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IN THE WEB OF WORDS: A READING OF AND AROUND OLIVER REYNOLDS'S "VICTORIANA"

Streszczenie

Artykuł niniejszy jest oparty o interpretację wiersza Olivera Reynoldsa pt. „Victoriana", pochodzącego z opublikowanego w 1985 roku tomu *Skevington's Daughter*, nie ogranicza się jednak wyłącznie do tej interpretacji. Problematyka wiersza dotyczy spotkania Jamesa Murray'a, redaktora pierwszego wydania *Oxford English Dictionary*, z doktorem W. C. Minorem, jednym z współpracowników Murraya, pacjentem zakładu psychiatrycznego dla przestępców Broadmoor. Konfrontacja dwóch rzeczywistości: uporządkowanej, ustrukturalizowanej, związanej z tworzeniem słownika, którą w wierszu reprezentuje Murray, z chaotycznym, dotkniętym obłędem stanem umysłu Minora kieruje uwagę na sposób, w jaki oparta na racjonalizmie epoka wiktoriańska, mogąca stanowić symbol wszelkich racjonalnych praktyk ludzkości, zderza i przeplata się z tym, co irracjonalne, symbolizowane przez obłęd. Zestawienie to służy również za podstawę do refleksji na temat granic rozumu i racjonalności. Wszak zdroworozsądkowy podział na to, co racjonalne i irracjonalne, normalne i nienormalne w społeczeństwie, nie tylko wiktoriańskim, omawiany wiersz wydaje się poddawać w wątpliwość w największym stopniu. Kwestionowanie owych podziałów pozwala rozważyć treść wiersza w szerszym, kulturowym, społecznym i językowym kontekście. Reynolds w swoim utworze podważa zasadność pierwszego wrażenia, oczekiwań i założeń, a także społecznych konstruktów takich, jak nauka, relacje międzyludzkie i w końcu sam język, artykuł zaś bada sposoby, w jakie nadawanie sensu zjawiskom, wydarzeniom, słowom stało się procesem rutynowym, a tym samym pozbawionym refleksji.

Oliver Reynolds is a Welsh poet born in Cardiff in 1957, educated at the University of Hull, the author of five volumes of poetry: *Skevington's Daughter* (published in 1985, opening with "Victoriana"), *The Player Queen's Wife* (1987), *The Oslo Tram* (1991), *Almost* (1999) and *Hodge* (2010), living in London. According to *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry in English*,

> [his] strongest work is in a vein of oblique or fragmentary historical narrative in which (often horrific) details of violent death or suffering are treated with extreme detachment, and the poem derives power from the indirection it employs in circling towards a centre of bizarrerie

or cruelty. Some of Reynolds's most memorable poems [...] deal with madness and the insti-
tutionalised lives of mental patients; his approach is that of the compassionate observer[1].

The latter observation may be related to the fact that young Reynolds spent his gap
year working as a porter at Withchurch Mental Hospital. "Victoriana" both fits the
above description well, as one of poems of suffering and cruelty and, simultane-
ously, can easily be seen as a poem showing the less "compassionate" perspective.
Reynolds puts himself at a distance, showing in the poem the point of view of
a Victorian scholar, trying to get to the truth about the most prominent contributor
to his work. This is not to say that Reynolds as a commentator is absent from the
poem, but he filters his judgement through at least a few perspectives – James
Murray's, William Chester Minor's, Murray's granddaughter, whose account, in-
cluded in Dr. Murray's biography *Caught in the Web of Words*, forms the narrative
frame of the poem, and, eventually the narrator's and the poet's own[2].

As far as the story described in the poem is concerned, it focuses on one main
event: the visit of Dr James Murray in the Broadmoor Asylum for the Criminally
Insane to see Dr William Chester Minor, who, Murray thinks, is an employee, or
even a supervisor, there. It turns out that Minor is in fact a patient, admitted to the
Asylum after killing an innocent man, who, in Minor's delusions, which he suffered
as a result of trauma of branding an Irish deserter during the American Civil War,
attempted to avenge his compatriot. After a short and awkward meeting, Murray
leaves with a gift from Minor, a copy of Ovid's poems, which the patient suppos-
edly carried in his pocket on the night he had committed murder.

This complexity of viewpoints makes the poem a web, new-historical account
which keeps the reader wondering about the authenticity of the events described,
although many attempts are made to suggest that the poem contains nothing but
a realistic description of facts. In the first stanza, Murray refers to historical events
forming a telling backdrop to his work and quest – the years of conflict in South
Africa preceding the Second Boer War (1899–1902). Also, the names of both
Murray and Minor are authentic and can be easily verified as the names of the first
editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In Minor's story there is a crucial reference
to American Civil War (1861–65). The meeting between the two men is believed to
have taken place in the early 1890s[3]. Most of the facts concerning the life and illness
of William Chester Minor can also be traced back to various biographical accounts[4].

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[1] Hamilton Ian (ed). The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry in English. Oxford, New
     York: Oxford University Press 1994. P. 449.
[2] Reynolds, Oliver: Skevington's Daughter. London: Faber and Faber 1985. P. 9.
[3] BBC Legacies. Local Legends. Broadmoor's Word-Finder. http://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/
     myths_legends/england/berkshire/article_4.shtml (30.06.2011).
[4] Cf. Winchester, Simon. The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Mak-
     ing of the Oxford English Dictionary. New York: HarperPerennial 1998. R. W. Burchfield,
     Murray, Sir James Augustus Henry (1837–1915). In: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.
     Oxford University Press, Sept 2004–2010. http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35163
     (30.06.2011). Berkshire Record Office. Inside Victorian Broadmoor. http://www.berkshire

There is, however, a number of clues, that make the reader aware that neither the reality in general nor the reality presented in the poem from Murray's point of view, can be taken for granted. According to the presently available information, the version of events concerning the first meeting between James Murray and William Chester Minor is but an "engaging myth" and Murray had known that his contributor had been a convicted criminal, suffering from mental illness long before he went to see him[5].

As it has been mentioned, the source of information concerning the events described in the poem is another book, another narrative, which was most likely composed by "filling the blanks" between the events, constituting a story written by Minor's granddaughter, a member of his family, whose account may be seen as more subjective than that of any historian who is a stranger to the person whose biography they are writing.

In tropological theory, outlined in his *Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect*, Hayden White states "events happen, whereas facts are constituted by linguistic description […] If there is no such thing as raw facts but only events under different descriptions, then factuality becomes a matter of descriptive protocols used to transform events into facts"[6]. In case of "Victoriana", "events" have been transformed at least twice: using the "descriptive protocol" of a biography and of a poem. It cannot be excluded that K.M. Elisabeth Murray heard the story in a form of a narrative from her grandfather – if that was the case, yet another "protocol" forms a layer that makes the truth of the events even more distant or relative. This complex story-within-a-story structure, made quite clear by Reynolds in the acknowledgements and, consistently, by means of specific textual devices – in the poem itself, is to raise doubts as to what we perceive as truth, reality and fact.

The devices used in the text to strengthen the effect of doubts the reader is supposed to have when confronted with the world presented in the poem include the story of Minor's illness, which is not reported in the poem by the patient himself nor by his doctor, but by the driver of the carriage that takes Murray back to the station, which may well be a reason for questioning it as being gossip. Apart from this, the poet himself adds notes concerning both his characters' biographies, their opinions or just statements in brackets (e.g. stanzas 3 and 4, 5, 26, 30, 31 and 37[7]), which, at the first glance, appear to authenticate the story and its participants, but, on second reading, they seem more of "a postmodern wink" at the reader than

recordoffice.org.uk/GetAsset.aspx?id=fAA1ADgAfAB8AFQAcgB1AGUAfAB8ADAAfAA1 (30.06.2011). Contributors: Oxford English Dictionary. http://www.oed.com/public/contrib/contributors (30.06.2011).

[5] BBC Legacies. Local Legends. Broadmoor's Word-Finder. http://www.bbc.co.uk/legacies/myths_legends/england/berkshire/article_4.shtml (30.06.2011).

[6] White, Hayden. Figural Realism. Studies in the Mimesis Effect. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 2000. P. 18.

[7] Reynolds, Oliver: Victoriana. In: Skevington's Daughter. London: Faber and Faber 1985. Pp. 13–19.

a report of actual events. The further into the poem, the more unlikely the speaker in the poem seems to be a conscientious historian and more a poet, narrator, conjurer of stories. The poem appears to tell a complete story, which the reader may see as a speculation rather than account of facts: the details of the small talk Murray makes with the driver, the description of Minor's room are all poetic, fictitious pieces of a seemingly authentic report, which gradually disintegrates in its assumed authenticity.

All this may also serve a presentation of more general thoughts on the issues related to sense, meaning and the process of reasoning as most people see it. Reynolds seems to be constantly challenging the sense-making process: every time the reader establishes a frame of reference, assumes a point of view, the poet disestablishes it in favour of posing questions regarding what the reader considers to be the truth, the possibility of straightforward categorisation and classification of everything that the reader might perceive as logical or reason-based. This process of making sense of things is similar to the process of compiling a dictionary, aimed at ordering a reality that can never be fully described, as words take on new meanings, or might have references of which the lexicographers are not aware. However, they would still be certain, particularly in England of the Victorian era, when the first edition of the *OED* was being compiled, ruled by reason and the conviction that the whole world can be conquered and ruled, that the process may at a point be finished and reality ordered. The reader of "Victoriana" is similarly lured into believing so, only to be challenged time and again by the poet. The poem based in history, one would even be tempted to say in "historical truth", dealing with seeking the truth, is in fact about the impossibility of ever reaching it, if the means of the search are only rational. According to Chris Wiggington,

> […] by linking antinominalism (or the collapse or the word and the object, signifier and signified, into something essential) to the processes of colonialism, Reynolds is writing against the Leavisite view of language as mimetic, as embodying realities. Thematics regarding the precariousness of the balance between reality and representation, sanity and insanity, permeate Reynolds's poetry[8].

In most general terms, the major effect of the poem on the reader and of the events described in it on James Murray – the man whose point of view the readers are meant to follow – is shock, surprise resulting from the clash between the world they both represent and the world they are confronted with and its consequences both for the rational mind of Murray and the readers.

Starting from the first stanza, we are made to look at the world with the eyes of a Victorian, rational man: the conflict with the Boers in South Africa, reported in *The Times*, Murray is reading on the train to Crowthorne, is light-heartedly dismissed by him as the one that will not last. The reader, however, knows that it is not going

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[8] Wiggington, Chris. Welshing on the language: R.S. Thomas, Oliver Reynolds and Postmodern Wales. In: Welsh Writing in English. A Yearbook of Critical Essays 7 (1998). Pp. 126–127.

to end in the Boers' quick capitulation, quite to the contrary. It is also going to result in a war that will see the first concentration camps among other atrocities. As, in fact, the war was not yet in progress at the time of Murray's trip, why would the poet even mention it? The answer might be not only in the contrast between the character and the reader's knowledge but also in the contrast between Murray's distanced, observer's perspective, that of a member of the colonizing nation still at its prime, and Minor's first-hand experience of civil war with its atrocities that arguably led to his mental illness. At this point in the poem, the reader still, however, assumes, just like Murray, that life offers no surprises and can be ordered along predictable lines.

Still certain of the explicability of things, Murray is set to finally meet his long-time contributor, with whom he has so far been acquainted only by letters, including those regularly explaining Minor's absence from annual Dictionary Dinners with "physical reasons". The speaker of the poem makes a remark at this point that the words were atypically written, but Murray, we must assume, has not realised it and thus disregarded the first clue of the possible complexity of his colleague's predicament.

The first overt clue of Minor's limited knowledge of the world and the words, and perhaps another hint at the fact that not everything that Murray is about to witness can be easily classified, is the word "sursik" used by his brougham driver, which the lexicographer must admit he does not know despite being "an expert in dialect"[9]. What is more, in spite of his professional curiosity and the driver's explanation, Murray and the readers are left without a definition of the word. Instead, we are given quite precise information on where the word comes from – a buck-teeth Spaniard: the information that appears crucial to the driver's use of the word. This, again, points to the limits of cognition, which, despite any scientific effort, is never complete, always in process.

Still before the turning point of the poem, i.e. the ominous meeting, there is another interesting piece of small talk between the driver and Murray. In stanza 14, the lexicographer warns the driver that fast driving and skidding in front of the Asylum are bound to result in "crazy paving", which he means most certainly to be "irregular [in] size and shape, laid in a haphazard manner sometimes with mortar filling the gaps between [the paving stones]"[10]. The diver's response, creating comical effect, but also being a common-sensical comment made by someone much more grounded in reality that surrounds him and bound to the literal meaning of words, is: "Just the place for it". Again, Murray does not seem to be able to properly communicate with the man, despite his expert knowledge of the language they both speak.

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[9]   Reynolds, O.: *Victoriana*. P. 14.
[10]   *Crazy Paving*. http://www.crazy-paving.com/index.html (30.06.2011).

Similarly, during the coming meeting with Minor, logic and science will fail, as both Murray and the reader will be faced with a paradox. The man of letters, a prominent contributor to one of the greatest sources of knowledge about the (English) language, the primary means of communication, attempting to encompass the Lacanian symbolic mode of existence, is a person who has violated the primary rule of social order, suffering from a mental illness that suggests his incapability to exist in the symbolic, social realm he is so productively examining and describing.

Arriving at the Asylum, Murray still assumes that an educated and experienced doctor of medicine, a person of such extensive knowledge of language, and thus of reality, cannot be a patient of a psychiatric hospital, yet it turns out to be the truth. This points to the obvious theme of the poem: the opposition, or rather the coexistence, of reason and insanity. Another evidence of this coexistence might be in the fact that the topic of Murray and Minor's conversation that enables both to communicate with ease and is the bridge to their mutual understanding is ancient philosophy and art – Aristotle and Ovid – instantly associated with rationality and reason. Finally, it seems to be suggested that one of the most barbarous practices of humanity – war and torture lay at the root of making the dictionary: had it not been for Minor's war experiences, he would never have found himself in the hospital, responded to Murray's advertisement and contributed so prominently to the production of the dictionary.

Reynolds shows that reason is always undermined, deconstructed and torn apart by irrationality and madness even, similarly to how the symbolic – language-producing and, widely speaking, social practices of an individual and humanity are constantly being undermined by the uncontrollable urges and desires residing in the unconscious, imaginary or semiotic realm that can never be completely controlled. Apart from particular phrases used throughout the poem, which will be discussed in the further part of this article, this is evident in the description of Minor's room at the asylum:

> His room pullulated with words
> As if it were the site of some
> Gutenbergian breeding scheme.
> Each flat surface was legible[11].

Minor is locked inside a socially constructed and approved institution and, to add to that, virtually lives within another social construct – language. His dictionary work, his research into the meanings of words, his attempts to make sense of them, and perhaps, to make sense of his existence, are present all around him. He is an insane person living in the middle of rational, describable, categorizable reality which he, in a sense, created and still has some control over. Yet, the use of the words "pullulate" and "breeding" might be seen as another hint at the uncontrollable, primal undercurrent of the seemingly ordered reality, much more in line with Minor's

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[11] Reynolds, O.: Victoriana. P. 16.

frame of mind than his work as a researcher for the *OED*. On the other hand, it is "G u t e n b e r g i a n breeding scheme" and the reference to the father of printing is clearly a reference to production, re-production and preservation of printed texts, books, products of culture, society. This stanza contains one of the phrases aimed at achieving the effect of a paradox: lexical structures, which constitute a combination of the rational and irrational, seem to undermine themselves, implying, as Wiggington suggests, that language is not to be trusted, or even perhaps that reality it describes cannot be relied on either.

Is it then the conclusion that at the bottom of our rational practices there is madness? That they both intertwine and cannot possibly exist separately? Was then, the Victorian era, or possibly any period of human history dominated by reason, resting on very much irrational foundations, contrary to what the people living during the period might have wanted to believe? Referring again to Murray's first lighthearted observation on the Transvaal conflict and contrasting it with the most violent wartime events in Minor's story, we might find a confirmation of this proposed conclusion. American Civil War, fought for the very noble cause of abolishing the inhumane practice of slavery, bringing as its result the victory of industrialized, modern, tolerant society, was nevertheless a war of brother against brother and the Battle of the Wilderness, fought May 5–7, 1864, which brought about the onset of Minor's illness was one of the most bloody and atrocious events of that day. This by no means suggests that war is indispensable and quite obvious turn of events in the progress of civilisation, particularly if we look at the long-term consequences shown here: an incurable illness that destroys an individual who has witnessed the horrors of war, and also results in murder: the violation of the laws and regulations of society it helped to form.

This inexplicable connection between civility and brutality is evident throughout the poem: the description of the events is consistently riddled through with words referring to war. Or, to put it more precisely: Murray's world is described with the occasional use of such phrases – the rational is torn apart by the barbarous, irrational; the side of things Murray is ignoring or denying is brought to the surface in his world and therefore can no longer be disregarded.

In stanza 9 train doors slam "like a sloppily drilled gun salute"[12], the Asylum's governor's "extravagant flossy tufts|Billow from his ears like gunsmoke"[13]. Most significantly, however, the war-referring metaphors are used in stanza 24, when Murray has finally met Minor and they sit in the latter's room. Minor's face is "ambushed by rearing clouds" and Murray's chair "bide[s] its time,|[being] A springy, book-propped booby-trap"[14]. The image, particularly its second part, suggests the awkwardness of the situation and the entrapment of both people involved in it, Murray's discomfort, both physical (the chair is probably old and broken) and emo-

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[12] Ibidem. P. 14.
[13] Ibidem. P. 16.
[14] Ibidem. P. 16.

tional. However, it may also be seen as suggesting fear of what might come next. Murray's rationality is of no use anymore, the lexicographer feels uncertain of everything and this feeling stays with him, which might explain his hesitation to open the package Minor gives him for fear of it being something an insane criminal might give rather than a present from a respected and predictable colleague. The image might also serve as a basis for a more general reflection on the construction of society, culture: the phrase "book-propped booby trap" may suggest that all culture, the provider of security, stability, a symbol of productiveness of civilisation, is in fact as unstable as if it was rigged with explosives, on the verge of disintegrating, self-destructing.

The use of war-related images might, on the one hand, be read as a reference to the South African conflict mentioned in the first stanza, which Murray so lightly disregards. On the other hand, the images might imply that there is a constant undercurrent of violence, brutality and irrationality running under the surface of the ordered, rational world of both Murray and the reader.

In addition to the discussed phrases, the poem offers several images in which the two: reason and insanity, civility and violence, can be seen as two sides of the same coin, one of which, the terrifying, indescribable one we mostly choose not to see.

In stanza 15 "distant sounds" of the doorbell at the Asylum that "echo, faint as lost memories"[15] may constitute a hint at something that lies to be awaken and, even more so in a criminally insane asylum, it is quite threatening and intended (by social institutions) to remain hidden. This "something" might refer both to Minor's story that Murray and the reader are about to unveil and to the process of repressing events, feelings we cannot allow ourselves to remember if we want to remain sane, or deny, if we want to maintain the illusion of control over reality, just like Murray does with the Transvaal conflict and the truth about Minor's plight.

In stanzas 16 and 17[16] the traditional opposition between light and darkness is inverted: from the moment of entering the Asylum, Murray, the enlightened man, is kept in the dark, both literally and metaphorically. Although the darkness of the Asylum interiors may easily be seen as a symbol of darkness and mystery of insanity, it is rather a play on the assumptions, again, of both the reader and Murray, who, in fact does not know the truth, while he is confident in his assumptions of what it should be. This description directly precedes the revelation of Minor's actual place in the asylum. Significantly, the rational Murray is presented in this image sipping his tea – another hint at the ties with the traditional, ordered, imperial and self-righteous frame of mind the lexicographer trusts so much.

Stanzas 29 to 40[17] present Minor's story. They combine the image of Minor as a student of medicine, learning the Hippocratic oath, probably in Greek, with the image of application of medicine during war-time, when Minor's everyday doctoral

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[15] Ibidem. P. 15.
[16] Ibidem. P. 15.
[17] Ibidem. Pp. 17–18.

duties include "charnel chores,|[…] cauters and amputations" and, finally, the ominous "branding of the deserter"[18]. Medicine, with its noble principles, one of humanity's greatest developments is presented beside, or as a part of, one of humanity's most horrifying practices: war and torture.

The image is made even more ambiguous when we learn that the same procedure is used for cauterising the wounds of the soldiers and torturing the deserter.

> The audible crisping of flesh
> And the sudden reek of shocked blood
> Were as routine as mud of tents:
> Old battlefield familiars[19].

Familiar might be both the medical procedure of stopping bleeding and branding, where the latter is the more horrifying but not less likely interpretation – Murray and the reader cannot be sure.

Finally, the closing images of Minor committing murder and Murray unwrapping the gift are perhaps most crucial in the whole poem. Both are interconnected by the book – Ovid's poems.

Ian Gregson's offers the following interpretation of the poem and its closing image:

> […] the contrast between this and Murray's scholarly and civilized activities which dominates the poem whose closing image refers, partly, to the impossibility of making the two sets of subject-matter cohere: Minor has given Murray the copy of Ovid which he carried with him when he committed his murder, and which was 'balanced', in his other pocket, by a pistol; the book has pages which are dotted with globules of glue - 'Braille tracks healing the torn paper'. The visible attempt to repair a torn text - it echoes the poet's attempt to reconcile his conflicting materials; it also refers to the relationship between institutional structures and linguistic ones, the relationship between the army and the prison on the one hand, and dictionary compiling on the other - which is also reflected in the 'balance' between Minor's pistol and his Ovid. The bafflement aroused by the attempt to understand these connections is enacted in the near oxymoron 'Braille tracks'[20].

Gregson does not expand on the possible complexities of the relationship he points to, however, what deserves comment is the bafflement effect he underlines: if all reasoning processes result in bafflement it is hardly possible to say that reality can ever be completely "mastered" be it by means of reason or, in this case, language. Moreover, he seems to suggest that neither Murray nor Minor, neither the reader nor the poet can "make matters cohere". What if coherence is not the result we must look for? As it has been said earlier, sense, reason, rationality on the one, and non-sense, madness and irrationality on the other hand, can be seen as two sides of

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[18] Ibidem. P. 17.

[19] Ibidem. P. 18.

[20] Gregson, Ian. Oliver Reynolds And the National Subject. In: The New Poetry in Wales. Cardiff: University of Wales Press 2007. Pp. 76–77.

the same coin. They will never cohere as no-one can at once see nor comprehend both, yet they form a whole that can never be split in two.

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