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GENOCIDE AND THE BEGINNINGS OF MODERN PROSE: ZOFIA NAŁKOWSKA'S *CHOUCAS*[2]

Nałkowska's artistic *Weltanschauung* was formed under the typical influences of early modernism – Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde, and Henri Bergson. The heroines of her early prose are women who revolt against the hypocrisy of contemporary society, and against the boredom and tawdriness of everyday life. They all desire to escape their world's constraining boundaries, and to break loose of the obligations imposed on them by a culture that customarily delegates women to the role of wife and mother. Nałkowska's heroines dream of personal freedom, of the right to choose whom they love, and of being able to express their erotic, aesthetic and existential experiences. But above all, they dream of living life to the full – which their existence does not allow them to do. From the beginning of her career Nałkowska was interested in literary portrayals of people. She developed a generic category that she later referred to as 'types'. Here she was inspired by 18th-century moralists such as Chamfort, but, as many modernists, she was also interested in the deep psychological motivations for individual behaviour. 19th-century writers inspired her; she was well read in French literature, with a particular interest in Stendhal, Flaubert, and Proust, but she also had a deep interest in Dostoyevsky.

Nałkowska's writing underwent a profound change during the First World War, as she developed different mechanisms to describe and explain human behaviour. Distancing herself from depictions of artistic characters, and from a simple opposition between nature and culture, Nałkowska now devoted more space to individuals' relationship with their everyday lives, with their social environment, and their family and history. In 1929, the German editor of *Führende Frauen Europas* invited Nałkowska to contribute her own autobiography to the book devoted to her. Here is how she sums up the early phase of her career:

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[1] Translation is by Tuesday Bhambry. Originally published in Polish as: Włodzimierz Bolecki. 2003. "Ludobójstwo i początki prozy nowoczesnej (*Choucas* Zofii Nałkowskiej). *Arkusz* 5: 31-49, Poznań 2011." See: Bolecki, *Modalności modernizmu [Modalities of Modernism*], Warsaw 2013.

[2] *Choucas* by Zofia Nałkowska, Ursula Phillips (Translation), Published 2014 by Northern Illinois University Press.

> For me, writing emerged from the longing for another existence, for the lives of other people. I thought about the happiness of those places where I could not be. I thought of myself as someone else. Of myself – not as a better person, or as a happier person, but, in a way, as the true *me*. As that *I* for whom all possibilities had found a way to realize themselves, whose every wish had come true. I see the history of my life as related to my creativity. I wasted my youth on sadness and worry, but surely it could not have happened differently. Later years brought me happiness. In the first stage of my writing career my gaze was focussed on my own inner depths – in both scrutiny and wonder. […] I set my own standards, I was myself a sufficient criterion to judge the world. In my books I wrote about love and thought that everybody had the right to love. I wrote about art as well, about the beauty of philosophical thought. *Women*, *The Prince*, *Kitten*, *Contemporaries*, *Narcyza*, *Snakes and Roses*, *Mirrors* – these books belong to my past and now appear strange to me. It all changed when the war broke out. The world spun in its own foundations. Only then did I realize what another person, or people, could be. I saw something I had hardly noticed until then: the suffering of another person. My books from the new series are different – almost as if someone else had written them. Not only do I tackle different themes, but the form in the new series is also entirely different. Now my vantage point is different – consequently, the world seems different to me, and must be written differently. This form, which critics label 'simplicity', corresponds to a vision of the world in which little things and people are worthy of attention and of sympathy, while authenticity becomes the key of artistic beauty. My thoughts about war, my deepest conviction that war is evil, no matter what it is fought for, is expressed in my books *Hrabia Emil*, and *The Secrets of Blood*. The book I wrote in Switzerland, *Choucas*, may not express a conviction, but it certainly expresses my belief that the hatred between nations must come to an end.

Choucas – The Polish 'Zauberberg'

The title of this novel is derived from the name of a bird which lives in high altitudes and is known as the Alpine Chough (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*). It is of the same family as the crow or jackdaw, but has black feathers, red feet, and a golden-yellow beak; in the second chapter — or episode — of the novel, Nałkowska herself distinguishes between this bird and the jackdaw (Polish: *kawka*). *Choucas* was written between 1925 and 1926, after Nałkowska had returned

from a stay in Leysin, Switzerland, with her husband. The novel is set in an unnamed vacation spot in the Swiss Alps in the early 1920s. It hardly has a plot; instead, it is divided into 42 episodes, in which the female narrator describes scenes at the local health resort. We learn from the descriptive passages that the peak Chamossaire and the pass Dent du Midi are in the vicinity, as well as the valleys of the Rhône and Grande Eau. The novel begins in the winter, at the end of the carnival season, when the land is still covered in snow. The spa guests and tourists are busy with winter sports, they go on walks together, visit concerts and parties. Above all, however, they talk. The narrative ends in the spring of the same year, a few weeks after Shrove Tuesday. Although we do not learn the narrator's name, the Polish reader can easily identify her with Zofia Nałkowska.

The subtitle of the novel – *An International Novel* – derives from the fact that its characters represent a variety of nationalities. Mrs. Norah Tharp and Mr. and Mrs. Vigil are English; there is the Italian Manilio Costa; the Spaniard Carrizales; the French are represented by Geneviève de Carfort, Monsieurs de Flèche and Curchaud, Mr. and Mrs. Saint-Albert, and Monsieur Verdy; there are two ladies from Russia, Vogdeman and Alicja; Tocki is Swiss of Russian descent; Miss Hovsephian, Sossé Papazian, and Mister Peynirian are Armenians, there is the Rumanian Est, the German Fuchs, and the English Mrs. Malden.

Other characters who are not patients at the spa include Spaniards, Italians, and Germans. They all constitute, as one of the characters observes, a *'Société des Nations'*. They represent different age groups – the youngest, Sossé Papazian, is twenty years old, whereas the other characters are middle-aged or elderly, such as the Saint-Alberts. The narrator is a tourist at the resort, and stays only for a short period of time, while other characters have serious health problems. Some of them have been at the spa for several years (Mrs. Tharp has been there for three years, curing a tubercular hip, but then her knee gets ill). Most of them suffer from serious conditions. Some of them are able to go on walks, but others, such as Mrs. Tharp, Hovsephian and Papazian, are bed-ridden.

Modern poetics

Autobiography and antifictionality [*antyfikcyjność*]. The poetics of Nałkowska's novel is based on autobiographical writing, as well as on antifictionality in the act of storytelling. Indeed, it is not a novel, but a memory-story [*opowieść-wspomnienie*] about a recent stay in Switzerland, ending in the narrator's (or the author's) return to Poland. At the same time, conventions of memoir writing are interwoven with diaristic conventions. Although Nałkowska does not introduce dates into her story, the individual episodes are often written in

the present tense – just as if she had kept a diary, or as if her story was the reconstruction of earlier diary entries.

Restricted omniscience. The narrative strategy of *Choucas* is based on limiting the extent of the narrator's knowledge to what is probable or possible in any given situation. The extent of her knowledge about them varies therefore. Sometimes we learn the given and the family name of a character, sometimes only the family name (e.g. Vogdeman) or only the given name (Alicja). The same applies to the characters' age or place of origin. These details are revealed about merely a few characters.

A discrete kind of autobiography is written into this strategy of restricting the narrator's omniscience. Thus, the reader does not learn who Nałkowska's partner is during her stay in Switzerland, although the form 'we' is often used in the text.

Novel – Diary – Note. *Choucas* was written in the form of weekly instalments published in the paper *Tygodnik Ilustrowany.* Nałkowska continued to apply this method for some time, as her financial situation obliged her to write intensively. Identical fragments can be found in her *Diary* (e.g. the entries of 15 February, 10 April, and 13 November 1925). *Choucas* exemplifies a crucial transformation in the poetics of the modern novel – a transformation that would become popular in 20th-century Polish literature. It hinges on the integration into the novel of (1) the time of its narration, (2) fragments or notes that resemble a feuilleton or diary entries, and (3) a loose composition. This type of writing conferred on the novel its characteristic openness and associated it with everyday forms. The novel ceased to be a 'work of art' isolated from life (as it was for the symbolists and expressionists), and instead became part of it.

Nationalism and Colonialism. The novel's leitmotif is represented by the characters' conversations about their personal affairs, their illnesses, death, and love, interwoven with discussions on the relations between nation states and the international situation after 1918. All discussions take place 'in the shadow of the First World War and its consequences'. Nałkowska's novel is based on a strong contrast between three motifs: (1) on descriptions of the beauty of the natural alpine surroundings, which allow the characters to experience a sense of harmony in the world, (2) the characters' struggle with their personal problems, and their grave, often chronic, ailments, and (3) discussions on the relations between different nations.

The first two motifs, characteristic for early modernism, depict life as a slow process of dying in the face of the beauty of the natural world. The third motif concerns nationalism and colonialism, and how in the human psyche these phenomena are removed from any real national conflicts. The luxury of the Swiss spa, and the characters' interpersonal relations ought to suspend any national prejudices. However, each of the characters arrives at the resort 'saturated' with their own personal experiences and stereotypical views of other nations. The novel's subtle drama hinges on their confrontation.

The English, Mr. and Mrs. Vigil, 'were exceedingly prejudiced, and in different ways. They despised almost every nation, ridiculed the French and Spanish, felt revulsion towards Blacks, and considered the Irish to be criminals and murderers'. Their compatriot, Norah, the most cheerful of the lodgers, studies all the languages for the pleasure of communicating with her neighbours. This beautiful woman is confined to her bed for many years ('given the cruelty of her fate, her physical beauty seemed terrible, even scandalous'). She admits to the narrator the nature of her relationship with the Irish: 'you know, it is stronger than me: I hate them […] *I hate them*[3] – she repeated clearly, looking me in the eyes, honestly and cheerfully.'

Est, a Rumanian Jew, was forced to leave Bucharest after a spell of antisemitic disturbances. Vogdeman lost all her relatives during the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and feels homeless – she has no place to return to. Tocki, however, a Swiss citizen of Russian descent, considers himself a republican and a democrat, and sympathizes with the revolution in the USSR.

Papazian is incurably ill, in bed for the second year. 'Her body seems to lack any life instinct. She left Turkey, escaping the carnage, and as a girl she was taken to a boarding school in Geneva. But before she left, she had already seen something. Only you can't talk to her about it.' 'With high fever and delirious, she would focus on a single horrifying vision, which she only knows, and which fills her with despair.' We learn about this vision from her compatriot, Miss Hovsephian, whose 'eyes are frightened and tragic, ready to weep at any moment, eyes that have seen'.

Hovsephian talks about the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks. Here, Nałkowska introduces a characteristic contrast: the scene takes place while the characters drink 'Turkish' coffee. 'When the war started, a new wave of persecutions began – and then one million and two hundred and fifty thousand Armenians perished. The Turks murdered them in their

[3] English in the original.

homes, in the street, in prisons. In the towns they drove little boys onto the market places and massacred them with axes and knives, while behind the police cordon their mothers wailed and raged in agony. Entire Armenian towns, armies of spectres, regiments of death-bound people, were driven through swamps and deserts, and along the paths lay the rotting bodies of those who had gone before. On these marches they died of hunger and sickness – men, women, little children. They stopped to rest in the cemeteries, in the poison of bodies scarcely covered with earth. And then they continued, and in the grass among the graves they left those who were dying from typhus or cholera, while the cordon blocked off the American and Swiss ambulance men. Near the cities one could often see on the ground some hand, or some gnawed bone, or some pieces of rotting human flesh that dogs had dug out from the shallow mass graves. The waters of the Euphrates were poisoned, reeking because of the bodies […] Armenia, subjugated for eight hundred years, recently divided between Russia, Persia and Turkey, buried all its hopes with the victory of the Triple Entente… One nation ought not to oppress another, right?' This last sentence reappears several times in the narration, forming its most important leitmotif.

Another character, Carrizales, is 'a devout Catholic, attends mass every day, often goes to confession, and is the only one at our table who observes all the fasts. He was a faithful son of the old blossoming Spain, which used to be a menace to global stability, the Spain of the Inquisition and of the Crusades. The Spain of fanaticism and glory. There was a time when, having defeated the Turks in the East, Spain ventured into Africa, fought the Protestants in Germany, France, and England, converted idolaters in the New World, repressed among her own people the Jews and the Moors, and in the fervour of the *auto da fé* refined the fiery passions of its faith. Today – stunted and insignificant – it has been engaged for a number of years in a blundering conflict with the rebellious leader of its own Morocco, sending ever more armies and gold, never to be seen again. How natural it seemed to this passionate Carrizales that it should be necessary to sustain this conflict – that it should be necessary to send people and money, until the Moroccans' felonious and incomprehensible resistance is broken. […] And then Miss Hovsephian's naïve words sounded even stranger to us […] One nation ought not to oppress another, right? […] Madame de Carfort look at her coldly […] when Miss Hovsephian went away, she turned to me: "These Armenians are insupportable. They could drive anyone silly with their tedious misfortunes." I declared that those misfortunes did not appear that tedious to me.' 'The Moroccans', according to Madame de Carfort, 'are beginning to understand what benefits France brings them. We provided security in their own land, brought with us culture, railways, irrigation, the rule of law. We

were able to win them over… Now they have yielded, even though they are still deeply rooted in their own tradition, and their faith, which I find so charming with Arabs. You know, ladies and gentlemen, what their greatest grievance is about? That we emancipated the Jews along with them, that they are now allowed to come out of their ghettos.' Madame de Carfort remembers a French missionary: 'For many years he lived with different African tribes, and his sheer example exerted such an influence that these tribes later submitted almost voluntarily, whereas others had to be seized by force.' However, in the end the missionary was murdered by the people he converted. Mr. Curchaud, who arrived from Cambodia, tells with pride about his father, an officer of the French army, who 'perished like a hero. My father fell in Senegal. I and my brother nevertheless settled in the colonies.' Nałkowska demonstrates how the politics of a specific nation create the boundaries of its citizens' understanding of the world.

Verdy 'thought in all seriousness that Germans are somehow different, that they are worse than any other people on earth.' 'Mr. Verdy didn't like the English, either, and without hesitation he projected his antipathy onto the kindly Mrs. Malden […]. But this was nothing compared to his hatred of Germans. Mr. Verdy's son had fallen at the Marne. How could the Germans have murdered his only son, if they were not the worst among all nations? What would be the sense of this death, if they were just as anyone else, normal people […]?" Fuchs from Berlin could not come to terms with Germany's loss of Lorraine and Alsace to France. The vision of an armed recovery of these territories was, for him, a patriotic duty. The Russian, Mrs. Vogdeman, thus comments on Fuchs's attitudes: Those who suffer innocently retain their pride. She adds: 'How challenging must be the moral effort of the defeated – the justly defeated – to somehow find that inner motivation, somehow to come to terms with it, to find some way out of it – even if it's just for one's own use, against everyone […].' For her, Fuchs exemplifies the type of person who 'struggles with the fact of a defeat that has no escape and that cannot be justified.'

"ONE NATION OUGHT NOT TO OPPRESS ANOTHER". The characters' stories and their views on specific nations lead Nałkowska to explore the psychological sources of nationalism. It is characteristic that she frames her own position as the subject of her reflection. Commenting on the hatred of the Frenchman Verdy towards Germans she reaches the following conclusion: 'Yes, the Germans were truly our greatest common enemies. That brought us somewhat closer to Mr. Verdy; we were close in our hatred. And this hatred stood in for all the other reasons and motives for friendship**.** […] But at the same time I could not

stop myself from thinking that the brotherhood of any two nations hinges on the idea that they are together against a third. And then the brotherhood of all nations becomes impossible. For against whom would they unite?'

Tocki, however, 'believed that there would come a time when there would be no more wars, he believed that they are unnecessary. And he saw indications of this in modern religious thought, which strove for peace in the world […] it is a process of "the internationalization of God".' 'And this is what Switzerland proved […] that it is possible – to realize a certain definite concept of social being – and moral being – to reconcile and to unite that which everywhere else would seem impossible to reconcile: languages, races, and religions – which were not only different, but in opposition to one another, even hostile. This unusual model, which transformed a diverse population into a strong nation, represents to the world a lesson about how to transform combating nations into humanity.' 'To pray for victory before a battle, to invoke the intervention of divine powers – what is this if not a remnant of polytheism […] a truth that people must understand: God is above nations […] when all nations will have grasped the neutrality of God […] he will become internationalized […], then war will become impossible.' Earlier, Miss Papazian says: 'God cannot give victory to one nation in combat against another nation. I believe that to ask for this is wrong, and unnecessary.'

However, the conclusion of the debate is paradoxical. One of the characters (Madame de Carfort) reasons that Tocki subconsciously propagates the ideas of the Swiss 'prophet' Leonhard Ragaz, who 'imagines the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth quite like the Soviet Republic'. At the same time, despite the hope for 'the internationalization of God', 'no great cause in the history of the world has prevailed without bloodshed […] not even Christianity'. This exchange of views transforms Nałkowska's memoirs into a thesis novel, concerned with the intellectual debate on the modern *Weltanschauung* after the First World War. Nałkowska confronts utopias of 'ecumenical rationalism' with nationalism as a given of human nature.

In *Choucas* the individual characters' nationalism is not ideological, and does not result from any political doctrine. It is rather an ensemble of stereotypical images of other nations, as well as 'emotional schemata' that are not rooted in any personal experience. Despite the fact that deadly illnesses threaten the majority of the characters, they do not realize that their nationalism is equally an illness. It is significant that Hovsephian, the character who is both most seriously ill and most cruelly tried by history, lacks any nationalist feelings whatsoever, has no desire for revenge, and no feelings of hatred. However, the words she repeats, 'no nation ought to oppress another', appear to the other characters as 'naïve'. At

the same time, the most violently nationalistic views are expressed by those characters who have no negative experiences in their relations with other nations – for instance the English Mrs. Tharp or the Spaniard Carrizales. Nałkowska demonstrates that their views are rooted in a mechanical transferral of judgements about individuals onto entire nations, and above all, in their extreme ethnocentrism: 'How strange is this human vanity that causes one to consider one's own tent, even the most temporary one, as the centre of the world.' The 'internationalism' in Nałkowska's novel is represented not only in the multi-national composition of its character set, but above all it is expressed in the idea of a neutralization of nationalisms as a myth of ethnic differences, which make it impossible for individuals to understand the supra-national essence of humanity. This notion would soon be developed by Witold Gombrowicz and Józef Mackiewicz.

Difference – Otherness – Modern Sensibility. Nałkowska gives voice to her astonishment that despite the cruelties perpetrated in recent years, people continue to behave as though nothing had happened, as if the events of the First World War did not demand a radical revision of their views. 'We humans like to speak to one another differently everywhere – and only our laughter and our weeping mean the same thing everywhere and are understandable to everyone. However, while I was there for all these months among people speaking in different tongues, I constantly felt that they still had more things in common than there were things dividing them, and that the things they shared were more important, were even the most important thing. And the fact that they use different sounds to communicate on different places on earth, that their eyes or their hair are of somewhat different colours, that they have somewhat different tastes and habits – that is less important. But it is just that, only that, which makes things the way they are. Which creates between them misunderstandings, hatred, and war. And which makes it futile for Miss Hovsephian to repeat her naïve words, that one nation ought not to oppress another.'

Mrs. Vogdeman expresses the most pessimistic opinion. Although it seems that the revolution in Russia has brought about significant changes, the ills which the revolution was meant to eliminate have persisted: 'war, prison and one group's power over death and life of another group! "*Il n'y a de vraie revolution que morale!*" [There is no revolution but moral revolution!], said Mrs. Vodgeman, quietly repeating Duhamel […], or is the revolution just about giving the same things a new name?' Nałkowska concludes her novel by emphasizing, through her narrator, her belief that a modern sensibility must evolve. 'To suffer more from the wrongs one inflicted than others suffer from the wrongs they experienced.'

For Nałkowska, the essence of this modern sensibility is subsumed in the de-victimization of patriotic feelings, and the demystification and overcoming of ethnocentrism. 'The moral revolution' for which Nałkowska's novel argues is every individual's ability to see herself of himself differently, as well as the understanding that other people are hurt in the name of national interest, ideological and national myths. Since after the First World War nations in Europe dwelled on the injuries they themselves experienced at the hands of other nations, Nałkowska's idea touched on the taboo of the suffering of simple people, irrespective of their national affiliation or the place to which history assigned them in armed conflict.

Precisely the same happened after the Second World War. It was not until several decades had elapsed that this idea began to gain ground at the end of the 20th century. *Choucas* was the first Polish novel, and certainly among the first in Europe, in which the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks was depicted as a method of solving political problems in the 20th century. Nałkowska's narration is dispassionate, based on sober facts, numbers, documents, while testimonials by witnesses to the massacre are not framed by any commentary other than the composition and the very suspension of the author's voice ('I once saw a strange gem. It was a rosary whose beads – the larger ones for the Lord's Prayer, and the smaller ones for the Hail Mary – were made from dried nipples, cut off from the breasts of murdered Armenian women…').

Twenty years later, Nałkowska wrote about another genocide. Her portrayal of the holocaust of the Jews in the collection of short stories *Medallions* (1946) uses a similar literary discourse. Thus, reading *Medallions*, we must remember *Choucas*.