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PASSING BY LAYERS OF MEMORY

In my paper, I will focus on Mariusz Wilk's reportage from the Solovetsky Islands, where the Polish journalist and author lived from shortly after his first visit in 1995 until 2015, when he was denied the right to live in Russia for several years (Śmieja n.p.).

As the phrase "passing by" in the title of this paper indicates, I would like to argue that Wilk, in his Solovetsky reportage, makes us aware of the passing of time and of issues of duration and maintenance. I will read his text as a reflection on the different kinds and "media" of memory, such as conversations, written texts, photographs, but also stones, memorials and the landscape itself. One remarkable feature of Wilk's text is the combination of a variety of genres (or, at least, his borrowing from them). As I will argue, this, if you like, poly-modal style underlines the reflection on memory and its – equally poly-modal – qualities, which also includes the medium of written language. In the first part of my paper, I will briefly describe the styles of Wilk's reportage, before I proceed to the media of memory which appear in the text. Among others, I will use Martin Pollack's notion of "contaminated landscapes" for a view of nature as a medium of memory. Finally, I will bring together the poly-modality of both memory and writing.

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WILK'S POLY-MODAL STYLE IN *THE WHITE SEA WOLF*

The original title *Wilczy Notes*, i.e. Wilk's notebook, or – as the Polish pun has it – “a wolf's notebook”, makes clear that they are documentary texts of some kind, whilst at the same time hinting at a certain sketchiness, since Wilk does not use the common genre term “reportaż” (Frukacz). And, indeed, although we can say of a good portion of the book that the chapters belong straightforwardly to the genre of reportage, other paragraphs might make us more hesitant of such an attribution of genre. For example, in some chapters each paragraph is dated (though incompletely, for one year is missing), so the notebook seems more like a diary; this is the case for the following chapters: VI 7, VII 1, VIII 6, X 2&4, XI 2. This generic ambiguity is increased by the use of epigraphs. Each of the 13 chapters is preceded by a quotation, and most of them are taken from nineteenth-century French travelogues. Epigraphs of this kind are far more typical for fiction than for reportage. As I will argue later, this inclination towards fiction also has an impact on how the text becomes a source of memory. In the third chapter, the reporter invites the reader to follow him on a walk around the island, and in the second, he describes his mode of presentation as a Baedeker-like way of giving a panoramic overview of the whole archipelago. Apart from the reference to the travel guide, the similarity of his notes to a travelogue is enhanced due to the tradition of the genre: we know of invitations to go on an imaginary journey (in which we follow the narrated paths and events in our imagination) from Romantic travel writings.¹ In such an entanglement of imagination and real landscapes and places, the room for remembrance becomes extremely broad: memory is by no means restricted to what is immediately given.

¹ Such an invitation to go on an imagined journey took its most elaborate form in Juliusz Słowacki's *Podróż do Ziemi Świętej z Neapolu* (Journey to the Holy Land from Naples, written in 1838-1839), which echoes as much the poet's own travels as those of previous travellers to the Holy Land and their travelogues. Kalinowska discusses the text and the various pretexts in detail; Dąbrowski draws attention to the communicative level and its dialogical character. I do not mean to suggest that Wilk opens up this intertextual link to this particular travelogue (closer in terms of content to Wilk's Solvestky texts is Słowacki's poem *Anhelli*, which Słowacki wrote at the end of the poet's journey to Egypt, with its vision of travelling through imaginary Siberia and visiting different prisoners). In any case, Romantic travelogues expanded their generic frame by adding a component of imaginary travels. This was continued (though with a very different emphasis) by e.g. Maria Konopnicka in her *Wrażenia z podróży* (Impressions from a Journey, 1882).

In the first edition of his work, Wilk included several photographs by Tomasz Kizny (a different selection appeared in the English translation), so that the *Wilczy Notes* can be also viewed as a photo report.² However, the photographs added in the English translation lack captions. In the Polish first edition, where the photographer's name and the captions are included, they are rather loosely connected with the paragraphs which they separate. In the English edition, they appear in the book in the form of two collections, which makes it impossible to relate them to particular situations or places. The photographer remains anonymous and the pictures do not have captions. This under-determination of what they show undermines the very notion of a documentary report. As Susan Sontag and many others have argued, a photograph becomes a document only once it is stated (in captions or the like) what exactly it shows. Therefore, by not including any photographs in the second edition of *Wilczy Notes*, the author reinforced the effects of the generic ambiguity of his work.

In the two chapters having the form of a travel guide, Wilk describes the beauty of the landscape and richness of the flora and fauna; he also introduces his readers to the history of the archipelago and the monastery. As he points out, his goal is to let the islands, so to speak, grow into the text:

And perhaps it is right here, where the sea meets the table – where elements meet objects – that it is easier to understand my intention to try and grasp reality, give it form, imprint it in words. (III 2, p. 19)³

I być może właśnie tutaj, na granicy morza i stołu – żywiołu i rzeczy – łatwiej pojąć mój zamiar: próbę uchwycenia rzeczywistości, nadania jej kształtu, odcisnięcia w słowach. (26)

In another paragraph, the text is said to have risen out of the landscape and its history. Closely related to this, Wilk mentions that his aim was to “experience” Russia in all its vastness and extremely wide range of phenomena, i.e. to “recapitulate” the way of his journeys (I 3, p. 8). Thus, the text is saturated with Wilk's experiences of Russia – and these (at least in principle)

² The photographs are collected in Kizny, in the section on Solovetsky, cf. 36-113, for the photographs see 84ff. In Kizny's catalogue, the collection of photographs includes various portraits of people, whose short biographies are collected together with some annotations about their families. For a discussion of the status of illustrations in travelogues, see the collection of articles by Vlasta/Englert.

³ In the same paragraph, there is a similar blurring of writing and landscape, when Wilk has the ink on the paper meet the traces of skies outside.

can be brought to life by the reader. In this sense, we all share the *lieux de mémoire*⁴ (Pierre Nora) of the Solovetsky Islands.⁵

One chapter is dedicated to the writer's friend Tonia, who committed suicide in Arkhangelsk (cf. XI 2). Apart from his personal memories of Tonia, the speaker intertwines them with then-current events, such as the day when her body was brought to the island, the preparation for the funeral, the digging of the grave, and finally the funeral service. Some of the funeral speeches are retold by means of paraphrase, others quoted directly. A "celebration of mournful orality," with its passing, momentary characteristics, finds its way into the text.

Different genres, i.e. travel guides, travel writing, diary, "oral literature" and fiction, reportage and photo documentary, relate to memory in different ways. The diary is usually an intimate notebook of personal reflections and memories, and its primary target reader is the author himself (as is obvious in Wilk's text, with his casual mention of people who are not necessarily introduced to other possible readers). Travel guides, in contrast, assemble the attractions and places of interest in the respective country or region, providing information about their past. Photographs, as another medium of memory, are reliable (due to their indexicality), but to some degree casual (due to the chance moment when they were taken). As far as memory is concerned, an invitation to pursue imaginary trips seems interesting, I think. It is an attempt to, so to say, stabilise and actualise what was imagined, as if it were possible to make it present or to revive the experience which has been designed in the text. If you like, it is an attempt to put something unstable (i.e. passing experiences) into something that endures. Finally, with the intertextual references of the epigraphs, and of other texts as well, e.g. Kapuściński's *Imperium*,⁶ there is also a "text memory," as Renate Lachmann

⁴ Etienne François defines *lieu de mémoire* in his introduction to the German translation of the Pierre Nora volume *Erinnerungsorte Frankreichs* as follows: "These sites of memory are 'crystallization points of collective memory and identity,' which can be material or immaterial. They are long-living in the sense that they outlast generations; they are characterized by a 'surplus of symbolic and emotional dimension.' They are embedded into the social, cultural and political spheres, and their semantization and connotations change in correspondence to the way in which the perception, appropriation, use and transmission change" (quoted by François and Schulze, 17f., note 8).

⁵ The Russian North in Polish literature in a broader sense is discussed by Marszałek; see Frank for a study on the Solovki text (by understanding 'text' in Todorov's sense of the word).

⁶ Wilk contrasts his own approach to the former Soviet Union, the "kitchen perspective" (145), with that of Ryszard Kapuściński in *Imperium* and his notion of a bird's eye view, cf. 77.

has argued.⁷ In her most recent work on the Gulag, Renate Lachmann (*Lager und Literatur: Zeugnisse des GULAG*) turns to one particular part of the textual memory, namely survivors' texts. She emphasises the importance of understanding "how the victims succeeded in finding ways of translating the sorrow they experienced into legible texts" (26).⁸ In her book, Lachmann aims to analyse the survivors' ways of expression without losing focus on what they narrate.⁹ Wilk refers to Shalamov's book while writing about Gulag survivors in his Solovetsky reportage. Another explicit textual memory are the texts by Skoptsy. More prominent as sources of memory for the Gulag are other media, as I will discuss in the next section, turning to those which appear in Wilk's work. Wilk's written text, due to its poly-modal style, has layers of different modes of memory.

THE MEDIA OF MEMORY ON THE SOLOVETSKY ISLANDS

On the Solovetsky Islands, we find very different types of memorials or phenomena, which invite us to remember – mostly architecture and script:

For centuries they [i.e. the Solovetsky Islands] have been the heart of the Orthodox Church and a powerful focus of Russian statehood in the North. Here, in the Solovetsky monastery, in its cells for monks and prisoners, the history of Russia has been written over hundreds of years: on the parchment of chronicles and the pages of history (...). Here, new technologies were tested and new social utopias put into practice. (...) And it is here, in the *skit* of Anzer, that the schism of the Russian Orthodox Church (...) had its beginnings. To this day, old Orthodox believers make a pilgrimage to Solovki as Muslims do to Mecca. Finally, it is here, in the dungeons of the monastery, that the oldest political prison in Rus was situated and then, after the

⁷ Lachmann's *Gedächtnis* discusses the commemorating function of literature; in her most recent work on the Gulag, *Lager*, she emphasises the importance of reading texts such as Shalamov's *Kolymskoe rassakzy* as both a testimony and a literary work; for Gulag literature, see also Thun-Hohenstein.

⁸ In many survivors' texts, as Lachmann points out, the problem of finding a suitable language for their writing is discussed explicitly; the contributions to the volume by Fischer von Weikerstahl and Thaidigsmann bring a lot of new material; in addition, they discuss the relationship between reality and fiction; see also Toker.

⁹ More broadly, Lachmann reflects in this study on cultural memory, on how to deal with the knowledge about the Gulag. By pointing to the Soviet tradition of glorification in the collective memory and by underlining the fact that, so far, Russia has not developed a public discourse on the Gulag, although its memory as such does exist (cf. 47), she also draws attention to different politics of memory.

Revolution, SLON (Solovetsky Lager Osobovo Naznachenia), the first labour camp in the Soviet Union, emerged – the testing ground for the GULAG. (I 4, p. 9)

Bo Wyspy Sołowieckie to (...) od wieków centrum prawosławia i potężny ośrodek ruskiej państwowości na Północy. Tu, w sołowieckim klasztorze, w jego celach i kazamatach, zapisywano dzieje Rosji całymi stuleciami: na pergaminach latopisów i na kartach historii (...). Tutaj wypróbowywano nowinki techniczne i wcielano w życie nowe utopie społeczne (...). To tutaj, w skicie Anzerze, wykuł się raskoł ruskiej cerkwi prawosławnej (...). Do dziś na Sołowki pielgrzymują staroobrzędowcy, jak muzułmanie do Mekki. Tu wreszcie, w lochach klasztornych, mieściła się najstarsza tiumna polityczna na Rusi, potem zaś, po Rewolucji, powstał SŁON, pierwszy łagier w Sowieckim Sojuszu – poligon GULAG-u. (14f.)

Therefore, at least along with the archive material, the surviving buildings serve as sources of memory. In the abovementioned coalescing of landscape and writing, Wilk also turns nature into a source of memory, almost like a palimpsest. Furthermore, the landscape becomes a painting, on which

successive generations of ‘splash artists’ have diligently immortalized their god, smearing on thick layers of paint (...), and then some acid, toxic, and corrosive rain has washed it off – although not entirely – leaving fragments of a drawing, vestiges of colour. (III 2, p. 19f.)

landszaft na Północy przypomina deskę, na której kolejne pokolenia „bogomazów” pracowicie uwieczniały swojego boga, paćkając grubo farbą (...), a potem jakiś kwaśny deszcz, jadowity i żrący, zmył wszystko, acz niedokładnie, zostawiając szczątki rysunku, resztki koloru. (26, 28)

In this quote, the rain that washes off the layers of a painted landscape and “art” or human workshop can barely be disentangled.

But also, in a different sense, the main source of memory is the landscape, although it is mostly hiding the violent and terrible history of the place.

Ever since the beginnings of the SLON, there have been strict discipline punishment cells there. Nobody survived a long sentence on Sekirna. Corpses were buried on the slopes, among blueberry bushes. To this day, the blueberries which grow there are exquisite. (IV 4, p. 39)

Od początku istnienia SŁON-a, na górze był karcer srogiego reżymu. Dłuższych kar na Siekirnej nie przeżywano. Trupy grzebano na zboczach, w jagodnikach. Jagody do dzisiaj tu rosną dorodne. (48)

This layer of memory can be associated with Martin Pollack’s notion of “contaminated landscapes” (*Kontaminierte Landschaften*):

(...) which became places, at which killing in their thousands was carried out, was committed in the hidden, removed from the view of the surroundings, often in strict secrecy. And after the massacre, the perpetrators undertook everything conceivable in order to wipe out the traces. (20)

Pollack emphasises the fact that by committing mass murder in secret “contaminated landscapes” – in contrast to officially acknowledged places of memory – those responsible aimed to have them disappear from the “map” of the collective memory. With this concept, then, Pollack demands both to acknowledge the existence of such crimes, and attempts to reveal the names and biographies of those who were killed at these respective places. As becomes clear from Wilk’s reportage (as much as from Pollack’s own explanations of the term), finding the locations of the mass graves is impossible without using other sources, i.e. newspapers, plans of the camps (which by far surpassed the brick buildings of the monastery, and included a whole range of camp areas with shacks, usually surrounded by barbed wire), reports by eye-witnesses and the like. Such sources are also necessary to reveal the identities of the victims. Yurii Dmitriev’s work (mostly concerning Karelia) is probably the best-known example of such a project. His imprisonment shows how dangerous the turn to contaminated landscapes can be.¹⁰ By bringing in the notion of contaminated landscapes, Pollack points to something which has been central to memory studies, namely forgetting. With this notion, he thus makes available a tool for writing against one source of this deliberate forgetting.

However, on the Solovetsky Islands, there is also public memory of the Gulag. Tonia, whom Wilk came to know on his first visit to Solovki, made it public. While recalling their first walk around the island, Wilk tells about Tonia’s efforts to remember the SLON. Apart from writing for the newspaper, she had an idea for the memorial of the unknown *zeka*:

A little further along – brushwood and the grave of an unknown *zeka*. It was Tonya’s idea; a mound of stone, raised by the hands of the children and grandchildren of SLON victims. Our ancestors, their spirits, live on in such stones the same as they do in words. The Saams knew this ... (XI 3, p. 124)

Nieco dalej – chaszczce i grób nieznanego zeka. To był Toni pomysł: kopczyk z kamieni, usypany rękami dzieci i wnuków ofiar SŁON-a. W kamieniach bowiem, jak w słowach, żyją nasi przodkowie, ich duchy. Już Saamowie to wiedzieli... (137f.)

¹⁰ For details about Yurii Dmitriev and his discovery of the site of mass executions in Karelia, where inmates from Solovki were murdered, see Ekaterina Makhotina, “Sandarmoch”. dekodeer. www.dekoder.org/de/gnose/sandarmoch-gedenkstaette-terror-zwangsarbeit (accessed 20 May 2021).

So, first, there is a memorial, and, second, it is built of stones; that is to say, it is built of a material which itself is memory-laden. Stones, as something that has “always” been present (at least during all of the events described), have “witnessed” human history. When Wilk in his reportage describes these two layers of memory, the text becomes another source of memory. In order to name such a practice of including non-textual art works in a text, Dubravka Oraić-Tolić coined the term “vertical intertextuality”, which – like “horizontal intertextuality”, i.e. the quoting of texts and creating intertextual links by other means – builds the “quoted” into the text, thus turning the text into a further source of memory (cf. Lachmann, *Gedächtnis*).

Again, as with the different genres of literature, the media of memory vary widely in their explicitness, accessibility and endurance. While the brick buildings are long-lasting and fairly stable, of the wooden shacks only accidental remnants are left. From oral sources, of course, hardly anything remains, unless it is re-told (with all the unreliability of spoken memory, which, in addition, might be prone to inaccuracy more than other media). Nature comes in two very different ways. On the one hand, there are the contaminated landscapes, which will keep the remains for an extremely long time. However, they are hidden, and unless we know of the graves, the landscape will not bring its memory to light. On the other hand, there are the stones of the grave of the unknown *zeka*. As has already been pointed out, apart from its explicit function of a memorial, the stones themselves (regardless of their place within the memorial) are said – and here we may add authors such as the German Romantic poet Novalis or the Russian acmeist Osip Mandel’shtam – to keep memories for ages (in the very literal sense).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Wilk draws a picture of the Solovetsky Islands by means of different genres and styles, which have various functions: from the invitation to imagine to providing short pieces of information. Because they are all embedded in the genre of reportage, they are all a secure, reliable link to reality (one of the traits central to this genre). The present (i.e. the late 1990s) allows us to read about the islands’ past – back to the first monasteries in the 15th century. Wilk, using various modes of remembering, created a very dense memory text. In respect to time, as well as – if we think of that which is hidden in the landscape – in respect to space, the different modes and layers of memory are interwoven into one another. The collective memory here comprises the

visible as well as the invisible, as the notion of contaminated landscapes makes us particularly aware.

With Wilk's notebooks, we have a text that reveals the complexity of the mutual links between the past and the present, which here and there open up into the future. In the long quote above about the history of the SLON and of the church in Solovki, Wilk introduces the islands as a Utopian social experiment. He thereby adds the future as another aspect of the time structures. Furthermore, with his reportage, we also have an account of the late 1990s, i.e. of the early post-Soviet time in one of the Northern provinces, where – due to the very poor living conditions – certain moments of nostalgia for Soviet times arise.

I would like to finish with a quote from Wilk's work. His text, which, so to speak, follows many paths (note that they are readable) around the Solovetsky Islands, here comments explicitly on the various layers of time, preserved on the islands as much as in his book:

Tropas run between the lakes: (...) Some lead into the depths of the island, other into the depths of time; some wind along the seashore etched out by the waves (...), other cut across or someone's memory. (...) You can read the Solovki *tropas* endlessly, you can wander along them, look for the truth (where is it?), go for a walk (...), gather herbs (...). You can (...) get lost in the muddle of paths and lakes, in the tangle of time present, past or actual, in the reflections, echoes and echolalia. (IV 2, p. 32)

Między jeziorami bieżą tropy: (...) Jedne wiodą w głąb wyspy, drugie w głąb czasu; niektóre plotą się brzegiem morza, wydzierganym przez fale, (...) inne tną na przełaj błota, lub czyją pamięć. (...) Tropy sołowieckie można czytać bez końca, można nimi błądzić, szukać prawdy (gdzież ona?), spacerować (...) albo zgubić się w poplątaniu ścieżek i jezior, w zamotaniu czasu terazniejszego przeszłego i obecnego, w odbiciach, w echach i w echolaliach. (40f.)

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PASSING BY LAYERS OF MEMORY

S u m m a r y

The paper discusses the dimensions, genres and mediality of collective memory in Mariusz Wilk's reportage on the Solovetsky Islands. As the authoress argues, on the one hand, his reports reflect a broad variety of different media, where the text itself also appears as a medium of memory. On the other hand, Wilk draws attention to the sites of memory on the Solovetsky Islands. For those, different concepts from memory studies help deepen our understanding of both the layers of memory on the islands and of those in Wilk's text.

Keywords: Memory; Collective Memory; Memory Culture; reportage; Mariusz Wilk; mediality; genres.

PRZECHADZKI PO WARSTWACH PAMIĘCI

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł omawia wymiary pamięci kulturowej w reportażu Mariusza Wilka o Wyspach Sołowieckich. Jak dowodzę, z jednej strony jego relacje odzwierciedlają szeroką gamę różnych mediów, w których jako nośnik pamięci pojawia się również tekst. Z drugiej strony M. Wilk zwraca uwagę na miejsca pamięci na Wyspach Sołowieckich. Dla nich różne koncepcje z zakresu badań nad pamięcią pomagają nam pogłębić zrozumienie zarówno warstw pamięci na Wyspach, jak i tych zawartych w tekście M. Wilka.

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć; pamięć zbiorowa; pamięć kulturowa; reportaż; Mariusz Wilk; medialność; gatunki.