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Miłoszewski's
A Grain of Truth
as a Non-classical
Conspiracy Narrative
Theories

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In Zygmunt Miłoszewski's *A Grain of Truth*,¹ the main crime plot deals with a triple homicide. Near the remains of a woman whose throat has been slashed, the police find a strange knife, defined by Teodor Szacki, the officer in charge of the investigation, as a "razor-machete." The knife turns out to have been originally used in Jewish ritual slaughter. This clue immediately directs suspicion toward a Jewish perpetrator. And because this takes place in Sandomierz, where to this day there hangs in a church a picture depicting the legendary extraction of blood from Christian children in order to make matzoh from it, the Jewish thread has dramatically heightened resonance. "I think it's all very odd and theatrical," Szacki remarks with regard to the knife. "Even with squalid crimes of passion, every drunken thug remembers to take the murder weapon with him. I don't believe it was left in

¹ Z. Miłoszewski, *A Grain of Truth*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, London 2012.

those bushes by accident.”² If a traditional investigation involves attaching signs to their signifieds – and is therefore fundamentally a semiotic operation – then the overly obvious presence of a murder weapon by the body tells the experienced detective to double-check the simplest interpretation.

Szacki frequently underscores the fact that he is conscious of a certain theatricality in the criminal's arrangements relating to the crime, working to conceal his true motives and identity: “Very interesting, but none of that is of any significance. Whoever planted the ritual knife wants us to get involved in all that – paintings, history, legends, so we'll start traipsing around churches, sitting in libraries and talking to academics. It's a smokescreen, I have no doubt.”³ It becomes clear even to less seasoned readers of detective stories that the Jewish theme in connection with the murders is merely a distraction. Finally, however, a suspect is apprehended... a policeman with Jewish ancestry. The story goes as follows: Commissioner Wilczur killed three people because they were descendants of people who during the Second World War harmed or refused aid to his Jewish parents. His mother died in childbirth because the daughter of the midwife who came to help her was frightened by a barrel standing near the entrance, so the two women fled the Wajsbrot home. The father, a doctor, who could have helped with the birth, was arrested on charges of false denunciation, as a result of which he committed suicide. Three innocent people in Sandomierz

² *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

have thus now been made to pay for the indolence, superstitiousness, and anti-Semitism of their forebears. The fact that such a convoluted story managed to convince not only the police but also the media and public opinion testifies merely to the fact that the Sandomierz dwellers of Miłoszewski's book would have bought any old hogwash as long as blame was placed on the Jews.

Though the history toward which the murder tries to direct the detective is referred to by Szacki as "that blasted anti-Semitic legend of blood,"⁴ in reality that legend relates to an old conspiracy theory that claims to explain what happens to missing Christian children: they are abducted by Jews, to be murdered and used in religious rituals. If, however, we look at Szacki's behaviour from the perspective of considering his investigative methodology, the theory of the Jewish provenance of the culprit in light of the clues found seems rational. If the motive for the crime was revenge, clearly marking the crime with indications of Jewishness makes sense to the extent that the avenger wishes his vengeance to have broad reverberations. That is indeed what happens in the novel.

Detectives in crime stories are united by their faith in the semiotic interpretation of signs.⁵ Such interpretation involves joining observation to some general laws regulating a given type of sign. Thus arises a classic syllogism, with a minor premise (Czubaj names the example

⁴ Miłoszewski, *A Grain of Truth*, p. 365.

⁵ Here I make use of Mariusz Czubaj's thesis in his book *Etnolog w mieście grzechu. Powieść kryminalna jako świadectwo antropologiczne*, Gdańsk 2010, pp. 190–201.

of Holmes and a certain kind of shoes), a major premise (only fishermen wear this type of shoes) and a deduction (ergo, the character who wears such shoes must be a fisherman). This way of thinking can be effective under one condition: that the social structure is transparent and its indicators unchanging. Such an assumption can, however, somewhat charitably be called naïve. After all, Sherlock Holmes himself knows that the criminal's basic defensive strategy relies on the use of such indicators of social structure in such a way as to direct investigators' thinking toward a false trail. On the other hand, there is no established method that would allow real clues (left unintentionally) to be easily distinguished from clues planted by the murderer. Hence, the impression of theatricality that Szacki gets does not conclusively prove that the evidence is fake. The possibility of roles being played means that common sense – if that category can be used to refer to the deductive logic of explaining a case – often leads us down the completely wrong track. That is why it often seems that detectives behave in an irrational manner, falling into paranoia based entirely on the apprehension that some parts of the puzzle fit only outwardly, only through a direct shift toward social conventions of signification. Does the same thing not occur with those who devise conspiracy theories?

“By conspiracist narratives, speaking generally, I refer to stories which express a belief that – contrary to widely held views – essential information concerning public affairs

remains hidden due to activity by a group of individuals covertly collaborating with each other for the purpose of obtaining some advantage at the cost of the greater common interest”⁶ – thus Franciszek Czech initially defines the subject of his analysis. Detective narratives are usually constructed in such a way that the crime is identifiable as an “action” with its particular “actor.” Thus, within a certain procedural framework, a single actor is assigned to an action. When conspiracist narratives are concerned, things can get much more complicated. In a fundamental sense, they seek other culprits, that “group of individuals covertly collaborating with each other,” most often those who are responsible for producing the “official,” symbolically empowered narrative regarding the causes of events. Often, however, what happens is that conspiracy theories ascribe intentional agency where in fact chance, coincidence, or a sociostructural process is at work, where, in fact, intention or plan is difficult to discern or establish. This is how Karl Popper, discussed in Czech’s book, formulated the problem: “I call it the ‘conspiracy theory of society’. It is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed) and who have planned and conspired to bring it about. This view of the aims of the social sciences arises, of course, from the mistaken theory that, whatever happens in society – especially happenings such as war, unemployment, poverty, shortages, which people as a rule

⁶ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015, pp. 12–13.

dislike – is the result of direct design by some powerful individuals and groups.”⁷

According to Popper, to find conspiracy and intentional agency where an accident, a completely contingent event, has occurred, means to transfer the metaphysical narrative of divine agency and omnipotence onto imagined or real groups of people. The classical conspiracy metanarrative also requires a kind of “paranoid language”⁸: the psychologization that has developed in assessments of conspiracy theories over the years has made it increasingly easy to ascribe mental illness to the authors of such explanations, treating those authors as incapable of “rationally” evaluating facts. As we noted earlier, this rationality has more in common with the symbolic universe in which it is created: the conclusions that we choose to believe in issue from earlier premises regarding the word and social structures. In the final analysis, therefore, a person who questions the official version of events is also questioning the procedure by which truth is produced in given conditions and at a given historical moment.

In the Sandomierz of the novel, widely shared anti-Jewish beliefs cause the majority of the population to find semiotic interpretations based on those beliefs convincing and logically coherent. In this context, Szacki, who declares that events have been erroneously linked to each other, begins speaking in a paranoid language. “I could tell

⁷ K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Princeton 2013, p. 306; [in:] F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, pp. 35-36.

⁸ See F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, pp. 87-89.

that was the right way to think”⁹ – this is the language of insinuation, without proof. In a most intriguing convergence, both the anti-Semitic theory of Jewish vengeance and the true – according to Szacki– story of the triple murder are presented at various stages of the investigation as what can be called conspiracy theories. Not, obviously, a conspiracy by the authorities or an all-powerful organization, not one that influences the course of world history,¹⁰ but still, according to a possible metanarrative, a conspiracy theory can also be defined as “an explanation of particular local events, by no means necessarily an all-embracing conspiracy.”¹¹ In this sense, “Jewish vengeance” would mean that the murderer – though a lone killer is unlikely – acts in the name of a group, carrying out its long-standing plan (murdering Christians, seizing power, and so on). Szacki, however, denying the semiotic “evidence” suggesting a Judaeo-centric narrative, uses the language of premonitions and intuition to weave a paranoid counter-narrative. Szacki’s theory, undermining the idea of “Jewish vengeance,” does not point to any particular conspiracy, but is aimed at the broad popularity of anti-Semitic beliefs, which has led to a situation where the theory of “Jewish vengeance” easily becomes validated. He thereby constructs a counter-narrative, which in the Sandomierz context looks 1) less rational (Jewish vengeance is paradoxically easier to argue) and 2) has no evidence in its favour, only “a sense of uncertainty about the real course of historical events and what it signifies, what

⁹ Miłoszewski, *A Grain of Truth*, p. 365.

¹⁰ See J. Tazbir, *Protokoły Mędrców Syjonu. Autentyk czy falsyfikat?*, Warszawa 1992, p. 9.

¹¹ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 66.

the official version of events is, and even about whether it is at all possible to have a logically coherent historical report”¹² – the features attributed to what Franciszek Czech calls non-classical conspiracist metanarratives. Or critical theories, which shall be discussed in further detail below.

Non-classical conspiracist metanarratives reject several basic premises that formed a part of earlier definitions. Conspiracy theory functions here as a possible explanation of events. The definition thus loses its evaluative character. It does, however, assume “enormous reserves of skepticism toward official knowledge.”¹³ As Hannah Arendt, cited by Czech, writes: “[t]he object of the most varied and variable constructions was always to reveal official history as a joke, to demonstrate a secret sphere of influences of which the visible, traceable, and known historical reality was only the outward façade erected explicitly to fool the people.”¹⁴ If the anti-Semitic interpretation functions in Miłoszewski's novel as legally valid, Szacki finds himself in the opposing position. In *A Grain of Truth*, the bad intentions of alleged “Jews” are perceived as official “knowledge.” In this sense, the “secret sphere of influences” about which Arendt writes is precisely the anti-Semitism that – due to its popular acceptance – reinforces its “knowledge” on the subject of the Sandomierz murder, and that knowledge falls on fertile ground, quickly becoming official history, widely believed. Thus Szacki's theory that there is no conspiracy paradoxically

¹² Ibid., p. 230.

¹³ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Orlando 1976, p. 333; quoted in Czech, p. 52.

finds itself in the position usually occupied by conspiracy theories, fulfilling the same function in relation to the official version. Szacki sees anti-Semitism where public opinion in Sandomierz finds a logical explanation for the three murders.

A non-classical conspiracy narrative also posits that what motivates the construction alternative theories regarding important events is not paranoia. Czech quotes Fredric Jameson on the essence of conspiracist thought: “It constitutes a manifestation of ‘the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system.’”¹⁵ Czech continues: “it is the properties of fluid, late modernity – the lack of transparency in public institutions, anonymous systems of experts, obscure connections among business, politics, and media, and revelations that appear from time to time about the secret services – provoke the adoption of conspiracist optics.”¹⁶ It appears that the reasons enumerated above also form the bases for both the theory of “Jewish vengeance” and Szacki’s alternative explanation. However, in the first case, the social order allegedly threatened by the Jews is something of value that needs to be restored. For Szacki – in keeping with non-classical conspiracist metanarrative – this social order is what Czech would call “an oppressive system that functions through the concealment

¹⁵ F. Jameson, *Cognitive Mapping*, [in:] *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, Urbana 1988, p. 356; [in:] F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 89.

¹⁶ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 91.

of its essence.”¹⁷ The essence of the social system in Miłoszewski's novel is anti-Semitism, which produced the official knowledge about the crime, the theory of “Jewish vengeance,” in which Szacki himself also believes until nearly the final pages of the novel. That simple reversal, however, the placement of Szacki in the position of the unmasker of the “conspiracy” among the anti-Semites of Sandomierz, does not contradict the idea that Szacki's explanation contains many features resembling a conspiracy theory in its non-classical definition.

Szacki's version nonetheless can also be seen as a critical theory aimed at uncovering a possible plot by anti-Semites, who themselves are the constructors of a conspiracy theory concerning Jews. Both Jews and anti-Semites play the role that Popper attributed to earthly inheritors of theodicy: “[t]he gods are abandoned. But their place is filled by powerful men or groups – sinister pressure groups whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from – such as the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the imperialists.”¹⁸ There undoubtedly exists or exist a person or persons guilty in the deaths of the three victims. However, the subjects of accusations of a “Jewish conspiracy” or “anti-Semitism” are much harder to identify. Probably neither of these groups made an explicit agreement to become anti-Semites or become Jewish murderers. Though that provides no basis for ruling out either that the crime was committed

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁸ K. R. Popper, *The Open Society*, p. 306; quoted in F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 36.

by a Jew or that the anti-Semites are responsible for the theory of the three murders rejected by Szacki.

From these considerations, we may conclude that conspiracy theories and crime-solving procedure have two features in common: 1) mistrust of official versions suggested by “evidence” or the authorities, and 2) an effort to establish guilt, a search for perpetrators that arises in the course even of evidently accidental occurrences. “The paranoid’s interpretation of history is in this sense distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone’s will”¹⁹– writes Richard Hofstadter, quoted by Czech. And this discovery of “someone’s will” is the clue found both by authors of conspiracy theories and by detectives who often see an “accident” as a screen arrayed by the criminal around the facts of the case. The more distracted, fluid, and obscure the “world of postmodern capitalism” or the “deep state of anomie”²⁰ appear, the harder it is to separate accidental processes from intentionally planned ones. Nevertheless, when Szacki accuses anti-Semitism, he is attempting to be a social critic, which paradoxically brings him closer to the authors of conspiracy theories. Czech here cites the following highly relevant declaration by Bruno Latour: “in both cases again [of conspiracy theories and critical theory] it is the same **appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark** acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly. Of course, we in the

¹⁹ R. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Cambridge 1963, p. 32; quoted in F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 47.

²⁰ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, pp. 94-95.

academy like to use more elevated causes – society, discourse, knowledge-slash-power, fields of forces, empires, capitalism—while conspiracists like to portray a **miserable bunch of greedy people** with dark intents, but I find something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below. What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique? Maybe I am taking conspiracy theories too seriously, but it worries me to detect, in those **mad mixtures of knee-jerk disbelief**, punctilious demands for proofs, and free use of powerful explanation from the social neverland many of the weapons of social critique. Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are **our weapons** nonetheless. In spite of all the deformations, it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trademark: Made in Criticalland.”²¹

The inhabitants of “Criticalland” – among whom we also include detectives – have in common these same weapons: mistrust, suspicion, searching for clues, flinging accusations. From this perspective there is not much to distinguish Marx’s “industrial capitalists” or Szacki’s “anti-Semites” from “the Jews” or “the American govern-

²¹ B. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 2004, 30:2, pp. 229-230; quoted in F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 82. Emphasis ours.

ment.”²² Each of them is a vaguely defined group of individuals responsible for some event or other.

In such cases, however, the principle of attribution of agency that operates in the case of the triple murder revealed at the end of *A Grain of Truth* turns out to be unavailing: there is no localized culprit against whom an accusation can be made. Here we are faced with what is probably one of the largest deceptions of (classical, naturally) detective stories: the presentation of a crime as mainly the result of actions by villainous individuals.²³

Causative agency in detective stories is often an offshoot of a Cartesian vision of the subject which they adopt: a thinking thing (*res cogitans*), an independent initiator of action, separate from the world (*res extensa*), sovereign in its decisions, but also bearing individual responsibility. The subject, defined thus, lay at the foundation of liberal democracy and the legal system binding within it. This is also the subject Karl Popper has in mind when he states that monopolists or imperialists should not be burdened with blame. In this ontological vision, one cannot, for example, punish a nation for its sins. The nation, as a non-subject, cannot commit crimes.

²² D. Shariatmadari, *The Truth Is Rushing Out There: Why Conspiracy Theories Spread Faster Than Ever*, The Guardian, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/26/the-truth-is-rushing-out-there-why-conspiracies-spread-faster-than-ever> (28.02.2016).

²³ See R.A. York, "Agatha Christie: 'sita rozumu'", trans. J. Misun, *Kultura Popularna* 2/2012, pp. 18–25.

The authors of conspiracy theories, like exponents of critical theory, use such collective designations, not refraining in any instance from formulating indictments in the language of the law, which after all cannot sentence “capitalists” for the poverty of workers. Non-classical conspiracist metanarrative, according to the quotation above from Latour, is, however, capable of appreciating these subjectless indictments: “conspiracy theories force us to search for better explanations of social phenomena. When an explanation not resorting to conspiracy has been perfected as a result of a discussion with adherents of conspiracy theories, we may consider that useful.”²⁴ In this sense, conspiracy narratives play an important role in expressing what remains invisible to observers whose search is limited to determining individual guilt. The injustice (caused by capitalists, socialists, corporations or governments) articulated in the language of conspiracism has made us rethink a concept of agency that inhibits the possibility of burdening such collective subjects with responsibility.

The first shifts took place in the field of the study of history. Attempts undertaken by Fernand Braudel to establish the influence of geographic factors on historical processes,²⁵ as well as newer texts dealing with plants as a factor in historical change,²⁶ have led scholars to reach the following conclusions:

²⁴ F. Czech, *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, p. 86.

²⁵ See A.W. Nowak, *Podmiot, system, nowoczesność*, Poznań 2011, p. 190.

²⁶ See e.g. R.C. Foltz, *Czy natura jest sprawcza w znaczeniu historycznym? Historia świata, historia środowiska oraz to, w jaki sposób historycy mogą pomóc ocalić Ziemię*, trans. A. Czarnačka, [in:] E. Domańska (ed.), *Teoria wiedzy o przeszłości na tle współczesnej humanistyki*, Poznań 2010, pp. 631–659.

Subjecthood understood as causative agency can thus not be separated from the conditions that are necessary for an act of subjective agency to come into being. The subject becomes a network of subjective relations, a multi-element network of mediations. Agency is 'woven into' the fabric of collectivity, i.e., into the complex network of nonhuman elements, 'things,' interactions, social relations, etc. The active subject cannot be 'separated' from that which made possible the effect of subjective agency. For example, there is no way for the person writing these words to be 'separated' from the networks that make possible that act."²⁷

In his analyses of the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Bruno Latour, or Amitai Etzioni, Andrzej W. Nowak writes about subjecthood as a "thickening of relations"; moving away from essentialization of the subject as an objectively existing entity, he proposes the formulation subjective-objective, which does not mark precise boundaries between them:

Causative subjecthood is thus one of many 'participants' who create historical existence; it is one of many variables that influence the dynamic self-organization of the whole. Habitus allows us to understand the individual subject as the result of a trajectory of historical contingencies, including microhistorical (biographical) ones.²⁸

²⁷ A.W. Nowak, *Podmiot, system, nowoczesność*, p. 216.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

Therefore, no such thing as isolated individual agency exists; action is always collective, it assumes the use of human and nonhuman allies. The subject becomes a “hybrid, a tangle of things and actions, of the dynamic of systemic functional determinations and the dynamic of historical existence’s self-organizing ontology.”²⁹

Because the law does not acknowledge the ontology of social existence defined in this way, detectives are unable to present “anti-Semites,” “capitalists,” or other collective suspects before a court. Moreover, in terms of individual agency certain crimes become invisible because they cannot be defined as concrete actions that directly resulted in tragic consequences. For this reason, one of the crimes in Miłoszewski’s novel is only signalled towards, and cannot be meaningfully labelled within genre convention. I refer to the murder of Wilczur’s mother and father, the Wajsbrots. In theory, none of the suspects in the case had a hand in their murder. The indictment can only be formulated in the language of conspiracy theory, treated as a hypothetical conditional: if the prison warden, the midwife or the informer made a deal whose aim was to have the Wajsbrots killed, they would be guilty in the couple’s deaths. That is nonetheless probably not what happened. We need a language of conspiracy theory capable of insinuating: “they are guilty of conspiracy,” in order to see that – despite the lack of legal justification – we cannot pass over the actions of those three characters indifferently.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

Critical theory, as mentioned by Nowak, attempts to describe the conditions of guilt and responsibility: no agency is purely that of a subject (the subject is empty), and thus nobody should be condemned as an individual for the deeds they have perpetrated (they have always had many human and nonhuman allies). Scholars pose a question entirely legitimate in its premises: can there be such a thing as an unintentional conspiracy? Or, put differently: what causes a completely undetermined coincidence to occur? The problem was captured adeptly by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Czech quotes: “[s]ociety everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.”³⁰ Is a conspiracy by all of society possible?

The answer cannot be stated in the language of the penal code. That is why the detective novel is usually unable to articulate the guilt of other “allies” involved in a crime. We see an increasing number of crime novels, however, that see this collective, structural culprit, an accomplice to the narratologically crucial crime. To name one example, that is the case in the first part of Stieg Larsson’s *Millenium trilogy*,³¹ in which the social structure, not only the individual, stands accused. The purpose of such a move, however, is not the restoration of order through judgment of the offense. That would follow the conservative premise of the classical detective narrative: before the perpetration of the individual crime, everything in the society was in the best possible order. Instead, the purpose of this

³⁰ R. W. Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” [in:] *The Complete Works*, Vol. II. Essays: First Series, Boston 1904, <http://www.bartleby.com/90/0202.html> (11.11.2016).

³¹ S. Larsson, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, trans. R. Keeland, New York 2008.

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new approach is to re-envision social life in such a way that – to use Latour's language – just and non-predatory relations can stabilize.

translated by Timothy Williams