

Under the Gallows of  
Zoto's Brothers:  
Essays on *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*

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Under the Gallows of  
Zoto's Brothers:  
Essays on *The Manuscript  
Found in Saragossa*

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## Two Labyrinths in Two Novels: Stanisław Lem and Jan Potocki

### 1.

*Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, written in 1960 and first published in 1961, is one of the less popular of Stanisław Lem's novels, yet one of the most interesting. Though possessing certain traits of classical science fiction, grotesque and detective fiction, it does not unambiguously fit into any of the author's prominent styles. What distinguishes *Memoirs* from Lem's other works is a surprising quantity of literary allusions and their significance to interpretation of the novel. Critics have identified numerous associations of *Memoirs*: with works by Kafka, Borges, and Gombrowicz, along with borrowings from Gogol, Orwell, Bradbury and Genet. This essay focuses on its relation to one novel only, Jan Potocki's *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*.

Lem's novel, stylised as a critical edition of a document from a remote past, is made up of two parts: the proper "Memoirs found in a bathtub", also referred to as "Notes from the Neogene", and a critical "Introduction", which brings information concerning the origins of the memoirs, the circumstances of their discovery and their significance for a contemporary, i.e., the thirty-second century's historiography. It says that the manuscript is one of the very few written records which escaped destruction in the days of "papyralysis", which obliterated the "Prechaotic period" culture at the end of the twentieth century.

The account of the political situation preceding the disaster recalls the days of the cold war, when *Memoirs* was written: a world divided into two adversary political blocks, one of which is centred in the state of Ammer-Ka and worships Kap-Eh-Taahl and Da-Laahr, while the other, under the name of Earth Federation, gathers the supporters of “secular sociostatic management”. The expansion of the latter had pushed the last devotees of “sacred property” into complete isolation within the refuge of the Third Pentagon, an underground fortress somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. Then an earthquake terminated its existence, flooding the corridors with magma, which fortunately saved the manuscript of “Notes from the Neogene” from the “papyralytic” destruction.

The “Notes” however do not mention their political context and remain outside the SF literary convention (unlike the “Introduction”, which introduces not only a “future” perspective and a destructive “RV catalyst” of the “papyralysis” from space, but also time travel and flying saucers). The time setting of the events is unspecified. It is a story of a man, who arrives at a Building which serves as a military headquarters, a secret service seat, and a colossal bureau. The hero never reveals his identity and never mentions his earlier life. The record has no beginning, its first sentence begins in the middle: “(...) I couldn’t seem to find the right room – none of them had the number designated on my pass”.<sup>1</sup> Nobody awaits the hero, no one can or wants to tell him what he is supposed to do, or if they do, it is only to misguide him:

Stubborn, I went from room to room and pestered people with questions, though the answers were invariably wrong >in original: false<.<sup>2</sup> I was still on the outside, still excluded from that ceaseless flow of secrecy that kept the Building strong. But I had to get in somewhere, find an entry at some point, no matter what. (MB, p. 13)

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<sup>1</sup> Stanislaw Lem, *Memoirs Found in a Bathub*, trans. Michael Kandel, Christine Rose (San Diego – New York – London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986). We localise subsequent quotations by the short form of “MB” followed by the page number.

<sup>2</sup> In case of Lem’s novel there are sometimes significant differences between the original and the English translation; we note it wherever necessary. The complements according to the third Polish edition: Stanislaw Lem, *Pamiętnik znaleziony w wannie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1983).



This tenacity is rewarded, it seems, when the hero manages to meet the Commander in Chief and obtains, or rather extorts, a Special Mission assignment from him. The problem is that the Commander does not explain the character or meaning of the assignment, only assuring the hero of its utmost importance and secrecy. This meeting opens a whole series of encounters and conversations seemingly crucial, but in fact merely misdirecting and disappointing. The protagonist tries now and again to discover the objective of the Mission and his efforts gradually turn into an attempt to comprehend the intrinsic nature of the Building and his own significance in its structure – a quest that is in vain. The narration ends abruptly, maybe because the rest of the text was destroyed, or, as suggested in the “Introduction”, because of the protagonist’s sudden death in the earthquake.

## 2.

A title is the first link between *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* and *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*. It has been said that the title of Lem’s novel is suggestive generally of the eighteenth-century form of manuscript fiction,<sup>3</sup> but the allusion seems to be more precise. It refers not just to a literary convention from the days of the rise of the modern novel, but to the most famous “found manuscript”: Potocki’s *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, which made this convention a focus of its attention and reflection, also by exposing it in the title. In the eighteenth-century romance it was typically an extensive subtitle which named the genre, describing the text for example as a collection of letters found and published, often with some purpose (in Richardson: “in order to cultivate principles of virtue and religion in the minds of youths of both sexes”), and indicating the real author, usually disguised as an editor of the documents. Whereas the proper title often included the name or names of protagonists and implied the character of the plot, e.g. *Pamela; or, the virtue rewarded*.

From this perspective the title of Potocki’s work can be treated as a conscious and meaningful strategy: it leaves out the information on

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<sup>3</sup> Andrzej Stoff, *Powieści fantastyczno-naukowe Stanisława Lema* (Warszawa – Poznań – Toruń: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1983), p. 128.

the protagonists and the story and confines us to information about the form and origin of the text. François Rosset recalls that the motif of a found manuscript was “a literary device overused already in Potocki’s times” and the title, chosen by Potocki after much hesitation, “draws attention to the literary technique, not the plot”.<sup>4</sup> *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* is a kind of a parody of eighteenth-century manuscript fiction, just as the “Introduction” in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* is a parody of science fiction.<sup>5</sup> Lem not only exploits the structure of Potocki’s title, but caricatures it, swapping the exotic Saragossa for a bathtub, which appears odd and comical in this context. This matches the grotesque quality of Lem’s novel, in which a dramatic plot and deep philosophical problem are contraposed to an unrestrained, inspired word-formation activity and tendency towards distortion, queerness and playfulness.

*Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* re-renders many motifs and subplots of Potocki’s masterpiece. The multi-storey castle of Cassar Gomelez, quarried inside a mountain, and other labyrinth constructions from *The Manuscript* may be considered as models for the Third Pentagon. The castle is even destroyed in the same way as the Building: in an earthquake, however artificially effected (a natural – or supernatural – earthquake demolishes the palace of the Principessa di Monte Salerno in the gypsy chief’s story). All underground domains in *The Manuscript*, starting with the cave of the seven sleepers of Ephesus in the first day’s story and ending with Cassar Gomelez, provide refuge to the groups escaping religious prosecution, while the Third Pentagon is the last shelter of the Kap-Eh-Thaal worshippers. The secret state of Gomelez, striving for control over the Arabs and for the expansion of Islam, infiltrating Christian governments and widely using espionage, has its equivalent in the institution of Pentagon,

<sup>4</sup> François Rosset, “Labirynt Jana Potockiego”, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, No. 14 (1996), p. 16. See also his *Le Théâtre du romanesque: Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse entre construction et maçonnerie* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> On parody in *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* see François Rosset, “W muzeum gatunków literackich: Jana Potockiego *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie*”, *Pamiętnik Literacki*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (1985). A. Stoff (*Powieści fantastyczno-naukowe Stanisława Lema*, pp. 128–130) discusses the parodic stance of “Introduction” in Lem’s *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, with relation to the conventions of science fiction, “found manuscript”, and scientific discourse.

which devises space conquests, exercises surveillance over everyone and suspects everything of conveying encoded meanings.

In both works the cloudy and secretive character of a “powerful conspiracy”, which drags the protagonist into its machinery, is reflected in a labyrinthine shaping of its dwelling space. In *The Manuscript* it is primarily a maze of linked caves and passages, partly natural, partly constructed by man, an underground world visited by Alphonse van Worden and other characters. Similarly the Sierra Morena and the Alpujarras are presented as a terrain isolated from the rest of the world, enclosed, self-governed, and difficult to cross, not because of the rolling land but rather because of the limited visibility, complex topography and the multitude of intersecting paths:

We came down from the mountains and wound our way into deep, narrow valleys or rather ravines, which seemed to go down to the very bowels of the earth. They cut across the mountain range in so many different ways that it was impossible not to lose one’s sense of direction. One did not know which way one was heading at any one time.<sup>6</sup>

A traveller who encounters an obstacle like this, especially if he is not led by an experienced guide (or has been abandoned by one), is doomed to stray and return again and again to where his journey began, just as in a maze. Entering the labyrinth initiates an unforeseen prolongation of the journey. Alphonse van Worden, like some ancient mythical hero, arrives at the gates of the Labyrinth, bravely steps inside and follows snaking tracks all alone until his task is accomplished. Then, generously rewarded, he may leave the “realm of estrangement”<sup>7</sup> and return onto the straight path of his life, the path of honour, duty and service to His Majesty the Spanish King.

The world of Lem’s novel is entirely underground, spreading through the countless corridors and rooms of the Building. The hero never leaves it and its isolation from the surrounding world is constantly stressed: the corridors and rooms have no windows, office

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Potocki, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, trans. Ian Maclean (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996). Subsequent quotations localised by the short form of “MS” followed by the page number.

<sup>7</sup> Michał Głowiński, “Labirynt, przestrzeń obcości”, in *Mity przebrane* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1990).

life runs at its own pace independently of the day or night, there are no calendars, the clocks and watches are coded and the main objective of the Building's working is suppressing information, staunching its flow between the Building and the outer world. One cannot even be sure that the hero ever arrived at the Building from without, as we see him already and only in his quest through interminable corridors along rows of identical doors. Only once does the hero manage to find "the legendary Gate, an exit from the Building" (MB, p. 185), but he does not have the nerve to go through it, even though it is ajar. Possibly because, as he himself explains, it would be a retreat and surrender to the baffling secret of the Pentagon, or maybe because there is no life beyond the Building. In Lem's novel, as in twentieth-century literature generally, a labyrinth is no longer a "realm of adventure" (which was still the case in Potocki's romance), but turns into a "realm of life".<sup>8</sup>

As far as spatial construction is concerned, *Memoirs Found in a Bath tub* re-renders many formulaic motifs of gothic fiction, used freely also by Potocki. There are areas in the Building which are hardly accessible or altogether barred from the hero: rooms "not on the list", doors hidden behind mirrors or shelves, handleless doors guarded by "perfect secretaries". There are places which cannot be found again after the first visit, or places which are very difficult to find for the first time only.

The Building has also its own "cellars", which are zones different from the dominant space, opening before the hero in all sorts of unlikely locations. They are either cramped and full of nooks or spacious like church naves; blazingly illuminated or, more often, dusky; ornamented or shabby – but always set in contrast to the indistinctive, sterile corridors. However, these enclaves are equally incognisable and unsafe as the rest of the Building, they are labyrinths within the labyrinth. One enters them through side doors, hidden entrances and narrow bending passages, and from the inside they seem to be parts of some larger spaces of uncertain bounds: "Massive benches stood on either side of the aisle, barely visible in the darkness, and beyond them were niches, their contents altogether hidden" (MB, p. 39).

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<sup>8</sup> M. Głowiński, "Labirynt...", p. 152.

The “official” space of the Building is confusing because it is so extensive and unvaried, while the “enclaves” disorient the hero by their intricacy, asymmetry and a multitude of organic-like offshoots. There is a discontinuity between the two types of space and crossing from one to another is always unexpected and causes astonishment. White doors in the corridors all look the same, but any of them may lead to the most bizarre chambers, each unlike the rest. They constitute a secret sphere of the Building, its intestines. The two spheres do not seem to belong to the same dimension, as a gap in a row of doors does not have to mean that there is some ample hall on the other side of the wall, and inversely, even if a corridor looks ordinary and the doors are in a regular row, one of them may lead to a chamber of enormous size: a chapel, a library, a hospital with a *Theatrum Anatomicum*. It is as if the Building expanded inwards.

These spatial relations recall the “two-dimensional” world of *The Manuscript*, which consists of a horizontal labyrinth of mountain tracks and the vertical kingdom of Gomelez, reaching deep down underground.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, all which is obscure, tangled and disorderly, that is Sierra Morena (“dark mountains”), lies above the ground. Below there expands a dazzling, exclusive realm of clear geometry. For example, Alphonse finds his way to a “well-lit room in the middle of which stood a table laden with oriental bowls and carafes made of rock crystal” (MS, p. 12) through the cellars of an abandoned, ruined inn. In *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* it is the reverse: what is plain and ordered is on the surface, while dimness and confusion prevail deeper down, where things seem very far from the rational truth quested after by the hero. As in “the hermitage”, an asylum for those who failed and gave up:

I hesitated, then walked up and opened the door to a dim antechamber cluttered with all sorts of junk (...). Only the centre of the room had been swept (...). I reached the other door, stepping gingerly through the debris, and turned a heavy iron handle. Inside, there was shuffling, whispering. By the light of a single candle somewhere on the floor I saw shadowy figures scurry about, crouch in the corners, scuttle under crooked tables or cots. Someone blew out the candle and there were angry whispers and grunts in the

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<sup>9</sup> On the two-dimensional character of the world in Potocki’s novel see F. Rosset, “Labirynt...”.

darkness. The air was heavy with the stale smell of unwashed bodies.  
I beat a hasty retreat. (MB, p. 45)

There is a place in the Building which is exceptional, which forms a real shelter for Lem's hero: a bathroom on one of the floors. Unlike the office rooms, which are usually hot and stuffy, the bathroom is spacious and cool, "bright and gleaming", with a "marble bathtub like a sarcophagus" (MB, p. 38) and embroidered towels. Here one can take a bath, have some sleep, repose after a tedious exploration, come back as if returning home.<sup>10</sup> Paolo Santarcangeli noted the existence of "labyrinthine" and "non-labyrinthine" epochs in the history of European culture, and according to this thought the corridors of the Building would be modern and functional, the "enclaves" gothic or baroque, while the bathrooms classical.<sup>11</sup> They are oases of rationality and safety. It is not before the end of his quest, when he feels completely harassed, that the hero starts thinking of himself as "a prisoner of the bathroom"<sup>12</sup> and notices that the relief on the plafond depicts "a scene from paradise. There was Adam and Eve playing hide-and-seek among the trees, and a serpent lurking on a branch (...), and there was an angel on a cloud busily writing a denunciation (...)" (MB, p. 175).

In both texts there exists a clear correspondence between space and its creators and inhabitants, between the conspiracy of the Gomelez and their domain in the mountains and between the institution of Third Pentagon and the Building. The places are hidden below the ground from the eyes of enemies, whether religious or political, their layout and destination are not manifest to intruders, they cover vast areas and extend into every direction through passages, corridors, hallways, aisles and tunnels. And so are the two organisations: secret and guarded against those who are not initiates, working towards mysterious ends, including a lot of collaborators and wielding wide influence over the world without (even if only in wishful thinking). The differences between the Gomelez conspiracy

<sup>10</sup> See M. Głowiński, "Labyrinth, przestrzeń obcości" on the contrasting symbolism of a labyrinth as "a realm of estrangement" and home as "a realm of control".

<sup>11</sup> Paolo Santarcangeli, *Księga labiryntu*, trans. [from *Il libro dei labirinti* (Firenze: Vallecchi Editore, 1967)] Ignacy Bukowski (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1982), pp. 40–41.

<sup>12</sup> Left out in the English translation.

and the Third Pentagon also have their spatial representation. The empire of the Gomelez, which turns out to be a powerful secret organisation with perfectly logical objectives accomplished through effective, if unusual, methods, has a definite centre. On the one hand it is a confidential, camouflaged treasury and on the other hand it has the Great Sheikh of the Gomelez, “an old man wearing a snow-white turban” seated on a “throne of gold” (MS, p. 598). The Building also seems to have its “treasury” and its “sheikh”, but they soon prove a sham. The depository of top secret documents is one of the most easily accessible places of the Building and the hero enters it already on his first day in the Pentagon: “Twice I ended up in a storage cellar and leafed through some secret documents lying about. But there was nothing there of any value to me” (MB, p. 13). Later he finds out that there are many such “treasuries” about, and that the Admiral, the highest rank officer in the Third Pentagon, is a demented and infantile geriatric, whose body seems to hold together only due to a stiff uniform. This labyrinth has no centre, which the hero-Theseus, might reach in order to complete his quest.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.

The plots of *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* and *Memoirs Found in a Bathub* are similarly constructed: both stories draw upon the *topoi* of the journey of life and an educative journey. In *The Manuscript* these motifs are clearly and parodically related to the formula of the eighteenth-century exemplary narrative.<sup>14</sup> The sixty-

<sup>13</sup> “The Building’ is a kind of Jabyrinth, in which the centre – the protected holy place – is simultaneously nowhere and everywhere”. Jerzy Jarzębski, “The World as Code and Labyrinth: Stanisław Lem’s *Memoirs Found in a Bathub*”, trans. Franz Rottensteiner, in *Science Fiction Roots and Branches*, Rhys Garnett, R. J. Ellis, eds. (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 81. See also: J. Jarzębski, “Stanisław Lem: Rationalist and Visionary”, trans. Franz Rottensteiner, *Science-Fiction Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 20 (1977), pp. 85–86.

<sup>14</sup> On exemplary narratives see Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions. The Ideological Novel As a Literary Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), Chapter 1: “Exemplary’ Narratives”. F. Rosset notes the parodic attitude towards the formula giving *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* the name of “anti-educative novel” (F. Rosset, “W muzeum...”, pp. 61–62, 67).

six-day long journey becomes a lesson of life for the young Walloon officer, in which his character and system of values are put to the test. Even if the content of the lesson does not quite agree with his previous education, based on the principles of honour and piety, and if the teaching is not entirely effective (it is the reader who should be more perceptive), still Alphonse van Worden will leave the mountains richer with an instructive experience and with a load of gold. On the way, apart from conventional courage and fidelity tests, Alphonse has to go through “trials of interpretation”, he must pass an examination on “the interpretation of cautionary tales”<sup>15</sup> and recognise in these stories the variations of his own adventures. However, at a closer look all these tests reveal their somewhat fictitious nature and François Rosset rightly states: “Under the pretence of testing Alphonse’s bravery, it is rather the ability to tell the genuine and natural from the false and artificial that is measured before the reader’s eyes”.<sup>16</sup>

The journey in *Memoirs* also has an educational dimension as the hero’s progress through the Building is paired by piling up of hypotheses which concern the functioning of the place and his own role in it. This interpretative journey is as incongruous as the space through which the hero passes. Now and again he reaches distinctly peculiar sites, where the essential nature of the Building is brought out with exceptional intensity. One of such initiating points is a “museum” displaying models of hands arranged in meaningful and ambiguous gestures evoking interpretation, or the Department of Collections, holding the exhibition of secret service trophies: “artificial ears, noses, bridges, fingernails, warts, eyelashes, boils and humps”, “artificial limbs >in original: artificial artificial limbs<, corsets, clothing” (MB, p. 21–22). These “semantic” expositions demonstrate the unlimited potentiality of camouflage and the omnipresence of ciphers and codes, which implant in the visitor’s mind wariness and a habit of looking out for hidden meanings.

Both protagonists share a tendency towards recollection and re-interpretation of their adventures. Alphonse van Worden starts turning

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<sup>15</sup> F. Rosset, “W muzeum...”, p. 62. On the “trial of interpretation” see S. R. Suleiman, p. 78 ff.

<sup>16</sup> F. Rosset, “Labirynt...”, p. 16.



things over in his mind at the beginning of his stay in Sierra Morena, and later he not only ponders on the subsequent events and stories that he is told, but in his thoughts he returns to the onset of his journey and reflects on everything which happened to him since he left Cadiz. In spite of being offered all kinds of “demonic” explanations of the affairs, the young officer soon harbours the suspicion that he is a subject of mystification and, though sometimes in doubt, already on the tenth day ascertains the true nature of his adventures, “without having recourse to supernatural beings” (MS, p. 110).

The hero of *Memoirs Found in a Bath tub* ruminates on his situation usually in the bathroom: “Now shaving has always helped me think and (...) here was a good opportunity to come to grips with my predicament. What had happened so far?” (MB, p. 103) Though here the recounting of the events is more accurate and the interpreter more discerning than young Alphonse, still he fails to comprehend the situation and find his way in the “mire of conjecture” (MB, p. 104). Belief in the Mission, concepts of a trial, provocation, coincidence, power games between the Departments, someone’s cruel joke – these are only hypotheses none of which the Building ever verifies, all the time creating new ones instead. The “niches” and “enclaves”, like the museum of hands, are only seemingly initiative, as their initiations are inconclusive and turning points are spurious. Unlike in the narratives based upon the structure of apprenticeship, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* included, the progress of Lem’s hero is not linear, or indeed, it is not really a progress in the traditional sense. It does not lead from obliviousness towards understanding and its sole token is the hero’s growing scepticism.<sup>17</sup>

Encounters with others are vital elements in both novels. In Potocki’s *The Manuscript* their primary function is to bring about subsequent stories, which for the most part present subsequent variants of Alphonse’s own adventures. In *Memoirs* the encounters usually take the form of an initiation. Succeeding strangers introduce the hero into the secrets of the Building and suggest interpretations: the elderly undereavesdropper expounds for him a vision of the Building filled with “thousands of safes, thousands of original documents (...) everywhere, everywhere, on every level of the

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<sup>17</sup> See S. R. Suleiman, Chapter 2: “The Structure of Apprenticeship”.

building, all under lock and key, each one an original, each one entirely unique – millions and millions of them, and each one different!” (MB, p. 30) The specialist from the Department of Codes assures the hero that everything is a code or camouflage, himself included, thus everything is subject to uncircumscribed interpretation: “A cracked code remains a code. An expert can peel away layer after layer. It’s inexhaustible. One digs ever deeper into more and more inaccessible strata. That journey has no end” (MB, p. 65).

The most crucial encounter in *Memoirs* is with the hero’s *alter ego*, the “honest spy” (“honest” because seemingly independent from the Building’s intrigues and conscientiously spying for the enemy). The conversation with him makes the narrator aware of the typicality of his predicament. The spy sees him only as “one in a series” and asks: “Still a test? >in original: Still at a test or at a muddle?<” (MB, p. 119), having in mind the current stage of the hero’s understanding development. The spy also faultlessly predicts the narrator’s subsequent adventures and shatters his illusions about the importance of espionage, including the spy’s own activities performed only “to keep my hand in”. At the same time he realises that the hero is not ready to grasp the meaning of his words: “You are not far enough along >in original: not at the proper stage< to understand. And even if you knew your p’s and q’s, you’d never believe them. I know what you’re thinking: he’s a spy, provocateur, sent by *them* (...)” (MB, p. 121).

In Potocki’s romance there is an equivalent, or rather a model of this image of life and cognition as a route, that is something two-dimensional and already there, which can be divided into stages and always follows the same pattern. The conceivable map of the Sierra Morena represents the map of Alphonse’s future and he seems to be aware of it, saying: “it only remained to decide what I should do at that instant; that is to say, which way I ought to go” (MS, p. 25). The gypsy chief Avadoro, long in service to the Gomelez and well informed about the intrigue against Alphonse, performs the role which in Lem’s novel belongs to the “old spy”: “He seemed to know all about my adventures and predicted that I would have more” (MS, p. 129). The majority of stories the young officer is told are narrated, and possibly invented, by Avadoro, who presumably also takes part in arranging the scenes designed for Alphonse in Venta Quemada.

There are also significant differences between the texts as far as this view of life is concerned. Primarily, the hero in Lem's novel at the "stage" when he meets his older colleague is determined to free himself from the power of the Building rather than to become involved in its workings. Similarly his interlocutor seems to be "the individualist", someone who attempts to remain independent from the institutional structures of both Building and Antibuilding (a legendary headquarters of the enemy). However, one cannot be certain of anything in this world of total suspicion, where all secret agents are double agents, if not triple or quadruple. The peculiar semantic training he goes through in the Building makes it impossible for the hero to trust anyone. The more so that his belief in the unprompted and accidental character of his movements is continually contrasted with the feeling that his actions, even most offhand steps, are arranged according to some premeditated plan:

How many times, travelling aimlessly here and there like a speck of dust in the wind, driven like a blade of grass in a stream, never knowing what the next moment would bring, sometimes submitting to events, sometimes resisting them – how many times had I been forced to admit, always too late, that in any case I always ended up *exactly* where they wanted me? I was a billiard ball aimed with mathematical precision (...)! (MB, p. 108)

This mechanistic vision is obviously a contradiction to notion of human subjectivity. The irrational feeling of incapacitation is suddenly confirmed when the hero, for a brief moment, gets hold of the long searched for "instructions", which instead of providing a description of the mission are the record of his movements, thoughts and emotions. This process of objectification is complemented by the hero's awareness of his being "one of a series":

I was nothing, just one of a series, another copy, a stereotype, trembling in all the places my predecessors trembled, repeating like a record player exactly the same words, feelings, thoughts. (...) all of it, chapter and verse, was in the instructions – no longer *my* instructions, they weren't made for *me*... (MB, p. 124)

In *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* a similar discovery of the analogies between the stories read or heard and his own life does not impress the hero so much. Alphonse's "distraction" at dinner after he has read one of the *Curious Stories by Happelius* is evoked by the

suspicion that he might have been tricked by demons and thus may share the plight of the story's hero Thibaud la Jacquière; he is not troubled by an anxiety over his identity, by the thoughts of being part of "a series". Similarly he is not distressed by a striking resemblance between the adventures met by himself and by Velásquez, who is postponed in the Sierra Morena on the way to Madrid for the same reasons as Alphonse. The fear of losing one's identity, the imperative of individual freedom and the threat of total institutional control remain beyond the cognitive frame of mind of the hero from the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is the twentieth century's experience which brings them into literature. The motifs of mirrored characters, multiple objects, repetitiveness of behaviour and actions, though used in *The Manuscript* extensively, never transgress the bounds of a classical *decorum* and illustrate "the fright of the world already under control".<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.

The narrative structure of *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* matches the story it tells, namely the story of a labyrinthine world. The intricate structure of the text, which hinders interpretation and forms a contrast with the elegance and clarity of the style, has long been a puzzle and intrigued the readers. Interestingly, in the critical texts there reappears a figure of the confused reader, who evidently represents the confused critics themselves, rarely willing to admit their bewilderment. In 1859 Lucjan Siemieński wrote:

I would pity anyone modelling their novel after the plan of Potocki's romance; there are such multitude of characters and events that even the most quick-witted reader, finding himself at a loss frequently feels weary and would drop the book in exasperation if each time there didn't follow another story capturing his attention and curiosity anew.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Aleksandra Olędzka-Frybesowa, *W głąb labiryntu: wędrówki po Europie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1979), p. 279.

<sup>19</sup> Lucjan Siemieński, "Bogactwo fantazji w romansie: powieść Jana Potockiego", in *Kilka rysów z literatury i społeczeństwa od roku 1848–1858* (Warszawa: Gebethner i Spółka, 1859), II, pp. 227–228.

Several years later Stanisław Tarnowski also sympathised with the reader:

All the stories always return to the dark affair of the Gomelez, something is going on, something momentous is being devised in the underground of the Sierra Morena, but what may it be? What does it signify, where does it lead, what does the author want and think? Throughout the whole novel the unfortunate reader racks his brain over it, all in vain. At first, when the hero refuses to make his confession, we think that maybe the author's intention will be to show that a man can live his life only by the sense of honour, without religious feelings or practices. Soon the hypothesis proves false and turns into another one. When the Jewish cabbalist scholar discusses the mystical wisdom of the Mishnah and the Talmud, when the Wandering Jew elucidates old Egyptian myths indicating the elements which they share with Christianity, Judaism and Islam, when the Spaniard Velásquez proves the authenticity of the Christian revelation by mathematical demonstration – the contented reader again believes he has managed to grasp the author's thesis and declares that the objective of the book is to demonstrate that all religions are equal and whichever one embraces is of no concern. But the author slips away once more: all those discussions and deliberations constituted only an episode, the main thing are the worldwide, diverging and powerful Gomelez conspiracies. New idea, this time certain: the author is a man of the eighteenth century, those Gomelez must be some illuminati, Freemasons or the like. With this conviction we reach the end and learn that the aim of all the secret pursuits was the Moor domination in Spain (...). He [Alphonse] was necessary, being the last male descendant of the family (...). All his adventures were trials: ghosts and phantoms in the deserted inn, the Holy Inquisition cell, the hermit, the Wandering Jew, all was feigned. So it was a mere fanciful tale with no aim or intention?<sup>20</sup>

Aleksander Brückner wrote that the reader was going to be greatly impressed by Potocki's book "but may be fatigued by incessant disturbances in the narration when new threads are woven into the story, this relentless suspending of the plot copied from oriental stories".<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Stanisław Tarnowski, *Romans polski w początku XIX-go wieku* (Kraków: Drukarnia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1871), pp. 58–59.

<sup>21</sup> Aleksander Brückner, *Jana hr. Potockiego prace i zasługi naukowe* (Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1911), p. 31.

The question of the reader's confusion returns also in more recent criticism. However, it is from a different perspective:

Before Alphonse, thus before the reader, unfolds a labyrinth, where each track leads on along some separate philosophical, religious, mythological or purely literary tradition. Each character has a chain of conventional signs ascribed to him, related to the codes and languages of these traditions. And as it befits a labyrinth, the tracks constantly cross and interweave. The reader-Theseus recognises particular signs, but soon realises that, following what seems to be one track, he is following several at the same time. The journey appears to have no end (...).<sup>22</sup>

There is a characteristic element recurring in almost every critical text concerning *The Manuscript*, since Julian Krzyżanowski's *History of Polish Literature* first published in 1939<sup>23</sup> – the quotation in which Velásquez compares the gypsy chief's Chinese box narration to a very intricate maze:

Really, this story alarms me. All the gypsy's stories begin in a simple enough way and you think you can already predict the end. But things turn out quite differently. The first story engenders the second, from which a third is born, and so on, like periodic fractions resulting from certain divisions which can be indefinitely prolonged. In mathematics there are several ways of bringing certain progressions to a conclusion, whereas in this case an inextricable confusion is the only result I can obtain from all the gypsy has related. (MS, p. 334)

The bafflement and anxiety of the listener-Velásquez is similarly brought up by the critics as a figure to describe the reader's troubles. It is Velásquez, a scientist dreaming of a consistent, formalised description of all forms of existence, who suggests "that novels and other works of that kind should be written in several columns like chronological tables" (MS, p. 316). Such tables for those lost in Potocki's "veritable labyrinth" were published several times, starting from Krzyżanowski's work. And how many readers have drafted similar charts showing, "who is speaking and who is listening" for their own use?

<sup>22</sup> F. Rosset, "Labirynt...", p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> See Julian Krzyżanowski, *Historia literatury polskiej: alegoryzm – preromantyzm* (Warszawa: PIW, 1974), pp. 522–525.

However it is not the only mode of reception projected in the text. Velásquez's mathematical passion amazes the marqués de Torres Rovellas, who politely voices his protest: "To tell the truth (...) I had thought that one could draw some moral from the story of my life, but not turn it into an equation" (MS, p. 467). Alphonse represents a similar style of reception in which "a literary work, irrespective of its real character, becomes in reading a kind of cautionary exemplum, a sort of didactic fable".<sup>24</sup> Rebecca ridicules both Alphonse's moralistic interpretations and Velásquez's formulaic mathematical attempts sarcastically saying: "Continual surprises don't keep one's interest in the story alive. One can never foresee what will happen subsequently" (MS, p. 316). She apparently values the unpredictable, the unconventional, the fantastic and the tangled.

Some nineteenth-century critics adopted comparable attitudes on reception of the text. Tarnowski (quoted above), having diagnosed *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* as a fanciful tale, concludes: "yes, obviously a tale, yet written with such talent, such imagination that it could provide material for a hundred romances, and it would still surpass them in its pleasurableness".<sup>25</sup> But it is mostly the twentieth-century critics and readers who manifest "a suspicious liking for dizziness, unwholesome desire for being lost, a fascination of the void".<sup>26</sup> What was once considered to be a superfluous and flippant fantasy or a narrative extravagance hindering reception of the enlightened, rational tendency of the book, is nowadays regarded as the primary means of conveying the ideas of the novel. The idea which we read into *The Manuscript* today is the image of a confusing labyrinthine world full of riddles and traps laid on the road, incognisable on principle, yet offering singular pleasures:

As for the philosophical interpretation of the world, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* is a record of sceptical understanding comprising the fantastic and mysterious qualities of it along with the methods of their rational "taming". (...) the structural equivalent of this

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<sup>24</sup> Michał Głowiński, "Świadectwa i style odbioru", in *Dzielo wobec odbiorcy: szkice z komunikacji literackiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 1998), p. 147. French translation: *Literary Studies in Poland*, Vol. 9 (1983).

<sup>25</sup> S. Tarnowski, *Romans...*, p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> F. Rosset, "Labirynt...", p. 16.

scepticism is the perplexity into which *The Manuscript's* reader is many times led.<sup>27</sup>

In his analysis of Potocki's work Kazimierz Bartoszyński employs the typology of games framed by Roger Caillois: "an important aesthetic feature typical of *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* is (...) the ability to evoke the *illinx*, a specific and 'positive' state of light-headedness".<sup>28</sup> The sensation of "pleasant puzzlement" comes both from the identification of the reader with the hero who has strayed into the labyrinthine world and from the reader's own wandering in a narrative tangle.

This tangle has two dimensions: the first is horizontal and consists in the accumulation of a great number of stories which actualise the same pattern but differ in various details essentially enough to retain singularity. In this aspect the structure of *The Manuscript* meets the primary criterion of a classical labyrinth as it designs the longest possible route within a limited area observing the unity of style (its graphic design, where performable, should consist of uniform segments: i.e., straight lines and angles or curves).<sup>29</sup> The second dimension is vertical and builds up with the disorientating multiplication of narrative levels and voices. The "Theseus" figure representing the reader in the maze of accumulated stories is Alphonse van Worden, who unmasks them as subsequent versions of his adventures, while in the babel of narrative voices it is don Diego Velásquez who valiantly attempts to keep up with the proliferation of narrative frames.

## 5.

In relation with Potocki's *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* Kazimierz Bartoszyński specifies the characteristics of frame structure novels: "uneconomical" management of the plot and other elements

<sup>27</sup> Kazimierz Bartoszyński, "Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie – 'szkatułka' i powieść", in *Powieść w świecie literackości* (Warszawa: IBL PAN, 1991), p. 24. French translation: *Literary Studies in Poland*, Vol. 23 (1990).

<sup>28</sup> K. Bartoszyński, "Rękopis...", p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> See P. Santarcangeli, "Księga...", p. 51.



of presented world, which results in a multitude of characters, who have their own stories and spaces assigned to them; apart from, one should add, their own narrative acts. Bartoszyński compares it with nineteenth-century realistic fiction:

Classical novel in a way reduces the number of characters and plots encompassed within a certain universe (...). Several functionally comparable characters merge to become one, several analogous or related stories coalesce into one story.<sup>30</sup>

In Potocki's work this prodigality of Chinese box narration takes the form of a repetition of one story, presented by subsequent narrators in more or less altered versions. If Lem's novel is a particular modern variation (or re-telling) of *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, it constitutes an "economical" realisation, in Bartoszyński's terminology. Though there appear many characters in *Memoirs*, their importance in the story varies and only one may pretend to the rank of the main hero, one of the reasons being that he is the only narrator in the novel. The parallel of *The Manuscript's* narrative maze may rather be found in the construction of the Building's internal space, which is a "collection of places visited by the hero",<sup>31</sup> and in the composition of the plot as a journey with "stopovers". Lem's narrator is also lost in the labyrinth of actual and potential stories:

It was only when my hand touched the door that I remembered where I was. (...) An endless white labyrinth lay in wait out there, I knew, and equally endless wandering. The net of corridors, halls and soundproof rooms, each ready to swallow me up (...) >in original: each ready to drag me into its story, only to spit me out the next moment< (MB, pp. 38–39)

In the rooms he visits the hero does not listen to other characters' "stories", as they have no personal life or past they might narrate. However, each is involved in some chain of events and relationships which constitute a part, or a module, of the ever-working machinery of the Building. Each also seems to await the hero so that they may play their role in the performance of his "education", just like the

<sup>30</sup> K. Bartoszyński, "Rękopis...", p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Andrzej Stoff, "Świat ze słów. (O Pamiętniku znalezionym w wannie Stanisława Lema)", *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici. Filologia Polska*, Vol. 32 (1989), p. 128.

narrators in Potocki's novel. It is the protagonist who tells his story to others, hoping to hear an explanation of what has happened, and also to himself, in subsequent attempts to comprehend the reality around him. These relations chronologically never reach back beyond the moment of the first day in the Building (unlike in *The Manuscript*, where the stories commence from genealogies, as the ancestry determines identity), but still there is more than enough to narrate:

Quickly I tried to review the whole chain of events, to prepare my report according to procedure. I couldn't contradict myself; that would be fatal. But I was so confused. For example, did that whole affair with the little old man take place before or after they arrested my first guide in the hall? (MB, p. 72)

There are also some Chinese box narrations in Lem's novel, though not numerous and never more complex than twofold. The quantitative reduction of the narrative framing does not make it insignificant; on the contrary – according to the rules of novelistic economy, these passages, which suggest repetitiveness of certain chains of events, become salient and acquire symbolic meaning. The most prominent instances are the fragment of the “instructions” that the hero manages to glimpse, which implies that all his actions were foreknown or even contrived by the Building (and, possibly, enacted by other “agents” in the past) and the episode with the “old spy”, who foretells the hero's future, supposedly because it was once his own. The spy is shown as the hero's double, his older self: “In the mirror I saw the sleeping man (...); it was like looking at myself sound asleep after some long and wearisome journey” (MB, p. 115).

The scene with the “instructions” takes an effect similar to Potocki's narrative frames, but reaches further. If the text contained in “a thick bundle of papers” sounds almost exactly like the hero's own story, it means that the novel entitled *Memoirs Found in a Bath tub* is one of the versions of the “instructions”. One of the many, because there are reasons to assume that this document, as all documents in the Building, exists in an indefinite number of copies. Which is authentic, which is a true account of the protagonist's adventures and which is a counterfeit? Or else: does the text we read tell the truth? Is it a story of a man lost in the Building or just a product of one of the

Departments? Is there anybody behind the narrating self? Or maybe, as one of the characters claims, “there is only the Building” (MB, p. 170)?

Posing these questions the reader half unawaredly enters the role of the hero and begins to behave like a spy “of the old school”, “that waits and hopes to seize the Document of documents, the Secret of secrets” (MB, p. 159). He starts to believe in the existence of a semantic centre of the textual labyrinth, in the prospect of reaching it and returning home. While in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, just as in the Building, “anything, hence everything, leadeth everywhere!” (MB, p. 171) the novel does not disclose its secrets, or rather discloses them too eagerly, but this superfluous openness does not bring the reader closer to grasping its meaning. Like the top secret documents, the meaning seems to be lying in the open, suggested in every scene but in every scene different: the nature of the Building is presented in turns as an allegory of a totalitarian state, God, the universe, human nature, science, or language.<sup>32</sup> And this proliferation of interpretations, of which each is justified and none prevails, makes the puzzle unsolvable.

The key-word of *Memoirs* is “cipher” or “code”, which acquires a particular meaning: it connotes secrecy and need for interpretation, but not necessarily imparting intelligence:

“You mean, he deliberately used that beautiful scene to disguise a lot of foul language directed at some Matthews?”

“Who says he did it deliberately? A code is a code, regardless of the author’s intention” (MB, p. 64).

The Building’s semiotics lacks pragmatic rules, which would restrict the freedom of interpretation by relating an utterance to the communicative situation. In *Memoirs* the situations themselves require interpretation. Moreover there are no conventions which would stabilise meanings. The signs, detached from objects and intentions, refer only to other signs. Communication becomes reduced to a sheer semblance, for when everything means everything, when one never knows who communicates what and to whom, there

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<sup>32</sup> J. Jarzębski and A. Stoff reflect on the range of possible interpretations of *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*.

are no addressers or addressees and a human being becomes only an addition to text in the process of unlimited semiosis.

One might say that Lem recalls the etymology of the word “cipher”, which comes from the Arabian *ṣifr* meaning “zero; void”.<sup>33</sup> The ciphers used by the Gomelez in *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* are very different. Their mysteries serve to hide real secrets and their extensive intrigues and conspiracies have a definite aim. The treasury, a heart of the underground castle and a symbolic centre of the labyrinth does exist, as there also exists a “key” to the treasury and to the novel. In *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* all efforts to find it are of no avail. *Memoirs* depict a world without a centre, an incomprehensible tangle of signs devoid of any consolidating meaning. It is a labyrinth one cannot leave, even though there is no doubt that “whoever takes part in this game will suffer defeat”.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* 2 on CD-ROM. Version 1.02. © OUP 1992, © AND Software B.V. 1992.

<sup>34</sup> Dominique Sila, “Stanisława Lema gry z wszechświatem”, trans. [from “Lems Spiele mit dem Universum”, in *Über Stanisław Lem*, W. Berthel, ed. (Frankfurt/Main, 1981)]; Barbara Czałczyńska, in *Lem w oczach krytyki światowej*, Jerzy Jarzębski, ed. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1989), p. 68.

### **Małgorzata Glasenapp, Marcin Wołk**

Dwa labirynty w dwóch powieściach: Stanisław Lem i Jan Potocki

#### Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono związki między *Pamiętnikiem znalezionym w wannie* (1961) S. Lema a *Rękopisem znalezionym w Saragossie* J. Potockiego. Utwory łączy podobna konstrukcja przestrzeni jako labiryntu, budowa fabuły z centralnym motywem wędrowki bohatera, temat poznania, parodystyczny stosunek do tradycji literackiej oraz celowe komplikowanie procesu odbioru. Lem, wykorzystując szereg motywów powieści Potockiego, nadaje im nowe znaczenia i tworzy pesymistyczną wizję samotności współczesnego człowieka we wrogim, niepoznawalnym świecie.

**Małgorzata Glasenapp, Marcin Wolk**

Deux labyrinthes dans deux romans: Stanisław Lem et Jan Potocki

R é s u m é

L'article présente les liens qui existent entre *Le manuscrit trouvé dans une baignoire* (1961) de Stanisław Lem et *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* de Jan Potocki. Les points de ressemblance des deux ouvrages, ce sont: une construction d'espace conçu comme labyrinthe, la structure de la fable avec le motif central de voyage du héros, le thème de la connaissance, la relation parodique envers la tradition littéraire et la complexité volontaire du processus de la réception. En ayant recours aux plusieurs motifs du roman de Potocki, Lem leur assigne de nouvelles significations et crée une vision pessimiste de la solitude de l'homme moderne dans un monde hostile et inconnaissable.