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The Loom of the Land

“A Polish classic (...) it reads like the most brilliant modern novel”.

Salman Rushdie in *The Guardian*

What is presented to the reader as the manuscript found in Saragossa begins with a radical gesture of deterritorialisation:

At the time of which I speak, the Count of Olivarez had not yet established new settlements in the lowering mountain range of Sierra Morena, which separates the provinces of Andalusia and La Mancha. They were then only inhabited by smugglers, bandits and some gypsies who were set to murder travellers and eat them: which is the origin of the Spanish proverb “Las gitanas de la Sierra Morena quieren carne de hombres”.

But that was not all. Travellers who ventured into that wild country found themselves assailed, it was said, by countless terrors which would make even the stoutest of hearts tremble. Piteous wailing could be heard above the roar of the torrents and the howling of the storm; travellers were lured from their path by will-of-the-wisps, and invisible hands propelled them towards bottomless abysses.¹

Riding into the Sierra Morena range with Alphonse van Worden, we venture beyond the pale of the Spanish state law enforcing power and into the mountain region of the uncanny, the space of danger and

¹ Jan Potocki, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, trans. Ian Maclean (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 5. Further page numbers from this work are given in parentheses.

initiation. Worden has left his home on his own for the first time in his life, equipped with his father's feudal notions of honour and chivalry as well as some basic truths of the Catholic religion instilled in him by the theologian Inigo Vélez, his teacher. Already at the beginning of the journey the servants desert him and the approaching danger takes the corporeal form: at the mouth of the valley of Los Hermanos two carcasses, plucked at by vultures, hang each from its own gallows. The perfect image of the uncanny – and doubled. Two pillars of Hercules marking where the world (mapped and civilised) ends. Yet it is not all:

Very strange tales were told about the two brothers who had been hanged; they were not said to be ghosts, but it was claimed that at night nameless demons would possess their bodies, which would break free from the gallows and set out to torment the living. (p. 9)

We seem to enter a liminal land which, apart from being the outside of the power of the state, is also beyond the power of reason, at least the familiar classifying reason of common sense. And what happens in the story from now on is a constant assault on Worden's notions of true and false, good and evil, believable and unbelievable, worthiness and unworthiness. The land looms large with its ghosts, spectres, devils, magic powers and mirrors. One is not sure where one is and if it is not some devilish plot to rid one of one's senses, to make one a puppet, a marionette that would speak not as oneself but with somebody else's words. Yet precisely this is what is finally pronounced to have been avoided: Worden wins out by sticking to the simple truths of his upbringing; he overcomes temptations and confusions; he remains one with his own voice. The adversaries admit defeat, the plot is laid out at his feet: the uncanny is displayed as fake.

Or is it?

The text of *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* seems to be of a very particular status which goes far beyond strictly literary matters. It all starts off very conventionally: what we are reading is supposed to be translated for us from Spanish by a Spanish officer in the times of Napoleon's campaign in Spain. Such a gesture is a conventional device in the romances of chivalry (and especially their Spanish variation) in which the text is usually claimed to be a translation from

a manuscript in a foreign language.² Accordingly, Worden has many features of a knight errant: honour is his highest value; his attachment to the king and Catholic religion is boundless; he is fearless and bravely overcomes all obstacles on his way. *The Manuscript* is obviously a parody of the genre (as well as many others: gothic tale, exemplum, travel literature, etc.) but the parodic intention is from the start complicated: the convention that is used is at least double. It is not only the convention of the chivalric romance as such, it is also the convention of the parody of the chivalric romance, as every reader of *Don Quixote de la Mancha* knows: Cervantes's work also pretends to be a translation from Arabic into Spanish and since *Don Quixote* may be treated, at least from a certain angle, as the mother of all Western novels, this parody of the convention in its turn becomes a general convention, if not the founding gesture of all subsequent novels.

Yet if the complications had only had to do with uses of convention and the like, that is to say, with strictly literary matters, the status of the book would not have been much different from other contemporary works. There is, however, something that puts the whole ontological status of the work into question. It seems to be the matter of editorial accident, yet has to do with questions of translation, too.

The Spanish text of the "original" manuscript gets translated, by the Spanish officer, into French and in this language the book is known to have been written. The first and only time some extracts of the early version (the first ten days) were printed anonymously under the author's supervision took place in St. Petersburg in 1804 and the language was French. Later some other extracts were published in German translation, still others in French in Paris. They were not authorised, although there is good possibility that some of those fragments were translated or copied from the original French manuscript (the work achieved some fame in the literary circles first of St. Petersburg – Pushkin is known to be an ardent admirer – and, later, western Europe), yet it is impossible to establish which are

² Aníbal González, "Translation and Genealogy: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*", in *Gabriel García Márquez: New Readings*, Bernard McGuirk, Richard Cardwell, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 79.

“first hand” copies and which are “second hand” ones (copies of copies, copies of copies of copies, etc.). Adding to this confusion is the fact that the complete original French text was never published and after Potocki’s death (in 1815) was lost in the course of the 19th century. The only “complete” version of *The Manuscript* that survives is the Polish translation by Edmund Chojecki (published in Leipzig in 1847), who supposedly translated from the original manuscript by the author. Yet Chojecki’s translation is notoriously inaccurate. Aleksander Brückner, who had compared the Polish translation with the “original” Petersburg text, noticed substantial differences (the Petersburg edition is now lost) and the same can be said if one compares the translation with the fragmentary unauthorised editions published in Paris in the years 1813–1814.³ The work of the editors both contemporary and modern seems only to complicate matters further: the “complete” translation can only be compared to other translations or to the “original” Paris fragments that can be (and in all probability are) the “second hand” copies. Furthermore, by skipping large parts of the text they “smooth out” what they present to the reader into a different and more consistent narrative, which has only vague resemblance to the lost multivocal text. In a sense, they are also translations which transport the original into another idiom, although it all happens within the bounds of the original French.⁴

Taking the above into consideration, can one find a better example of the work that demands asking a fashionable (although already hoary) question of “who is speaking”? Which parts of *The Manuscript* are the author’s? Which are the translators’? Which are the editors’? What is the status of a printing mistake in such a work? What of the misreading of the handwriting? What of the misreading caused by misunderstanding or lack of necessary knowledge (*The*

³ More detailed comparison can be found in: Leszek Kukulski, “Nota wydawnicza”, in Jan Potocki, *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie*, Leszek Kukulski, ed. (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1956), pp. 634–638. All information concerning the editorial history of *The Manuscript* is also taken from this text.

⁴ As an example one may mention *Avadoro, histoire espagnole par M. L. C. J. P.* (Paris, chez M. Gide fils, 1813) which is the extracted story of the Gypsy chief that skips the framing narrative of Worden (and all its branchings) as well as the division into days (L. Kukulski, “Nota wydawnicza...”, p. 631).

Manuscript utilises a large number of specialist discourses: historic, mathematical, philosophical, religious, political, etc.) What of the supposed corrections of such corruptions of the text? Is it possible to avoid this ontological vertigo? The editor and with him the reader end up in reality as unhappy and defeated as Velásquez within the bounds of the novel:

I have tried in vain to concentrate all my attention on the gypsy chief's words but I am unable to discover any coherence whatsoever in them. I do not know who is speaking and who is listening. Sometimes the Marqués de Val Florida is telling the story of his life to his daughter, sometimes it is she who is relating it to the gypsy chief, who is in turn repeating it to us. It is a veritable labyrinth. (p. 316)

By a particular historical sleigh of hand, that is, by the original version and even the "authorised" Petersburg fragment being lost, reality and the novel (an instance of this most mimetic of literary genres) find themselves truly mirroring each other. Yet what kind of mimesis is this if the process enacted in the novel is in reality (the "real word") historically posterior to the act of writing? What mirrors what? And is there anything to mirror here? Can an accidental (?) historical phenomenon have a more general emblematic force for us?

The story of Alphonse van Worden's sojourn in the Sierra Morena does not seem to present us with anything difficult to grasp. What Worden is told towards the end of the novel is that the supernatural events he has been through were merely directed by the Great Sheikh of the Gomelez and that their aim was to convert him to Islam or, at least, to make him impregnate his two female cousins in order to perpetuate the Gomelez line which would otherwise die out with the sheikh. The situation appears to be simple: on the one hand we have the real, rational, mundane world with its pedestrian goals and events, on the other, the fictitious world of the masquerade performed to scare Worden and test his courage as well as lure him into doing certain things. The world of ghosts is fake ("just words"), the world of rational planning is real. Yet if we take a closer look at the narrative, the matters cease to be so straightforward. Is the rational explanation of the supernatural, which reintroduces balance into Worden's shaken image of the world, really the case?

During his peregrinations through the miraculous Sierra Morena, Worden is introduced to many stories in which supernatural forces intervene. He also takes part in certain events which either might be or are explained as intervention of demonic or angelic agents. What is more, he acquaints one of such mythical figures, that is, he encounters and listens to the life story of the Wandering Jew himself. However, during the denouement, the Jew is said to be just an actor, one of the sheikh's people whom the fake cabbalist Uzeda taught the *fable* of the Wandering Jew. Similarly, everything supernatural is explained as fictions that were perpetrated to fool Worden, fictions that are *necessarily fake on the level of the "real" story*, that is the story as seen from the knowing vantage point of the Gomelez, who prepared the whole spectacle. Yet the Wandering Jew unexpectedly turns up within the story of the supposedly real events as related by the sheikh. When the leader of the Gomelez relates the *true* story of the Uzedas through the mouth of Mamoun, the cabbalist and Rebecca's father (the formerly provided story of the Uzedas, as the cabbalist told it to Worden, having been displayed as fictitious), the name of the Wandering Jew, the creature belonging to the realm of *fable*, comes up again as belonging to the last member of the other branch of the family from which the Uzedas spring. With this gesture, the work displays the mirror within itself in which the whole work is reflected: at the moment that the narrative is supposed to tell its *real* story (the story that would take place at a different level than the level of fictions or fake reality of the stories previously told to Worden and arranged for his sake), it recounts its tale as one of the miraculous stories told within the realm of the masquerade. The story mirrors itself as mirrored: language folds upon itself.⁵

The image of the *speculum* is not accidental here. A lot of things happen in mirrors within the narrative, but, most of all, they reflect images of the uncanny (and how can one say if what is reflected is real or fake?). Or, rather, the mirror becomes the very image of the uncanny itself: the invisible (what has no image in the "real" world) does appear in the mirror and, what is more, it is already reflected there as *double* (e.g. the prospective spouses for the Uzedas: Salomon's daughters or Dioscuri). Especially one example seems to be of

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits. 1954–1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), I, pp. 219–220.

particular interest as far as the phenomenon of self-mirroring or doubling of language is concerned – deeply lost within the fabric of the novel we can find the devil contemplating himself in the mirror. Moreover, the mirror is raised to nth power: Worden tells his readers how he was given a book in which Happelius tells the story of Thibaud de la Jacquiere who is told a story by a girl in which the girl contemplates herself in the mirror *as somebody else*⁶; the girl turns out to be an evil spirit and Thibaud, after making love to her (?), wakes up embracing a decomposing corpse. The devil, the woman and the human carcass – a particular trio indeed. (We remember that similar awakenings keep happening – sometimes after a night of passionate love – to the first mirror within our sequence, Alphonse van Worden himself.) Can one find a common denominator within this unholy trinity?

As it has been repeatedly noticed (mostly *by women*), images of women, at least within the context of the West, display a surprising tendency to converge; so, to a substantial degree, we can be justified to speak about the Western image of “the” woman – a paradigmatic figure. Thus, the particular quality of such a creature would be her lack of qualities: her very emptiness. She does not display any stable property; she presents herself as what she is not; she is without a proper “interior”, without a “character” – she can become everyone but is, in herself, no one. The woman does not resemble herself but always already masks herself, it is her very essence: she is a perpetual flight from herself. In this she is a perfect figure for nobody, “no one – in person”.⁷ The woman, therefore, is always already her own double, always somebody else, a faceless image, a mirror mirroring itself – a truly demonic force.

“The cadaver is its own image”, claims Blanchot in “The Two Versions of the Imaginary”, and it is in this sense: the dead body does not resemble anything anymore; it is no longer a human being, a “person” nor is it merely a thing, a heap of meat and bones. Blanchot (recalling Heidegger) likens this strange kind of presence to what stands out in a damaged tool:

⁶ “There was a tall mirror in which I went to look at myself as soon as I had got up. (...) Sometimes I imagined that I saw in the mirror a companion of my own age, who responded to my gestures and shared my feelings”. (p. 116)

⁷ Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, Christopher Fynsk, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 119.

the tool, no longer disappearing in its use, appears. This appearance of the object is that of resemblance and reflection: the object's double, if you will.⁸

Yet a corpse is a strange kind of double, it does not "simply" resemble the living person now deceased.

It no longer entertains any relation with this world, where it still appears, except that of an image, an obscure possibility of a shadow ever present behind the living form which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms it entirely into shadow. The corpse is a reflection becoming master of the life it reflects – absorbing it, identifying substantively with it by moving it from its use value and from its truth value to something incredible – something neutral which there is no getting used to. And if the cadaver is so similar, it is because it is, at a certain moment, similarity par excellence: altogether similarity, and also nothing more. It is the likeness, like to an absolute degree, overwhelming and marvellous. But what is it like? Nothing.⁹

The image the corpse presents us with is of the same structure we have already noticed within the image of the woman and within our narrative. What they have in common is that they double themselves: there is a mirror within the mirroring/mimetic structure, and since it is impossible to establish the place where the original to be reflected seems to rest, what is mirrored in this mirror is only the slip of representation. The mirror always presents us with the copy which is the figure of the process of mirroring itself that might be figured as many things: a spectre, a woman, a corpse – any image that images just itself.

The corpse has yet another feature we have not mentioned yet: although it might seem immobile it does not rest.

No matter how calmly the corpse has been laid out upon its bed for final viewing, it is also everywhere in the room, all over the house. At every instant it can be elsewhere than where it is. It is where we are apart from it, where there is nothing; it is the invading presence, an obscure and vain abundance.¹⁰

⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 258.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

The dead do not stay in place – they break free from the gallows and *wander*. The ceaseless mimetic collapse shatters the possibility of a punctual (both temporal and spatial) place because the stable point on which the original used to rest is always already displaced into the shadow existence of the copy. Therefore the distance between the original and the copy is both infinitely close (the original is displaced into the copy, it is always already the copy) and infinitely distant (copy bears no resemblance to anything outside itself), yet they do not collapse into each other (we would not speak about the mirroring process then). The distance between the Sierra Morena and Puerto Lapiche is substantial, yet the letter and the money waiting there for Worden cover it instantaneously at the cabbalist's bidding (p. 99). The narrative takes place in 1739, yet, by means of the Wandering Jew and magic, it ranges freely through time and space (some experiences at the Venta Quemada last longer than a night and they terminate under the gallows). Within the realm of the uncanny, distance and time appear as something altogether different.

The supernatural and uncanny is, we remember, displayed to Worden as fake narrative, as untrue and imaginary words. The imaginary, however, is the region which does not really allow such simple-hearted distinctions. The word is like a corpse: it resembles itself to the absolute degree; neither is it the object it names nor the separate object that simply *is* itself. The word is like an evil spirit, a vampire: it does not reflect in the mirror because it is always already its own image. The word is death itself: it does not reflect the thing it names but kills it: it sends its substantial being beyond the realm of representation – what we deal with as the word is just a spectre: a negation abstracted from its flesh and blood.¹¹ Yet the word refuses to be buried: it always returns to the world dragging behind it its new spectral body (a word is also an “object”, after all), which, however, does not resemble the body of the thing that was sent into oblivion, and therefore is not that thing's image. “What does it represent, then?” we may ask again. And the answer will be the same: it

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 41–48; Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell *et al.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 322–325. Both authors refer to the Hegel of *Phänomenologie des Geistes* and *Jenenser Realphilosophie, 1803–1804*.

represents nothing; or: it represents itself. The word is its own image, its own inevitable double.

Worden's journey through the land of evil spirits, one may notice, is also the journey that takes him into the domain of words: his time in the Sierra Morena is spent listening to a ceaseless flow of language, sometimes his own. Passing the gallows of Zoto's brothers Alphonse van Worden rides into language.

Worden's three months in the mountains is a nomadic period: he travels around with no particular aim, together with a band of gypsies and a few noblemen he meets on the way. The wandering takes three months of journeying and storytelling – none of these activities is “direct”. Pursuing a straight path, Worden would have reached Madrid before long, so, to delay his arrival, he (with the others) has to keep turning aside and then back, crossing his former track many times and at many different angles. Also the stories told, as we have already noticed, do not follow a coherent, unidirectional course; they divert from the straight path, pursue the side-tracks, return to the characters mentioned formerly by a different storyteller, creating a criss-cross of mutually connected tales that seem to spread ever further in all directions. Sooner or later, each story crosses every other (they will inevitably have a common point: a character, an event, a place, etc.) just as every way across the mountains necessarily crosses the ones previously taken and to be taken. The Sierra Morena is the space within which the paths already covered and to be covered yet create a texture that mirrors itself in the texture of the storytelling. It is the region where the loom of language, its grid, mirrors the network that is the surface of the land or, conversely, where the imagined land of paths and spectres mirrors the work of language. None of the structures can claim precedence – once again we come across two mirrors facing each other.

The Sierra Morena, as we have already noticed, is a region beyond the power of the king and the church. It is the land of vagabonds and gypsies who are known to be criminals (robbers, contrabandists, etc.), of Jews who simulate conversion to Catholicism to avoid being exiled, and of Muslims whose presence is outlawed in Spain. This “native” population, however, seems to live in a kind of symbiosis with the official powers; it is even mentioned that the Holy Inquisition might have some interest in maintaining the

matters the way they are (although the interest is never explained). The gypsies wander constantly about the surface of the earth, the Muslims stay below in the caves of their own making, guarding their secrets, and the Jews seem to be the messengers between these two societies as well as the world of the king. The space within which the narrative takes place appears to be a strange manifestation, within the bounds of the kingdom, of precisely those forces that the kingdom sees as threatening to its very constitution and which, therefore, are sentenced to disappear beyond the *limes* of the domain of the law. In the Sierra Morena, however, the outside seems to pierce through the threadbare fabric of the officially mapped terrain. But what kind of the outside is a Jew, a Muslim or a gypsy in Spain? Isn't this uncanny threat "in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old established in the mind [the land, too] and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression"?¹² Who took into possession the material and cultural heritage symbolised by Averroes, Moses of Leon's *Zohar*, and the popular gypsy culture as exemplified, for instance, in music, dance or cooking? They are all founding stones of the Spanish kingdom, some of its most important sources which had been dissimulated as the invading outside that is evil and hateful. This is the outside that keeps surfacing as the uncanny stories of the suckers on Christian babies' blood, the believers in Mahound, Satan incarnated or the servants of demonic forces. They constitute the other side of the guilt-ridden conscience – the *fabulated* outcome of a very real suffering as exemplified in the fates of those exiled, humiliated and executed. The only reality we are left with is pain, yet great pain is precisely that which cannot be thought as one, as bringing identities into focus. The nature of suffering is that it is always in excess of itself. "Suffering is suffering when one can no longer suffer it, and when, because of this non-power, one cannot cease suffering it". Pain that is "bearable" is just an event of displeasure that happens to somebody, that is, it is recoverable within the bounds of an identity. Suffering happens to no subject – the torment makes one absolutely coextensive with

¹² Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", in *Art and Literature*, Albert Dickson, ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 363–364.

one's own body from which one cannot distance oneself and make oneself into a subjectivity.¹³ The suffering body is no stable ground: it expands and fills the whole universe without ceasing to be *here*, in the place of torture; time ceases to be countable and becomes the indivisible moment, yet this moment *lasts* and it lasts for all infinity. The reality that we encounter in suffering is, therefore, the reality of the outside.

The story of the vanishing point of origin repeats itself here: real persecution is excused as the outcome of a monstrous event (the outside is evil and threatening), but this event is actually a fable invented to make persecution excusable: the origin of suffering is actually *the copy of itself as copy*, always already displaced from the real into fiction, yet drenching reality with blood nevertheless. It turns out that this cadaverous intrication of the uncanny with the real we encounter in the Sierra Morena so openly may not only be the case in the far away mountains where the powers of the king and reason founder.

But what does it have to do with our stories and their nodal point – the Gomelez's secret? What is hidden in the caves of the castle of Cassar Gomelez?

The secret is given out to Worden towards the end of the narrative: it is gold which he is asked to dig every day during his stay at the castle. The discovery of some treasure is, of course, a very conventional ending of all sorts of traditional narratives, the event that enables the protagonist to live happily ever after outside the bounds of the narrative (the "ever after" is never narrated). Yet isn't it only a kind of prosthesis as far as *The Manuscript* is concerned? One might notice a strange discrepancy in the consistence of the Great Sheikh's behaviour. Being the framing narrator, Worden tells his readers that the whole spectacle was staged for the sole purpose of converting him to Islam, which would enable his becoming a new sheikh (he gives us this explanation as the one he was provided with by the Gomelez). The project, however, *fails*. In this light, the sheikh's behaviour in the denouement scene, when Worden is given his rational explanation of what happened to him, seems particularly

¹³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 44–45.

odd: he does not try the final desperate attempt at conversion, he is not depressed by the failure of the plan that devoured the incredible amount of energy and invention, he is *happy as a lark*¹⁴:

Then the sheikh stepped down from his throne and kissed me. My cousins did the same. The dervishes were dismissed and we passed into the second chamber, at the back of which a dinner had been prepared. There were no solemn speeches, no attempts to convert me to Islam. We gaily spent the rest of the night together. (p. 599)

The sheikh behaves as if Worden's conversion was of absolutely no importance to him. The disclosure of the hidden gold seems to be the consequence of his indifference.

There is yet another discrepancy in the framing story of the Gomelez secret: it is given out *twice*. More or less in the middle of the manuscript, on the thirtieth day, Worden enters the caves of Cassar Gomelez and the dervish he encounters there addresses him thus:

Senor Alphonse, I know that your fair cousins have spoken to you of your ancestors and have explained the importance they attached to Cassar Gomelez's secret. Nothing in the world could be more important. (...) The laws which have governed us for centuries require that the secret should only be revealed to men of the blood of the Gomelez, and then only after they have provided convincing proof of their courage and integrity. Equally, it is required that a solemn oath reinforced by the full authority of religious ceremony be sworn. But knowing your character we will be satisfied with your word alone. (pp. 338–339)

Worden swears never to reveal the secret and the dervish opens the *tomb* (the uncanny does not want to leave us alone) into which the hero descends. Nothing is ever said about the necessity to become a Muslim.

So I went down and saw things which I would most happily tell you about if the word I gave did not constitute an insurmountable obstacle to my doing so. (p. 339)

¹⁴ Janusz Ryba, *Motywy podróźnicze w twórczości Jana Potockiego* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1993), p. 148.

Why this doubling? Why is the word of honour referred to if it is broken anyway later in the narrative? Is it the economy of the tale which forces Worden to withhold the information because otherwise the rest of the narrative would be superfluous to the reader? But, also from the point of view of the narrator and hero, if the secret is revealed in the middle of the narrative, the rest of it *is* superfluous: he would not have continued the journey and reacted the way Gomelez's plan wanted him to react if he had known that everything had been especially orchestrated to induce him into performing some actions by making him believe certain "false" events were true; also the gold does not offer any explanation why he continued the journey, wasting his time on the stories that he very often did not even consider interesting, only to come back to the treasure which had already been disclosed to him. Even from the point of view supposedly "external" to the narrative, that of the author, the secret revelation is spurious: Worden's descent down the tomb does not introduce anything that the narrative would need from the point of view of consistency; if these few paragraphs were deleted from the book the consistency of the tale would actually *increase*, rather than decrease. The point we encounter here seems to be of special importance, if it is introduced in defiance of all principles of storytelling and common sense.

But maybe what we have encountered is not one secret but two, or one dissimulated as the other? Maybe the secret of gold is no secret at all, but only a conventional end-point of the narrative made to fit Worden's limited powers of understanding?

It has been repeatedly noticed that the main protagonist of *The Manuscript* is intellectually indolent, a "slow-witted narrator"¹⁵ who is the antithesis of the traveller we usually find in the Enlightenment literature, where the journey is constructed as the didactic one and whose hero wants to amass as much information and knowledge as possible in his travels in order to widen and improve his mind and life. *The Manuscript* obviously descends from such a tradition but, as in the case of its relationship with chivalric romances, the genre is not

¹⁵ J. Ryba, *Motywy...*, p. 146. See also: Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, *Klasycyzm, sentymentalizm, rokoko. Szkice o poglądach literackich polskiego Oświecenia* (Warszawa: PWN, 1975), pp. 404–405; Leszek Kukulski, "Posłowie", in Jan Potocki, *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie*, Leszek Kukulski, ed. (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1965), p. 764.

innocently adopted. Although Worden does not cross large spaces, he is bombarded with contemporary knowledge from a large number of discourses ranging from mathematics to theology. Yet he never learns anything – his only reactions are either boredom or suspicion. While estimating the *intellectual* content of the Wandering Jew's story (the common features of all religions), his recourse is to the notion of *honour*¹⁶:

After the wanderer had gone away, I reflected on what he had said to us, and I thought I detected in it the more or less blatant desire to weaken our religious principles and thereby to abet the plans of those who wanted me to change mine. But I knew very well what course honour prescribed for me in this respect and that however one went about it, it would be impossible to succeed. (p. 365)

As most heroes of didactic travel romances (Candide, Rasselas, etc.), Worden is innocent, but, unlike his models', his innocence verges on stupidity. It is not the refreshing absence of conventional knowledge springing from lack of experience, which, when provided, is able to turn into wisdom which is never blind obedience to the law of the king, the code of honour, or the articles of faith. Such wisdom is, above all, never blind to what makes it limited: the necessary presence of the absence of knowledge, of the blind spot of its own origin within the horizon of knowledge. This blind spot whose position we have been tracing throughout this essay and which we, partly emulating Potocki, figured as a mirror within the narrative.

Worden, riding into the Sierra Morena, indeed begins the adventure of his life which, if understood, would have made him a different man – a man conscious of the split that makes him differ from himself; a man conscious of the fictional basis of his own identity, aware of the ways it defines itself against the outside that is its own product; a man conscious of the dangers constituted by making oneself believe such fictions absolute (as mockingly exemplified in the way his father fictionalised himself into his own diary of duels); a man conscious that the uncanny he had experienced in the Sierra Morena is not the approach of evil and madness, but the very substance of our everyday world that surfaces ceaselessly *dissimulated as* this everyday world itself.

¹⁶ J. Ryba, *Motywy...*, pp. 146–147.

So, maybe there is nothing to disclose and the word of honour is only the cover-up that masks being at a loss for words? Maybe, for Worden, there is no secret whatsoever? Maybe he went down and in the mirror he must have encountered there (even if it was only the mirror of his own mind) he did *not* see anything uncanny? Maybe he just saw himself as usual, the old (although young) familiar face, the face of senor Alphonse van Worden, the captain of Walloon Guards, the subject to his king, his pope and the sovereign master of his dominions? Because what you see depends on the way you look and a thirty day exercise in looking, when it can elicit no other support than courage, is bound to fail, no matter how hard the instructors try. This seems to be the secret, the unwise wisdom of the Gomelez: to see the invisible you do not have to go beyond the visible; the invisible charges at you wherever you look; it is everywhere dissimulated as the visible; not hidden behind it, in its depth, as its secret, but precisely as its surface, lacking all depth and mystery: everything *is*, the intransitive verb, the very obvious itself but in its obviousness inexhaustible.

The failed lesson was the lesson of language because its shady nature puts the uncanny region of mimetic collapse on display most clearly. Yet, in order to learn what it has to teach, one has to part with oneself or open oneself to its strange lack of power: even in the most conventional theories of reading the necessity of abandoning oneself in order to identify with the protagonist is underlined (and who is the protagonist if not a convention, the *impersonal* itself – another figure of the uncanny). This, however, is already suspect within the realm of the self-justifying integral law: here literature always bears the seal of either madness or lie to be cured with a straight-jacket or a whip. In this sense, the already quoted fragment:

After the wanderer had gone away, I reflected on what he had said to us, and I thought I detected in it the more or less blatant desire to weaken our religious principles and thereby to abet the plans of those who wanted me to change mine. (p. 365)

describes, in a paradigmatic way, the position of all literature in the face of the self-identical paternalistic discourse, whose *only* possible answer is the inevitable self-aggrandisement and self-fortification as exemplified in the discourse of honour:

But I knew very well what course honour prescribed for me in this respect and that however one went about it, it would be impossible to succeed. (p. 365)

What we have here is not just Worden's slow-witted reaction but the general ruse of the act of faith which grounds the self-assurance of the lawful reason. And such an act of assurance is provided when it turns out that the prospective sheikh is a man unequal to the task: he is provided with gold – the only value (except honour) he is able to understand – as well as a reasonable story to let him perform a honourable exeunt and make his sleep sound again. Can't we therefore, just for the sake of the final flourish, bring together Worden's two descents into the tomb of the uncanny to retrieve the secret of/and the gold? Can't we say that what happened within the depths was his encounter with himself but in *the mirror of gold*? Then what took place was the casting of a common curse: he saw himself as infinitely beautiful and fell in love with himself.

Sławomir Masłoń

Osnowa złej ziemi

Streszczenie

Autor stara się ukazać, w jaki sposób ontologiczny status *Rękopisu znalezionego w Saragossie*, a raczej kłopoty z jego ustaleniem (tekst oryginalny nie istnieje; to, co za niego uchodzi, jest kompilacją fragmentów w różnych językach) mają znaczenie wykraczające poza ramy tekstologiczne. To, w jaki sposób fragmenty tekstu odbijają się w sobie, usuwając grunt spod nóg interpretatora, znajduje wyraz w problemach głównego bohatera *Rękopisu...* van Wordena, mającego do czynienia z podobnym procesem, jeśli chodzi o konstrukcję rzeczywistości i wielość opowieści, których doświadcza w czasie swej podróży (stanowiącej treść utworu). Świat nie rozpada się tu na podstępą fikcję i prawdziwą realność – ich relacje są znacznie bardziej problematyczne. Spoglądając z innego punktu widzenia niż przedstawiony przez głównego protagonistę i narratora, stwierdzamy, że status zarówno rzeczywistości, jak i opowieści zaprezentowanych w tekście, daleko odbiega od tego, co zostaje nam na koniec podane jako oficjalna interpretacja wydarzeń, która odwołując się do "prawd" nie obowiązujących na obszarze wyjętym spod królewskich i kościelnych praw, pragnie go opisać za pomocą kategorii nie znajdujących tam zastosowania. Teren ów jest również terenem narracji w sensie praktyki literatury.

Stawomir Masłoń

Le canevas de la mauvaise terre

R é s u m é

L'article s'efforce de montrer de quelle manière le statut ontologique de *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, ou plutôt les problèmes qu'on a à l'établir (le texte original n'existe pas; ce qui passe pour l'être est en fait une compilation de fragments dans de différentes langues) possède une signification qui dépasse le cadre textologique. La manière avec laquelle les fragments du texte se reflètent en eux-mêmes en faisant perdre pied au commentateur trouve son expression dans les problèmes du héros principal de *Manuscrit...*, Van Worden, qui a à faire à un processus similaire s'il s'agit de la construction du réel et de la pluralité de récits que celui-là connaît au cours de son voyage (qui constitue le fond de l'ouvrage). Le monde ne se décompose pas ici en une fiction trompeuse et une réalité véridique – leurs relations sont beaucoup plus problématiques. Si l'on adopte un point de vue qui diffère de celui du protagoniste principal et en même temps narrateur, il s'avère que le statut du réel, comme celui des récits présentés dans le texte, est fort différent de ce qui nous est donné à la fin en guise d'interprétation officielle des événements laquelle, en se référant aux „vérités” qui n'ont pas cours dans l'espace qui échappe aux lois royales et ecclésiastiques, s'évertue à le décrire à l'aide des catégories qui n'y sont pas utilisables. Ce terrain est aussi celui de la narration dans le sens de la pratique littéraire.