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The grotesque in the works of Bruno Jasiński



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Introduction

A rano, kiedy przyjdą i wyważą drzwi,
będę leżał na ziemi spokojny i siny [...] i wtedy ujrzą przedmiot, co mi z ust się zwiesza:
mój siny, napęczniały, przegryziony język,
jak wąska
nieodcyfrowana depesza.
— Bruno Jasiński, *Morse*

In the morning, when they come
and force the door open,
I will be lying on a floor silent and blue [...] they will notice an object hanging from my mouth:
my blue, swollen tongue bitten through,
like a narrow
undeciphered cablegram.

An assertion that ‘to examine Bruno Jasiński’s literary career is not an easy task’ (Kolesnikoff 1982:123) is one of the few non-controversial statements one can make about this futurist turned Communist, this poet, novelist, dramatist and short story writer. The task of critical evaluation of his works is complicated further by the nimbus of secrecy surrounding Jasiński’s personal life. Little is known, particularly of the years he spent in the Soviet Union. The fact that Jasiński was arrested and executed by Stalin’s secret police in September 1937 meant that his name was to be forgotten, along with everything he had ever written or published. In consequence, neither the manuscripts of his works, nor any other significant source material such as diaries, notes or correspondence, was accessible to the scholarly community.

To this day the only legitimate legacy of Bruno Jasiński is that of his literary works republished after his official rehabilitation in 1956. Critical material dealing with his works is limited to a few general studies and none

of them comprehensively examines his whole creative output. Scholars prefer to confine their research to the writer's place of residence or his association with literary movements. As a rule, Polish criticism deals with Jasiński's futuristic poetry created before 1925, while Russian scholarship emphasises his masterful application of socialist realism in his two novels written for the Soviet reader, *Man changes his skin* (*Человек меняет кожу*) and *A conspiracy of the indifferent* (*Заговор равнодушных*). All scholars seem to agree that growing ideologically, Jasiński renounced the avant-garde and its ideals, and embraced socialist realism as his only creative method. The fact that throughout his artistic career Jasiński remained faithful to his futuristic ideal of freedom of expression is downplayed as much as is the fact that his support for socialist realism was at best selective. Little attention is given to the fact that even though Jasiński advocated the artists' obligation to society – to uplift, to teach and to warn – he upheld the right to imagination and bold experiment to the end of his life, as seen in his numerous articles published in the Soviet press, even as late as 1936 at the peak of the 'terror' of socialist realism.

The real difficulty in evaluating Jasiński's writing lies, however, not in the complexity of his artistic career but in the ambivalent and incongruous nature of his writing. This point applies as much to his early futuristic poems as to his mature grotesque satires, all of which still remain like an 'undeciphered cablegram' – as his poem foretells – holding the secret to Jasiński the artist and the man. The contention underlying this study is that the grotesque is one of the most significant artistic devices chosen by Jasiński as a device that enables him to project – initially to highlight and later to conceal – his personal anxiety over the challenges facing his generation. As this study intends to show, the grotesque features consistently in Jasiński's works throughout his artistic career, regardless of the genres he chose, and notwithstanding his political affiliation or place of residence. The grotesque unifies his whole creative output into one whole, throwing light on the artist's view of the world. The aim set for this project is thus to provide an analytical account of Bruno Jasiński's grotesque works beginning with his poetry, including the long poem *The lay of Jakub Szela* (*Słowo o Jakubie Szeli*), his early prose, namely *The legs of Isolda Morgan* (*Nogi Izoldy Morgan*) and *I burn Paris* (*Pałę Paryż*), the play *The ball of the mannequins* (*Bal*

manekinón) and the short stories: 'Bravery' ('Мужество'), 'The chief culprit' ('Главный виновник') and 'The nose' ('Нос').

In order to set up a theoretical framework for the survey of the grotesque in Jasieński's works, a brief summary of the development of this artistic device is given in Chapter I. The understanding of the grotesque applied in this study stems from a wide reading on the subject rather than being based on one particular interpretation. Almost all scholars of the grotesque agree that it represents a world that is enigmatic and incoherent, a world that is composed of elements that are inherently incompatible. There is also consensus that the grotesque cannot be defined as representing a universe which is real or fantastic because the interplay of both these elements in a work is frequently of paramount importance to creating the necessary effect of unfathomable incongruity. A similar element of interplay applies to other categories of human experience which makes the grotesque immanently ambivalent, being neither wholly real nor fantastic, neither bad nor good, neither moral nor immoral, neither tragic nor comic. Emphasis is placed on the tendency of the grotesque to challenge established authority, to undermine the hierarchy of values accepted in a given epoch, and to reject its aesthetic code. In addition to this, scholars point out that grotesque work defies unequivocal interpretation. The reader, realising that his or her efforts to comprehend the universe portrayed in such a work are futile, is left with the feeling of emotional discomfort.

Since Jasieński identified himself and his work with two literary trends – the avant-garde and socialist realism – the attitude of these trends towards the grotesque is briefly outlined. The concise summary of the relationship of the grotesque with the avant-garde and socialist realism leads to the conclusion that while the avant-garde embraced the grotesque as one of the most versatile modes of expression, socialist realism with its neo-classical approach to art dismissed it entirely. Socialist realists were forced strictly to obey the prescriptive rules for creative writing set out by Stalinist apparatchiks. Their works had to be constructive and instructive, that is, they had to set out in their works positive, edifying examples of the human contribution in the building of communism and to inspire readers to follow this path. Authoritarian socialist realism could not permit the ambivalence and incongruity on which the iconoclastic grotesque thrives.

Being one of the leading Polish futurists, Bruno Jasiński accepted the grotesque within a framework of avant-garde artistic programmes which called for total rebellion against the moral, social and political establishment. This attitude transpires from his early theoretical writing, namely his futuristic manifestos. Departing from the futuristic position that the world ceased to be comprehensible in simple and logical terms, Jasiński rejected common-sense logic as outdated and useless in times in which the world is undergoing technological revolution and social upheaval. Jasiński also placed great emphasis on the form of the new art, believing that it must provide readers with a ‘mind-blowing’ experience. In order to shock placid provincial townspeople, he called for artists to experiment boldly with various means of expression – to rely on logical ‘somersaults’ to use his own terminology. Later, as a Soviet writer, Jasiński seems to have embraced the new political order, but, admitting to an unreserved support for the ideas underlying the doctrine of socialist literature, he blamed narrow-minded and uninformed bureaucrats for strangling any manifestation of intellectual independence and artistic freedom. Although the element of open rebellion in his theoretical and critical pronouncements is subdued if at all present, he continued to use the grotesque in a number of his works, which had to be seen by his opponents as an act of dissent or even deliberate provocation on his part.

Although in examining the grotesque in Jasiński’s works the chronological sequence of their appearance was observed – the study progresses from his early poetry and ends on the analysis of his short stories – the chronology has no other significance than to provide a framework for the evolution of the targets, intensity and function that the grotesque is ascribed by the author. In his earliest poems Jasiński directs one of his most violent attacks at the old art, especially at its decadent and pointless self-indulgence. He calls for the new art to become a part of everyday life, to be topical, to reflect the strife of the day. The grotesque is for him a device that highlights both his revulsion with symbolism as a hallmark of the immediate past and his fascination with the new art. Almost concurrently with his aesthetic concerns, Jasiński becomes interested in the matters of everyday life. His futuristic poetry targets the modern city populated by lonely and anonymous people, not so much lost in the labyrinth of streets as

in the labyrinth of life itself. Jasiński's urban landscapes are hostile to humans, but each human being is hostile to another human being. The relationships between people lack compassion and love; instead, they are based on the need to dominate, whether by violating another person's rights or his or her body. Human tragedy is met with indifference and remains as anonymous as a victim. The world Jasiński depicts is deceptive and full of misleading appearances; expectations lead nowhere and there is no common-sense causal correlation between, or explanation of, events.

Many of the poems reveal Jasiński's acute awareness of social injustice. His attitude towards the downtrodden is obscured, however, by the grotesque indeterminacy which affects his portrayal of the masses, marked both by admiration, fear and even contempt. One of the significant characteristics of Jasiński's grotesque is the lack of a fixed point of view and the elusive nature of truth. His concern that truth is relative received the fullest exposure in his most mature narrative poem *The lay of Jakub Szela* where he undertakes the revision of history on the grounds of class consciousness. Choosing one version of an historical event, Jasiński ascribes it to the historically disadvantaged masses of Polish peasantry. In this poem, intended as a token of Jasiński's ideological commitment to the masses, the grotesque is at its most disturbing since the reader is led to believe that brutal murder may be justified by what the poet calls 'historical justice'. Because of the complex nature of *The lay of Jakub Szela*, in this study only the motif of dance is singled out for close examination as the one which effectively represents the relativity of perception and illusory nature of human relations. Jasiński turns dance into a powerful grotesque representation of the peasants' bloody mutiny against their landlords. The grotesque, initially used by the poet as a novel and extravagant device – for instance an unusual simile or metaphor, odd personification or blasphemous rhetoric – eventually becomes Jasiński's favourite stylistic technique rendering the universe emerging from his poetry ambivalently estranged and incomprehensibly ominous.

Jasiński's first attempt at prose is associated with a short novella, *The legs of Isolda Morgan*, published during Jasiński's association with futurism. The novella deals with the issue that was central in all futuristic programmes, namely technological advancement and its effect on society. As was the case

in his poetry, the device of the grotesque affects almost every aspect of the text. The portrayed universe is strange and threatening, human characters are devoid of essential humanness and live only by their obsessions, while machines are imbued with evil intelligence and a determination to destroy people. According to Jasiński's own introduction to *The legs of Isolda Morgan*, this work captures the moment of distress in social consciousness caused by people perceiving machines as threatening to replace humans. The novella shows the process of machines assuming human characteristics, and people becoming soulless and emotionless automata. The moment of this vanishing of the distinction between human and mechanical categories is portrayed as particularly dangerous, causing the dissipation of traditional human values, such as compassion, respect or love. The cult of the machine, the young futurist seems to warn, will be perilous to society if people forfeit human values and moral integrity.

A similarly strange and threatening universe is created in Jasiński's polyphonic novel *I burn Paris*, written and published in France, where he lived for four years between 1925 and 1929. The novel voices unequivocal rejection of the world as it is and marks the culmination of Jasiński's apocalyptic sentiments, underscored by the panoramic exposure of the moral degeneration and physical dilapidation of the European metropolis. The novel develops the theme of an individual, rebelling against the oppressive social system which he blames for the widespread crumbling of standards. His personal problems and his retrenchment (as evidence of social injustice) set off in the young proletarian Pierre, obsessive hatred directed at all the inhabitants of Paris, prompting him to kill them all by contaminating the city's water conduit with microbes of bubonic plague. Based on the novel's intrinsic contention that the ends justify the means, the narrative concludes with the vision of a future proletarian city, built in the place of the evil world that has been destroyed by the plague.

The grotesque affects the style of the novel as much as it affects its universe and the portrayal of its various characters. The style of the novel is saturated with figurative devices ranging from outlandish comparisons and similes to the most elaborate metaphors. The function of the poetics in the novel is to enhance the ambiguity of its universe in which nothing is what it appears to be. Although Pierre's reasoning develops logically as he under-

goes a *sui generis* metamorphosis from a victim to the avenger, the reader cannot reconcile trivial causes with the final apocalyptic destruction of the city and its multicultural and multiracial population. The unresolved nature of the narrative perspective prevents the reader from distinguishing between the 'objective' reality, that is, the one perceived by the (implied) author or the narrators and the subjective perception born in the traumatised mind of Pierre.

The examination of the various aspects of the grotesque in the novel suggests that Jasieński, like his hero Pierre, resented the world, its social order and moral foundations. As the author of the novel he applies every artistic resource to justify the destruction of this world and makes room for the new better world, emulating the biblical paradigm. However, having no sound ideological background and, evidently, little faith in people's ability to build an ideal world, the author fails to paint a vision of a future proletarian State that would be both convincing and alluring. As was the case with Jasieński's ambivalent attitude to the masses seen in his poetry, here too one observes a striking discord between his emotional solidarity with the socially disadvantaged and his intellectual resentment of the uneducated and unsophisticated mob.

I burn Paris is Jasieński's last work where the grotesque is used predominantly to enhance the expressiveness of the text and to stimulate the reader. Up to the moment of completing this novel the grotesque was for Jasieński a tool both to awaken the audience to the problems of the day and to provoke, giving him at the same time the opportunity to express his own radical dissatisfaction with the world. After his arrival in the Soviet Union in May 1929, he could officially publish his grotesque works only as satires. But the relationship of the grotesque and satire is a complex one, as critics note, and if not used cautiously, the grotesque may obscure both the message and the satirical targets in satirical grotesques. Moreover, the grotesque is both a 'magnifying glass' (Mann 1970:133–144) and a 'vault' of meaning (Harpham 1982:27). As a 'magnifying glass', the grotesque helps authors of satire in highlighting issues and problems which they want to expose. As a 'vault', it harbours secrecy and conceals alternative meanings. The grotesque text may thus be an effective mask preventing the reader from ever seeing the true face of the author, that is, from ever knowing for

certain what his or her true intentions are. These two qualities fully apply to Jasieński's Soviet works selected for the analysis in the last chapter of this study. While the objectives of the satirical attack in each of these works are relatively easy to identify, the reader is compelled to look for the possibility of a hidden deeper meaning.

Jasieński's first work published in May 1929, shortly after his arrival in the Soviet Union, was *The ball of the mannequins*, intended by its author as a comedy deriding French social democrats. The most effective grotesque in this play originates in the confusion of humans and human-like objects, that is, tailors' dummies. The virulent comment this grotesque comedy seems to make is that the similarity in shape mirrors the inner vacuity shared by its human characters and the mannequins. The universe of the play is ambivalent – fantastic and verifiable at the same time. Its population consists of creatures that are neither human nor inanimate marionettes. The traditional hierarchy of values is frustrated when the highest respect is given to social status and outward appearance. Language is deprived of its communicative value; instead, the play's characters develop a peculiar jargon, the linguistic simplicity of which reflects their moral and spiritual emptiness. Although the play was intended for a Soviet audience, its author deliberately fails to make an emphatic distinction between the 'evil' capitalist society and the 'good' Communists, since the jargon of the play applies to both, encouraging the reader to draw analogies. The play's overall misanthropic tonality also sanctions the assertion that human weaknesses such as thirst for power, toadying, greed, vanity, and misuse of language are universal characteristics of people – scheming politicians and competitive party officials especially.

As the action develops, the comedy assumes significance as a tragic comment on the epoch in which all the beacons of orientation have shifted to the point that it is no longer clear who merits respect and who deserves contempt. Neither appearance nor language provides reliable guidelines in human relations. Apart from its superficial comment on the hypocrisy of French democrats, this grotesque comedy illustrates the breakdown in interpersonal communication in a world that worships status and appearance, and hides behind euphemisms, ideological slogans and political new-speak. Moreover, Jasieński, who never made his own voice distinguishable from other voices heard in his works, here too might have used the text as a

mask for his own admission to having fallen victim to the misleading appearances and slogans which lured him to the idea of Communism and subsequently to the Soviet Union.

Jasieński, who since his early futuristic manifestos believed that it is the artist's obligation to react to the burning issues of the day, eventually turned his attention to the matters of the totalitarian threat which dominated the political scene in the thirties. During the years 1935 and 1936 he published three short stories, apparently intended for a collection of 'unusual stories' (Dziarnowska 1982:498), with a common theme: individual versus the State and its parsimonious needs. In all three cases the human life is lost in the name of the regime. In 'Bravery' individuals represented by young Komsomol activists recognise the priority of the State's needs, heroically sacrificing their young lives, or so the official version wants the public to believe. The story poses a question, whether the Communist State has the right to prejudice the worth of human life on the grounds of its use for the Party. In 'The chief culprit' the individual fears the Fascist regime and hates its omnipotence, but is helpless in fighting it and loses his life. In 'The nose' the individual is a prominent Nazi scientist who devises ideological justification for the oppressive system to which he eventually falls victim.

The grotesque interacts with satire in all three tales, although the intensity of both the grotesque and satire changes from story to story. In 'Bravery' there are only subtle hints at the absurdity of interpersonal relationships within the hierarchy of Soviet bureaucracy, while 'The chief culprit' voices radical contempt for the menacing lunacy of military regimes. In this trilogy 'The nose' occupies a special place. The ludicrous universe of the story parallels the absurd ideological foundations of Nazism. During one of his scientific experiments, the story's chief character, a prominent Nazi scientist, undergoes an inexplicable metamorphosis – he becomes his own victim when his own nose changes its shape from 'immaculately straight' and typically German to 'huge, hooked and shamelessly' Semitic. Once this happened, all the achievements of this distinguished professor together with his reputation as exemplary citizen and family man are nullified and he becomes a useless nobody who must be discarded. As there are no guidelines for the reader in respect of probable and improbable or moral and immoral, the inane logic of the narrative appeals only to the

reader's own sense of right and wrong. 'The nose' supplies additional perspective on other satires discussed in this chapter, illustrating that civilisation has lost its sense of measure and value, and that mere appearance has become the yardstick by which value is measured in the modern world. As illustrated by his satires – all published in the Soviet Union but unanimously disregarded by Soviet criticism even after his rehabilitation in 1956 – Jasiński remained critical of his generation for the general depreciation of moral standards and for forsaking traditional human values, finding compensation for their absence in ideological jargon.

The grotesque so abundantly present in Jasiński's works contests the extent and earnestness of his 'ideological growth' in the Soviet sense. Proclaiming his support for the Soviet Communist government, including its policies towards art and literature, Jasiński defied them by continuously using the grotesque as his favourite means of artistic expression. The presence of the grotesque in Jasiński's 'Soviet' works proves that he was unable to reconcile in himself the artist he was, and the 'engineer of human souls' he wanted or was expected to be. Among Jasiński's literary works there are only two that have been omitted in this study because the understanding of the grotesque applied to the analysis of the rest of his works does not apply to them. These are his two Soviet novels: *Man changes his skin* and *A conspiracy of the indifferent*. And although the odd examples of the grotesque device may be found in these novels, such as unusual metaphors, extravagant hyperboles or disturbing images, they do not project a typically grotesque, ominous ambivalence onto the whole narrative. Considering that *Man changes his skin* was written soon after Jasiński's arrival in the Soviet Union, the optimistic realism of the novel may be attributed to his seeing a purpose in the collective endeavour of Soviet men in changing life, and believing that the effort of the masses would resolve not only the social, but also the moral problems facing humanity. Although this belief is no longer evident in *A conspiracy of the indifferent*, the mode of the novel is realistic. It draws parallels between Communism and Nazism, sanctioning the same disturbing parallels as noted in his satires, but its universe is wholly confined to reality. It is only as absurd and ambivalent as life came to be. The characters of the novel are real in the ordinary way, all prone to hypocrisy and a skilful manipulation of language. In this last and unfinished novel Jasiński yet

again undertakes the task of exposing the terror of the State and the unhindered militarisation of modern society irrespective of the name chosen by the political regime, but turning rather to bitter irony than to riotous grotesque. The reader thus has no doubt that this is the world he or she knows, populated and accepted by the human race.