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On the Necrophilic
Style of Reading.

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Parlant au lieu de mourir

Maurice Blanchot

Reading Edgar Allan Poe's tale entitled *Loss of Breath*, Jean-Didier Urbain observed a certain lapse:

In a short time, however, we arrived at the place of sculpture, and I felt myself deposited within the tomb. The entrance was secured – they departed – and I was left alone.¹

Mr Lackobreath is unjustly sentenced to death by hanging, after which he is to be buried. However, the poor wretch loses his breath before he is hanged, so the main task of the execution cannot be completed. Lackobreath perse-

¹ See J-D. Urbain, "Rzeźba/Grób: przedmiot graniczny", trans. M. L. Kalinowski [in:] *Wymiary śmierci*, selection and introduction S. Rosiek, Gdańsk 2010, p. 309.

veres in a condition of suspended life and a death which cannot come. And it is this deferred death that makes it possible to make a peculiar reenactment of his own funeral. This peculiarity, however, does not end with its first-person narration describing the burial of a living person.

There is also a certain trifle, a word which can be easily overlooked and which awoke Urbain's curiosity. In the quoted fragment of the original text, Lackobreath arrives "at the place of sculpture", while in the French rendition the translator changed to "au lieu de la sépulture", to rectify Poe's minor error, and leave no doubt that he refers to a "place of burial". The author of the tale used the word *sculpture*, where the obvious choice in the context of the tale would be the word *sepulture*. The French scholar finds the lexical substitution of the tomb for the sculpture perplexing, and it provokes him to consider the circumstances of the creation of the text.² The scholar's thesis that the tale becomes a place for projecting Poe's imagination (personified and lived by his double, Mr Lackobreath) leads to the conclusion that

2 The sculpture is a separator and prevents from permeating into the other world appearing exactly at the moment when Lackobreath expects to pass from life to death preserving a full, though impossible consciousness of the passage. According to Urbain the substitution made by the author of *The Black Cat* serves a semiotic function. It is the evidence that something has been concealed, that the world has been divided along the category of life and non-life while by becoming a part of literary fiction it lifts censorship to reveal the referential fullness of a sign that becomes a screen upon which all the myths of fantasies of the "other side" are projected. The other side is perceived thanks to it as a populated and inhabited site.

The author, conflated in one character with his double, seems someone who is in the darkness of a closed coffin, under a shroud, which block his access to the outside world (...). If a lapse is usually a symbolical manifestation of the unconscious in the consciousness, the irruption of imagination into the real world, then, considering the circumstances presented here, in the tale in question, the phenomenon needs to be acknowledged, vice versa, as a sudden appearance of reality in the imagined world described by the author.³

The Reading practised by the French scholar required then activating certain contexts of Poe's epoch, convincing readers about intrusions into the orders of life and death, and bestowing the status of primary main *signifiant* upon the sculpture (the Funerary Object), which will send the reader beyond the order of literary fiction, to the reality contemporary to the author himself. That is why Jean-Didier Urbain, in the conclusion of his text, does not hesitate to argue that

if objectively the Funerary Object censors, conceals and obfuscates, then, subjectively, demarcating a certain boundary, it inclines the living to ascribe the non-empty "other side", corporeal density, to it and to perceive it as inhabited space (...) and even to bestow a personality upon it.⁴

3 Ibidem, p. 314.

4 Ibidem.

The interpretation of the French scholar consisting in the separation of the order of the objective status of the Object and its subjective (since it is ascribed to Poe) perception allows us to state that the peculiar substitution in the text is the outcome of the operation of the author's consciousness, his conviction about the magical properties of the Object and the referential fullness of the sign. Thereby, to continue reasoning in the spirit (ambiguity intended) of Urbain, it may be argued that by offering resistance to the reading of the tale the persistently present sculpture is much more provoking and inspiring for the reading of the text than the absent tomb/burial would have been since it would not have created the possibility of reaching "beyond the text" if it were merely an expected and comprehensible element of the tale. Yet, what the interpretation of the scholar (who employs anthropological-semiotic instruments) does not address may well be an equally interesting treatment of *sculpture* as a *sepulture*. The non-living, but also undead protagonist, Mr Lackobreath situates his desire to stay alive in an "open tomb" as something located between life and death. Seeing a sculpture where there should be tombs may well be a strategy for escaping the ambiguity of the tomb/burial.⁵ It is as though the moment of perceiving a figure were a desperate attempt to capture life where it is no longer there. For this reason, the object works like an open grave amongst others which

5 The open grave awakens terror by the risk of closing and unequivocal ascribing of the character who lies in it to the space of death although, in his situation, when he is treated as a non-living person, the solution would put the inconveniences of his peculiar position to an end. On the other hand, the open grave does not yet fully fulfil its function which is the preservation of the corpse in an isolation in such a way as to preclude its permeation to the world of the living.

are closed and immersed in death. Whoever takes a peek into an open grave without feeling abhorrence but rather a curiosity about the peculiar object, finds himself in the position of a *quasi*-necrophile. What is in the grave is detached from the life of the biological individual. It is what the subjectivity of the onlooker is defined against.

However, a particular, singular grave which the subject faces invites him to confront a desire to last in a special way, while the border between “interior” and “exterior”, the space of the living and the dead, seems to be prone to interference. The subject learns to trespass their own condition, to open themselves up to death, while death returns to them as a desire deposited in the grave and prior to death. For this reason, whenever a grave is opened (in the sense of the violation of the border), what is located there returns as something different. It is never the way it could have been before it was buried in the crypt. Eventually, the subject, who by his (non)presence crosses a border, conceals and disguises an absence, but also, as Derrida says in *Fors*, “disguise[s] the act of hiding” and “hide[s] the disguise”, “reveals a secret which is already always detached, separated, placed outside.”⁶ For the self-returning process to arise, death is necessary. Here I will risk the kind of reading suggested in the title, or, to be more exact, of reading and of writing. Of reading/writing about the crypt but also from the crypt. Reading/writing, as I will try to demonstrate, which will always be necrophiliac acts. Derrida’s project, supplemented by Blanchot’s consider-

6 J. Derrida, “Fors”, trans. B. Johnson [in:] *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word. A Cypotomy*, trans. N. Rand, Minnesota 1986, pp. xiv-xv.

ations about the qualities of language and their consequences, will be in this article treated as a certain kind of thinking about the strategy for the reception of a literary text remaining in an alienable relation with everything that haunts it, and thereby conditioning and anticipating the condition of the reading subject. Hélène Cixous in her essay "The School of Death" says: "To begin (writing, living) we must have death."⁷ She then declares: "I like the dead, they are the doorkeepers who while closing one side "give" way to the other."⁸ The expression "give way" suggests a certain space in between, of a kind of transborder which conditions the state of suspension between the past and the present. Yet the door makes it possible for what is dead to cross the border and come to us, or even "into us", while what is "in us" becomes possible thanks to death as a cause of the memory about the deceased and about us who were attached to them. It needs to be borne in mind, however, as Derrida points out, that in mourning, "[w]e weep precisely over what happens to us when everything is entrusted to the sole memory of what is 'in me' or 'in us'."⁹ That is why the truth of the dying of another is an impossibility, only their endless recollection from the beginning and with no end. Recollection is a process which is always "in between", which exposes primarily the one who recollects. Who in the space of death recollects life is subject to the influence of ghosts and spectres, evoked by the desire of the subject. A desire to learn life and the

7 H. Cixous, "The School of Death" [in:] *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. S. Cornell, S. Sellers, New York 1993, p. 5.

8 Ibidem.

9 J. Derrida, "Mnemosyne" [in:] *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. C. Lindsay, J. Culler, New York 1986, p. 33

process of learning, as Derrida says in *Spectres of Marx*, can take place solely

*between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone. What happens between two (...) can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some host (...) So it would be necessary to learn spirits. Even and especially if this, the spectral, is not. Even and especially if this, which is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, is never present as such.*¹⁰

The problematic “in between” is also the space of literature itself. Literature happens between the writer and the reader, between myself and the other; it is about experiencing rather than cognizing, about “haunting” rather than being. For this reason writing/reading, ghosts and haunting are not so much related as downright inseparable: “everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of the other.”¹¹ That is why this kind of writing/reading is also writing “from crypt”, because it continuously moves the border of concealing and revealing, remembering and forgetting. Such a practice concerns then the movement *fort/da*, which makes it possible to drive circles around the secret of the crypt.¹² This concerns the secret, which is constituted at the cost of dividing the “self”, which can find internal res-

10 J. Derrida, *Spectres of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf, New York 1994, p. xvii.

11 Ibidem, p. 174

12 While the anthropology of the grave in Urbain's version highlights the significance of the necessity of moving away from the crypt, of maintaining a distance, in Derrida's consideration maintaining distance is not possible at all.

cue only by placing the secret exactly within the crypt, that is inside, being simultaneously outside of the “self”.¹³ The secret possessed by the “self” must be inside, that is, outside. What does this mean? The secret must be concealed from others, otherwise it would not be a secret, while at the same time it must be concealed for others. It cannot be decoded by the subject which possesses it while it can always be “misread” by another. Yet, it cannot exist without the risk of misreading. Neither can the “self” exist without it. Derrida takes up here an interesting motif which appeared many times in Maurice Blanchot’s writings. It is a question of the ways of protecting one’s own individuality presented in an act of writing if each instance of writing requires its subjection to what is distinct and different. How is it possible not to become dispersed and “misread” if the individuality must be shared? In *L’Ecriture du disaster* Blanchot observes:

To write (of) oneself is to cease to be, in order to confide in a guest – the other, the reader – entrusting yourself to him who will henceforth have as an obligation, and indeed as a life, nothing but your inexistence.¹⁴

13 According to Derrida’s interpretation, the crypt is a place of “purloin[ing] *the Thing*” from itself (“Fors”, op.cit., p. xiv). The secret, deposited within the crypt must be outside of the “self” which places it therein while the secret continues to be a part of the “self”, its most intimate fragment. Derrida’s entire complex reasoning aims to present the crypt as a place of the division of the “self”, which simultaneously conceals and exposes its secret. The “self” can maintain its internal cohesion (which is the secret itself, the condition of identity) only thanks to placing it outside of itself, in the place where it will be exposed to the view of others (“Fors”, op.cit., p. xiv).

14 Maurice Blanchot. *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln 1995, p. 64.

Existence through inexistence is according to Blanchot the only condition which a writing subject can possess. His secret is truly “his” only when it ceases to be his and the writer himself or herself slides into death. In the continuation of the analysis of Blanchot’s remarks about the language¹⁵, Derrida concludes that “one writes (...) for the dead” and “every name is the name of someone dead”. Since “if the destination of one’s own writing is names or if one writes in order to call names, then one writes also for the dead”. And it does not concern death in general but a particular dead person so that in every text there is someone, a man or a woman, a single figure of death to whom the text is directed and who it denotes¹⁶.

To elucidate the convoluted logic in the context of the consideration about the crypt, it is necessary to look at its topography first. The crypt constitutes the subject of Derrida’s considerations in the already cited *Fors*¹⁷. Already the title of the essay calls for an explanation. In the French expression *le for intérieur* “for” denotes the inner heart, the interior of the subject. In plural “fors” – derived from the Latin *foris* (“outside”) – is an archaic preposition which means “except for”. The word “fors”, as Barbara Johnson further explains, means both interiority and

15 Blanchot in the majority of his writings, both critical and literary, struggled with his own assertion: “When I speak, death speaks in me” (see: “Literature and the Right to Death” [in:] M. Blanchot, *The Work Of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E Wellbery, Stanford 1995, p. 323). Language gives rise to being, but it gives rise to it already devoid of being since it is its absence, void, what has remained of it when it already has lost being.

16 “Roundtable on Autobiography” [in:] *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. P. Kamuf, New York 1985, p. 53.

17 The text is a tour-de-force of a foreword for the interpretation of the condition of the Wolf-Man made by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. It focuses in particular on the “psychotopography” of the incorporation fantasy.

exteriority, and refers in particular to their problematic spatial relation¹⁸. Therefore, when in the fragment quoted above Derrida pointed out that while writing one writes also for death, it may also mean that it does not concern only the subject, who is performing the act after death, but also that death itself stands in for him or her, that it is death that writes through the writing of the writer. The one who writes as a living–dead on behalf of death but also with death itself. The consideration of the problem of the crypt should then be by definition a “contract with the dead”¹⁹, a contract made both between the writer and the reader and between the ghosts which I follow in this text.

Let us ask then, just like Derrida asks in his own text, “what is a crypt?” The question does not refer to a general theory of the crypt. It is implausible to ask about crypt in general. It is possible to consider only one, which is “this one out of which and with which I write”²⁰.

The topography of the crypt, or, following Derrida, „topography”²¹, consists in its situation outside of the natural order: “the striking history of an artifice, an architecture ,an artifact: of a place comprehended within another but rigorously separate from it, isolated from general space

18 See: translator’ note, “Fors”, op. cit., p. xi-xiii.

19 J. Derrida, “Fors”, op. cit., p. xxxviii.

20 Ibidem, p. xi.

21 This displacement aims to exploit and too expose the categories which are directly related to the crypt or which are its components: *topoi*, death, cipher. They are not essential attributes which lend themselves to hierarchization and ordering. “Their being together did not just happen; their unity is irreducible only with respect to the crypt they constitute through and through: That unity is only thinkable from out of this crypt, here. (Ibidem, p. xiv)

by partitions, an enclosure, an enclave. So as to purloin the Thing²² from the rest.”²³ That is why Derrida will also say the “inhabitant of a crypt is always a living dead”²⁴, detached from “the rest”, from life, and yet “living” and understood by means of non-presence at (no)place (*non-lieu*) of transborder nature. In the common understanding the crypt usually conceals something that is already dead; a dead being which we keep as alive although it is dead. As long as it is kept this way (also in us), it continues intact as alive²⁵. Something that is placed in the crypt and that returns from it in the shape (?) of a spectre is connected to desire. (“The crypt is the vault of desire”²⁶) The economic function of the crypt is a “safekeeping” of something that could return to “the game” at any moment, taking in a way our position in it (just like Blanchot’s reader of his writings). Slavoj Žižek, considering the presence of the “living dead” in the cultural imagery, notes that the deceased returns from the grave to the living to claim an unpaid, symbolical debt²⁷. Abraham and Torok, in an essay entitled *The Lost Object-Me* explain the strategy of the return of the spectre by means of the category of “reincarnation” and broaden the problems in question by adding the issues of the construction of the *ego*:

22 It is a reference to Heidegger’s understanding of the Thing and to Lacan, who developed the trope further, but eventually betrayed it. Derrida rejects both interpretations pointing out that the movement by which nature separates itself from itself by placing itself in the crypt simultaneously erases the movement in such a way that what is placed inside cannot recognise its own condition as that which is already inside.

23 Ibidem, p. xiv.

24 Ibidem, p. xix.

25 Ibidem, p. xxi.

26 Ibidem, p. xvii

27 S. Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge-Massachusetts-London 2000, p. 23.

*The 'shadow of the love object' strays endlessly about the crypt, until it is finally reincarnated in the person of the subject. (...) The mechanism consists of exchanging one's own identity for a fantasmic identification with the "life" – beyond the grave –of [a lost] object of love.*²⁸

Does it not resemble the situation of Mr Lackobreath from Poe's tale mentioned at the beginning? His verbal lapse is an acceptance of the mask which identifies him with life, virtually an extraction of himself out of the grave to which he does not want to belong. Lackobreath, losing breath, was not deprived of life. Being hanged, he perseveres as a living organism, describing himself as a living being as though he was taking on himself the lost life, to identify himself before the others who were often confused by his condition. Laid in the grave Lackobreath does not look for a way out, or, as Derrida has it, does not say a radical "no" to the space in which he found himself²⁹ but at the same time he cannot identify with it. This space with which he will not be identical and in which he will not achieve full identification because he does not want to acknowledge its mortuary dimension. "[I]dentity can only affirm itself as identity by opening itself to the hospitality of a difference from itself or of a difference with itself"³⁰.

28 Quoted after: J. Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida's Ghost Writing*, Quebec 2001, p. 10.

29 "Is this strange space *hermetically* sealed? The fact that one must always answer yes and no to this question that I am deferring here will have already been apparent from the topographical structure of the crypt" (p.xiv). The negation of this space would be paramount to the acknowledgement of its sealed and inaccessible nature Chile Lackobreath wants to exploit its ambiguity.

30 Quoted after: *Mapping Michel Serres*, Michigan 2005, p. 232.

The opening to the hospitality of a difference by means of which and with which the “self” gains conditions for being the self (thanks to the inner secret already always remote from the “self”) becomes possible exactly thanks to the crypt. When the lost object (returning to Abraham and Torok’s observations) is incorporated by the self, it begins to live as its part, kept in security by but also in the alienation from the very “self”. What is dead, lost, is resurrected in the crypt of the “self”, but by rising from the dead it performs a funeral of its idiom by the “reproduction” in the “self”. However, the “self” also undergoes the process.³¹ It is re-produced because, as Abraham and Torok say, the identity of the living is replaced. How can I be sure in such conditions of what is absolutely mine? It is the uncertainty that is most essential here. The crypt is both a house inhabited by the spectre possessing a living “self”, entertaining its guest, as well as a grave of all the individuality. However, both the house and the grave are subject to annihilation. Besides, the very classification into a guest and a host in this scenario seems impossible to endorse. “As Derrida points out, the hospitality of the one who appears to be receiving is in fact preceded by the hospitality of the one who seems to be being received, and who is expected to show gratitude.” It is hard to resolve then “which one gives and which receives, which one is inviter and which invited”. Considering the difficulties, “[w]e cannot even (...) speak of the crypt as a receptacle”

31 This the principle of signature, which according to Derrida, is both the tomb of the text and its erection. “The signature remain(s) both the house and tomb”. Text functions so as to process its own mourning. And the other way round. See: *Glas*, trans. J. P. Leavy, Jr., R. Rand, Lincoln and London 1986, pp. 4–5.

and “the answer to Derrida’s question”³² what it can then be is: “No crypt presents itself”.³³ “The problematics of the spatial dynamics of the crypt are constantly crumbling into aporetic rubble. Ruin is the principle of its possibility.”³⁴

Since the signature of the text (of the proper name) can conceal another signature the moment can be called “ghost writing” in reference to Ruth Parkin-Gounelas’ claim that “Derrida’s text is haunted by Marx, just as Marx’s texts are ... haunted by Max Stirner, whose own texts, Derrida tells us, are haunted by Hegel’s”.³⁵

Words behave just like spectres, ghosts, words of desire, excluded from the unconscious, as is mentioned by Abraham and Torok, when they discuss the fantasy of incorporation. According to Derrida the language which inhabits the crypt is a form of words, “buried alive”³⁶, returning from the place where they were hiding from the ego, as different words, which are also concealed, or as physical symptoms, “as different words”, that is words precluding discerning of any primality, pointing to detachment and dispersal rather than to a possibility of accessing the source.³⁷ Every time, in every successive act of reading,

32 *Mapping Michel Serres*, ed. N. Abbas, Michigan 2005, p. 233.

33 J. Derrida, “Fors”, op. cit., p. xiv.

34 *Mapping Michel Serres*, ed. N. Abbas, Michigan 2005, p. 233.

35 Quoted in J. Castricano, *Cryptomimesis: The Gothic and Jacques Derrida’s Ghost Writing*, Quebec 2001, p. 22.

36 J. Derrida, “Fors”, op. cit., p. XXV.

37 Abraham and Torok analysing the case of Wolf-Man point to the fact that in successive analyses two independent people appeared in one figure, none of which constituted the “authentic identity” of the patient. Cf. zob. *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word...*, op. cit., p. 3.

writing, there is another word. And also a different death. And perhaps above all a different delight of death. The secret kept in the crypt is inexpressible, but possible, and even meant to be discovered by another. The secret may be Barthes' text of bliss – inexpressible and prohibited.³⁸

Poe, Didier-Urbain, Derrida *et al.*, who are haunting my text, “haunt” (to use Blanchot’s word) me as well. But it is also me who visits them. Their inexistence is also a question of my interpretation. Their observations return, but as “other words”, captured by me. The crypt from which I evoke them is temporarily mine (the crypt from which the ghost comes back belongs to someone else³⁹). To whom mine will belong when I come back? In relation to so delineated, entangled chain (lechery of what is entangled, as Richard Rorty⁴⁰ wrote about Derrida) the motto on the promotional materials of the main academic library in Kraków seems terribly adequate – “We all read dead people”.

Bio

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38 See R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York 1975, p. 47.

39 J. Derrida, “Fors”, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

40 See R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge 1989.

Abstract

The article attempts to read and to use the category of the “crypt” from Jacques Derrida’s *Fors* to develop a different way of thinking about a literary text and the strategies of its reading. The author ponders how such concepts as the “spectre”, “crypt” and “haunting” influence the perception of the condition of every reader and what kind of reading delight they engender.

Derrida’s dictionary is supplemented by critical categories suggested by Maurice Blanchot (e.g. his reflections on language as death), which makes it possible to look at the act of reading as a strategy of necrophile pleasure that can constitute another option of thinking of the experience of reading and writing understood as confrontations with spectral presence.

translated by Joanna Maciulewicz