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Traces in the ocean : on Melville, Wolanowski, and Willing Suspension of Disbelief

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TRACES IN THE OCEAN.

On Melville, Wolanowski,
and Willing Suspension of Disbelief

Ed Murrow—who has recently become the central character of George Clooney's picture Good Night and Good Luck, and who, during the war, spent quite some time treated in hospital along with a group of wounded Poles and spoke our language pretty well—would tease me when the Przekrój weekly began to publish my cycle 'Now you can tell the whole story'¹ and other reportages, saying: 'Lucjan, reading what you write, I am beginning to understand how you would write, if you yourself believed in what you write'. He would often lend me American writing coursebooks and reportage collections.

Lucjan Wolanowski, *Nie wszyscy byli aniołami. (Dziennik dziennikarza)*
[*Not Everyone Was an Angel. (A Journalist's Journal)*]

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FAIRY-TALE/REALITY. A PREFACE²

I am reading Wolanowski as a 45-year-old, in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century—and I swallow the 290 pages of his

1. *Przekrój* [*the Cross-Section*], published since 1945 until 2013, was one of the most highly esteemed opinion-forming Polish weeklies, promoting western culture and values and featuring texts by leading Polish journalists, creative writers and satirists. 'Now you can tell the whole story' is my proposition of a translation of the original title of Lucjan Wolanowski's cycle or reportages 'Teraz to już można opowiedzieć'.

2. The argument of this article is based on my chapter in a Polish monograph dedicated to Lucjan Wolanowski: Paweł Jędrzejko (2009) 'Ślady na Oceanie. Refleksja nad myśleniem magicznym i prozą Lucjana Wolanowskiego', in *Wokół reportażu podróżniczego. Tom 3. Lucjan Wolanowski (1920–2006). Studia–Szkice–Materiały*. Dariusz Rott and Mariusz Kubik (eds). Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 94–106.

book on the *Rebels of the South Seas*³ in one night. Just like thirty-odd years before, when—as a chronically ill, bed-ridden child from the then smoggy, industrial, province of Silesia—I would devour every book that a kind parental hand would leave at my night table (then, out of sheer boredom), especially, if such a book could teleport me to places distant in time and space. So distant that they would seem unreal; so unreal that they would almost seem a fairy-tale, born of someone’s poetic imagination. Quite honestly, in the 1970s and 80s it would not make an iota of difference to me if I went to sea on board of the *Adventure* with Moomin-pappa, or whether I sailed around the world with Joshua Slocum as a deckhand of the *Spray*. At the time, the facticity of distant realities was just as unverifiable for me as it was for the adults of my family. Only I had not yet developed the necessary awareness to understand how important this difference was for them.

SAILING/IMAGINATION. INTRODUCTION

When the *Rebels of the South Seas* came out in 1981, one of the very few legal windows onto the world in the then communist Poland was sailing. All one needed to do to be allowed to go to sea on board of a sailing yacht—one usually owned by a yacht club sponsored by a major state-owned industrial company or by a state-run institution—may be summarized in a few uncomplicated steps. First, one needed to undergo training, pass an examination and obtain a proper sailing license. Then, one had to file an application with the local branch of the Polish Yachting Association to have the so-called ‘Yachtsman’s Log Book’ issued. Henceforth, things were simple: one had to make an appointment to undergo a few medical tests, have the doctor’s approval stamped into the newly obtained Log Book, pay a visit to the local passport office, fill in about a ton of official documents, and finally—allowing a few weeks necessary for the Authorities to x-ray the applicant for traces of political dissidence—spend an exciting night while waiting in line to receive the much longed-for ‘Sea-Sailing Permit’ from a ‘botox-faced’ automaton of an officer. The shiny red rubber stamp in the Log Book

3. (Wolanowski, 1980 [1981]). Throughout the article, I refer to the book by its English title in my translation: *Rebels of the South Seas. A Reporter on Track of the Mutiny on Board of His Majesty’s Ship the Bounty*.

was *almost* a passport, just like sailing itself was *almost* traveling. *Almost*, because the 'Permit' did not grant one the right to leave international waters or enter the territorial belt of any country other than Poland. All it legitimized was a far-off glance at the fascinating Western world, a distant perspective, which, after all, is an archaic term for a spy-glass. Indeed, at the time, we were allowed so much as an 'optical *delusion*': we could sail as close to the islands of Bornholm or Christiansø as the regulations permitted and spy through the glass of the binoculars upon the other, forbidden, reality of the 'bloodthirsty capitalist world'. Voyeurism, along with the fantasies it energized, would, out of necessity, have to suffice in lieu of a full-fledged experience. Still, returning from such cruises, Polish yachtsmen would often spin yarns, bragging, for instance, to have 'been to Denmark'—yet, although they would never have set foot on the Danish soil, just because they managed to 'sneak' a nautical mile or so into the belt of Danish national waters, in their minds their 'almost-a-visit' would be nothing short of real. As real, as they only could imagine it. After all, nominally, they *were* in Denmark.

Incidentally, it was also in that time that the log books of the majority of Polish sailing yachts would record a skyrocketing increase in the instances of serious damage to hulls, rigging, or vital systems: 'unexpectedly', fresh water pipes would 'crack', steering cables would 'suddenly' break, and the leaky planking would let in such amounts of seawater that, despite their dedication, the crew working the bilge pumps (which, more often than not, would 'prove defective' anyway) and buckets—would not be able to avert the imminent danger. 'Now you can tell the whole story': many of the more courageous skippers (who would either have struck friendships or deals with crewmen, whose day job would incidentally involve serving as officers of the Home Security Service of the People's Republic of Poland but who, like everyone else, would *also* harbor secret desires to experience the world outside the Eastern Block) would, more or less openly, and sometimes only on paper, sabotage the boats in order to meet the legal requirements for a 'justifiable deviation' as defined by international laws concerning Marine Occurrence Obligations and the master's responsibilities in event of emergencies. The 'justifiable deviation' laws would

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allow skippers to put into port with a damaged ship. The fact that the closest port of escape would always be a non-Polish port would, of course, be a 'complete coincidence'.

Then, usually, the sailors would return home—and when the short sailing season in the Baltic Sea was over, those enchanted by the sea would seek an ersatz to nautical voyaging: they would lose themselves in Conrad, Melville, popular travelogues, diaries, journals and reportages, often published in the then popular series titled *Famous Sailors*.⁴ The sailing community would also gather together around the first sea-shanty festivals and concerts, mesmerized by the simplicity of the then fresh translations of traditional working songs introduced to Polish culture by such major figures as Marek Szurawski and his group 'The Old Bells', Jerzy Rogacki and his band 'The Four Reefs' or Andrzej Mendygrał and his favorite a cappella ensemble, 'The Roaring Twenties'.⁵ Between concerts, in a joyful mood, in any space that—with a wee bit of imagination—could pass for a port tavern, surrounded by trusted shipmates', friends, with whom one would share the secret of the last 'justified deviation', one would make plans for the next cruise: the next expedition into the liquid space of unlimited freedom, of liberty without borders. The sea and the whole maritime tradition—which the Poles have first adapted from maritime nations of the British Isles, Ireland, Brittany, or the USA, and then developed their own, original, formulas⁶—would bring people together. Thus emerged a phenomenon

4. A series published by Wydawnictwo Morskie in Gdańsk; the original title of the series is *Sławni żeglarze [Famous Sailors]*. For the complete list of titles, see, for instance: <<http://www.biblionetka.pl/bookSerie.aspx?id=177>>.

5. The English names of the bands are those in official use; the Polish names, respectively, are: Stare Dzwony, Cztery Refy and Ryczące Dwudziestki. All of them still exist and are active in the Polish and international scene of maritime folk music.

6. To some extent, this kind of 'magical thinking' manifests its power until this day. After 1989, yachting became one of the favorite Polish sports and the popularity of sea songs reached such heights that the proliferation of sea shanty groups and events dedicated to maritime music gave rise to a unique branch of music industry in Poland. Next to traditional songs—whose musical arrangements are often simplistic, and whose lyrics are often sexist and anti-ecological, sometimes brutal, sometimes bawdy or crude, yet whose popularity never abates among

unique in the scale of the world: a heterogeneous subculture bound with the ties of solidarity—a close-knit community of yachtsmen and sea shanty lovers, that, by imparting upon each of its members a modicum of the sense of liberty, would empower everyone—came into existence right under the noses of the Home Security Service of the People’s Republic of Poland. Anchoring the complicated, tangled everyday reality in a distant history—in the days when ‘ships were made of wood and men were made of steel’—members of this group, like the mutineers of old, would seek refuge from the ‘injustice of laws and the cruelty of the authority’ in the endlessness of the inhuman ocean and in the fascinating unfamiliarity of the distant lands: the sailing season over, travel writing, sea romances, adventure novels and sea shanties had to suffice as a necessary antidote to the harsh, hopeless reality of the time. No wonder then, that in contrast to the penetrating greyness of the Poland of the 1980s, the lush vegetation, the mild climate of the South Seas and the warm composition of the happy islanders—mythologized in songs of many nations—became central tropes of the stereotypical Polish rhetoric of an earthly paradise. Hence, sailing,

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the aficionados of maritime culture—contemporary songs of the sea constantly come into existence: new forecandle songs, rock-shanties, pop-shanties and neo-shanties are often performed with the accompaniment of instruments or a cappella. The latter ones usually retain the essential poetics of the traditional maritime work song, but are performed in professionally arranged close harmonies—and even though the genetic continuity is unquestionable, the neo-shanties, written for stage and recorded in professional studios, are a genre of entertainment and not a working tool. Groups such as Banana Boat, Pearls and Rascals, Formacja, or EKT Gdynia continually supplement their ‘traditional’ repertoire with new songs; every year new maritime folk groups are formed and new events dedicated to maritime music are held: in 2009 alone, over 30 cyclical sea shanty festivals would be organized throughout Poland, gathering jointly several hundred thousand lovers of maritime folk. Until the online community life shifted to Facebook, the statistics of the largest Polish portals of maritime music—*Szantymaniak* and *Szanty 24*—would record several thousand unique and returning visitors a month. The phenomenon of the Polish sea shanty, however, continues to develop, albeit its ideological significance has changed: today, to a much greater extent, maritime culture provides a psychological ‘safety valve’ for the generic overworked corporate employee, whose idea of freedom is no longer related to national liberation.

maritime culture and the literature of the sea proved to resonate in unison with the Polish romantic tradition of national liberation. For years, the figure of the nautical voyage and the limitlessness of the open ocean would kindle hope: sea literature would give Poles the strength to take heart in the face of daily adversities, sailing trips would whet the curiosity of the world, the communal listening to sea shanties would strengthen social bonds of those defiant with respect to the stifling system—and thereby, by bringing the popular awareness of oppression to a much sharper focus—all of these factors together would help ferment mutinous sentiments in the no longer ‘captive minds’. This is the time when Lucjan Wolanowski’s extraordinary reportage made it to the Polish bookstores—and this is when the Poles believed its truth without reservations.

Today, the excitement of sailing no longer depends on instances of ‘justified deviation’. Anyone, money and health permitting, can circumnavigate the globe: a rebellion—if it ever happens—tends to take the form of ‘an intimate revolt’.⁷ The Poles sail more often, much further and far better than ever before, albeit the philosophy underlying their nautical adventures has, comprehensibly, evolved. Myself, at those rare instances when time permits me to go to sea, I am no longer drawn to sailing by the magnetic virtue of the more or less imaginary Other worlds: it is the mesmerizing power of the ocean that attracts me. I go sailing to reduce the number and intensity of stimuli that my mind is forced to process every day, to experience the ‘natural stepper’, the rocking and rolling boat, tossed by the seething swell with no land in sight. Sailing, I face ‘organic’, immediate, reality—I regain peace of mind and can hear my own thoughts. I go to sea to clearly see the crevices of the discourse: to map places, where the somatic and the semiotic blend together. And I read Wolanowski as if time never passed.

THE MAGICAL/THE REAL. JOURNEYING

In the past (not so distant at all), in a world in which places reachable today within a few hours were so achingly unattainable that they would—in essence be unreal—the threshold separating the fact and the fiction was drawn by one’s capacity of willing suspension of disbelief. Key words activating the process are often tantamount

7. A term borrowed from Julia Kristeva’s eponymous book.

to the names of particular genres of writing: terms such as ‘travelogue’, ‘diary’, ‘memoir’, ‘journal’, or ‘reportage’, as well as ‘history’ open up the space of trust. Representing the so-called ‘literature of fact’, the thus labelled works of non-fiction function in the realm of readerly reception as media of historical truth. Yet, it is not only in the context of societies exposed to the consequences of prolonged isolation that the thought Friedrich Nietzsche formulated in his *Daybreak* proves applicable:

Facta! Yes, Facta ficta!—A historian has to do, not with what actually happened, but only with events supposed to have happened: for only the latter have *produced an effect*. Likewise only with supposed heroes. His theme, so-called world history, is opinions about supposed actions and their supposed motives, which in turn give rise to further opinions and actions, the reality of which is however at once vaporised again and produces an *effect* only as vapour—a continual generation and pregnancy of phantoms over the impenetrable mist of unfathomable reality. All historians speak of things which have never existed except in imagination. (Nietzsche, 2005: 156)

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The discourse of history—always ‘perspectivist’, always political—like all other narratives lends itself to deconstructions. It is so, because—on the one hand—is does have the power of calling into existence ‘facts’ whose ‘facticity’ is usually an exponent of the credibility of a given interpretation of objects making up material reality, or of source texts. On the other—it is capable of rendering ‘facts’ null and void: it may marginalize, or eliminate them altogether. The first of the two processes finds an excellent illustration in a contemporary debate on the Battle at the Dog Field, described by Vincentius of Cracow in his *Chronica Polonorum*,⁸ which allegedly took place in the fall of 1109 between the forces of the Holy Roman Emperor Heinrich V and the army of the Polish ruler, Boleslaus III the Wry-Mouthed. It is common knowledge that today a major group of historians—revising historiographic canons

8. *Chronica seu originale regum et principum Poloniae*, or *Chronica Polonorum*, is a Latin history of Poland written between 1190 and 1208 by Wincenty Kadłubek (1161–1223), a thirteenth-century Bishop of Cracow and historian of Poland, also known as Vincentius de Cracovia, Vincent Kadlubek, Vincent Kadlubo, Vincent Kadlubko, Vincent of Kraków, or Master Vincentius.

that had dominated the teaching of history in the decades preceding the 1989 political transformations of Poland—present arguments undermining the ‘facticity’ of the alleged military engagement. Myself, however, I have experienced its ‘truth’ in a manner that leaves no doubt as to its ‘reality’. In front of my whole elementary school class, I was failed by the teacher for the lack of knowledge of the date of the fateful battle—and I had to swallow a very real, burning shame of public humiliation: a fact, that even the make-up grade, which saved my GPA at the time, could not erase.

More importantly, however, it seems that even though the reality of the battle referred to above avoids verification, since the skirmish (even if it happened) is historically too remote to allow for any unambiguous confirmation or disproof of its facticity, its presence in the discourse of history has continued to have most tangible consequences. The battle *has happened*, even if it has not: the school transcript featuring my feral failing grade proves it beyond doubt. Interestingly, the reverse mechanism works in an analogous fashion: historiography proves perfectly capable of eliminating inconvenient ‘facts’ by removing them from history. Suffice it to remind the reader how many Poles painfully felt the consequences of overt speaking about the massacre of Polish officers executed by People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), the Soviet secret police, in the village of Katyń in April and May 1940, when the official historiography of the People’s Republic of Poland recorded no such event. In the context of the above, a question that translates the heretofore reflections on ‘facts’ and ‘non-facts’ into the sphere of ethics becomes central: if Poland had not undergone political transformations in 1989 and if the next ten generations of Poles were educated on the basis of the ‘factography’ underlying official history coursebooks, would the Katyń crime be a ‘fact’, a ‘myth’, or perhaps the question itself would no longer make sense in the face of the ‘silence of history’?

The truth of a historical description appears to be a ‘pragmatic truth’: it may only be determined on the basis of a tangible—measurable—experience of the *effects* of the introduction of the facts into the discourse, of their elimination from it, or the impossibility of their acknowledgment (and therefore also the impossibility of their description) due to the shortage of categories allowing

one to distinguish 'facts' *as existing objects or events*, and thus to bring them out of the nondescript space of ineffability and into the space of relational epistemology. Eventually, historical truth is the truth *bona fide*.

Before I pass on to the analysis of the examples from the literature of the sea, it is important to consider the consequences of such thinking about history and historiography in the context of the truth inscribed into the culture of the West as a transcendental value. There is no doubt that truth is axiologized as more valuable than fiction, and therefore text classified as 'literature of fact', or non-fiction, command a greater degree of confidence than *belles lettres*, which, representing fiction, land dangerously close to 'old wives' tales'. Writing his *Rebels of the South Seas*, Lucjan Wolanowski officially presents himself as 'a reporter on track of the mutiny on board of His Majesty's Ship the *Bounty*'—and by thusly declaring his allegiance to the milieu of 'factographers', he is granted the trust of the knowledge-hungry readers demanding access to the distant world as a person 'writing the truth'. Yet, because *facta* are *facta-ficta*, Wolanowski the 'factographer' must first believe such a truth himself—unlike Herman Melville, who is an artist and a man of *belles lettres*. Writing his *Typee* almost a century and a half before, Melville creates a novel: a work of fiction, which (at least in its preliminary concept) makes no claims to expose any historical truth. The above notwithstanding, in both cases—as it seems—it is the sanction of 'truth' that has decided about the formula of the reception of each respective text.

Wolanowski gives his readers a guarantee of the 'truthfulness' of his account (i.e. its accordance with facts) by defining himself as a 'reporter' in the subtitle of the book—which is one of the many causes of his popularity. Conversely, the condition of the popularity of *Typee*—although by Melville's assumption, the text has always belonged to the sphere of fiction—was the official verification of the 'facts' described in the narrative and the external confirmation of the credibility of its author. Historians of American literature, however, are well aware that although while writing *Typee*, Melville drew his inspiration from his own biography (among the more important events in which were the episodes of his desertion from the whaling ship the *Acushnet* and his brief sojourn in the island of Nuku

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Hiva), he would, above all, make liberal use of the freedom granted by the novelistic convention, quite consciously creating a fictitious reality, which was his primary goal. For instance, in order to realize his artistic concept, he 'extended' the time of his stay in Typee-Vai from the historically documented several weeks to the fictitious four months, which in itself is evidence of fabularization. And yet, in the 19th century America whose reading audience would demand the experience of the exciting truth about the far away reality of the paradisiac islands of the South Seas, the 'factographic' value of the book—promisingly subtitled *A Peep at Polynesian Life During a Four Month's Residence in a Valley of the Marquesas*—proved to be a factor of much greater importance than its aesthetic value.

The readers would approach Melville's work with mistrust: *Typee* described events that 'were too extraordinary, and too much at variance with what [was] known of savage life, to be true [...]'.⁹ The shadow of the doubt was only removed by the unexpected emergence of the eyewitness to the events described in the novel: having read the review of the book, Tobias Greene, the other Acushnet deserter and the writer's companion for most of the duration of his stay in Typee-Vai, paid a visit to the *Commercial Advertiser* editors' office in Buffalo in order to ask for information about his friend, whom he had already considered dead. Unaware of how much time Melville really spent in the Marquesas, Greene nonetheless officially vouched for the 'truthfulness' of the novel: his statement proved sufficient for *Typee* to lose its aura of 'incredibility', which resulted in its sudden reconceptualization as a work of non-fiction, a 'factographic' piece of literature. And because Melville had a number of reasons to wish for his book to attain the highest status and reach the widest audience possible, he not only refrained from dismantling the accidentally born myth of himself, but also took care that this myth should become the only version of history in existence. Since then, the fiction of *Typee* enjoys the sanction of the truth, while Melville himself basks in his fame of a travel writer and the author of a 'factographic romance'.

'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend'—observes Maxwell Scott in John Ford's classical western movie *The Man Who*

9. See: Thomas M. Foote, 'How strangely things turn up!', *Commercial Advertiser*, July 1st 1846, quoted in Hershel Parker (1996: 434).

Shot Liberty Valance of 1962. This maxim seems to best summarize the magic of the realism practiced by many, if not all, travel writers: believing in the legend, they first create history and then inscribe themselves in it so deeply that when ‘facts’ permeate from their novels into their biographies, they feel no need to rectify information that might deviate from the truth. This is why for decades Melville’s readership believed that their author indeed spent four months in the Marquesas—and such information is provided as ‘fact’ in many important encyclopaedic publications, including the Polish *Encyklopedia powszechna* of 1864. However, the same cultural mechanism that was responsible for the fact that in order for Melville’s literary text to gain wide readership it had to become reconceived as non-fiction, also opened up the space for Lucjan Wolanowski—a credible ‘reporter’, granted an enormous credit of trust by the audience hungering for the knowledge of the world out of their reach—to believe in the power of a legend. Well aware that under his pen the legend becomes fact, he opens his account of the history of the mutineers of the *Bounty* with an introduction written in a language of a romance, in which the magical tale and factography blend together into an inseparable whole:

The tropical night enveloped the plotter’s secret council on board of the HMS *Bounty* with a shroud of silence. When the Southern Cross paled away in the firmament, Fletcher Christian mustered his comrades. By dawn, the ship was already in their hands. Her commander, William Bligh, and those of the crew still loyal to him were unceremoniously thrown into a lifeboat and abandoned at the mercy of the fates amidst the endless ocean. When the insignificant nutshell of a boat, rocked by the swell, disappeared from their sight, the mutinous seamen resumed their cruise. They did not know the port of their destination, they did not know what was in stock for them. Yet, they dreamt of a far-off place, somewhere over the rainbow, where the wrath of the British justice would not reach them: some island aside from the frequented nautical routes, where they could establish their private paradise already in this world, and where they could live their lives away from the iron discipline and safe from the cruel anger of their captain.

They set sail to weather through One Thousand and One Adventures and make it into the wide pages of History.

This is the account of their vicissitudes, told by the author who, two centuries later, followed in their wake through the isles of Oceania. (Wolanowski 1980: 5)

One Thousand and One Adventures, like *One Thousand and One Nights*: that, in Wolanowski's book, is a true bridge between the silent fact and history. His awareness of the liquid nature of reality and of the uncertain status of historiography which always caves in under the pressures of the Authority, filled with an empathic wish to understand the human condition and the passage of time, renders his history of the *Rebels of the South Seas* a veritable tour de force of its author's philosophical self-consciousness. An experienced journalist, a sensitive observer, an intellectual—Wolanowski seems to be winking at the reader: he knows that if Fletcher Christian and William Bligh had not been a part of the magical imagination already, if the expedition of the *Bounty* had not already become the stuff of the legend—its history would have been unimportant, and the 'fact' itself would fade away like ink on the pages of ancient court records, yellowed with age. It is not historiography that drives Wolanowski to follow in the wake of the mutineers: it is the magic of the legend. And even if a similar 'reportage' could be written on the basis of the testimony of William Bligh and the documentation collected by the Admiralty—an expedition in search of the legend was indispensable, because it made it tangible, it gave it substance. Here it is the legend that calls facts into existence thus creating history which, in turn, legitimizes the legend itself attributing to it the value of truth. A truth all the more trustworthy because it bears the signature of a journalist enjoying the highest esteem among his colleagues and universally loved by his readers, a factographer who in 1980¹⁰ gives the Polish audience a romantic story of men who rebelled against the tyranny and choose the path of freedom, yet a path leading beyond the point of no return. And it does not really matter that in the end the mutineers of the *Bounty*—after a short moment of rest in Tahiti—landed on a hostile, weather-beaten rock of an island at the end of the world, where nearly all of them died, murdering one another. It is inessential that the brief episode

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10. The year of the consequential, tragic events at the Gdańsk shipyard, the year in which Andrzej Wajda symbolically produces *Hamlet* in the legendary Stary Theater in Cracow using the text of the play based on the translation by one of the most important Polish dissidents, Stanisław Barańczak, then at Harvard.

of the mutiny itself would 'expand' in Wolanowski's narrative into many pages, while whole years of the mutineers' miserable lives in the Pitcairn Islands were fit into several paragraphs. What is important is that the people—desperate at the arrogance of the authority (here: the captain, second to God), hardened by the ruthless reality of the navy—finally rebelled against it. They took the risk, even though they realized that in case of failure, the consequences would be unimaginably harsh and that if they chose to take this step, there would be no turning back. This is why their act of defiance became legendary and the rebels themselves gained the status of romantic heroes. The mutiny of the *Bounty*—mythologized, inscribed into a song, made into films, and finally, revised in terms of 'factography' by Wolanowski's rhetorical gesture—ideally meets the 'demand for truth' which the Polish reader under the Martial Law would develop: the reader, who especially then may have dreamt 'of a far-off place, somewhere over the rainbow', where the wrath of the communist justice would not reach them. The mutiny, an act of throwing off the yoke, and then 'some island aside from the frequented nautical routes', where one could establish one's private paradise already in this world, and live one's life away from the arrogant government, away from the 'iron discipline and safe from the cruel anger' of the system.

In this way, through the discourse of Lucjan Wolanowski's 'reportage', which—as the motto overarching the argument of the present article clearly suggests—requires of the reader an act of a willing suspension of disbelief, the sailors and officers of the *Bounty* spectacularly made it into the wide pages of History, including the History of Poland. Such is the condition of the 'truth of history', which the reporter calls into existence for himself and for those willing to believe it.

THE IMAGE/REALITY. A REPORTAGE

In 1790, inspired with the events on the *Bounty*, Robert Dodd thus imagined the traumatic scene of abandoning William Bligh and those loyal to him in an open boat in the open ocean:¹¹

11. Robert Dodd [artist & engraver], *The Mutineers Turning Lt. Bligh and Part of the Officers and Crew Adrift from HMS Bounty, 29 April 1789*. B.B. Evans [publisher], Date: 2 Oct. 1790. National Maritime Museum,



Fletcher Christian, dominating over the whole scene, stands in the stern of the *Bounty*, evidently relaxed, nonchalant in posture. At the same time, the tallest figure among the crew of the boat is William Bligh, standing amidships. Both heroes of the scene look each other straight in the eyes: in the final round of the conflict no one is significant enough or sufficiently strong to dare violate their private dialogic space. The mutinous officer and the dethroned master confront each other in solitude: metaphorically and literally, the duel takes place at a level much higher than that from which other participants of the scene perceive the ongoing events. Having lost his ship, deprived of his power, Bligh—humiliated, wearing only his underclothes—is evidently in distress: the prospect of sailing the waters of the open ocean in an open boat, close to islands inhabited by hostile peoples, is tantamount to a death verdict. Hunched, he makes one last attempt at warning his adversary about the gravity of his crime and explaining the horrible consequences the mutiny will inevitably cause. Gesticulating vigorously, he may still hope to convince the rebellious officer to change his mind: he does not *ask* Christian *for mercy*, he *threatens him*, he negotiates. Christian,

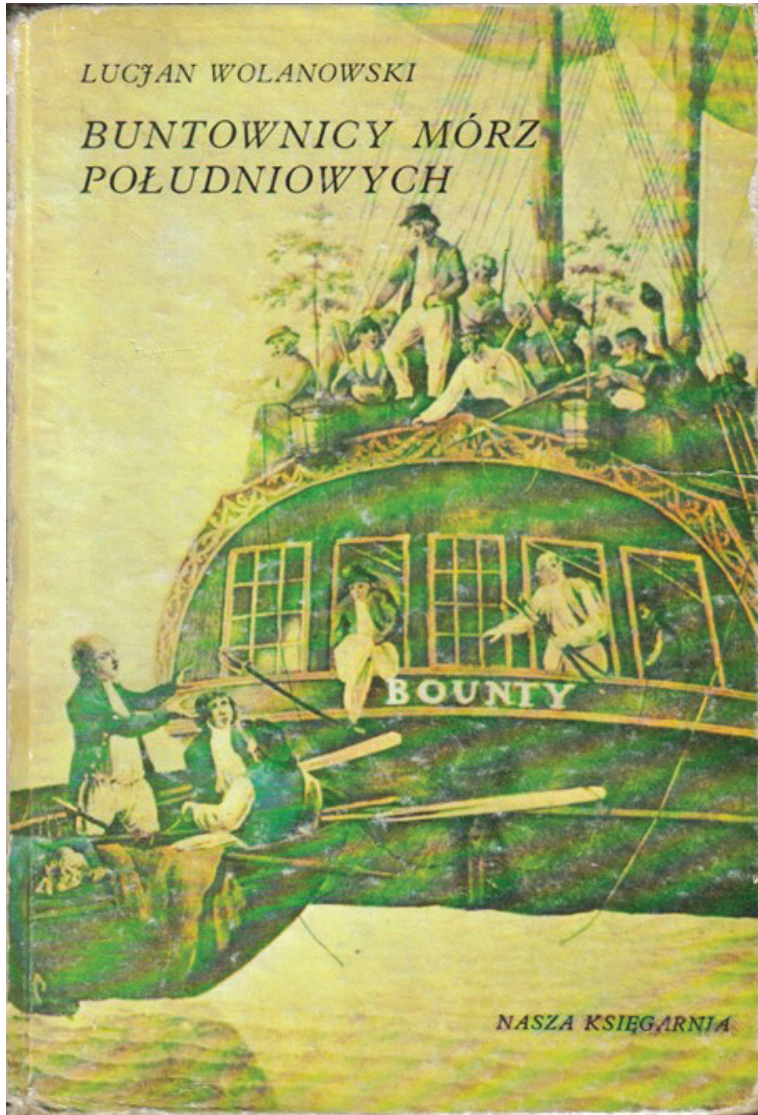
Greenwich, London. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mutiny_HMS_Bounty.jpg>.

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however, remains calm: he has 'the higher ground'—but he is well aware that there is no turning back. In the background, the crew of the *Bounty* are celebrating their victory: they throw their hats in the air, cheering the prospect of the return to the paradise of Tahiti; others, gathering in the stern of the ship, watch the humiliation of their former oppressors with poorly camouflaged satisfaction. Certain that none of the crew of the boat will survive, almost mockingly, they pretend concern, throwing into the boat all the necessary objects: rapiers and cutlasses, pieces of canvass, hats left behind in the turmoil of the struggle. The crew of the boat, however, have already taken up their ordinary duties: mates and petty officers have already taken steps to organize the rhythm of work and get their nutshell of a vessel ready for the journey. The officer sitting in the bows of the boat clearly shows his interlocutor, the doubting sailor, who is in charge on board and with whom his allegiance lies. Others—do not doubt: they await commands. The confrontation of two orders—the order of the power and the order of the independence from the oppressive system—lies at the core of the conflict between the weltanschauungs of the leaders. Each of them has already demonstrated the magical power of their respective rhetorical skills. Bligh has managed to convince a group of his supporters to follow the British law, not to bring shame upon themselves as traitors and not to risk inevitable, cruel punishment—yet to live such a truth, they must risk their lives embarking upon an extremely dangerous voyage. Fletcher Christian has proven most successful in alerting his shipmates to the 'tangible facts': the cruelty and greed of the captain, his inefficiency in managing the ship's operations, squalor, disease and—above all—the lack of prospects for the future upon the ship's return to England. This, juxtaposed with the prospect of the return to the paradise, has evidently allowed Fletcher to present his own supporters with a choice so obvious that the return of William Bligh to the poop deck of the *Bounty* ceased to be an option for anyone to seriously consider. Robert Dodd's pictorial interpretation of the conflict seems to emphasize the dynamics of opposing visions so powerfully that it becomes central to the graphic design of the cover of Wolanowski's book. However, like the reportage itself, its 'facticity' undergoes a rhetorical and visual retouch.

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Dodd's painting makes it to the cover of the *Rebels of the South Seas* in a mirror reflection, although the word 'Bounty'—the name of the ship carved on a board attached to the stern—remains untransformed. After all, it is important that the stern with the name of the ship and the victorious Fletcher Christian dominate the *front* cover of the book, thus, rhetorically, emphasizing the idea underlying the title: were the painting reproduced 'directly', the 'heroism' of the mutiny itself would lose prominence. Without the transforma-

tion, the person dominating the front cover would be the betrayed ship's master, William Bligh, and the ideological effect would be contrary to Wolanowski's 'exhortative' strategy. Instilling rebellious sentiments in readers living in an oppressed country is an 'end that justifies means', especially that the painting is essentially 'the same', even if presented in a mirror reflection and slightly retouched: it allows the reader to see the whole of the 'reality' as postulated by Wolanowski. Irrespective of whether the author had any influence upon the decisions made by graphic designers of the *Rebels of the South Seas*, the whole 'transformative' gesture contributing so chiefly to the building of the reality of the storyworld of the reportage must have proven most efficient: after all, at the time, it was only a very small group of people who would have a chance to confront the image on the cover of the book with Dodd's original painting. The trust Wolanowski enjoyed would probably exclude the possibility of any doubt as to the 'truthfulness' of the image crossing the readers' minds. The 'facto-graphic' narrative, which made it to the bookstores in Poland in a substantial print run, has in itself become a fact: a fact, which Wolanowski sums up thus:

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Yes, this was a 'difficult' story, even if only because I have never had a chance of experiencing this journey along the lines of a proper, logical sequence of events. For instance, the issue of the visas: granted one, I would have to wait to be granted the remaining ones—and in the meantime the one I would already have received would expire, and the whole process would have to be started anew...

The theme itself is well-known in the literature of the English-speaking world, but in Poland it was still unexplored. I wanted to offer a vision of this story not only in the 'archival' perspective, but also to show the traces it left in the Ocean...

I couldn't tell how many years I dedicated to this project, especially bearing in mind the excess of my regular, run-off-the-mill duties in the editorial office.

Was I successful in the realization of my plans? This is a question only the readers can answer.¹²

12. A few months before his death, Wolanowski inscribed the quoted text of his self-commentary into a copy of *Rebels of the South Seas* owned by Mariusz Kubik, whose online archive has been opened to the public. The inscription is dated for September 4th 2005; the place of the inscription has been indicated as 'Warsaw'. Source: *Gazeta Uniwersytecka UŚ* (Special Issue), April 2006: 8.

As opposed to the fantastic 'traces in the ocean', the *Rebels of the South Seas* is not ephemeral: tracing the liquid discourse, Wolanowski's apparent 'reportage' operates with elements of a magical tale and strategies of reversal—enjoying a license usually granted to belles lettres. Simultaneously, it relies upon the authority of 'factography'. The masterful combination of the two introduces a romanticized legend into the sphere of reality, which the legend itself helped shaping. Wolanowski—the 'realist', the 'reporter', the 'journalist'—may have 'chosen to believe' that he was, indeed, writing a reportage. Yet, even if this was not the case, his readers, both in the 1980s and today, continue to willingly suspend their disbelief identifying with the rebel heroes who threw off the yoke of oppression to sail free.

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