

There is no escape from *habitus* — about *The Journey* by Stanisław Dygat

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*O bitter is the knowledge that one draws from the voyage!
The monotonous and tiny world, today
Yesterday, tomorrow, always, shows us our reflections,
An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom!*
Charles Baudelaire, *The Journey* (excerpt)¹

‘Internal journey in its metaphorical sense shapes in the form of philosophical activity of the mind and can be conducted with the journey in the external world simultaneously’². *The Journey* by Stanisław Dygat published in 1958 is practically a realization of the thought quoted above. The given text is, as the title suggests, a kind of account of some journey. In more specific words it is the account of a trip to Italy of a fictitious character Henry Szalaj. Nevertheless, it is not a simple report of a tourist who visits and discovers new, unknown places. It is a formally complex prose based on compositional binding which is established by the character’s journey to the South of Europe. The given prose discusses the issue of human existence — *habitus*³ of existence and especially the ways of (not) coping with reality. In *The Journey* S. Dygat creates quite radical idea of human’s condition in the world. During the life time human being is a subject only to a couple of events which determine his or her later existence. As Pierre Bourdieu claims, such events which determine his or her *habitus*. This rule applies of course also to Henry Szalaj the main protagonist of the novel:

1 Baudelaire Ch., *The Journey*, [online], [access: 15.06.2013], <http://www.artofeurope.com/ baudelaire/bau6.html>

2 Kazimierczak M., *W poszukiwaniu praktycznej filozofii podróży*, [in:] „Folia Turistica” Filozofia podróży i turystyki, no. 24–2011, Cracow 2011, p. 24.

3 I understand *Habitus*, after Pierre Bourdieu, as dispositions of the human being to use certain systems of valorization and perceptual thinking. *Habitus* consists of the environment of ideas of a given individual — the system of his/her beliefs, convictions, inclinations etc.

Henryk Szalaj — mój przygodny znajomy z wagonu restauracyjnego — uważał, że siedem zdarzeń między piątym a dwudziestym rokiem życia wywarło decydujący wpływ na formowanie się jego charakteru i usposobienia. [...] Charakter i usposobienie, uformowane już, tworzą siłę vitalną piekielnej mocy, z którą daremnie nieraz usiłuje potykać się nasza bezstronna świadomość oraz to, co przywykliśmy nazywać rozsądkiem⁴.

As Michael Januszkiewicz claims, such concept of human fate (rooting *notabene* from psychoanalysis which was popular among interwar period writers) is not an ‘invention’ of Dygat. It is highly probable that the writer took it from his older colleague Stephen Otwinowski⁵. In his novel *Life Lasts for Four Days* (*Życie trwa cztery dni*, 1936) one of the protagonists evaluates the character of the existence:

Życie ludzkie, autonomiczne życie jednostki, trwa właściwie kilka dni, czasami nawet mniej. Od chwili przebudzenia funkcji wewnętrznych do czasu zajścia „faktu obserwacyjnego”. Potem wszystko powtarza się, w zależności od tego decydującego zjawiska. Owszem, człowiek żyje przez jakiś czas ciągłą obserwacją tych zależności i stosunków po to tylko, aby sprawdzić powtarzalność zjawisk, względnie ich konsekwencji⁶.

The journey of Henry Szalaj to Italy is his ‘journey of life’ literally and metaphorically. The protagonist has dreamt about the trip to the south since childhood — his father kept promising him annually that the next holiday they would be spending abroad with the whole family — however the escapade never came true. When Henry finally decided to participate in the long postponed journey he had mixed feelings about it: the joy and euphoria he felt at the beginning transformed into anxiety, despair and apathy:

Oto, po około trzydziestu pięciu latach, SPEŁNIAŁO SIĘ JEGO MARZENIE: wyjeżdżał za granicę.
Ale było już za późno⁷.

Mówiąc prawdę, Wiedeń rozczarował mnie. Parę godzin, tylko parę godzin w mieście, o którym tyle się marzyło i rozmyślało, musi rozczarować. Marzenia i rozmyślanie nabrzmiały są uczuciem, które trudno odnaleźć na nieznanym i niezrozumiałych ulicach⁸.

4 Dygat S., *The Journey*, Warsaw 1963, p. 20.

5 Januszkiewicz M., *Stanisław Dygat*, Poznań 1999, p. 23.

6 Otwinowski S., *Życie trwa cztery dni*, Cracow 1977, p. 107.

7 Dygat S., op. cit., p. 149.

8 Ibidem, p. 207.

Byłem we Włoszech i fakt ten napelniał mnie zdumieniem i radością. [...] Przyznam, że po pierwszym olśnieniu i zachłyśnięciu się faktem, że jestem we Włoszech zaczęło zakradać się ku mnie jakieś zwątpienie, jakaś niechęć i coś w rodzaju niezbyt silnego i nie bardzo określonego przerażenia. [...] Jeszcze nie zdołałem wchłonąć pierwszych mocnych wrażeń, a już poczęło mnie niepokoić coś w rodzaju rozczarowania. [...] Zacząłem się już przyzwyczajać do tego, że jestem we Włoszech, ale jednocześnie coraz silniej dawał mi się odczuwać niepokój i smutek. Niepokój, że co ja tu właściwie robię, co mi do tego wszystkiego, za późno, już za późno⁹.

In order to understand specific reactions of the protagonist we must embed ourselves into his personality a little bit. However the term 'embed' is not the appropriate word as Henry Szalaj seems not to own any deepness neither spiritual nor emotional. As far as the creation of him is concerned, Dygat pictured a typical model: an office worker, a human being which is deprived of subjectivity, passive, featureless, average, a human being without attributes. As Henry Bereza claims, the protagonist of Dygat 'is a person who is not perceived as romantic in nature in neither positive nor negative way. It is a person in whose mind is no place for heroic deeds, it's a person who lacks independence and freedom'¹⁰.

Henry's fate which is determined, as it was mentioned before, by seven events from his life is marked by despair and this is a double despair. Szalaj is not happy what is more he is not happy at all. It is very rare to find him even pleased about something. He lives in an imperfect relationship which lacks of emotional deepness. Marriage with Victoria created not upon a romantic relation but established only by the use of impulse (deeply regretted by the protagonist at the wedding day) did not give him the feeling of fulfillment. What is more, it is the source of his frustration and evokes the feelings of imprisonment in him:

Henryk stał w oknie i zastanawiał się nad tym, że na dobrą sprawę rzeczywistość uratowała mu życie, że w każdym razie na pewno rości sobie do niego w tej mierze pretensje. To budziło w nim nie tyle uczucie wdzięczności, ile raczej świadomość beznadziejnego uwiązania. [...] „Ale ja jestem skazany na dożywotnie więzienie, nie ma dla mnie ratunku ani ulaskawienia”¹¹.

The protagonist is not a happy father too. The truth is that he loved his son but as the author emphasizes 'only because of official-biological necessity'¹². He never liked his baby. Son reminded him of his younger

9 Ibidem., pp. 208–209.

10 Bereza H., *Stanisław Dygat*, „Zarzewie” 1966, no. 7, p. 5.

11 Dygat S., op. cit., p. 196.

12 Ibidem, p. 193.

brother — an intelligent boy at first and a famous director in the adult life. Henry neither noticed positive aspects of John (brother) nor Adam (son). He perceived his son as a know-it-all youngster, he never approved the maturity of Adam. What is more he got angry when his son behaved in a not childish way. As we can see the feeling of inferiority towards his brother accompanied Henry throughout his all life. It was one of the factors which determined his unsuccessful family relationships.

Professional career of Szalaj is not a source of satisfaction either. He is an average office worker in the ministry ‘...without career visions even clerk’s one’¹³. Situation of Henry is deteriorated by the fact that he is completely aware of what he is or who he had become. He writes in a letter (unsent) to his brother:

Doprawdy, nawet nie wiem, jak, dlaczego i kiedy to się stało, że z młodzieńca pełnego aspiracji, ambicji, wiary i nadziei przemieniłem się w stojącego w oknie urzędnika.

Czy Ty wiesz, co to jest stanie w oknie? [...]

Kto raz zacznie wystawać w oknie z rękoma założonymi z tyłu, jest już chyba ostatecznie zgubiony i pogrzebany. Człowiek stojący w oknie myśli sobie o tym, jak piękna była jego młodość i jak wszystko, czego oczekiwał w życiu i na co liczył, zawiodło go. Myśli bez goryczy i bez złości. Niestety. Gorycz i złość to uczucia popędliwe i aktywne, które dają człowiekowi energię, zmuszają go do czynu i do buntu. Ale człowiek stojący w oknie myśli o swoich zawodach tylko z żalem i smutkiem. Żal i smutek są to uczucia obezwładniające. Każą się zgadzać z tym, co jest, przyznają rezygnacji wręcz policyjną władzę, a nadzieję zmuszają, by odeszła do podziemia i działała w bardzo skrytej konspiracji¹⁴.

As we can see the protagonist is fully aware of gloominess of his position. He knows that he ruined his life somehow, he leaded himself to the situation in which he can only stand in the window and recall years of his youth. Henry has also the feeling that there is no escape from the fate which is destined as his own. Grief and sadness paralyze him, they introduce torpor into his life and not allow him to implement actions vital to improve his situation. The above attitude is accurately described with actions of the protagonist when he meets director Młotkowski in the train:

Niezaprzeczalny fakt, iż przebywałem fizycznie na terenie dworca wiedeńskiego, był nic nie znaczącą i nie prowadzącą do żadnych konsekwencji formalnością. Praktycznie rzecz biorąc, byłem w warszawskim urzędzie,

13 Ibidem, p. 132.

14 Ibidem, p. 133.

całkowicie podporządkowany jego prawom i wymaganiom. Absolutny brak indywidualności dyrektora Młotkowskiego był silniejszy od niezależnej, wiedeńskiej rzeczywistości, zalewał sobą i wypełniał wszystko. Jego wrodzona skłonność do bycia przełożonym była równie silna, jak moja naturalna skłonność do bycia podwładnym. Czulem się jak zahipnotyzowany i gdyby on kazał mi popelnić jakieś świństwo, to byłbym je popelnił¹⁵.

Even during his holiday Henry is not able to run away from his mask of the office worker. He allows himself to be crammed into it — when somebody behaves as a supervisor towards him his natural reaction is submission. His *habitus* is so defined that he cannot or maybe do not want to change it¹⁶.

The attempt of Szalaj's escape from his reality of which the main domains are sadness and apathy is the journey discussed above. That particular journey takes place as already mentioned on two levels — literal and symbolic. The first one has been already described — the protagonist writes to his younger brother, famous film director Giovanni Szalaj to ask him for an invitation to Italy. Of course Giovanni invites Henry who travels through Austria by train, reaches Italy, visits Rome, Napoli and finally reaches Capri. Events which take place on the island make him come back home.

While travelling to Venice (from which he heads for Vienna and then Warsaw) Henry meets the narrator of the novel to whom he confesses in about his life (for that purpose he stays in Venice extra day and a half). We already know that the journey of the protagonist is not a fortunate one. Despite of visiting all the places he was dreaming of since childhood, the trip does not give him pleasure. He is full of anxiety, lonesomeness, his enthusiasm transforms quickly into disappointment. On the level of geographical, real journey nothing special happens (besides from the plot about a prostitute which will be discussed in the following paragraphs).

Much more interesting level of Henry Szalaj's journey is the mental one (as far as existential issue of Dygat's novel is concerned). Let's come back to the beginning of the novel when the first-person narrator meets a certain man — our protagonist in the restaurant car of the train heading to Venice. Both men start a conversation from which the reader can figure out Henry's life and those events which determined his fate as the office worker. It is not an easy relation both on the formal level (poetic aspects of the novel)

15 Ibidem, p. 204.

16 It is worth mentioning in passing that what is described in this paper as a *habitus*, was called differently in literature: M. Januszkiewicz determines the nature of such a structure as a 'mask' (Januszkiewicz M., op. cit p. 21), Zdzisław Skwarczynski sees this structure as a secondary nature relative to Gombrowicz's 'forms' and 'mouth' (Skwarczyński Z., *Stanisław Dygat*, Warszawa 1976, passim).

and existential one. Captions from the journey to Italy mix with the protagonist's memories, thoughts and internal monologues.

Forms of Szalaj's utterance which are especially interesting are two letters being a big part of the novel. The first one written to Giovanni is confessing in its character. The protagonist reveals to his brother the reasons for which their relationships were so poor since childhood. He describes his history and what happened to him during those twenty years of not seeing each other. The most interesting thing is what happened with that letter after writing it. Henry does not send it although he was writing it through the whole week (in conspiracy against his wife).

He does not send the letter with which he wanted to impress Giovanni: 'he did his best not to impress Giovanni but only himself, he wanted to present himself advantageously in his own'¹⁷. He does not send the letter because 'all these confessions which awoken such tender joy now filled him with deep disgust'¹⁸. He does not send it because the truth is that the letter was not intended for Giovanni but himself. All that information was not the appropriate one to give about his successful brother. Finally, Henry 'without regret and with some anger took his impressive manuscript and slowly, deliberately tore it into pieces'¹⁹.

The same mechanism occurred while writing the second letter — to his wife. While being in Napoli Henry devoted almost the whole day to inform Victoria about everything which happened to him from the moment of their farewell to the arriving to the city mentioned above. Big and detailed text shared the fate of the letter 'for' Giovanni. Why? Because the protagonist knew from the very beginning that he would tear it apart and throw away.

Pisał do siebie i tylko dla siebie, dla utwierdzenia swojej niezależności, dla wyznaczenia bezpiecznego dystansu między sobą i światem obcych wydarzeń (a i to przecież tu i ówdzie nakłamał!)²⁰.

With the aid of these unsent letters Szalaj journeyed mentally to the depths of himself and tried to create his image and if it would be possible a little bit changed, improved one. As we can see his actions made him realize that if he made mistakes in the past which determined his fate there is no point in seeking the attempts to redress or even to take a breath because they not only cannot improve his situation but even make it worse. The protagonist came to the conclusion that if 'somebody littered his life, it is much

17 Dygat S., op. cit., p. 139.

18 Ibidem, p. 141.

19 Ibidem.

20 Ibidem, pp. 217–218.

appreciated of him to sit quietly, peacefully and meekly and to surrender to bad fate. It is the maximum of what he can achieve²¹.

Such attitude of Henry towards the reality results in the fact that in his world the journey can be only 'the homeopathic gesture doomed for annihilation. It cannot bring a consolidation of the protagonist around new or gained identity apart from deepening of the experience of inadequateness'²². Although Szalaj makes a gesture which can indicate an attempt of fighting for better fate, slight change of *habitus* he quickly comes to the conclusion that it is not worth it. The liveliness caused by different stimuli such as: new places, change of life rhythm, change of economical status (the protagonist got some 'pocket money' from his brother which allowed him a high range of economical status) quickly transforms into boredom, disorientation and alienation. Henry Szalaj throughout all his life was 'different'. Being in a foreign place far away from home and family intensifies alienation and loneliness. Such feelings stabilize and deepen the awareness of being a loser. So in that case we come back to first couple of sentences of this paragraph in which the vicious circle has its beginning and end.

Henry's suffering (according to M. Januszkiewicz mental masochism²³) has its roots in the desire of being someone else. During the journey the protagonist manages to fulfill that dream partially (but only apparently) — only for a limited amount of time he can break with his external image. He buys new, expensive and elegant clothes and gains a disguise which makes him happy:

To jednak dawało mu zadowolenie. Nie z prymitywnej próżności urzędnika przeglądającego się w lusterku z fotografią narzeczonej po drugiej stronie, ale dlatego, iż widział w tym lustrze osobę pod żadnym względem nie przypominającą jego samego. [...] Henryk nie był ani próżny, ani głupi, i sam fakt, że wyglądał na interesującego cudzoziemca, nie mógłby mu dostarczyć szczególnych emocji. Otuchą napawał go fakt, że nie wyglądał NA SIEBIE. Pozwalało mu to przecież jakoś jednak uciec od siebie na moment. Nie mogąc skryć się ani uciec od siebie w żaden inny sposób, skrywał się przynajmniej w odmienne od własnych szaty i to jakąś dawało mu ulgę²⁴.

The desire of being someone else of the main protagonist is implemented also by the means of adventure with Zita-Patricia on Capri. The given

21 Ibidem, pp. 218–219.

22 Żarowski M., O „dystansie, który dzieli” i „odległości, która łączy”. Egzystencjalny wymiar drogi w myśli Gabriela Marcela i Paula Ricoeura, [in:] „Folia Turistica” Filozofia podróży i turystyki, no. 24–2011, Cracow 2011, p. 38.

23 Januszkiewicz M., op. cit., p. 86.

24 Dygat S., op. cit., p. 221.

plot called by M. Januszkiewicz 'between madonna and a harlot' is one of the most important and foundational plots of S. Dygat's 'private' mythology²⁵.

Pisarz podkreślał w jednym z wywiadów, że nie chodzi mu o jakąś prawdę o kobiecie, nie wierzy, by było rzeczą możliwą opisanie kobiety. [...] Dygat podejmuje raczej problem fenomenu, tj. stosunku do kobiety, wynikającego z pewnej tęsknoty, ale i lęków. [...] Owe poszukiwania prowadzą do dwójakiego rodzaju rezultatów: wyobrażenia kobiety idealnej, a przez to zmiastyfikowanej, zaś z drugiej strony do spotkań z kobietą realną, pozbawioną nimbu świętości, zdegradowaną. Tak oto stają naprzeciw siebie madonna i ladacznica²⁶.

Henry Szalaj meets a personification of the harlot and madonna at the same time — Zita the prostitute who changed into an ideal woman — Patricia just for a while. The protagonist meets her on the street of Napoli. He knows what she is doing for living but he wants to pay her not for her standard services but for some inscenization. He wants Zita to transform into a perfect lady for him in order to live a romantic adventure. At the beginning everything goes as planned, even better (even Henry is surprised by this) — the protagonist does not recognize a prostitute in Patricia while meeting on Capri. He thinks that he met a gorgeous woman (mythical madonna) and falls in not inscenized love. Eventually it comes the time to take off the masks. It happens when it seems to Henry that he managed to change his sad fate of the office worker. The masquerade is over and he once again faces painful reality. The game played by the protagonist in his journey gives him twice an impression of change, escape from the mask of the office worker, escape from *habitus*. However that change is apparent, it relates only to the surface being only an inscenisation which as all inscenisations has to end. When that end happens it shows brutally the reality, the world of authentic events and feelings.

'Journeys will not make you neither better nor wiser'²⁷ — unfortunately that words of Seneca seem to match perfectly the fate of Dygat's protagonist. The message is even more pessimistic due to the fact that according to the experts, what the writer presented in *The Journey* is the condition of the twentieth century man with his crisis of subjectivity on many levels with great accuracy²⁸. He portrayed a man deprived from his freedom, someone who cannot fight against schemes and roles imposed on him and which

25 Januszkiewicz M., op. cit., p. 103, see also: Gutkowska B., *Powieści Stanisława Dygata. Czas i przestrzeń życia i marzenia*, Cracow 1996, *passim*.

26 Ibidem, p. 104.

27 Seneca L.A., *Listy moralne do Lucylusza*, transl. Kornatowski W., Warsaw 1961, p. 554.

28 Januszkiewicz M., op. cit., pp. 57–58.

he is forced to implement as his own²⁹. In other words a man who cannot escape from his *habitus*.

At last what remains is to ask one fickle question (fickle as far as Dygat's works are concerned): 'Are we one hundred percent sure that the condition of human world is so bad and each of us can be Henry Szalaj?'

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29 Ibidem, p. 55.