

## VACUOUS INTERTEXTUALITY? Stanisław Lem's *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* and Its Intertextual Relations

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*The article discusses intertextuality in Stanisław Lem's novel, *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (1961). An analysis of *Memoirs* discovers references to numerous works of literature (Kafka, Borges, Gombrowicz, Mrożek, Chekhov, Gogol, Shakespeare, Mickiewicz, Ray Bradbury, Genet, and Jan Potocki, among others), philosophy (Cassirer, Peirce, Lévinas), religion, popular culture, and unwritten lore (the Bible, Greek mythology, songs, proverbs, aphorisms, rhymes, and toasts). However, careful examination reveals that it is extremely difficult to draw the line between connections intended by the author and those which are accidental or read into the text by critics or readers. That is because in *Memoirs*, Lem designed a work which is intertextually open, capable of establishing a virtually infinite number of relations with other texts and contexts, and encouraging its reader to recognize all possible links. Intertextual references operate here collectively rather than as relationships with individual works. Locating *Memoirs* in a vast, practically unlimited intertextual space does not lead to specific, premeditated meanings, but rather serves to multiply potential senses. In the article, this intertextual strategy is paired with Lem's theory that the meaning of a literary work is unstable and is fully developed in the process of individual reception.*

KEYWORDS: Stanisław Lem (1921–2006), *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, intertextuality, literary interpretation, modern Polish literature

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*Pamiętnik znaleziony w wannie* [Memoirs found in a bathtub, 1961] is one of the most interesting novels written by Stanisław Lem, even though it is also one of the least popular. First of all, it does not fully belong to any of the three major strands in Lem's fiction: neither to classic science fiction like *Solaris* [Solaris, 1961] or *Eden* [Eden, 1959], nor to the grotesque, like *Kongres futurologiczny* [The futurological congress, 1971] or *Cyberiada* [The cyberiad, 1965], nor to thrillers like *Śledztwo* [The investigation, 1959] or *Katar* [The chain of chance, 1976]; at the same time, *Memoirs* displays characteristics of all these genres. Secondly, and even more importantly, it stands out because of the extraordinary quantity of its intertextual references, which has a very significant influence on the work's meaning and on its critical and reading reception. In this essay I would like to look closely at those references and their role in the novel.

*Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* was written in 1960 and originally published in the following year; it was translated into English by Michael Kandel and Christine Rose, and published in the United States in 1973. The novel is constructed as a mock scholarly edition of a document from a distant past, divided into two parts: the shorter critical "Introduction" and the longer "Notes from the Neogene"—the memoirs proper. The "Introduction," just as fictitious as the memoirs, is dated the thirty-second century (of an unspecific calendar) and provides information concerning the origins of the "Notes": the time they were written, the circumstances of their discovery, and their significance to the contemporary historiography (i.e., to thirty-second-century historians). The reader learns that the manuscript is one of the rare written testimonies to survive the catastrophe of "papyralysis," which brought about the destruction of the "Prechaotic culture" at the end of the twentieth century, and that the pre-catastrophe world was divided into two antagonistic political blocs—a satirical reference to the Cold War political setup of the 1960s, when the novel was written. One of these blocs, called "Earth Federation," based on the concept of "secular sociostatic management," gradually gains ground over the other, originating from the state of Ammer-Ka and characterized by the cult of "sacred property." In the end, the fanatical supporters of the latter shut themselves off in their last bastion: the rock-cut Third, or Last, Pentagon. Their stronghold is eventually destroyed by an earthquake, which floods its corridors with lava. Fortunately, the lava, filling up the bathtub with the manuscript of the "Notes," preserved the pages, protecting them from the mysterious "RV catalyst" which was soon to destroy almost the whole of written culture on Earth.<sup>1</sup>

1. Stanisław Lem, *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, trans. Michael Kandel and Christine Rose (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1986), 1–12. If not indicated otherwise, subsequent quotations from Lem's *Memoirs* are from this edition. In a commentary to the Russian edition, the editor states, referring to the author's letter to the translator, that the "Introduction," which sets the story in America, is not an integral part of the novel and was written for the book to get past the censors. See "Prilozheniye: Ot izdatel'stva," in Stanisław Lem, *Sobranie sochineniy*

This political context is entirely absent from the “Notes,” the main part of the novel. “Notes” is also devoid of any conventional science fiction tropes, whereas the “Introduction,” set in a distant future, mentions flying saucers, time travel, and a mysterious catalyst originating from space. “Notes” relates the story of a man who arrives in an unidentified “Building,” which is a secret military-cum-intelligence headquarters and a gigantic office at the same time. The protagonist remains anonymous throughout the story, and although he narrates his experiences himself in the first-person, he never refers to his own past. The “memoir” begins as if in the middle; the first sentence is incomplete and reads: “. . . I couldn’t seem to find the right room—none of them had the number designated on my pass.”<sup>2</sup> Apparently, the hero was summoned to the Building, or at least given a pass to enter and told which room he was to report to, but no one awaits him or is willing to direct him any further—unless it is in order to mislead him. Still, he does not give up: “Stubborn, I went from room to room and pestered people with questions, though the answers were invariably wrong. 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.”<sup>3</sup>

This doggedness is eventually rewarded—or so it seems—when the protagonist manages to meet the Commander in Chief, General Kashenblade, who personally assigns a Special Mission to him. The problem is, the General fails to explain the exact nature of the mission and only alludes to its utmost importance and secrecy. This first interview leads to a whole series of further meetings, which seem crucial but turn out to be completely futile and disappointing. The protagonist strives in vain to discover the aim of his Mission, the nature and function of the Building and his own role in it. The narration abruptly ends mid-sentence, and we do not know if it is due to the manuscript’s incompleteness or—as implied in the “Introduction”—the protagonist’s death in the earthquake.

## 2

Critics long ago noticed numerous references to other works of literature in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*. The first Polish reviews discussed the novel’s relations to Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, Witold Gombrowicz’s *Ferdynand* and *Trans-Atlantyk*, or to works by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy). Later, at the more mature

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*v desyati tomakh*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Tekst, 1994), 338–339. In all Polish editions and in most translations, the “Introduction” is treated as a part of the work in its own right.

2. Lem, 13.

3. Lem, 13.

stage of “Lemology,” critics noted further intertextual connections: with short stories by Bruno Schulz and Sławomir Mrożek, Jean Genet’s *The Balcony*, Tadeusz Breża’s *Urząd* [The office], Jan Potocki’s *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, Jorge Luis Borges’s novellas with the labyrinth motif, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Kafka’s *The Castle*, or Gombrowicz’s *Cosmos*.<sup>4</sup> Actually, Lem himself first drew attention to some of these connections, discussing in *Fantastyka i futurologia* [Science fiction and futurology, 1970], his critical and theoretical work on science fiction, the analogies between *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* and Borges’s writings, as well as Gilbert K. Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday*. He also named “spy memoirs” as his source of inspiration.<sup>5</sup>

The list of such references, allusions, analogies, and connections in *Memoirs* is impressive and could still be extended. We might recognize references to Russian literature, namely to Anton Chekhov’s plays<sup>6</sup> and Nikolai Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*. Just as in Gogol’s work, Lem’s hero is on several occasions taken for someone important who acts on orders coming “from high up” and conducts a “superinvestigation”<sup>7</sup> of the Building’s departments. There are also analogies between *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*: the “papyralysis” may be interpreted as a universal and non-discriminating version of book burning; references to Shakespeare—the splendid scene of decoding an excerpt from

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4. See especially Jerzy Jarzębski, “Stanisław Lem, Rationalist and Visionary,” *Science Fiction Studies* 4, no. 2 (July 1977): 110–126, <https://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/12/jarzebski12.htm>; Jerzy Jarzębski, “Intertekstualność a poznanie u Lema,” *Teksty Drugie* 3 (1992): 161; Małgorzata Szpakowska, *Dyskusje ze Stanisławem Lemem* (Warsaw: Open, 1996), 173.

5. Stanisław Lem, *Fantastyka i futurologia*, Vol. 2 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1989), 390–392.

6. Compare, e.g., “Alas, my youth! My sacred childhood! The haunts where I was wont to play! Whither have they fled? And wherefore? Where are the snows of yesteryear? Must all things piss away—that is, pass away?” Lem, *Memoirs*, 144. This seems to be a parody of several lines spoken by Ranevskaya in acts 1 and 4 of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*: “O, my childhood, my innocence! [. . .] O, my orchard! [. . .] If only I could lift off my chest and shoulders this heavy stone, if only I could forget my past!”; “Oh, my darling, my sweet, beautiful orchard! . . . My life, my youth, my happiness, good-bye! . . . Good-bye!” Anton Chekhov, *Plays*, trans. and ed. Laurence Senelick (New York: Norton, 2005), 335, 371.

7. Stanisław Lem, *Pamiętnik znaleziony w wannie*, 3rd ed. (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986), 34, 44. I refer to this Polish edition whenever the English translation is not sufficiently accurate.

*Romeo and Juliet*<sup>8</sup> and a quotation from *Hamlet* (ignored, by the way, by the novel's translators into English)<sup>9</sup>; references to works by Polish Romantic poet Adam Mic-

8. "I've got it!" I announced with sudden inspiration. "My ears have not yet drunk a hundred words of that tongue's utterance, yet I know the sound: Art thou not Romeo and a Montague?"

"Fine."

Prandtl had hardly typed this out when the tape began to move from the slot, a paper snake. He gently handed the end of it to me, and I waited patiently while the printout emerged. The vibration of the machine suddenly stopped and the rest of the tape came out blank. I read:

BAS TARD MATT HEWS VAR LET MATT HEWS SCUM WOULD BASH THAT  
FLAP EAR ASS WITH PLEA SURE GREAT THAT MATT HEWS BAS

"What's this?" I asked, perplexed. Prandtl gave a knowing nod.

"Shakespeare evidently harbored a grudge against someone by the name of Matthews and chose to put this in code when he wrote those lines."

"What? 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."

"Let's see something," I said, and typed the decoded text into the machine myself. The tape moved again, spiraling onto the floor. Prandtl smiled but said nothing.

"IF ONLY SHE'D GIVE ME TRA LA LA TRA LA LA IF ONLY TRA LA LA  
SHE'D GIVE ME LA LA, TRA LA LA AND GIVE ME TRA LA LA HA HA HA  
TRA LA LA," went the letter of the printout.

"Now what do you make of it?"

"We have moved deeper into the seventeenth-century Englishman's psyche."

"Are you trying to tell me that Shakespeare's great poetry is nothing but bastard Matthews and tra la la? At that rate, your machine will reduce our monuments of literature, creations of genius, immortal works, all to complete gibberish!"

"Precisely," answered Prandtl. "Gibberish. The arts, literature, what is their true purpose? Diversion!"

"Diversion from what?"

"You don't know?"

Lem, *Memoirs*, 64–65.

9. "Biada podrzędnyim istotom, gdy wejdą pomiędzy ostrza potężnych szermierzy, uważasz?—zacytował" (Lem, *Pamiętnik*, 201) is an almost literal quotation from Józef Paszkowski's 1862 translation of *Hamlet*, with some alterations, which suggests that Lem quoted from memory. The relevant fragment of the original reads: "'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes / Between the pass and fell incensed points / Of mighty opposites" (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 5, 2). Kandel and Rose have rendered this passage as "It's the little individual, remember, that ends up caught between the Devil and the deep blue sea" (Lem, *Memoirs*, 160).

kiewicz—to *Forefathers' Eve*,<sup>10</sup> and the ballad “Mrs. Twardowski”;<sup>11</sup> allusions to the Bible<sup>12</sup> and Greek mythology;<sup>13</sup> parodic references to popular songs, proverbs and sayings (only a handful did not get lost in translation, mostly internationally recognized catchphrases like “*la Maison—c'est moi*” or “*nunc est bibendum*”).<sup>14</sup> There is also a separate group of various “philosophemes”: today’s reader might recall Ernst Cassirer’s idea of *animal symbolicum*, Charles S. Peirce’s *infinite semiosis* and *final interpretant*, Karl Jasper’s *ciphers of transcendence*, Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, Emmanuel Lévinas’s *face-to-face philosophy*, and others.

The map of *Memoirs*’ intertextual connections, real or seeming, may be further elaborated and refined—but is it worthwhile? Would collecting and cataloging all literary allusions, quotes, and references deepen or change our understanding of Lem’s novel? Critics seem to be skeptical about it. However, there is a certain ambiguity in critical appreciation of intertextuality in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*. For instance, Jerzy Jarzębski, having enumerated the references which had already been recognized in the text, goes on to add that more authors and works might be put on this list as well (and duly mentions them; he identified most of the literary works I name in the first paragraph of this section). He concludes as follows: “Lem’s novel is written in the broad tradition of a literature which defines the condition of the individual enmeshed in institutions, in civilization, in interpersonal relationships, and filled by a desire to see through them and arrive at a universal truth about himself [or herself] and the world.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, in Jarzębski’s view, recognizing individual literary allusions in Lem’s novel is less vital than placing *Memoirs Found*

10. “[. . .] imię ich milion” (“Their name is million”) Lem, *Pamiętnik*, 39; “and their name is Legion!” Lem, *Memoirs*, 29. Compare, “My name is Million, because for millions do I love and suffer agonies,” Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers' Eve*, trans. Charles S. Kraszewski (London: Glagoslav Publications, 2016), 2, which itself is a paraphrase of the demon’s utterance from St. Mark’s Gospel, 5, 9: “My name is Legion, for we are many”.

11. “Hulaj dusza! Hejże hola!” Lem, *Pamiętnik*, 180; compare in Mickiewicz: “Hulaj dusza! hulaj! [. . .] hejże! hola!” (“‘Make merry!’ [. . .] ‘Be content!’ / ‘Ha-ha, hee-hee, hoopla, whoopee!’”) Michael J. Mikoś, ed., *Polish Romantic Literature: An Anthology* (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 2002), 24.

12. E.g., “hermitage”—analogous to the Odollam cave in The Book of Kings 1,1; a plafond in the bathroom depicting a scene from Eden; numerous parodies of the biblical style.

13. Compare deliberations on “Hellenic Studies,” Lem, *Memoirs*, 148.

14. Lem, *Memoirs*, 147, 158. Other passages have survived in modified forms. For example, “Maszerują szpiedzy, maaa-szeee-ruuuja!” (The spies are marching, they are marching. . .) Lem, *Pamiętnik* 180—a travesty of the refrain “Maszerują strzelcy, maszerują [. . .]” (The riflemen are marching [. . .]) from the Polish 1917 military song “Szara piechota” [The grey infantry]—was fortunately replaced by Kandel and Rose with a travesty of “Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here” from *The Pirates of Penzance*: “Hail, hail, the spies are hee-eere!” Lem, *Memoirs*, 142.

15. Jarzębski, “Stanislaw Lem.”

in a *Bathtub* in a wider group of literary texts sharing certain properties. This group would dictate or suggest possible interpretations in accordance with these common properties rather than based on the individual and original traits of each work.

Another critic, Andrzej Stoff, observes that the multitude of literary references in Lem's novel is complemented by "the deployment of various literary conventions, from generic to stylistic." He also notes that: "The situation is further complicated by the fact that all these references are never made in earnest, but rather subversively, *à rebours*." Stoff sees critics' efforts to identify *Memoirs*' "noble ancestors" as an attempt to "ennoble" the novel, and encourages them to "break the habit [. . .] of searching for literary consanguinities"<sup>16</sup> and to focus on close reading of the text instead. However, a few years later the same critic says:

The important indication of the novel's literary value, setting aside its form, is the extensive—to a degree unusual for Lem—interaction with the most eminent works of contemporary literature, both Polish and foreign. Thus the novel is placed against a literary background; in a context which is vital for its meaning yet not sufficiently acknowledged and recognized in current research.<sup>17</sup>

This short review of critical approaches to the novel's intertextuality shows that the basic difficulty in analyzing *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* lies in recognizing the *interpretant*, that is, a group of factors which redefines the interpretation of the "borrowed" text in the new context.<sup>18</sup> Referring to the theory formulated by Michel Riffaterre, Ryszard Nycz wrote: "the presence of intertextual relations in a given text is determined by the presence of their textual representations, whereas their character—or *what they are*—is determined by the interpretant inferred from the features of the context."<sup>19</sup> Everybody agrees that *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* is involved in intertextual relations and notices the textual manifestations of the most evident ones. What remains uncertain is their role in the novel, or, more generally, the principle on which they function in it.

Further on, I would like to discuss these intertextual references, focusing on their evidence and structure, their semantic status, and the role they play in the novel.

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16. Andrzej Stoff, *Powieści fantastyczno-naukowe Stanisława Lema* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1983), 124.

17. Andrzej Stoff, "Świat ze słów. (O Pamiętniku znalezionym w wannie Stanisława Lema)," *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici. Filologia Polska* 32 (1989): 123.

18. See Michel Riffaterre, "The Interpretant in Literary Semiotics," *American Journal of Semiotics* 3, no. 4 (1985): 41–55.

19. Ryszard Nycz, "Intertekstualność i jej zakresy: teksty, gatunki, światy," in *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze* (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1995), 62.

## 3

It is easy to notice that among the intertextual references in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* I have listed so far, the majority occur in dialogues, namely in utterances of characters other than the narrator himself—the inhabitants of the Building. These references include quotations or paraphrases of fragments taken from the classics (the Bible, Greek myths, Shakespeare, Mickiewicz, Chekhov), as well as from popular culture texts or just unwritten lore (songs, proverbs, rhymes, or toasts). The quotations are for the most part comically distorted or placed in a context which renders them comical, so these references can usually be classified as parodic, satirical, or burlesque.

The vast majority of them occur in just one episode of the novel, chapter 11, which relates the protagonist's drunken spree with the "Buildingers."<sup>20</sup> The references to the "textlore"—songs, proverbs, sayings—emphasize the paradoxical "naturalness" and completeness of the novel's universe, in which "we gradually discover all the dimensions of life existing in the real world."<sup>21</sup> The parodies, whether of classical or popular texts, are obviously meant to entertain, but their primary function is different. This accumulation of more or less recognizable literary allusions in a relatively short fragment of the novel, as well as the uniform manner of transforming original texts create, with the aid of linguistic devices, a specific image of reality. This reality, according to Stoff, has a "grammar based on the rule of total linguistic camouflage and absolute distrust of words."<sup>22</sup> Chapter 11 is therefore a demonstration of the essence of the Building, where everything is looked upon as a coded message containing suspicious information ("sabotage gibberish"<sup>23</sup>) or a feat of unconventional intelligence techniques. The Building's offices conduct proceedings against "the One who—rested on the seventh day,"<sup>24</sup> define the institution of marriage as "the smallest espionage unit,"<sup>25</sup> and treat mythology as a reservoir of useful ideas such as "the Trojan Horse [that] marked the birth of cryptoequestrianism,"<sup>26</sup> "musical sabotage of sirens" and "Zeus's infiltration in the guise of a swan."<sup>27</sup>

This group of intertextual references may be characterized as "vacuous allusions," in the sense defined by Włodzimierz Bolecki. Such allusions do not invoke the original context of the hypotext (or invoke it only minimally) and their semantic function is fulfilled not in the sphere of interrelationship between the texts, but

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20. Lem, *Memoirs*, chapter 11.

21. Stoff, "Świat ze słów," 138.

22. Stoff, 139.

23. Lem, *Pamiętnik*, 81.

24. Lem, *Memoirs*, 154.

25. Lem, 143.

26. Lem, 147.

27. Lem, 147–148.

within the limits of the hypertext.<sup>28</sup> That explains why critics discussing literary references in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* did not go on to discuss Shakespeare or Mickiewicz as well—which they probably would have done had Lem employed proper literary allusions, occurring when a given text (hypertext) invokes an association with another text (hypotext) as a means of creating its intended meaning.

Another group of intertextual references in *Memoirs* comprises references to Gogol's *The Government Inspector* and—with some reservations, which I shall address presently—to Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, which seems to have been the inspiration for Lem's concept of "papyralysis" (although a similar motif also appears in Borges's works, not to mention practical realizations in European and world history).

There are at least two passages in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* where Lem seems to be following in Gogol's footsteps. First, when the *Memoirs*' protagonist is, for no apparent reason, taken by the frightened officials for an inspector sent over "from high up" and gradually begins to "play the role of an interrogator."<sup>29</sup> The second one is the scene (if not Gogolian literally, then in essence) when the Commander in Chief assigns him to a purported Mission—for this gesture results solely from the bureaucratic routine to which the commander resorts because he has no idea how to cope with an unusual situation. These scenes denounce the functioning of the Building as an office where humans are reduced to the function they have been assigned (sometimes accidentally), where the individual decisions are outrooted by procedures and routine, and the main motivation is fear of superiors.

However, these intertextual references are not typical allusions, either. Gogol's play, which was well known in Poland in Lem's times, is evoked in *Memoirs* in general terms, more as an approach to describing a bureaucratic system than as an individual literary work. In other words, Lem's novel directs the reader not exactly toward *The Government Inspector* but rather toward "[a] trope connected to the book":<sup>30</sup> a stereotype which Gogol helped to create, and which has come to be represented by the title of his play.

The question of "papyralysis" and its originating in Ray Bradbury's 1953 novel (published in Poland in 1960) looks similar, at least at first glance. It seems we encounter here an example of the "*non plus ultra* of a typical idea of science fiction"<sup>31</sup>—a

28. See Włodzimierz Bolecki, "Historyk literatury i cytaty," in his *Pre-teksty i teksty: Z zagadnień związków międzytekstowych w literaturze polskiej XX wieku* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1998), 25–26, 30–31. For definitions of hypertext and hypotext, see Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, foreword by Gerald Prince (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 5.

29. Lem, *Memoirs*, 42.

30. I borrow this phrase from Patrick D. Hopkins, "Bad Copies: How Popular Media Represents Cloning as an Ethical Problem," *The Hastings Center Report* 28, no. 2 (1998): 11.

31. Michael Springer, "Rozległość i różnorodność fantastycznego stylu. Pisarz Stanisław Lem," trans. Ryszard Wojnakowski, in *Lem w oczach krytyki światowej*, ed. Jerzy Jarzębski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1989), 35.

realization of a pattern belonging to the catastrophic, dystopian variety of sci-fi literature, this time taken to extremes and thus made comical. This interpretation of the relation between Lem's and Bradbury's novels and their fundamental concepts is confirmed by the parodic references to the popular science-fiction repertoire in the "Introduction" to *Memoirs*: flying saucers, time travel, or a plague from space. In this sense *Fahrenheit 451* would symbolize a universal science-fiction novel and would serve as a conventional sign creating the context for the genre parody.

However, this interpretation seems less valid when we remember that the destruction of books in Bradbury's novel is more than just a remarkable narrative idea or a plot device. "In *Fahrenheit 451*, it is not the burning of books that disturbs Bradbury but the burning of 'Books'—the abstraction of books. The recitation of titles being thrown on the fire is like a litany, and even the recitation of their contents is a ritual act."<sup>32</sup>

So, we have come close to the idea of Library, close to Borges's writings and to Lem himself, with his penchant for anthologies and encyclopedias. In *Science Fiction and Futurology* Lem bestows restrained praise on Bradbury's novel and criticizes its "naïve dystopia." In his opinion, Bradbury:

does not understand that there is something far worse than bad people's rule—it is the rule of people who do not need to burn books, because the books had already lost any value for society [. . .]. Culture is irrevocably destroyed when its last traces disappear from the collective memory as a result of applying social engineering methods for a sufficiently long time.<sup>33</sup>

Lem's opinion on a fellow writer's work and on threats to modern civilization can be read here as a "metatextual interpretant" of the intertextual relation between *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* and *Fahrenheit 451*.<sup>34</sup> It reveals the fact that *Memoirs* also is a vision of culture destruction. This destruction is not brought about by "papyralysis"—an equivalent of book burning engineered by "bad people"—but by the process of book depreciation. However, in *Memoirs* this loss of value of books is not due to the social engineering mentioned in *Science Fiction and Futurology*. The novel constructs a reality in which the "inflation of meaning," analogous to economic inflation causing a decrease in the value of currency, was brought about, paradoxically, by the excess of meaning. It is "a world in which everything is intentional, meaningful, and at the same time every element or event bends under the

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32. James Gunn, "The Bradbury Chronicles," in *The Road to Science Fiction*, ed. James Gunn, Vol. 3 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 81.

33. Lem, *Fantastyka i futurologia*, 457–458.

34. On a similar case, see Nycz, "Intertekstualność i jej zakresy": "Such an intertext, having its representation nowhere but only in a metatextual interpretant, can be [. . .] subsequently [that is, after being noticed and deciphered] justifiably treated as a factor in the text's semantic structure. Its link with the text, however indirect, is after all clear, empirically verifiable, and significantly shapes the work's overall meaning," 65.

load of these—contradictory—meanings.”<sup>35</sup> It is a world where there is nothing but books.

The way Lem deals with intertextuality plays a significant role in creating this image of culture killed by its own excessive growth. The relation between *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* and *Fahrenheit 451* gives an insight into this subject. Every intertextual reference in *Memoirs* may be interpreted in different ways; in this case as an element of playful parody, not affecting the philosophical meaning of the novel, or as an instance of intertextual relationship which is not strictly obligatory but broadens the understanding of the hypertext. This reference may also pass unnoticed (like the connection between *Memoirs* and *Fahrenheit*, not previously recognized by critics) or it may be noticed but dismissed as irrelevant (which might happen in the future).

## 4

As we have seen, the references to Gogol and Bradbury in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* work on more than one level. First, they invoke associations with other texts, Gogol's play and Bradbury's novel. Second, they evoke certain ideas. And third, unlike the quotations and paraphrases discussed earlier, they modify the reality presented in *Memoirs* and thus may be classified as structural. I would like to have a closer look at other references of this kind: the great “ancestors” of Lem's novel, that is the modernist works of Kafka, Gombrowicz, and Borges, and also Jan Potocki with his *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, a masterpiece novel from the beginning of the nineteenth century. I emphasize these writers' global renown, because it noticeably complicates the way in which references to their works may be interpreted: they can easily be taken for evidence of the influence of these four writers on Lem's novel.

Several things can be said in support of adopting the old-fashioned category of influence here. First of all, at least two of the four writers produced works of great power of influence in the literary world and had many followers. There were many who wrote in the style of Gombrowicz or Kafka in Polish and world literature. Secondly, in Poland when Lem wrote *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, the greatest works of these writers were sought after; they were being published, read, and discussed (apart maybe from Borges, whose writings came into fashion in Poland in the 1960s and 1970s). The first half of the 1950s in Poland was the time when the doctrine of Stalinism dominated all spheres of public life, including the publishing industry. When it was over, a critical edition of Potocki's *The Manuscript* came out in 1956, Kafka's *The Trial* was republished in the pre-war translation in 1957, and *The Castle* was for the first time translated into Polish and published in 1958, Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk* and *The Marriage* were published for the first time in Poland, and

35. Jerzy Jarzębski, “Świat jako szyfr,” in *Stanisław Lem, Pamiętnik znaleziony w wannie*, 4th ed. (Warsaw: Interart, 1997), 248–249.

the first post-war edition of his *Ferdydurke* came out in 1957 (until this moment Gombrowicz, who emigrated to Argentina in 1939, like all the expatriates, was not looked upon favorably by the communist regime). Between 1955 and 1960, Polish literary journals published Borges's short stories, including "The Library of Babel," "The Lottery in Babylon," and "The Garden of Forking Paths," which have the most in common with Lem's novel. What might support the hypothesis of influence is also the limited number and low distinctiveness of references to these texts on the textual level of Lem's *Memoirs*.

It is not my intention to criticize the hypothesis of influence here, though some of its arguments are easily refuted. For instance, it seems likely that Lem read Borges's works not only in Polish translation, because the quotations from Borges and titles of his stories mentioned in *Science Fiction and Futurology* are different than in their Polish editions, which means Lem did not have to wait for the stories to be published in Poland to read them. I treat this influence hypothesis as one of the possible ways of interpreting the intertextual connections of *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, and will return to it in the last part of this essay. For now, I would like to focus on the relationship between *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* and one of its most important hypotexts, Potocki's *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*. This connection deserves special attention, because it is the least obvious, even debatable (Jerzy Jarzębski observes that *The Manuscript* is a "distant model" for *Memoirs*<sup>36</sup>).

What does the relation between these two texts consist in?<sup>37</sup> First of all—the title. It has been said that Lem's novel evokes the eighteenth-century literary tradition of the found manuscript,<sup>38</sup> but the allusion here is much more precise. It directs the reader toward the most famous "found manuscript" in literature, the work which turned the literary convention into one of its own themes. The title of Potocki's work, emphasizing the narrative form of the novel—which in the sentimental and Enlightenment romance was usually reserved for the extended subtitle—rather than the names and trials of its protagonists,<sup>39</sup> is one of the means to achieve this. François Rosset observes that the motif of found manuscript is a "structural device outdated already in Potocki's times" and the title chosen by Potocki "after much hesitation and searching for other formulas, draws our attention to the process and method of writing, not to the subject matter, that is, hero's adventures."<sup>40</sup> *The*

36. Jarzębski, "Świat jako szyfr," 248.

37. For a detailed discussion on the links between *Memoirs* and *The Manuscript*, see Marcin Wolk and Małgorzata Glasenapp, "Two Labyrinths in Two Novels: Stanisław Lem and Jan Potocki," in *Under the Gallows of Zoto's Brothers: Essays on The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, ed. Zbigniew Białas (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2001): 188–210.

38. Stoff, *Powieści fantastyczno-naukowe Stanisława Lema*, 128.

39. Compare, e.g., the long title of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded: In a Series of Familiar Letters from a Beautiful Young Damsel, To her Parents* [. . .].

40. François Rosset, "Labirynt Jana Potockiego," *Tygodnik Powszechny* no. 14 (1996): 16.

*Manuscript Found in Saragossa* is a parody of the eighteenth-century novel, just as "Introduction" to *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* is a parody of science fiction.

The two texts are linked by their meta-literary interests, similarities in structure (frame narrative), and manner of communication (mock-documentary style). Moreover, Lem's novel utilizes many of the motifs used by Potocki. The multi-story underground castle of Cassar-Gomelez and other labyrinthine buildings in *The Manuscript* can be regarded as models for the Third Pentagon (the Building is destroyed in a similar manner to the Cassar-Gomelez castle—in an earthquake, which in Potocki's novel was artificially engineered). The institutional structure of the Pentagon corresponds to the structure of the secret Gomelez state, dominated by a religious doctrine, infiltrating governments of Christian countries, and resorting to conspiratorial methods in pursuit of dominance over the Arab world and spreading its religious beliefs. In both novels the main character (by disposition an honest and tenacious newcomer) gets lost, returns many times to the same place, and wanders around there (in *The Manuscript* it is the Sierra Morena mountains; in *Memoirs* the corridors of the Building in the Rocket Mountains). The category of betrayal plays a crucial role in both texts and the protagonist undergoes various trials, which are to determine if he is trustworthy, discreet, immune to persuasion, and not going to defect; in *The Manuscript* the hero is tempted by beautiful temptresses; in *Memoirs* this role is given to "lily white,"<sup>41</sup> the only female character introduced in the otherwise completely male world. Both texts abound in motifs of disguise, mirror reflections, secret messages which have to be decoded. Lem, one may observe, developed the motif of an encyclopedia of many volumes written by the scholar Diego Hervas in *The Manuscript* where Potocki lists the titles of Hervas' works, indicating a hundred scientific and pseudoscientific disciplines. In *Memoirs* its counterpart is the Building's library and its catalogue; the names of library sections and titles of books it contains represent the grotesquely total character of the Building and various spheres of its activity.

Such numerous and far-reaching similarities cannot be coincidental. The reader, having noticed them, naturally begins to consider their role in Lem's novel. The easily discernible analogies between the structures, styles, and ideas of the two novels might suggest that Lem made Potocki his mentor, a guiding light in his literary and philosophical pursuits. For many reasons, *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* might be read as a modern version of *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, for they share numerous characteristics: the circular narrative structure built around the motif of a journey or quest; the makeup of the protagonist who strives to complete his mission despite hindrances; the obvious fascination with the idea of infinity; or presenting reality as a labyrinth full of riddles and traps, where every occurrence might be seen as a coincidence, plot, or conspiracy.

However, *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* can also be read as a challenge to the vision of reality created by Potocki. In the famous hypotext all riddles are eventually

41. Lem, *Memoirs*, 181–183.

solved. The alleged supernatural interventions turn out to be engineered by the Gomelez (just as the hero suspected) and meant to achieve a trivial result. Harmony is restored between various religions and esoteric knowledge is reconciled with science. “The leader of the ‘powerful organization’ welcomes the new member, revealing at the same time all secrets. Alphonse [the hero] receives the key which unlocks the mystery of his own origin, while the reader is given the key to the mystery of the novel.”<sup>42</sup> In short, the enlightened reason emerges triumphant whereas daemons turn to dust, let alone fall asleep.

Unlike in Potocki’s novel, in Lem’s *Memoirs* all quests end in vain. The central, highest position in the Building is occupied by a senile and incapable old man whose power is completely illusionary. The “underground treasury,”<sup>43</sup> allegedly the hidden center of the Pentagon, is not guarded at all; the protagonist visits it inadvertently several times and finds secret documents “lying about.”<sup>44</sup> He leafs through them but realizes that they will never help him to solve any mystery for in the Building there are “thousands of safes, thousands of original documents,” of which “the first [. . .] would contradict the seventh, the seventh would contradict the nine hundred and eighty-first, and the nine hundred and eighty-first would contradict all the others.”<sup>45</sup> Lem describes a world without a center, devoid of universal meaning, constructed as an unfathomable labyrinth of signs, where the human mind cannot help but get lost.

As a literary work, *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* does not reveal its secrets either. Or rather reveals them all too readily, but it does not bring the reader closer to solving the novel’s mystery and grasping its meaning. This meaning seems to “lie about,” just like the secret files in the treasury—it is constantly hinted at. It seems hidden in the hero’s symbolic journey through the labyrinth; in his Everyman features; in the passages which suggest or even articulate possible interpretations of the nature of the Building (does it stand for the totalitarian state? God? the cosmos? human culture? science? language?). This multiplication of understandings, every one of which looks plausible, and none looks more plausible than the others, is what makes the mystery impossible to solve. There is an abundance of keys, but they turn out to be merely picklocks which give only illegitimate, “unauthorized” access to the semantic treasury of the novel.

However, is this connection between *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* and *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*, which I have just discussed, not one of such picklocks? Nearly all arguments for the existence and significance of a relationship between the two texts could be refuted. Why *The Manuscript*, this particular novel, and not generally the “found manuscript” motif as a literary convention? Because

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42. François Rosset, “W muzeum gatunków literackich: Jana Potockiego *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie*,” *Pamiętnik Literacki* 76, no. 1 (1985): 67.

43. Lem, *Pamiętnik*, 19

44. Lem, *Memoirs*, 13

45. Lem, 30.

Potocki's novel is the most famous of the kind? That would not be a satisfying answer. Because it is metaliterary, self-aware, and uses parody? Such features are typical of modern literature hence they do not need to be legitimized by literary tradition and cannot be treated distinctively as intertextual links with an older text. Because the motifs employed in the two novels are similar? Some of the motifs I discussed earlier—the labyrinth, the quest, various trials, the masquerade, the temptress—have been present in European culture for centuries. Others could be traced back to other hypotexts: the powerful organization to Kafka; the labyrinthine Building hewn in rock with a vault inside to Genet's *The Balcony* (we already know that *Memoirs* has a lot in common with Genet's play and Kafka's works). Because of the correspondence of ideas in Lem and Potocki's novels? They might be incidental, and anyway largely depend on interpretation. Because *Memoirs* contests *The Manuscript*? Well, why should a modern author challenge their literary ancestor? *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* is obviously different from *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*—like the modern rhizomatic labyrinth is different from the mannerist maze, and the Enlightenment literary sensitivity is different from the modern one—but the differences between their images of reality do not prove that the texts are engaged in dialogue.

How, then, should we answer the question about the intertextual connections between *Memoirs* and *The Manuscript*? Again, as in discussing the hypothesis of influence, we might take a closer look at the literary sources. Although Genet's *The Balcony* was published in Poland as early as in 1957, only a year later than in France, the motif of a building inside a mountain, the Mausoleum Studio, "the crown of the edifice" was introduced into the play in the second version, published in France in 1960.<sup>46</sup> It was when Lem wrote his *Memoirs* and two years after Roger Caillois published the French edition of *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* (in 1958), which was very much discussed in Parisian intellectual circles. So maybe Lem did not refer to Genet, but both of them referred to Potocki? There is no need to discuss this question here, however; it would be enough to note that it is possible to treat similarities in structure or plot between two different texts in completely different ways.

## 5

There remain two groups of problematic intertextual references in *Memoirs*. The first one includes Breza's *The Office*, Mrozek's "The Chronicle of a Besieged City," and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. There are many analogies between them and Lem's novel, which may result from shared sources of inspiration (both literary, like Kafka's works, and historical, like the nature of totalitarian regimes) or from similar issues taken up by them (like individual existence in a world dominated by bureaucratic institutions or ideologies). Some are distinct enough to be treated as direct literary allusions.

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46. For an English translation, see Jean Genet, *The Balcony*, trans. Bernard Fretchman (New York: Grove Press, 1966).

For instance, the combination of a plot structure similar to the one in Kafka's *The Trial* with the first-person narration and the setting of an imaginary siege in "The Chronicle" published in 1957 is so original that the similar construction in Lem's novel looks like an echo of Mroźek's short story. However, is it conscious and, above all, significant? Maybe the connection between *Memoirs* and "The Chronicle" (and *The Office* and other works) consists in their collective relationship with Kafka's *The Trial*, and all other similarities between them are only its consequences? One might argue, however, that Lem in *Memoirs* relates to Kafka already interpreted in other texts, such as Mroźek's short story with the weird "indictment" against the main character, whose situation symbolizes the relationship between an individual and the oppressive—and at the same time indispensable—society. Moreover, "The Chronicle" in the Poland of the 1950s and 1960s was read as a current political satire, and therefore invoking an association with it might suggest that *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* should be read in the same manner—it might function as a reader's manual of sorts.<sup>47</sup>

However, such reference to Mroźek would be devoid of any distinct textual evidence; it would be signaled solely by the similarity of motifs and structural devices, while the theoreticians of intertextuality emphasize the role of linguistic signals in meaningful intertextual relations.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, in Lem's novel there are no linguistic signals of its relationship with Kafka's *The Castle*, and yet critics have no doubts about its existence.

The last group of intertextual references in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* includes Gombrowicz's *Cosmos* and at least two of the "philosophemes" listed earlier in my essay. What is the common denominator of such different literary allusions? Their practical impossibility. The question of *Cosmos* seems obvious—it was published in 1965, and hence it could not be a source of inspiration or object of allusion for *Memoirs*, which was written in 1960. Still, two distinguished specialists on Lem's writings, Małgorzata Szpakowska<sup>49</sup> and Jerzy Jarzębski,<sup>50</sup> indicate the similarities between the two novels. These analogies are indeed striking: a chaotic universe of random structure, growing into a labyrinth of symbols and attacking an individual with meanings; meanings sprouting from the accumulation and juxtaposition of meaningless objects; an urge to decode the universe; the human's situation between contingency and determinism, freedom and necessity, chaos and order, nonsense and perfection; a peculiar, unorthodox idiolect as an alternative language which can be used to play with reality. Is it possible that Gombrowicz made references to Lem? As far as I know, there is no evidence that Gombrowicz read Lem at all.

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47. In a similar way, one could speculate on the influence of *The Office* on *Memoirs*. The first edition of Breza's novel, serialized in the weekly *Przegląd Kulturalny* (1959–1960), was entitled *Misja* [The mission], which clearly strengthens its links with Lem's work.

48. See, e.g., Nycz, "Intertekstualność i jej zakresy," 62–63.

49. Szpakowska, *Dyskusje ze Stanisławem Lemem*, 173.

50. Jarzębski, "Świat jako szyfr," 248.

However, it does not make sense to treat this impossible intertextual connection between *Memoirs* and *Cosmos* as a mistake. On the contrary, the observation made by Szpakowska and Jarzębski is consistent with the general way Lem directs his readers in *Memoirs*—the novel is full of “intertextual traps.”<sup>51</sup> I fell into one as well, tracing apparent references to several metaphors and concepts of modern philosophy in *Memoirs*.

The Building seems to be governed by a peculiarly deformed version of Peirce’s semiotics. The core of Peirce’s theory is the trilateral relation between the sign, the represented object, and the interpretant. All sides are semiotic by nature, including the object, which does not exist independent of the interpretation, but is “formed in the process of semiotic representation. We learn to recognize things only through their semiotic representations, for human thought does not experience reality directly, but lives in the world of symbols.”<sup>52</sup> The interpretation of a sign does not consist in pairing it with an object (because the relation between a sign and an object is variable), but in translating it into another sign, that is an interpretant. “There are no obvious interpretations. There are no interpretations independent from other interpretations. Each meaning must be interpreted by another one.”<sup>53</sup> This mutual translatability of signs means that the process of semiosis (and therefore interpretation) potentially never ends. The category of “final interpretant”—which in Peirce’s words is “that which would finally be decided to be the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached”<sup>54</sup>—is a boundary concept. No interpretant is final, although in practice, in a given moment of time and in a given social context, some interpretations may be treated as true and objective—that is why communication is possible at all. The problem with the semiotics of Lem’s Building is that it lacks the pragmatic rules which would stop the process of semiosis. In the Building “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.”<sup>55</sup>

The final interpretant in the novel can be symbolized by The Original, “the Document of documents, the Secret of secrets”<sup>56</sup>—the Holy Grail of old-fashioned spies, whom the protagonist meets sometimes in the Building. It could also be the “instructions,”<sup>57</sup> an unambiguous program of a “Mission” assigned to an individual agent. Both are elusive, and get lost in the quagmire of mutually falsifying

51. Jarzębski’s expression. See Jarzębski, “Intertekstualność a poznanie u Lema,” 69.

52. Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz, *Semiotyka Peirce’a* (Warsaw: Polskie Towarzystwo Semiotyczne, 1994), 59.

53. Buczyńska-Garewicz, 74.

54. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 8, ed. Arthur Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 184.

55. Lem, *Memoirs*, 65.

56. Lem, 159.

57. Lem, 16.

copies, forgeries, and reproduced “originals.” The equivalent of Peirce’s concept of the *dynamic object*—which remains intrinsically independent from the process of semiosis and thus inaccessible to human understanding—might be the world outside the Building, “There,” behind the Gate. The hero does not dare to go through “the legendary Gate,”<sup>58</sup> and the novel suggests it would mean death. Therefore, the reality of the Building is trapped in the universe of signs in which the existence of Peircean “dynamic object” (or Derridian “transcendental signified”) is solely hypothetical, just like the existence of the alleged Antibuilding, the headquarters of the enemy, which plays the role of a “constructive myth”<sup>59</sup> for the Building.

Such “semiotics” necessarily makes communication impossible. If there are endless layers of meaning behind every word, whatever one says can only provoke the addressee to turn on a “portable decoder”<sup>60</sup> which provides subsequent readings of the message, more and more detached from the speaker’s intention. That is why if Lem’s characters want to say something “for real,” they do not say anything at all (only “sigh,”<sup>61</sup> like captain Prandl) or create their own language, in opposition to the Building’s “codes” (like the “pale spy”<sup>62</sup> from the bathroom).<sup>63</sup> None of these methods succeeds in getting any message through; they can merely signal the will to communicate. But then again, any act of signaling arouses suspicions of illicit disclosure; whoever signals surely must encode some meanings, so it is necessary to discover their “real” intentions, decode their message, then decode the first reading, and so on.

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58. Lem, 16, 185.

59. Stoff, “Świat ze słów,” 129.

60. Lem, *Memoirs*, 36.

61. Lem, 70.

62. Lem, 107.

63. Here is a sample of this idiom:

You don’t believe me—all right! At least you’re trying. Listen. First they lined up for the bread, once upon a time. The last seat, toilet or otherwise, was taken. Full house. Afterwards—quit when the money’s still coming in? Then they couldn’t quit. Plant, infiltrate, fake, doctor, drug! Under the rug! Double agents, all right—triples, fine—quadruples, okay—and then quintuples come but of the woodwork! Lord knows how long this has been going on! An epidemic! A plague! Me, I tell you this, an honest, decent spy of the old school—me you can believe! [. . .] Like I say, you have time yet. Above all, keep up your strength. Regular meals, an occasional snack, cookies and milk, some cake. . . What’s the matter? You think that when I say ‘cake,’ I mean something, like maybe Headquarters or your instructions? Forget it! Cake is cake, period—at least with me. And no one sent me. I slept, I shaved, I missed supper on account of you, and now I’m off. See, I told you everything you wanted to know, and you don’t believe a word of it! Not a word, right? I spill my guts, give you the real dope on all these espials and cabals, and you go and make another puzzle out of it.

(Lem, *Memoirs*, 122–123)

The protagonist seeks refuge from this semantic trap in approaching the fellow human being. The character of these contacts encourages the reader to interpret *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* in the context of personalism and the philosophy of dialogue. We might associate the novel especially with the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas and his idea of face-to-face relation. *Memoirs* abounds in detailed descriptions of the characters' looks, most often faces and hands, which is a certain narrative peculiarity and calls for an explanation. The universal obsession with camouflage in the Building accounts for it only partially; it could be explained more fully in the context of Lévinas's philosophy. Looking at human faces, the protagonist of the novel does not look for signs of duplicity; on the contrary, he looks for signs of the true and visible presence of another human individual who might show him the truth about the reality around them and help him stand up to the totalitarian institution. Another human, whom he might not want to know, but with whom he might just communicate. The jargon used by the "spy in the bathroom"<sup>64</sup> fits the way Lévinas understands the functions of language—in contrast to the semiotics of coding and decoding which dominates the Building's reality. Lévinas emphasizes the role of individual expression in the process of language creation, its association with the desire to communicate to others, and the spontaneous production of meanings of words in conversation:

[. . .] it is not the mediation of the sign that forms signification, but signification (whose primordial event is the face to face) that makes the sign function possible. [. . .] Meaning is the face of the Other [. . .] That "something" we call signification arises in being with language because the essence of language is the relation with the Other.<sup>65</sup>

This search for direct contact and communication with another human being in *Memoirs* is doomed to fail. The first experience of seeing the face of the other inevitably turns into a cognitive process, turning the other person into an object (as every cognitive act has the power to objectify), or, more precisely, into a sign. The distinct opposition of "being" and "meaning" in the novel is eventually dissolved. In the beginning, the protagonist, not fully initiated in the Building's semiotics, sees the smell of a rose as "not a sign for anything; it is merely itself."<sup>66</sup> In the end there is nothing meaningless left; even the dead body of another in the closing chapters of the novel requires interpretation. The process of semiosis is endless.

*Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* seems to evoke associations with the thought of Peirce and Lévinas; moreover, their theories provide a good point of reference for understanding the novel, which might at times be difficult, even "ungrammatical." The problem is that it is almost certain (although—significantly—not entirely) that

64. Lem, 186.

65. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 206–207.

66. Lem, *Memoirs*, 59.

in both cases this intertextual connection is made by the reader. It is very unlikely that Lem knew the works of Peirce or Lévinas when he wrote *Memoirs*. The edition of Peirce's *Collected Papers* was completed in the United States in 1958, but it was not until the beginning of the 1960s that it attracted more considerable interest; the first review of Peirce's thought in Poland was published in 1962.<sup>67</sup> As far as Lévinas is concerned, the work *Totalité et infini*, presenting his own intellectual project, was published in France in 1961, the same year *Memoirs* was published in Poland. Polish scholarly journals published the first translations and reviews of his works in the 1970s.

## 6

It is generally assumed that if the concept of intertextuality is to be precisely defined and used as a fully operational analytical tool, it needs to be narrowed down to the references which are intended by the author, recognizable to the reader, and significant in our understanding of the hypertext.<sup>68</sup> Such a narrow definition would exclude nearly all the intertextual relationships of *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* discussed here. In the case of this novel, every connection to other texts may be disputed. The reader's awareness of their existence depends on the way the reader is capable or willing to understand the novel, and even on his or her acquaintance with other works by Lem (especially *Science Fiction and Futurology*). To acknowledge the existence of a given relationship is only the beginning—the next step is to recognize its nature and meaning. Is it an influence, a coincidence, or an allusion? A reference to a certain text or a parody of a genre? Which text does it refer to? In the case of the intertextual connections of *Memoirs* discussed here it may not be possible to give definite answers. As we have seen, the references which are distinct and clearly signaled by quotations or paraphrases may contribute less to the meaning of the novel than allusions (with all their vagueness and perplexity) or seeming intertextual connections which are in fact impossible, but still help the reader understand many of the text's intricacies.

In *Memoirs*, even the references which are more or less certain might be interpreted in many ways. They can be seen as allusions or influence, but also as a relationship similar to that which exists between text and vocabulary or between an individual structure and a set of traditional motifs. They might be, finally, also described as simply using the universally accessible supply of signs of our culture, "speaking" its language. It is not surprising that critics who mentioned the intertextuality of *Memoirs* wrote rather cautiously of "correspondence," "similarities," or "following tradition." It seems Lem indeed "follows" other writers rather than

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67. See Marek Dobrosielski, "O nowym wydaniu *Prac zebranych C. S. Peirce'a*," *Studia Filozoficzne* 3 (1962): 251–267.

68. See, e.g., Michał Głowiński, "O intertekstualności," in *Poetyka i okolice* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1992).

makes clear, unambiguous references to their works, and he does that without any reverence, which shows that he did not treat this tradition as a sacred canon of literary sources.

The number of intertextual references and allusions that seems to grow the longer one ponders over the intertextual dimension of *Memoirs*; the difficulty, if not impossibility of drawing the line between true connections with other texts and the ones that are accidental or read into the novel by the reader; and other ambiguities and uncertainties in this matter—all this makes it possible to reconstruct the plan of a well-considered writing strategy. This strategy, which might be described as totally allusive, does not work through distinct references to individual literary works. It consists in designing a text which is intertextually open, capable of establishing infinite relations with other texts and contexts, and encourages its reader to recognize all possible connections and even to make their own references. A text which at the same time intentionally hides the “certificates of origin”<sup>69</sup> of its intertextual links and impedes their identification.

Locating *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* in a vast, unlimited intertextual space does not lead to specific, premeditated meanings, but rather serves to multiply potential senses, which may be to a large extent arbitrary, as long as they are contained within certain limits. Intertextual references operate here collectively rather than as individual connections; this collective functioning manifests itself on various levels. First, the references to works which are mostly allegorical serve as a message to the reader, recommending a figurative, non-literal understanding of the novel. Intertextuality has a pragmatic function here, as it advocates a certain model of interpretation. Secondly, on the level of creating the fictional world, the structuring of the plot as a variation on the narratives written by Kafka, Borges, or Potocki suggests the previous existence of “the Building,” its perseverance, maybe eternal, in various forms: the Court, the Office, the Library, the Castle. Here, intertextuality functions as a means of philosophical reflection on the nature of our reality.

One might assume that Lem, some years before Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, discovered intertextuality in its broadest sense, as a connection between a given text and everything written beforehand (also, if we include the perspective of future readings, everything written afterwards as well). Lem skillfully manages the unsettling implications of this theory. On the one hand, the text’s entanglement in an unfathomable web of intertextual links undermines its referentiality, because “whenever [the] work seems to be referring to the world one can argue that this supposed reference is in fact a comment on other texts.”<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, such a total intertextuality undermines the status of the author as an autonomous and primal architect and creator: “utterances or texts are never moments of origin

69. Głowiński, 104.

70. That is how Jonathan Culler presents Kristeva’s and Barthes’ ideas. See Culler, “Presupposition and Intertextuality,” *Modern Language Notes* 6 (1976): 1383.

because they depend on the prior existence of codes and conventions, and it is the nature of codes to be always already in existence, to have lost origins.<sup>71</sup>

In *Memoirs*, numerous references to the literary tradition pulls this tradition into the novel. Jarzębski, after enumerating the *Memoirs*' various literary connections, observes: "All these and other similar texts should be potentially present in the Building's structure of meanings, just as the *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* itself is hidden there and even falls into the hands of the novel's protagonist."<sup>72</sup> The critic refers to the passage when the protagonist sees for a moment his "instructions," almost identical to previous fragments of the novel's narration, *his* narration.<sup>73</sup> Reading his own story written by someone else, coming from without, is deeply shocking to the hero because he realizes that the institution residing in the Building knows all his thoughts and deeds in advance, and because he understands that the existence of these "instructions" deprives him of the rights to his own life:

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, including this present moment, was in the instructions—no longer *my* instructions, they weren't made for *me* . . .<sup>74</sup>

This quotation can be ideally paired with the words uttered by the narrator of Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyk* after a verbal duel with another character (resembling Jorge Luis Borges, by the way): "I was left with no words for I had lost my tongue! [. . .] I had no Words as what [was] mine [was] not Mine, apparently Stolen!"<sup>75</sup> Unlike his hero, and that of Gombrowicz, Lem-author is not shy of using words stolen from somebody else. Moreover, he seems to be willing to give up a considerable part of his authorship to the Universal Library.<sup>76</sup> And *Memoirs* is filled with intertextual references nearly to the point of losing its own boundaries, of getting lost in literary tradition and failing to maintain the signs of authorship.

We can observe that Stanisław Lem in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* makes use of the theoretical elusiveness of the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality may

71. Culler, 1382.

72. Jarzębski, "Świat jako szyfr," 248.

73. Lem, *Memoirs*, 54

74. Lem, 124.

75. Witold Gombrowicz, *Trans-Atlantyk*, trans. Carolyn French and Nina Karsov, introduction by Stanisław Barańczak (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 34.

76. The reader of *Memoirs* cannot resist the impression that Lem shares with Gombrowicz a lack of respect for cultural tradition, expressed by the latter in *Trans-Atlantyk*: "the library, what trouble I have with it! God's curse, for these are the most precious, the most esteemed Works of geniuses, of the leading minds of Mankind only, but what, lookye, if they Bite each other, Bite, and also Cheapen from their own superabundance for there are Too Many, Too Many, and every day new ones arrive and no one can read through since too many, oh, too Many." Gombrowicz, *Trans-Atlantyk*, 82.

be obligatory, optional, or accidental. The reader and the critic are mostly interested in the references of the first kind—when the author invokes certain associations deliberately, and it is necessary for the reader to detect them if he or she is to fully understand the text—while in the case of *Memoirs*, it is often not possible to recognize which of the novel's intertextual references are intentional and which are not. Secondly, intertextuality in this narrow sense presupposes the idea of literary work which is self-sufficient, semantically complete, but simultaneously it requires that the reader knows the author's intention, the context of its creation, and its origins—which are external to the text itself. Thirdly, the theory of intertextuality has trouble with various reading modes and readers' competences, for what might be an obvious intertextual reference to one reader could be completely overlooked or dismissed by another. As we have seen, with novels like *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* it is possible that both be right.

Among Lem's writings, *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* is the most comprehensive realization of his theory that the meaning of a literary work is fully developed in the process of reception.<sup>77</sup> By writing this novel, he constructed a text which requires explanation, but at the same time allows for interpretations based on probability and randomness. It therefore excludes the possibility of a single legitimate and final understanding. This text might be characterized by the narrator's remark on the Building: "any sufficiently complex idea seem[s] to apply to the Building, to explain it . . . Odd, and a little frightening."<sup>78</sup> *Memoirs* is just that, a narrative "Building." One of the means constructing its totality is the pan-intertextual reading pre-programmed in the text. The reader, following subsequent, less and less distinct signs and traces of the novel's intertextual connections will re-create the hero's journey of interpretation—but unlike the hero can stop before it leads them too far and defeat them.

Agnieszka Gajewska, revealing the traces of the Holocaust in Lem's writing, argues that the worlds presented in his oeuvre, and in *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* in particular, "can be interpreted as a residue of personal, generational and family traumas, preserved within extraordinary spaces resembling encrusted lava, alienated and left alone, hidden away on strange planets and in windowless rooms."<sup>79</sup> Certainly, the way Lem uses intertextuality in *Memoirs* contributes to his creation of a literary world full of semantic traps which amasses senses, captures people, and is disinclined to release both humans and meanings.

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77. See Stanisław Lem, *Filozofia przypadku: Literatura w świetle empirii* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1968), especially chapter 8, "Los społeczny, czyli znaczenie dzieła" [Social fates, or the meaning of a work].

78. Lem, *Memoirs*, 113.

79. Agnieszka Gajewska, *Zagłada i gwiazdy: Przeszłość w prozie Stanisława Lema* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2016), 240. English translation: Agnieszka Gajewska, *Holocaust and the Stars: The Past in the Prose of Stanisław Lem*, trans. Karolina Gucio (London: Routledge India, 2021).