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The Horizon of Modernity: the Antihero as a Notion in Literary Anthropology.

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Have mercy, he's not a hero. He's just scum!
Tadeusz Różewicz, *The Card Index*

The antihero – initial terminological problems

It continues to be a puzzling matter that the concept of antihero is yet to meet with interest or understanding among Polish literary studies. No such term appears in the most important editions of the *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (written by Michał Głowiński, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, and Janusz Sławiński), and neither can it be found in Stanisław Sierotwiński's *Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Furthermore, the concept of antihero has failed to become the topic of discussions based on literary theory or literary history.¹ How is this possible?

¹ The exceptions are the attempts that I have made in this field. Among the most important are the article “Antybohater: kategoria modernistycznej literatury i antropologii literatury,” in: *Dwudziestowieczność*, eds. M. Dąbrowski, T. Wójcik, Wydział Polonistyki UW, Warszawa 2004, and the introductions offered in the books *Tropami egzystencjalizmu w literaturze polskiej XX wieku. O prozie Aleksandra Wata, Stanisława Dygata i Edwarda Stachury*, “Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne,” Poznań 1998 and *Stanisław Dygat*, Rebis, Poznań 1999; see also the article *Świadomość człowieka z podziemia. O “Notatkach z podziemia” Fiodora Dostojewskiego and the text Pluralizm interpretacyjny, świadomość estetyczna, antybohater, bierność, cierpienie, dialog* – the two last texts in: *Światłocienie świadomości*, ed. P. Orlik, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Instytutu Filozofii UAM, Poznań 2002 (however, these early ideas now seem rather unsatisfactory). It is also worth emphasizing that this concept was used by Hanna Gosk in her book

Perhaps the term “antihero” seems redundant? Where the word does appear, it is usually in a colloquial, intuitive sense, without precision. There is not even agreement as to the spelling (sometimes it is hyphenated, sometimes not²). So let us once again ask the question: a redundant term? One that we can happily disregard? In this essay, I will attempt to show that in fact the opposite is true, and that the lack of this category constitutes a significant gap in Polish literary studies.

To begin with, though, it seems crucial to demonstrate the main problem with the very definition of the concept. The antihero has a dual relationship with two other notions: the hero and the literary character. If we accept Henryk Markiewicz’s distinction between hero and literary character (albeit one that I consider not to be wholly consistent, and therefore not entirely transparent),³ then the concept of hero refers to the structure of a literary work – not only does it show its status (e.g., leading character), but above all it is understood as a function of the plot, a “product” of the work’s plot. The hero means the order of “semes” or distinctive and relational characteristics (for example in reference to other heroes). This way of thinking about the hero is the legacy of convictions formed within the formal-structural movement, which had a significant influence on our understanding of literature. At the same time, however, a marginal place has been taken by reflection on the literary figure understood as – to use Markiewicz’s phrase – an “anthropomimetic object,” meaning possessing specific individual characteristics: psychological, axiological, ideological, etc. The concept of antihero seems to be a simple negation of the hero. Yet it has little to do with a hero understood in a formal-structural context.⁴ In another sense, though, this negative relationship does exist, if we remember, as is clear from the heroic connotation of the very word “hero” [translator’s note: whereas this link is more obvious in English, the Polish (*anty*-)bohater is etymologically distinct from *heros*]. We will inevitably be drawn into axiological and ethical issues (we will return to this matter, as it requires further discussion). The concept of antihero therefore belongs – and this is the second type of relation – to what we understand broadly as a literary figure (a relationship of belonging). The fact that the question of the anthropomimetically and anthropologically (e.g., existentially) oriented category of the literary figure was marginalized for decades is one of the main reasons why the question of the antihero has gone unnoticed in literary theory. This subject is addressed at length by Edward Kasperski, one of few scholars trying to enforce radical changes in the matter, for which, in very general terms, the formal-structural paradigm is responsible:

According to such views, literary characters are firstly a phenomenon that is essentially “beyond language,” shifting and cognitively hard to grasp, playing the role of material,

Wizerunek bohatera. O debiutanckiej prozie polskiej przełomu 1956 roku, Wydawnictwo UW, Warszawa 1992 (see the chapter *Przestrzenie anty-bohatera*).

² Regarding the Polish *antybohater* vs. *anty-bohater*, see H. Gosk *Wizerunek bohatera*.

³ H. Markiewicz *Postać literacka i jej badanie*, *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1981 issue 2. See also: idem *Postać literacka*, in: idem *Wymiary dzieła literackiego*, WL, Kraków-Wrocław 1984.

⁴ I will not discuss this relationship in this essay.

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extratextual representation and story and narrative motivation, and secondly are lacking a diversifying role in artistic literature, and a structuring one in works. They are also, thirdly, insignificant owing to the semiotic and communicational indicators and properties of literature, fourthly, passive in literary culture, without influence on its form and changes, and fifthly, derivative and dependent in terms of meaning and material. Characters in this negative conception are only *derivatives* of extra-literary meanings, and not an independent *literary generator* of them. They do not belong to the “grammar of literature,” and thus studying them does not reveal its structure.⁵

It is therefore necessary to propose a new and original approach to this matter. This proves possible only on the basis of literary anthropology, which has emerged in recent years.⁶

The second important reason is a literary-historical one: Polish literature has been dominated by the national-romantic and social paradigm, exhibiting actions and missions undertaken in the name of higher, supra-individual values. If we then conceive literature as – to put it in the broadest terms – being in the service of the “cause” and nation, or fragmented in “patching up” the ailments of daily social-political life, then the category of antihero seems essentially unnecessary and to explain little. But this is not the case. The search for new languages and interpretations of literature breaking away from the traditional paradigm, everything that we can today call *transferring literature*, brings us towards the exhibition of phenomena that have previously been marginalized: an example might be the reflection on “dark” negative romanticism. The category of antihero turns out to be a necessary interpretational category – especially (although not only) with modernist literature (from the 19th to the mid-20th century). It is hard to do without it not only in the context of the literary of Romanticism or Young Poland, but also the prose, drama and poetry of the 20th century – for instance, the work of Tadeusz Borowski, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Witold Gombrowicz. Anglo-American criticism, meanwhile, stresses the particular role of the antihero in 20th-century popular culture – especially in film (for example Han Solo in *Star Wars*, or the protagonists played by Clint Eastwood in, for example, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and *For a Few Dollars More*). At this point, we should just mention the appearance of the antihero in the context of 1950s Polish film or the Cinema of Moral Concern. It is astonishing, though, that Dobrochna Dabert’s excellent work on this subject makes no reference to the concept.⁷

So, what is an antihero? For now, let us stick to a generalization: an antihero is an outsider – a figure in a particular conflict with the generally accepted norms

⁵ E. Kasperski “Między poetyką i antropologią postaci. Szkic zagadnień,” in: *Postać literacka. Teoria i historia*, ed. E. Kasperski, co-ed. B. Pawłowska-Jądrzyk, Wydawnictwo Dydaktyczne Wydziału Polonistyki UW, Warszawa 1998. 10.

⁶ The most important book on this subject is Edward Kasperski’s *Świat człowieka. Wstęp do antropologii literatury*, Akademia Humanistyczna im. Aleksandra Gieysztora-Aspra-JR, Pułtusk-Warszawa 2006 (in the context of the matters of interest to us see esp. part 3, entitled “Antropologia postaci”).

⁷ See D. Dabert *Kino moralnego niepokoju. Wokół wybranych problemów poetyki i etyki*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2003.

and forms of social life, questioning them and justifying his attitude in a reflective manner. I will argue, though, that the terms “antihero” and “outsider” are not interchangeable. The latter word has extensive sociological and philosophical connotations. I would like to reserve the concept of antihero for the field of art: prose, drama, poetry and film. In this sense an antihero is a category of a scholar of literary or film studies. I would also like it to be understood correctly and clearly: the antihero is not simply a rogue or villain devoid of principles.⁸ Here, we should specify the issue raised earlier: if the antihero is antiheroic, then this heroism is not just negated, but also affirmed. In this case, the lack of heroic traits reveals a longing for heroism; undermining of generally accepted moral principles at the same time shows a longing for these principles. As an aware and self-aware person, the antihero only unveils the illusoriness or fictitiousness of the social order and uncovers its instability, impermanence, and hypocrisy. Indeed, he is a nihilist. But for this very reason he is also a moralist. Perceiving the abstraction of codified ethical systems, he forms a morality based on sensitivity and elementary human feelings. This morality is an expression of the encounter with the variable world without foundations, with the other person as an ephemeral, weak, suffering being.

Yet we are still to overcome the problems with the conception of the term itself. We should emphasize that these result from the vagueness of the scope and content of the expression. The task that lies before us therefore – while preserving this vague content – at the same time specifies the scope of the concept. To refer to Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz,⁹ this therefore means proposing a tentative definition regulating the vagueness of the content and scope of the expression “antihero.” The fact that this word does not appear as a term in Polish literary studies is only due to the fact that we do not have a terminological convention or postulate of the language in which such a convention might apply.

Old literary tradition

One thesis that should be made is that the antihero is a category of literary history, connected in a specific way to modernist culture. But it is important to stress that the figure of the antihero does not come from nowhere: i.e., it possesses a wide literary-historical tradition.

The Russian scholar Valentin Khalizev cites as the first antihero Thersites from Homer’s *Iliad* – the opponent of Achilles and Odysseus, a caricatured and tragicomic character appearing against the aristocratic order in the name of the deprived rights of the commoners.¹⁰ We should point out at this point that the first historical feature of the antihero would have been a carnivalized image. This is something that certain protagonists of ancient or later heroicomic poems and comedies have. We

⁸ And even if we do find such examples, they require particular interpretive justification.

⁹ K. Ajdukiewicz “Definicje,” in: idem *Logika pragmatyczna*, PWN, Warszawa 1972.

¹⁰ В.Е. Евгеньевич Халзиев *Теория литературы*, Высшая школа, Москва 2002. 204.

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perceive the way of thinking and characters of these characters in clear opposition to the model of culture applying in the given historical period.¹¹

As Mikhail Bakhtin tells us, the carnivalesque image of the world placed the emphasis on freedom from the binding, widespread and constant truths and values, favoring the perception of the world as becoming, dynamic, and renewing. It also abandoned the hierarchical nature of relationships in favor of equality.¹² The typical “historical” antiheroes of carnivalesque literature would therefore be Marcolf or Till Eugenspiegel. Particular embodiments in later Polish literature turn out to be such characters as Papkin (Aleksander Fredro’s *The Revenge*) and Zagłoba from Sienkiewicz’s *The Deluge*. Alongside such characters, we must also point to the protagonists of picaresque novels, a genre which emerged in the 16th century. It is important to stress, however, that these are not antiheroes in the modern sense. Although Eulenspiegel-esque or picaresque literature, together with the literary characters created in later eras but still closely related to it, followed an erroneous reality, within its carnivalesque sensitivity it sanctioned serious culture – it did not erase the traditional paradigm of culture, and had nothing to do with nihilism. Moreover, it allowed the world and person to become closer to it, overcome existential fears, and proclaim the joy of existence and affirmation of the world.¹³

The 17th and 18th centuries marked an unequivocal departure from carnivalesque sensitivity, its place taken by seriousness – it was this that from now on harbored pretensions to expressing the truth about human existence.¹⁴ However, Bakhtin believes that the carnivalesque picture of the world was subjected to more profound adaptation – and although its external manifestations disappeared, a new dimension turned out to be the carnivalization of passion, the essence of which was the ambivalence of love and hate, greed and selflessness, desire for power and obsequious humility, comedy and tragedy etc.¹⁵ The literary figure with antiheroic features who proves to be the consequence of this adaptation is the romantic hero – Byron’s Don Juan, Goethe’s Faust, Słowacki’s Kordian, Pechorin from Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*, or Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin. They consistently reject the generally ac-

¹¹ As Krystyna Ruta-Rutkowska writes: “Aristophanes’ comedy negates...pathos, and opposes the belief about the sacred hierarchy of the world. It therefore often creates visions that are almost turned around, based on the idea of another hierarchy... the vision of the world contained in the Aristophanesian comedy...proves to be too subversive, exceeding the norms of ‘good taste.’ Not only does it make the body, cursed as it is sinful and lacking any rationality, the template of understanding of reality, but it also contradicts the order; it mixes reason and instinct, the unofficial and official, the constructive and the ‘corrupting.’” (“Arystofanejskość dramaturgii Mariana Pankowskiego,” in: *Dialog, komparatystyka, literatura. Profesorowi Eugeniuszowi Czuplejewiczowi w czterdziestolecie pracy naukowej i dydaktycznej*, eds. E. Kasperski, D. Ulicka, Oficyna Wydawnicza Aspra-Jr, Warszawa 2002. 429, 434.

¹² M. Bakhtin *Dialog, język, literatura. Głosy o Bachtinie*, eds. E. Czuplejewicz, E. Kasperski, PWN, Warszawa 1983. 148.

¹³ *Ibid.* 169.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 161.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 168.

cepted system of social and/or moral values, lifestyles approved by the traditional paradigm of European culture, and commonly esteemed life and social objectives. In this sense, we can speak of the *first model of the antihero*. This often includes literary characters with unusual, remarkable features, but immodest and rebellious (like Stavrogin from Dostoevsky's *The Demons*). The *second model of antihero*, meanwhile, would be defined by characters who might be characterized as everymen – average, weak, lost, literally deheroized; in the Russian terminology this will be *лишний человек* (like Oblomov, the titular protagonist of Goncharev's novel). The antihero is a reverse idealist; ideals, the spiritual world, are what he desires, but he is aware of the futility of this desire. The world of ideals does not exist. In this sense, we can call Faust, Werther or Kordian antiheroes. But for example Tristan, Robin Hood, Rob Roy or Janosik are not antiheroes. Although they challenge the officially recognized values system, as Hanna Gosk notes, they are heroes “in the eyes of the socially or politically deprived classes.”¹⁶

Without doubt, the second antiheroic tradition, alongside the carnivalesque – and no less important – is that which can be derived from the world of fables, fairy tales and heroic epics, in which, as Metlinsky notes,¹⁷ we can observe a demonic element. At first, this constitutes a challenge for the actions of the protagonists, who wage a tireless battle with it. From the 17th and 18th centuries, though, when the departure from carnivalesque sensitivity was ever more obvious, and the joy of existence was being supplanted by the awareness of the gravity of the world and existence, demonism sometimes affected the literary characters themselves (from the legendary motif of selling one's soul to the human-devilish character of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*). Again, then, romanticism proved to be an important turning point, in which an antiheroic feature is found in the metaphoric unconscious and dark side of the soul (for example the motif of twin or doppelgänger). We can point here to a whole host of characters: Don Juan and Manfred (Byron), Mandeville and St. Leon (Godwin), Faust (Goethe), Pechorin (Lermontov); as well as, in Polish literature, Konrad Wallenrod (Mickiewicz), Kordian (Słowacki) or Count Henry (Kraśiński) – albeit with various obvious caveats. The antiheroic demonicity, the particular kind of “duplicity,” is expressed here as various forms of dilemmas, struggles of good and evil powers, also in the context of romantic irony distancing itself from the world. On each occasion, they testify to the individual's isolation, solitude, and suffering.

If we continue to follow the Romantic path, we notice that certainly Don Juan, Pechorin, and Onegin gravitate towards the category of antihero. There is no doubt that, while some reservations are inevitable if we try to reconcile the concept of antihero with the Romantic position, such a connection does exist. The antihero is a disappointed idealist, experiencing being as a passage, transience, or impermanence. The bridge between the romantic and the modernist antihero (the latter

¹⁶ H. Gosk *Wizerunek bohatera*. 115.

¹⁷ Е.М. Мелтинский *О литературных архетипах*, Москва 1994.

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in the narrow sense of modernism) may prove to be the category of dandyism, the revolt towards mass culture and fixed social order, at the same time with the lack of any ideal, a new values system. Dandyism seems to connect the aforementioned romantic heroes and lead towards an antihero – a modernist dandy – the Duke des Esseintes from Huysmans' *À Rebours* and Durtal from his *Là-bas*, Lord Henry and Dorian Gray from Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and Lafcadio from Gide's *The Vatican Cellars*.

The antihero – the man from Russia

When discussing the tradition of the antihero, we must not forget the Russian context, if only for the fact that the very word “antihero” (*antybohater*) has a Russian origin (*антимероид*). This was first used in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864), the novel in which the basic model of this figure was formed (“a novel needs a hero, and all the traits for an antihero are expressly gathered together here”¹⁸). At this point we should stress that, even if it is possible to distinguish several sub-types of this form, as the Russian *Literary Encyclopaedia of Terms and Concepts* notes, they all appear in their most radical form in Dostoevsky's works.¹⁹ *Notes from the Underground* is a novel with a unique philosophical and literary status.²⁰ The (anti)hero of this work has a particular way of questioning both the entire European philosophical tradition, focused on a rational view of the world, and literary tradition, connected to a dominant type of literary figure. What do I have in mind? The fundamental literary “supertype,” to use Mikhail Bakhtin's concept, meaning a “timeless,” universal literary character, who was always an adventurous and heroic person: full of faith in his own abilities, reason and will, a person with initiative, one of action, able to achieve the goals he set himself.²¹ This traditional literary hero strives for fame, plays an active role in changes in life (whether his own or in the world): he serves society, the nation, and even himself.²² Dostoevsky's man from “under the floor,” meanwhile (to use a more appropriate – here at least – translation of the Russian word *подполье*) portrays the breakdown of the traditional world shown through faith in the existence of a permanent and good human nature, in which the passionate is wholly subordinated to the unchanging laws of reason and will. For no such laws exist. The nameless hero constantly demonstrates the unbridgeable gulf between human inclinations and consciousness, desires and reality, intentions, and

¹⁸ F. Dostoevsky *Notes from the Underground*, trans. Constance Garnett, Dover Publications, New York 1992, p. 90. See Ф. Достоевский *Затиски из подполья*, Санкт-Петербург 2006. 181: „в романе надо героя, а тут нарочно собраны все черты для антигероя”.

¹⁹ *Литературная Энциклопедия Терминов и Понятий*, ред. А.Н. Николютин, Москва 2003.

²⁰ For more on this subject: L. Shestov *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, trans. Bernard Martin and Spencer Roberts, Ohio University Press, Athens, OH 1969;

M. Januszkiewicz *Świadomość człowieka z podziemia*,

²¹ See М. Бахтин *Автор и герой. К философским основам гуманитарных наук*, Санкт-Петербург 2000.

²² See *Теория литературы*, ред. Н.Д. Тamarin, Москва 2004, vol. 1. 248-263.

the consequences of actions. He is an everyman, but one understood in a specific way, as he can hardly be denied the right to exceptionality: this is an absurd, passive being, immersed in the passion of (self-)reflection, lacking in any specific identity, and basking in his own suffering. This is not the way that Dostoevsky's antihero works. The first part of the book does not even have a story: it is filled with nothing but contemplations of a philosophical, introspective nature. The whole idea and sense of doing anything is questioned by the hero. Identity proves to be something fluid and lacking in any foundations. The "whence?" and "whereto?" of human nature are inconceivable. What remains? A heightened awareness. But this is just the source of suffering that cannot be removed. Freedom? Yes, but it is unrestricted by the laws of reason and moral norms. The freedom of whim (it was Dostoevsky, not Gide, who was behind the conception of *acte gratuit* – the disinterested deed understood as a whim). But it is here that *true life* lies – not in the mathematical constructions of "pure reason."

We know that *Notes from the Underground* had one more part, blocked by the Russian censor (for still unexplained reasons). This part has been lost. But we also know that in it Dostoevsky planned a change in his hero, who was to find meaning in life in the Christian faith. Paradoxically, the censor's interference was the cause of an unprecedented character in literature (in spite of the wide tradition we are discussing). Among the works modeled on this character were those of Céline (*Journey to the End of Night* 1932), Kafka, Hesse (*Steppenwolf* 1927), Sartre (*Nausea* 1938, *Roads to Freedom* 1945-1949), Camus (*The Outsider* 1942, *The Fall* 1956), Musil (*Man without Qualities* 1930-1943), Mann (Hans Castorp from *The Magic Mountain* 1924), Pessoa (*Book of Disquiet* 1982), Kundera (*The Joke* 1965, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* 1984), Yerofeyev (*Moscow-Petushki* 1973), or finally today's golden boy Michel Houellebecq (e.g. *Atomized* 1998 and *Platform* 2001). In Polish literature, this character gets a look-in, for instance in the works of Generation '56 (e.g., Ireneusz Iredyński, Marek Hłasko), but also in Tadeusz Borowski, Witold Gombrowicz and, especially, Tadeusz Różewicz (e.g., *The Card Index*). We should also without doubt mention the fact that the expression "antihero" appears in the title of Kornel Filipowicz's *Diaries of an Antihero* (1961).

It is extremely interesting that the antihero, so characteristic of modern culture, was really born in Russia. It is hard not to notice that this character often referred to the nihilist movement in Russia that emerged in the 1840s and took shape the next decade (during the rule of Alexander II). At the same time, though, the Russian antihero goes beyond this historical context. It would be legitimate to assume that the type described as *лишний человек*, "superfluous man,"²³ predates the radical heroes associated with historical Russian nihilism, and therefore has a prototypal

²³ Among such "superfluous" people we could mention heroes including Eugene Onegin (Pushkin), Pechorin (Lermontov's *A Hero of our Time*), Rudin (from Turgenev's novel of the same name), Oblomov (Goncharov's titular protagonist), Leonid Stepanovich (Avdotyia Glinka's *Leonid Stepanovich and Ludmila Sergeyevna*), and Valerian Pustovtsev (V.I. Askochensky's *Asmodeus of our Time*).

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aspect.²⁴ Before the works of Dostoevsky (who created various forms of antiheroes – for example Stavrogin from *The Demons*, Raskolnikoff from *Crime and Punishment* etc.), or Pushkin (*Eugene Onegin*), came Gogol, but later came Chekhov... A particular place in this tradition is without doubt held by Oblomov, the eponymous protagonist of Ivan Goncharov's 1859 novel, which features in the echelons of Russian classics. Oblomov, a nobleman of no small intelligence, displays singular passivity, apathy in life – incapable of action, a weak, superfluous man. It is also worth stressing, though, that at the same time this protagonist is a bearer of the Russian soul, contrasted in the novel with the organized and pragmatic German soul (the character of Stoltz).

Towards an anthropology of literature

Why should the category of antihero as such be connected with modernity? Because this was when thinking about the world and person was redefined. We cannot ignore the fundamental directions of changes taking place in the fields of economics and politics. The paths in economics are marked by functional rationality, thrift, usefulness, and efficiency. Man becomes a reified being. In the field of politics, the guiding principle turns out to be equality – democratization and liberalization of life grow incessantly. The state is a structure that disregards values other than those mentioned here. Ossified bourgeois morality is discredited by modernist culture – especially people of art. The sense of the value of the individual “I” grows (these processes are presented masterfully by Daniel Bell in his *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*²⁵). However, the glorification of subjectivity alongside the simultaneous rejection of authorities, or of global interpretations of meaning, and the veneration of freedom understood as negative freedom, bring about a growth in atomization and strengthen processes of alienation. Scientific achievements (e.g., Einstein's theory of relativity, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, psychoanalysis), interpreted in the spirit of the humanities, only substantiate these processes. Europe had previously proposed a certain clear philosophy of the person as a rational being (the legacy of Antiquity) and a free one (the legacy of Christianity), as well as the philosophy of the self-assured subject (Descartes). Rationality designated the sphere of human obligations and objectives (for instance the quest for the truth, ethics based on rationality). Yet freedom was never conceived as lawlessness, but always represented a field of limitation – on the one hand to rationality, and on the other to the fact that it was not an intrinsic value, but directed towards (objective) good (I am free insofar as I follow some higher supra-individual good, such as God, the common good etc.). In the societal sense, the individual constitutes only part of the whole, and its good, as secondary, is dependent on the good of this whole. Liberalism gradually turned these ideas around (John Stuart Mill). However, if we are looking for a turning point in European thought, and to point to metaphors of

²⁴ For more on this subject see Urszula Kryśka “Postać nihilisty w literaturze rosyjskiej XIX wieku,” in: *Postać literacka*.

²⁵ D. Bell *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Books, New York 1976.

the end of this paradigm, we might mention three philosophers to whom we will refer briefly. Schopenhauer called into doubt the axiom that existence is absolutely better than non-existence. In essence, he expressed the old doubts of the Gnostics. He questioned, and pointed to the absurdity of, the traditional justifications of evil and suffering in the world. Given his warnings, St. Augustine's *De natura boni* can only preach to the converted.²⁶ Nietzsche denied the Platonic-Christian moral conception, deducing the consequences of the death of God, announced in his *The Gay Science*. He put forward the postulate of revaluing of values, and marked the path of individualistic ethics. Freud, marginalizing the role of the sphere of the consciousness, questioned faith in human rationality and freedom, and, equally, importantly, criticized one of the main axioms of Western culture – the identity and identical nature of the subject.

It is in this kind of world that the antihero finds a place. And in this world, even if it is not without value, there are no longer any pointers to any global vision of meaning, since it is starting to disintegrate. However, an ambiguous and extremely uneasy ethic of authenticity begins to emerge.²⁷

As far as literary anthropology is concerned, I am interested in the particular literary features of the literary character. This means pointing to the key constitutive attributes of the antihero. To begin with, though, we must note that these features form an inextricable and dynamic whole, and I therefore only distinguish them because of the need to introduce some order.

I. Consciousness

Consciousness is a fundamental attribute of every antihero. By “consciousness” we understand the attitude which I can reflectively use to make the world and external reality manifest, and on the other hand, become aware of my own existence. The consciousness is what we must constantly use to testify to acts of self-knowledge, because otherwise we will experience the loss of consciousness and unconscious, non-reflective life. The issue of consciousness is implied both in Western tradition by the conviction of the identicalness of the human, the author of which is Socrates, who in Plato's *The Apology* utters the characteristic words: “But *I have been always*

²⁶ The conviction that existence, regardless of its form, is an absolute good, represents an axiom of Western metaphysics starting from Parmenides. It is also justified by the Bible in the First Epistle to Timothy (4, 4), which reads: “For everything created by God is good.” See also St. Augustine's dialogues, in which the author observes that “everything is rightly praised for the very fact that it exists, for from the very fact that it exists, it is good” (*The Problem of Free Choice*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ 1955, p. 161. Thomas Aquinas, meanwhile, says “Every being, as being, is good. For all being, as being, has actuality and is in some way perfect; since every act implies some sort of perfection,” *Summa Theologiae, Part I (Prima Pars)*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Benziger Brothers, New York 1947.

²⁷ C. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1992.

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the same in all my actions, public as well as private” [emphasis added].²⁸ Western metaphysics followed this path further (Descartes, Kant, Husserl).²⁹ However, the case of the antihero is aware of the decidedly differently conceived problem of the consciousness.

The antihero’s consciousness possesses three dimensions. The first, the *ontological-existential*, points to the being-in-the-world organized around consciousness and dependent on its laws. This is the conscious life in which a person becomes aware of the futility of his situation. He perceives his life as marked by illness, otherness, decomposition. The world appears absurd to him – its essence is decided by dissidence, both inner conflict and conflict with reality itself. It is no coincidence that, in all the moments in *The Demons* when he allows Stavrogin to enter the fray, Dostoevsky considers the problem of his consciousness. A madman, or a person conscious of his acts? This issue is settled by the protagonist himself, at the end of his dramatic statement: “By putting in this trifle here, I want to prove with certainty to what degree of clarity I was in possession of my mental faculties.”³⁰

This dimension of consciousness also comes to the fore, for example, in the protagonists of Kafka’s *The Trial* and *Metamorphosis*, Sartre’s *Nausea* and *Roads to Freedom*, and Camus’s *The Outsider* and *The Fall*. Only conscious life becomes life in the actual sense; it is this that gives value to humanity. Consciousness, therefore, also has an *axiological-ethical* aspect, and has a positive value, in contrast to the people and the world which lack this ability. On the other hand, though, when viewed through the prism of the consequences to which it leads in our daily and personal lives, it can only be described as an illness. Consciousness allows the protagonist to determine the boundaries of what is both right and wrong, both good and bad, both important and unimportant. In the sphere of interpersonal relations it leads towards aggression, distance, and indifference. The hero of Sartre’s *Nausea* says “I live alone, entirely alone. I never speak to anyone, never; I receive nothing, I give nothing.”³¹ This consciousness is at once a consciousness of guilt – albeit of a particular kind: “guilt without guilt.”³²

Finally, the *epistemological* dimension of consciousness. This allows us to search for the truth about the world in ourselves. But whereas it is easy to access the truth about the world insofar as it takes on the form of objective truth, the truth about ourselves is one that cannot be put into conceptual language. The important paradox here is that, as a subject, I cannot objectify myself. Therefore, whenever the protagonist of *Notes from the Underground* tries to make some judgment of himself, he always abandons it, perceiving falsehood, a lack of clear-cut answer, and his inability to describe himself.

²⁸ Plato, *The Apology*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, CreateSpace 2011. 11.

²⁹ On this subject see E. Kasperski, *Świat człowieka...* (here esp. part 2, “Antropologia podmiotu”).

³⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Demons: A Novel in Three Parts*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky Vintage Classics, New York 1995. 70.

³¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander, New Directions, New York 1959. 6.

³² I discuss the issues of “guilt without guilt” at further length in the article “Świadomość człowieka z podziemia,” 73-74.

The history of every antihero is the history of his consciousness. This is presented in two different ways: first, from the beginning of the book the protagonist is conscious from the outset (this is the case, for example, in Sartre's *Nausea* and Hesse's *Steppenwolf*); second, though, it is usually the case that the protagonist's consciousness is the expression of a process of gradual increase in self-knowledge (e.g., in Kafka's *The Trial* or *Metamorphosis*) leading to a negative epiphany, a sudden idea with which the changed way of perceiving reality is linked. When the mechanisms of denial stop working, the hero becomes aware of the "essence of things" and his own dramatic situation. This is what happens, for instance, with Albert Camus's characters. Meursault slowly starts to see things clearly in prison during his trial (*The Outsider*), while in *The Fall* Clamence does not immediately become aware of the position he adopted at the time of his suicide leap. The drama increases, finally coming to an explosive head ("By gradual degrees I saw more clearly..." says Camus's hero.

2. Passivity

The consequence of consciousness is passivity. This is a particular, reversed, example of contemplative life, or *bios theoretikos*. It is reversed, because whereas the contemplator turns towards God or some other spiritual dimension (e.g., art), the antihero retreats from life and becomes immersed in contemplation of himself; while for Aristotle *bios theoretikos* was the only form of existence that could lead to happiness, the antihero is led away from the potential to achieve happiness. For the hero of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, the thinking person is an inactive one.³³ "You know the direct, legitimate fruit of consciousness is inertia, that is, conscious sitting-with-the-hands-folded... I repeat, I repeat with emphasis: all 'direct' persons and men of action are active just because they are stupid and limited."³⁴ The hero of one of the most renowned Polish films of recent years, also a book by Marek Koterski, *Day of the Wacko*, begins his monologue as follows:

I'm scared to get up in the morning. I'm scared of the day. Every day.

In the morning I'm scared to open my eyes.

...What about looking out from under the quilt?... I have no idea what to do with the coming day. And when I finally decide to pull the quilt from my face I...- I can't go further! I'm supposed to have some duties - work, home, children, but - nothing: as if it doesn't matter in the slightest if I get up or don't, if I do something or not; I have this mental block. I don't want to again have something to do with wasting another day.³⁵

³³ F. Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*. 9.

³⁴ Ibid. 15-16. And later, on page 17: "Oh, gentlemen, do you know, perhaps I consider myself an intelligent man, only because all my life I have been able neither to begin nor to finish anything. Granted I am a babbler, a harmless vexatious babbler, like all of us. But what is to be done if the direct and sole vocation of every intelligent man is babble, that is, the intentional pouring of water through a sieve?"

³⁵ M. Koterski *Dzień Swira i inne monologi Adasia Mioduczyńskiego na jedną lub więcej osób oraz rozmowa z Autorem "Achilles na piętnastym piętrze wieżowca,"* Świat Literacki, Izabelin 2002. 193.

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Let us just add: the behavior of the antiheroes of Goncharev (*Oblomov*), Różewicz (*The Card Index*) and Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*) is no different.

3. Indeterminacy

This is the next fundamental attribute of every antihero. He cannot become “anything” – as the protagonist of *Notes from the Underground* says, “it is only the fool who becomes anything.”³⁶ The indeterminate nature of the antihero can be described in two dimensions: that of *identity* and that of *ethicality*. At this point we cannot speak of any permanent substantial identity. Traditional beliefs in this respect have been questioned. We are thinking of beliefs instilled not only by philosophy and the Christian religion, but also by poetry. Writing about characters, Aristotle emphasized the sphere of their actions through which the character (*ethos*) and ways of thinking (*dianoia*) of the heroes are externalized.³⁷ As we have seen, however, the antihero is passive. From a traditional philosophical point of view, the human “I” was treated as a unity, something permanent and unchanging. In fact, though, since the mid-19th century, naturalism and the natural sciences have led to a gradual rejection of the permanent in favor of variability, development, and dynamism. As well as the protagonist of *Notes from the Underground*, this problem is clearly shown by August Strindberg. In *The Son of a Servant* and the foreword to *Miss Julie*, the writer uses the phrase “without character” to describe his characters. Lech Sokół points here to inspirations from the psychology of Théodule Ribot and Henry Maudsley.³⁸ According to Strindberg, the “I” is not unity, but multiplicity, and the place of the unshakable character is taken by inner contradictions and division, variability, and lack of consistency. Identity, then, is not what is given, but what is searched for, formed and squandered. In the 20th century, such thinking about the person can be found, for example, in Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* (1927): the division of the personality is not dualistic in character – rather, the personality is multiplied. The book’s main character, Harry Haller, has to integrate this multiplicity, but there is no unambiguous positive solution.

Without doubt one of the most important novels demonstrating the indeterminacy of the protagonist, and also one of the most important novels of the 20th century, is Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*. One of the characters describes the main hero, Ulrich, as follows:

He is gifted, strong-willed, open-minded, fearless, tenacious, dashing, circumspect — why quibble, suppose we grant him all those qualities — yet he has none of them!...When he is angry, something in him laughs. When he is sad, he is up to something. When something moves him, he turns against it. He’ll always see a good side to every bad action...nothing

³⁶ F. Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, 5.

³⁷ On this subject cf. M. Januszkiewicz *O pojęciu mimesis w Poetyce. Arystotelesia*, in: idem *Wokoło hermeneutyki literackiej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2007.

³⁸ L. Sokół *Wstęp* [Introduction to:] A. Strindberg *Wybór nowel* [Selected short stories], trans. Z. Łanowski, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław-Kraków 1985. XV.

is, to him, what it is: everything is subject to change, in flux, part of a whole, of an infinite number of wholes presumably adding up to a super-whole that, however, he knows nothing about. So every answer he gives is only a partial answer, every feeling an opinion, and he never cares what something is, only “how” it is — some extraneous seasoning that somehow goes along with it, that’s what interests him.³⁹

Walter sums up his description of his friend as follows: “Such a man is not really a human being!”⁴⁰

Indeterminacy also translates into ethical issues. The antihero is neither a good nor a bad person. This is extremely important, as this issue compels us to distinguish the category of antihero from villains – as this points to some sort of determinacy. The fact that the boundary between the two seems fluid is another matter.

The first writer to use the phrase “without character,” though, was not Strindberg, but Dostoevsky in *Notes from the Underground*. His protagonist states, “I did not know how to become anything; neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect...] an intelligent man... must and morally ought to be pre-eminently a *characterless creature*” [emphasis added].⁴¹

4. Suffering

Every antihero suffers. But in the literature we are interested in, suffering loses all the reasons that justified it in previous tradition. It has no higher sense, and cannot be explained; it is absurd, stupid and unnecessary. Important, though, is the antihero’s attitude towards suffering. The antihero wants to suffer. It would be legitimate to speak of a certain mental masochism here. We can also find such an attitude towards suffering in Dostoevsky’s prose – in *Notes from the Underground* or *The Demons*. Stavrogin says, “Every extremely shameful immeasurably humiliating, mean, and, above all, ridiculous position I have happened to get into in my life has always aroused in me, along with boundless wrath, an unbelievable pleasure.”⁴² We find a similar situation in the work of Franz Kafka, or among the heroes of Stanisław Dygat, Tadeusz Różewicz, or Samuel Beckett.

It is very easy to explain the suffering of antiheroes by their neurotic condition. Yet explanations made on a psychological basis are misplaced. Much more significant is the fact that suffering becomes the measure of consciousness. I only exist in that

³⁹ F. Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*. 5.

⁴⁰ Musil, Robert, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike, Vintage, New York 1996. 63-64.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 64. See also Ф. Достоевский *Записки из подполья*, 45: „Я не только злым, но даже и ничем не сумел сделаться: ни злым, ни добрым, ни подлецом, ни чувственным, ни героем, ни насекомым. [...] умный человек [...] должен и нравственно обязан быть существом по преимуществу безхарактерным; человек же с характером, деятель, – существом по преимуществу ограниченным”.

⁴² F. Dostoevsky, *The Demons*. 692.

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I suffer. Suffering therefore implies conscious life. If suffering is chosen voluntarily, then a person is his or her own master – so goes the Pascalian idea.⁴³

5. Freedom

The antihero's freedom has a paradoxical dimension. For the protagonist of *Notes from the Underground*, then, it appears as opposition to the mathematization of human existence, to the simple truth that two times two is four. The human, even when given the optimal conditions for living, even when assured happiness, breaks free from every system, progressing in his own way – through whim or ingratitude. The reasons are immaterial. It was Dostoevsky (and not, as some people believe, André Gide) who coined the concept of *acte gratuit*, the disinterested deed, but understood in a negative sense: i.e., a concept expressing the conviction that the basis of human conduct is a whim.⁴⁴

Dostoevsky's heroes (Stavrogin and Kirillov from *The Demons*, Raskolnikoff from *Crime and Punishment*, and the protagonist of *Notes from the Underground*) are in favor of irrational freedom: the asset of this is that it appears as a sign of the height of life, a blow delivered to the abstraction of reason. Yet the paradox of this freedom is in the fact that – lacking foundations, rational, or moral limitations – it becomes a destructive force. Being free cannot be a guarantee of happiness, but rather is a fatal gift that one must accept, but knows not what to do with.

Franz Kafka's take on the issue is no different. In *The Trial*, the most important metaphor of freedom seems to be an interjected tale (which the writer also declared independently) which tells of a man attempting to cross the gate of the Law. But he does not gain the permission of the doorkeeper. His requests, and even attempts to bribe the doorkeeper, are to no avail. When the man grows old and dies, he learns that the entry was designated for him alone. Yet it is now too late. A superficial interpretation might suggest that Kafka's man is a predetermined being lacking the capacity to move, lacking freedom. The opposite is true, though. His hero is absolutely free. His freedom cannot be measured by the guard's behavior. This character's role – regardless of how we treat him – as a symbol of an institution, society, family, or as the prevailing morality and law – is to forbid entry. Yet the hero's task is to realize his freedom, in spite of the prohibition.

Why the term is necessary

This essay has attempted to systematize and categorize the literary character known as the antihero. My considerations of this category have led along two tracks:

⁴³ Cf. B. Pascal *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer, Penguin Classics, London 1995. 106.

⁴⁴ This is clearly emphasized by Ryszard Przybylski in his book *Dostojewski i "przekłete problemy."* *Od "Biednych ludzi" do "Zbrodni i kary."* PIW, Warszawa 1964. 197. See also my article "W kręgu antybohatera: acte gratuit – czyn nieumotywowany," *Polonistyka* 2006 no. 10.

through literary history and literary anthropology. In the former aspect I have attempted to prove that the antihero is a concept that is inextricably linked with modernist – in a wide sense – culture, embroiled in the historical processes and philosophical thinking characteristic of the last decades of the 19th century and the 20th century. Earlier eras only anticipated this type of literary character, but were unable to realize it. In terms of literary anthropology incorporated in books, meanwhile, the antihero proves to be a dynamic construction which can be characterized by a certain type of sensitivity embodied by a specific type of consciousness, passivity, indeterminacy, suffering, and freedom.

Since the issue of the antihero as a specific literary character has to date not been adequately covered, it is important to think about a set of other matters arising from this question. It might be worth considering this character in the context of poetics or ontology as well as axiology. Naturally, we might also ask whether the antihero is a strictly modernist figure, or also postmodernist. If we take the postmodern context into account, would this character not require a separate description and a separate axiology?

There is, I feel, no doubting the absolute need to consider the concept of antihero in our studies of literature. For several reasons: 1) it represents an important “cognitive” category in reference to modern literature, one which allows us to view the issues of the poetics and ethics of modern literature in a new way; 2) the concept of antihero is an interpretive one (or a “descriptive one,” as an old-school scholar might put it), allowing literature to be interpreted in many facets (literary history, anthropological, existential, axiological-ethical, etc.); 3) we can deepen our critical consideration of the tradition of European culture, its philosophy, the conception of the person etc.; 4) finally, the person represented by the antihero in literature can provide a bridge to understanding postmodern culture (and its sensitivity: driving reason and open to feelings) and the postmodern person. But this question would require a separate discussion.

The antihero is a type of literary character characteristic of the art of modernism and postmodernism, lacking the attributes that traditionally go with a hero (such as action, courage, will etc.). As the Russian literary encyclopaedia tells us:

The appearance of a character of this type...signals a crisis of personality and the loss of spiritual indicators in the conditions of cooling off and prosaic vulgarization of the world. Constant fluctuations between self-destruction and cynicism, despair and apathy, tragedy and farce, leads to diversities of almost mutually exclusive forms of these characters, but not breaking with the “man from underground” as its starting model, in which good is always powerless, and destructive force (“Мне не дают... Я не могу быть... добрым!”).⁴⁵

Zhivolupova adds:

If the hero is above all an activist whose activities erase the boundaries of personal interests and the goals associated with achieving one's own prosperity, then the antihero has a cer-

⁴⁵ *Литературная...*, 36.

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tain way of concentrating on his own personality [...] The spiritual comfort of the own “I” prevails, as an objective, over every activity aimed at the good of the world.⁴⁶

We would therefore be justified in concluding that the antihero proves to be a great challenge not only for literary studies or school education. It is a challenge with which we too, as people involved in the dynamics and crises of European culture, are faced.

Translation: Benjamin Koschalka

⁴⁶ Н.В. Жыволупова *Внутренняя форма покаянного письма в структуре исповеди антигероя Достоевского*, in: *Достоевский и мировая культура*, „Альманах” номер 10, Москва 1998. 99-100.