reymont's *The Vampire*: the beginning of infernal doom

Abstract

In *The Vampire* Reymont presents London as the imperial city falling into decline, where Polish immigrants, who lack identity, wander timelessly. It is also a place where a mercantile society is immersed in a reality dominated by technological development. Reymont's novel allows us to analyse the space of London at the end of the 19th century, and the human fate which is determined by this space. In my paper I would like to focus on the analysis of the city space, including the division into centre and suburbs of London, and losing the way in a maze (a maze of streets and a maze of subconsciousness of the main characters), the consequences of abandoning sacrum, entropy, and the crisis of family and art. The interesting vision of London created by Reymont gives us answers to a few important questions. Do the Polish immigrants find themselves in a new reality? How does the experience of a modern city affect people's lives? Why cannot contemporary man find his place in the surrounding world?

Key words: labyrinth, entropy, reversed colonialism, suburbia/ transurbia

A city is not only a network of streets, but first of all a collection of different kinds of experiences: individual, occasional or situational. In *The Vampire*²⁹, Reymont presents the oneiric vision of London – a declining imperial city. It is a place of ongoing wandering of immigrants deprived of their identity, and inhabited by a commercialised society of Londoners immersed in a reality controlled by technology. All of this allows the writer to make a thorough analysis of London at the end of the 19th century, and – what is more important – human fate determined by this space.

A coherent and organic picture of the city in the novel falls into separated patches, which often get lost and suggest different surfaces and their curiosities. The main cause of this phenomenon is the fact that the London of *The Vampire* does not have a centre which could introduce harmonic relations between the city and the world of “centre”. This leads to the

²⁹ The first version of the novel was published under a working title *In the fog* in *Kurier Warszawski* in 1904. Almost simultaneously Reymont's work was also printed in *Słowo Polskie* in Lwów and in *Dziennik Poznański*. As a book *The Vampire* was released in 1911 (it was a broadened version of *In the fog*).

common lostness and chaos. The central point in the city is both an element of topography and a source of rules. According to these rules order in the city does not restrict itself to a harmonic structure of streets, but first of all it exists as an invisible law system and administrative decisions, which come from the city centre. As in the 9th chapter of *Invisible cities* (1972) by Italo Calvino, which presents the story of Penthesilea: “it spills on a plain within a mile in a diluted mash of a city” (Calvino 1975, p. 121). This lack makes the city only an inner sum of the overlapping suburbs. It does not have its own face which would distinguish it from other spaces. That is why it becomes a scandal and nightmare, a fatal place for all people who live there, especially for the two protagonists of the novel. One of them is Zenon, a Polish artist who has been living in London for many years, and Joe, a British officer and a spiritualist, who is looking for a sense to his life. They both want to release themselves from a trap, a maze of human subconscious, complexes and restraints, which are present in all the places where the action takes place, and which symbolise the nightmare of human existence [Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom – the characters from *Ulysses* (Joyce 1922) wander in the same maze of solitude]. In this situation the necessity of a fight is unavoidable although a real victory is doubtful. It happens because London does not only consist of spaces which are “near”, “close” (sub-), but is becoming a transurbia in which the wanderer is just a passer-by who cannot reach the destination of his journey, and he is not even sure if he has not already missed it. He remains in a state of uncertainty and lostness, heightened by the impossibility of finding the city centre which is always “on the other side”, “somewhere else”, “beyond reach”. The city is deprived of “the crystal of space”, and a temporal centre is “the opposite of presence”, which means that it is situated where it was lost and pointing to it is beyond human perception. It belongs to the dark area, an unclear flash, a sparking. It is an empty grave – left after the death of all expectations and hopes for rescue (Sławek 1997, p. 23-25). The only islands which exist in transurbia are *no go in* and *no go out* (treated here as one) (Cf. Bauman 1997). These are districts dangerous for all uninitiated, which an inexperienced person should not enter, and which Zenon visits many times while in his hypnotic wandering. As a result the protagonist has to walk endlessly from one *Gate of Hall* to the other. He cannot leave this place because devilish peripheries are everywhere.

Michał Głowiński emphasises that a notion of a maze is always associated with the feelings of alienation, lostness, fear, being trapped, and no control over one's fate. This fate depends on the powers which are beyond human cognition (Głowiński 1994, p. 150) and it is limited to “pushing through the cracks in the density of matter” (Poulet 1977, p. 520). What is more, in the myth of a maze there often appears the motive of a wild dance, during which the

dancers move in spiral paths (Paetzold 1999, p. 114-115). Therefore, one of the forms used in the novel is a spiral layout of streets in which Zenon is immersed. It is important that he cannot get to know the layout, which would help him to move with ease in this space. As a result, he makes the wrong choices all the time. The Polish artist often wanders through the crowded streets full of hubbub, trying to disappear in their ordinariness. Reymont added to the description of London in the novel his own remarks on this city (the writer visited the capital of the British Empire in 1894). In his diary (Reymont 1948, p. 10–11) he wrote: “London is ugly and depressing but not common [...] everywhere you can see contrasts. [...] The streets go in all directions. [...] You walk through a park, a few quiet streets in which you feel as if you were in a drain with a grey sky above your head. Then you reach the Thames, and you stop again to stare at the muddy, greenish water, at hundreds of ships which look as though they fly on air. You see dozens of smooth bridge ellipses, and thousands of tower peaks, and this crazy and loud comedy of life in a big city. Then you go farther entering a maze of streets full of rubbish and dirt, which resemble the bottom of a drain. Dark houses are like shabby sheds. Windows are clogged up with rags, and doors hang on one hinge. People wander around like shadows. Dogs sniff, and dig in the heaps of rubbish. You can see here Hogarth's characters, houses dripping with dirt, and suspicious people inside them. The smell of rotten fish and wood nauseates you' meat on the stalls, and sheep carcasses hanging on hooks, dripping with blood. Blood stains the pavements, and seeps into a drain. Dirty shop windows, and a trash shop full of filthy rags. A cave-like tavern smells of gin and brandy, and a few gentlemen, leaning against the wall, smoke short pipes. They look hostile so I pass them quickly. In some nook I take out a Beadecker's guide from my pocket to check where I am, and I go back. When he witnesses a horrible Sabbath of “possessed souls shaken with the shivers of madness and death” (Reymont 1950, p. 93), he starts feeling dazed and he sinks into the maze of streets, he listens intently to “the sound of parks in the fog, a slavish, fearfully mean whisper of the straight hedges guarding the way” (Reymont 1950, p. 110). Zenon loses himself in the tumult of a cheering crowd which celebrates the victory over Nubar Pasha. He escapes through the transverse streets, deeper and deeper into the city, far away from his recent visions, people, and finally from himself. J. R. Krzyżanowski claims that the only artistically valuable fragments of the novel are those describing Zenon's wandering around London. He also suggests that criticism of living conditions in England, and the vision of a foreigner lost in the night full of crimes, misery and sadness, can be compared to *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* by F. Dostoevsky (Cf. Krzyżanowski 1987). In a terrible rush he reaches the Thames and sits on some steps leading to the river. He

feels dizzy and exhausted. The surrounding world immersed in boundless darkness is dangerous, and it terrifies him. In this moment the protagonist embodies sick and deformed civilisation being at the edge of a precipice. He is helpless and confused. He does not understand what is happening around him. Perhaps he starts feeling all the fears connected with the alienation of modern man, which would be the first symptom of the experience of strangeness in a crowd. When a not yet clear idea of committing suicide comes to his mind, he attracts the attention of a policeman who carries him to the illuminated streets, and who leaves him there weak and helpless. On his way through these hostile powers his life has been turned into an existential nightmare. The city maze becomes a double spiral, in which the protagonist continuously has to make his own choices although they are always wrong, and only bring him up against new dangers. As a result, Zenon is not able to control the space because all the existing paths and alleys do not lead directly to any destination. He cannot communicate with other people who speak different languages. In this situation wandering is inevitable. Meanwhile, London is changing more and more into “some fantastic forest, silent and dead, full of weird apparitions, where mysterious and horrible things take place” (Reymont 1950, p. 109). Unaware of reality, and asleep in a hypnotic dream, Zenon walks through the empty streets, in which from time to time appear groups of drunks, prostitutes, thugs and many other suspicious people- typical inhabitants, who embody the essence of life in a big city, prostitutes, street beggars and philistines. Together they create a corrupt society which either seeks the pleasure of stupor or wants to satisfy its primitive needs (Cf. Gutowski 1999c). He also meets religious fanatics who try to save the world by distributing holy maxims. The taverns are filled with the smell of alcohol and shouts of drunkards. This space lacks natural light and vital solar energy (Cf. Kochanowski 2002). Even in the afternoon the street lamps are lit: “the blinding lights of electric suns” beam from every alley, and at night the shop windows glimmer “with fading colours” instead of stars (Reymont 1950, p. 109). The surrounding reality is full of pathology, and suffused with damp, stuffy air, the smell of mud and soft asphalt. Pictures emerge from the rain, from the sound of the countless streams of rain water, and from the omnipresent fog – a symbol of common paralysis and death.

Reymont shows the city landscape contaminated with an overpowering disease, which destroys all vital energy, and makes the characters, objects and events unreal. London, presented in a oneiric way, is a symbol of declining civilisation. The final stage of the killing of the soul of the world is sleep. Almost all the world in the novel dreams its great and tragic dream, a nightmare which ends with doom. This nightmare is equivalent to the decline of civilisation, culture and humanity. The evil is omnipresent, and people, living in this space,

have become helpless, vampire-like mannequins – dominated by that evil, and trapped in its cage. London is a capital of death, destruction and finally a vampire from the title of Reymont's novel. Here, the chance for rescue is rather uncertain.

One of the theories of a maze suggested by Marcel Brion says that a traveller who goes into a maze wants to reach the central chamber, the crypt of mysteries. Nevertheless, after having reached his goal, he should leave the chamber and come back to the outside world. This act means rebirth. It is the core of all religions based on mysteries, and all sects which perceive wandering in a maze as a necessary element in a process of forming a new man. As the wandering becomes more demanding a person changes more and more, discovering his or her new “self” (Cf. Brion 1955, p. 333) By this token, Zenon's wandering in a city maze can bring to one's mind walking in a cave. It is a *nekylia*, descent into hell, the kingdom of death. An important element in this theory is selection. Only the chosen ones may be initiated into the mystery and rebirth in a spiritual sense (Rybicka 2000, p. 17). That mystery, however, can be surprising – as is the case with Zenon. The protagonist as an artist and – to some extent – an outsider (especially as an immigrant) is condemned to his own maze, from which there is no way out, and where Zenon can meet only himself. The aim of his mad searches and the destination of his way is solving a mystery – which is *deus absconditus* or a monster which Zenon in the end becomes (Santarcangeli 1967, p. 209–210). The final solution of the conflict between light and darkness, which takes place in his soul, is a decision to leave London with Daisy – an envoy of the Devil. Her victory over the soul of the Polish artist proves Satan's control over people's lives, but it also leads us to a conclusion that everyone has his or her own vampire which takes away vital powers and brings the victim to a downfall, making normal life impossible. Boarding a ship, mysteriously named Caliban, and beginning a voyage, Zenon chooses Madness and Death³⁰, rejecting the Wisdom which weary Europe wants to possess thanks to the prophets from the East. He also resigns from Life – the vital gift full of energy of the South. Reymont emphasises the contrast between sunny Italy and gloomy England. Whilst in London winter is eternal (the reason for complaint of almost all the characters in the novel) in Sorrento and Naples people enjoy endless spring. Both Ada – Zenon's first love – and Daisy want the protagonist to go South. For the first of the two women Italy is a symbol of fertility and life, but for the second one it is a seat of Satan's followers. Many works on Satanism were published in Italy at the end of the 19th century, for example, *Il Lucifero*, *L'Antichristo*, *Satana*. It was also a country with a large

³⁰ The names of places, starting with capital letters in the text of *The Vampire* suggest the destination of a journey.

number of masonic organisations, and a place where Nietzsche – a philosopher often mentioned by Zenon – had spent many years of his life. The name of the ship is an ambiguous allusion to the future life of the artist controlled by Bafomet. Zenon changes into a half – devilish creature and now resembles Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*³¹. Zenon takes the role of Caliban in Reymont's novel. He becomes a Devil's bastard who will probably end up as a slave – not capable of spiritual growth, living under the spell of occult powers. Probably he will also resemble Caliban from Ernest Renan's poem (*Caliban: sequel to The Tempest*, 1878), who burns books, destroys artefacts, hates intellect, and respects only those who are more powerful than he is. What is more, Renan's Caliban prosecutes his own mad allies who devoted their own lives to him. The writer emphasises in his poem that history would not exist without Caliban. His rumblings and bitter hatred which force him to get rid of Prospero, are at the same time factors of progress of humanity. The world, therefore, needs both the wise men (which is obvious) and the Calibans (Cf. Skarga 1969).

In *The Vampire* the experience of imperial service and self-confidence leading to laziness are maleficent for all Englishmen and cause that humanity to be perceived as a phantom. The nightmarish climate of the novel comes from the Reymont's vision of the Western world – a decadent civilisation addicted to pleasure. The author of *The Promised Land* felt this climate during his stay in London. In his notes from that period of time we find the following fragment: “England is a land of contrasts, inhabited by an emotionless nation of tradesmen. It conquers and exploits other nations – one hundred times more powerful than itself”. As for London, it seemed too big for a Polish writer. It was a city with “too many people and too many extraordinary things. One receives here too many impressions. Life runs too fast, and it is too exhausting. You feel as if you were among the waves of a rough sea, which take you and carry you with tumult” (Reymont 1948, p. 8–10). In fact Reymont perceived London space as ugly and depressing, but never as common. He noticed the economic power of an efficient and active nation. In the novel we also find a reversed colonialism: “the light from the East” becomes a colonizer which will civilize the declining West. The Orient takes the role of Prospero from *The Tempest*, who thanks to magic and secret knowledge, gains recognition, whereas London is Caliban, a lustful, drunk monster,

³¹ The name Caliban is Shakespeare's anagram of a word Cannibal (the writer often used it for naming cannibals in his plays, for example, in *Othello*). In *The Tempest* Caliban is a beast living beyond the civilised world. On his accusations that Prospero took away his island, and made him a slave, Prospero and his daughter reply that he does not deserve a better life because he is an uneducated savage. He would not understand his own worlds without help of the civilised people. Miranda even calls him an extraordinarily degenerate thing, and in this way she denies his human nature. However, Prospero knows that without Caliban he would not be able to rule the island (Cf. Markowski 2006).

deprived of ethical rules, lawless, condemned to a miserable life or even a prompt downfall. Reymont – like Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* – was focused on colonizers. The imperial or the colonial attempts occur to be captions for white people. They lead them to laziness, reveal their weakness, intensify their pride of being white, and strengthen their hypocrisy. As a consequence, humanity cannot avoid its doom, and the salutary Orient myth created by Europeans occurs to be only an illusion. Erazm Kuźma in his work *Mit Orientu i kultury Zachodu w literaturze XIX I XX wieku* (1980) points at the fact that modernism treated the myth of the East as a chance for rebirth of the European culture being in a state of crisis. Nevertheless, in *The Vampire* following Hindu meditation practices leads Joe to madness. It seems that meditation is too difficult for a person brought up in Western culture, and it is reserved only for people from the East.

One of the consequences of being lost in a commercialised world is the fact that a city becomes something trivial. It is no longer a place to live in, but it turns into a schema of passages and routes, which makes this space a domain of dangerous darkness in which one can easily get lost. In the city appears the phenomenon of social homelessness which leads to metaphysical exile. The alienated family is also in crisis. Another problem is the lack of a home as a safe shelter from the macabre of everyday life. The streets are full of confused, alienated and hostile crowds. Most important, however, is the decreasing role of the “centre” as a metaphorical union of divinity and mortality. Cosmopolitan Londoners lack Sacrum because the Church has involved itself in politics, forgetting about its proper function of being concerned with God. People left on their own, are prone to the influence of sects and so-called world saviours. The Church in *The Vampire* is more interested in politics than in God's service. Not only has it “killed” God but also has encouraged away from Him those in need, condemning them to the aimless searching for a way to salvation in all kinds of sects. At almost every street corner one can see people gathered around loud spouting preachers. There is also a large group of the Salvation Army, and Envoys of the Sin Tamers Church. It turns out that the world saviours are numerous although they are only crooks and hypocrites, who want to earn money thanks to the naivety of people and their fear of an imminent end of the world. The London area resembles an enlarged version of a European cemetery on which the loss of transcendent perspective, depersonalisation and atrophy lead to a slow destruction. The decline of family values, tradition, culture, religion, faith and weakening relations between people form together a trend which results in an increasing chaos and inertness.

London is seized by entropy. In the novel everything seems to be falling apart, and true reality is reflected through the characters and the social conventions. The lurking evil, the

temptation of occult powers announce the coming triumph of the entropy. About the entropy in American literature, T. Tanner (Tanner 1971) writes referring to the Victorian novel in English literature. Worth mentioning also is a poem *The City of Dreadful Nights* (Thomson 1880). The poet describes a capital plunged in darkness, without perspectives for a better future. God – if He exists – is an enemy of humanity, who wants its extermination, and if He does not exist, everything in our life happens by chance, and we belong to a nonentity. It seems that even death does not save us. The present is a marsh full of sadness, and return to the better past is not possible (Cf. Dahl 1961). The notion of entropy in Polish literature in the example of *The Lunar Trilogy (Trylogia księżycowa)* by J. Żuławski, especially *The Old Earth (Stara ziemia)* analysis W. Gutowski in his article *Mit w czasoprzestrzeni powieści młodopolskiej* (Gutowski 1999b, p. 20–25). Reality consists of mysterious powers, which are so powerful and even timeless that being exposed to their impact or looking for them causes the image of a man to become more and more humble or trivial. As a result, a man seems to be only a regrettable crumb involved in unimportant events. The vampiric space of London seems to be nothing more than a cold, disgusting and yellow fog which “flooded the city like dirty rough water, in which loomed dark shapes of houses and people” (Reymont, 1950, p. 194). This fog like “cotton wool removed from bandages, full of pus, soaked in some horrible liquid, wreathed with spongy volumes the streets and houses, drowning the city in a dirty wave” (Reymont 1950, p. 25). The world portrayed in the novel is going back to the state of chaos³² from which the “never stopping scream of the city comes out through the fog like a silent shiver” (Reymont 1950, p. 194). Reymont – like Dickens in *Bleak House* (1852-1853) – who pays attention to the madness of mood of the alienated Londoners, lost in the darkness and fog, where the muddy Thames brings to one's mind primitive life conditions connected with the threat of constant stillness or rather the situation with no way out – *deadlock*. In one of Dickens' novels we find a manor house owned by an aristocratic family named Dedlock. This surname is characteristic because it is pronounced in the same way as “deadlock” (Cf. Welsh 1971; Williams 1985). It is strengthened by the withdrawal from life, and inertia with axiological alienation leading to the death of the world. For an individual the city extends to the area of emptiness. As in a poem *The Dead City* by Leopold Staff the omnipresent death triumphs, turning the space of human community into a grave (Gutowski 1999c, p. 80–81).

³² A perfect picture of the world with all its degeneration presents a documentary *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) by G. Reggio. The author shows a vision of chaos which results in the decline of civilisation. The title can be translated as a life out of balance, full of hubbub, leading to doom. Here civilisation is a rival of Nature, and each scene gives the viewers a vision of destruction, forcing them to reflect on the condition of the modern world. Moreover, the documentary is – to some extent – a consideration of a problem of how Nature depends on modern industrialised civilisation

The only possible way of escaping from the fake space is its perverse approval. In Reymont's novel it appears as an extreme individualism, which looks for its own salvation and perfection. This individualism, however, can lead only to destruction. A person cannot withdraw from life like Joe who disapproves of European civilization, but at the same time does nothing to save it. Quite the contrary, he practices splitting his "self" to find the way out from the abyss. His imitation of a fakir's meditation practice indicates that: "the lives of crowds have become for him only an unclear and strange hallucination" (Reymont 1950, p. 160). Long-expected appearance of a double at first makes him happy, and brings him a feeling of release that he has eventually found a guide who will lead him through the darkness. Nevertheless, his second "self" soon becomes a vampire. The protagonist tries to fight with him but this leads him to permanent insanity.

In modern Europe fascinated with new possibilities of development offered by science, and rejecting its own natural and religious roots, a "vanity fair" takes place. In *Vanity Fair* (1847–1848) by W. M. Thackeray we find a satirical analysis of historical and social changes, while the novel *Flatland. A Romance of many Dimensions* (1884) by Edwin A. Abbott is an obvious mockery of Victorian social order, and also a satire on the modern world. It was not a coincidence that Abbott's novel was published at a time of huge popularity of spiritualism. The narrator's *Flatland* is a square which shows the readers round a two-dimensional world inhabited by a well-organised society of geometrical figures. In a city affected by the crisis of philosophy of accommodation (Derrida calls it "la crise du logement" (Derrida 1987, p. 481), art has been removed from its particular residences to the countless common places, where people do not "stay" but rather "come to", "enjoy themselves", and leave having done their everyday duties. In A. Rimbaud's poem called *Villes* (1875) a play takes place not in a theatre but in a shop. Art has changed into something trivial, and has become a part of everyday life. Also the law, which undergoes vague and continuous changes, is not precise, and does not give a clear view of crime and punishment. The commercialized art has changed into a trashy show. Tradition, which is the base of civilization, is dying out without successors and consumers. It is becoming an empty church like Westminster Abbey – "the cemetery of ages turned into ashes" (Reymont 1950, p. 111), a museum or even a tomb. Zenon never visits theatres, concert halls or opera houses because he believes that this kind of entertainment is redundant. He also never watches shows. In one scene he says: "I've hated all nonsense, bluff and trashy art which insolently pretends to be real art. I've had enough of imitations, stupid gestures sent into the emptiness, all this clownish life simulation, aping, and this boastful menagerie of authors and actors being applauded by the foolish crowd"

(Reymont 1950, p. 69). Dariusz Trzeźniowski in one of his publications remarks that the greatest aspiration of the Polish writer was a fulfilling of the Wagnerian “theatre and temple” dream which could serve the pure beauty released from subordinate functions. This dream would be a triumph of the spirit, and it would satisfy all metaphysical desires, giving humanity a chance for rebirth (Trzeźniowski 2002, p. 118–119). Unfortunately, the success of this plan is doubtful.

According to Reymont’s idea London is *pars pro toto* of the world. At the same time the way the city is portrayed in the novel goes towards a symbol or a model of the universe, and creates a condensed vision of the declining world. Like every city, London was an artificial creation. What is more, in *The Vampire* it is presented as a totally amorphous space, deprived of the ability of creative development. It is condemned to certain downfall, because it does not evolve. Undoubtedly it is a symbol of total destruction of civilization and culture, deformation of the inner world of man, but also a dump on which – among the remains and carrion of progress – a great sarabanda in praise of the self quasi magnitude takes place. London is a centre of a boastful island where culture goes hand in hand with barbarity.

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