

---

 Arkadiusz Żychliński
 

---

## A Stroll Through Literature of Tomorrow: A Brief (Futurological) Speculation<sup>1</sup>

---

 TEKSTY DRUGIE 2023, NR 2, S. 114–129
 

---

 DOI:10.18318/td.2023.en.2.8 | ORCID: 0000-0002-6798-9461
 

---

*Frío, frío, pero al mismo tiempo caliente, caliente.<sup>2</sup>*  
Roberto Bolaño, *Comedia del horror de Francia*

**T**he more deeply one delves into the analysis of contemporary literature, exploring how it evolves and comparing it to its predecessors, the more challenging it becomes to resist the occasional urge to view it from the vantage point of a potential future, when it will be seen as recent history. This perspective can stimulate one to give some thought to the evolving landscape of (possible)

- 
- 1 I am deeply thankful to Professor Piotr Śliwiński from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań for extending an invitation to me some time ago to deliver a lecture on this very topic, which served as the catalyst for me to revisit and consolidate some thoughts stemming from an earlier postgraduate university seminar I held.
  - 2 Roberto Bolaño, *Comedia del horror de Francia*, in Bolaño, *Sepulcros de vaqueros* (Barcelona: Alfaguara, 2017), 192. Cf. "Cold, cold, but also hot, hot." Roberto Bolaño, *French Comedy of Horrors*, in Bolaño, *Cowboy Graves*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (New York: Penguin Press, 2021), 106.

---

**Arkadiusz Żychliński** – Professor of Comparative Literature at the Institute of German Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University. His research focuses on exploring the development and transformations of contemporary fiction. His publications include *Unterwegs zu einem Denker* (2006), *Wielkie nadzieje i dalsze rozważania* [Great hopes and further considerations] (2013), *Laboratorium antropofikcji. Dociekania filologiczne* [Anthropofiction laboratory. Philological investigations] (2014), and *Zwrot przez współczesną. Pryzmaty* [A turn by contemporary. Prisms] (2020). He has also co-edited several critical volumes on authors such as Franz Kafka, Fernando Pessoa, Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Bernhard, Javier Marías, and Roberto Bolaño. Email: arkadiusz.zychlinski@amu.edu.pl

literature of the future. Not all too distant future – for we must exercise caution, as two hundred years from now, there may be no humans left on Earth, let alone literature – but the immediate one, say, a few decades from now.

Scholars, for understandable reasons, seldom get absorbed into this particular subject, they might at most briefly touch upon it.<sup>3</sup> It is a temptation that has mostly beckoned to writers themselves. Jorge Luis Borges, Elias Canetti, Italo Calvino, Stanisław Lem, Ricardo Piglia, Vladimir Sorokin, Zadie Smith or Enrique Vila-Matas are among the not so many contemporary authors which have succumbed to the allure of deciphering the elusive signs of present evolution. They have bequeathed us with occasionally astute, if not consistently remarkable, insights on this matter. Yet, it was arguably Virginia Woolf who presented the concept of such speculative contemplation most persuasively:

Far the greater number of critics turn their backs upon the present and gaze steadily into the past. Wisely, no doubt, they make no comment upon what is being actually written at the moment; they leave that duty to the race of reviewers whose very title seems to imply transiency in themselves and in the objects they survey. But one has sometimes asked oneself, must the duty of a critic always be to the past, must his gaze always be fixed backward? Could he not sometimes turn round and, shading his eyes in the manner of Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, look into the future and trace on its mist the faint lines of the land which some day perhaps we may reach? The truth of such speculations can never be proved, of course, but in an age like ours there is a great temptation to indulge in them. For it is an age clearly when we are not fast anchored where we are; things are moving round us; we are moving ourselves. Is it not the critic's duty to tell us, or to guess at least, where we are going?<sup>4</sup>

Woolf posed this encouraging question almost a century ago in 1927, and if we now embrace it, we are immediately prepared to embark on a stroll through literature of tomorrow.

So, where are we going? Right ahead, let us take a stroll beneath the ever-changing sky – now clear, then veiled by clouds. Following Roland Barthes,

---

3 For instance, the stimulating and informative book *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*, as indicated in its blurb, is deemed "essential reading for anyone interested in the past, present, and future of contemporary literature". Nonetheless, the last section can be extrapolated from the previous ones, rather than being treated separately in a chapter. Cf. Robert Eaglestone and Daniel O'Gorman, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

4 Virginia Woolf, *Poetry, Fiction and the Future*, in Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 74.

we can envision literature as a whole as comparable “to a sky, at once flat and smooth, deep, without edges and without landmarks; like the soothsayer drawing on it with the tip of his staff an imaginary rectangle wherein to consult, according to certain principles, the flight of birds, the commentator traces through the text certain zones of reading, in order to observe therein the migration of meanings, the outcropping of codes, the passage of citations.”<sup>5</sup> Barthes’ analogy, especially the concept (at first a little odd) of the “imaginary rectangle,” strikes me as particularly insightful. Let us draw our own imaginary rectangle while examining the vast landscape of contemporary literature. Within this frame, there is an inside and an outside. While its exact boundaries (or “certain zones of reading”) may seem somewhat arbitrary, tentatively drawing the lines remains indispensable. Contemplating the rectangle, the commentator, much like a soothsayer, can aid us in foreseeing certain tendencies in literary evolution.

By the way, you may notice that I occasionally tread on the stilts of expressive images. Because you can see further from on high, it is true, but also, I am inclined to believe that metaphor often represents “the higher form of the concept.”<sup>6</sup> But while I largely agree with this perspective, I also bear in mind Roberto Bolaño’s caution, from whom I have likely learned the most (though it is still very little, almost nothing) regarding the subject of deciphering fuzzy signs from the future. I recall the words of an insightful philosophy professor in Bolaño’s last tremendous novel – the one that catapulted him into the posthumous future: “a metaphor is like a life jacket. And remember, there are life jackets that float and others that sink to the bottom like lead. Best not to forget it.”<sup>7</sup> I will do my best to keep it in mind.

While the outside of my imaginary rectangle might not hold particular interest for me, it significantly shapes the conditions inside, which, after all, do not exist in isolation. Firstly, this imaginary rectangle is situated within a certain space, what we used to refer to as the world – in our case, the Earth. During our walk, I will not attempt to predict how the natural and social environment, which will serve as the lifeworld for people also in the time to come, will transform. However, this transformation will have a bearing on whether speculations like mine possess any substantial foundation, irrespective

5 Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1973), trans. Richard Miller (London: Blackwell, 2002), 14. Indeed, Barthes wrote about the text rather than literature as a whole, but he might not object to this minor recontextualization.

6 Peter Sloterdijk, *What Happened in the Twentieth Century? Towards a Critique of Extremist Reason*, trans. Christopher Turner (Cambridge: Wiley, 2018), 11.

7 Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009), 254.

of their factual accuracy. It is entirely possible that they might not. For we need not be anxious about the future of literature – it will endure as long as someone requires it. However, the future of our world is something we have reasons to be anxious about because there will not be another one, not just for literature, but for all of us. Hence, the uncertain future of the world as we know it remains the central issue that I set aside in my contemplation of the future of literature.

I also will leave aside the four outer sides of my imaginary rectangle, but not before I define them and justify my lack of interest in them. The first outer side is defined by literature created in the future by non-human intelligent machines. The second side encompasses popular literature of low artistic value, a vast spectrum ranging from commercialism to kitsch. The third side represents valuable literature, though already outdated at the time of its release, making it belong to the past from an evolutionary perspective. Lastly, the fourth side comprises literature produced in the future, influenced by new media that do not yet exist and about which we know very little. So here is my starting rectangle, the assumed outside and the not as yet distinguished inside. There is of course nothing *per se* obvious in the lines that have been drawn. Somebody else might consider my virtual outside as a proper inside, arguing that just within one of those excluded areas a real revolution is already taking place or will soon take place. It may be true but I have to admit quite frankly I doubt it very much. And I will explain the reasons why.

Firstly, I am not particularly interested in literature created – or rather, generated – by non-human authors, even though I acknowledge it will likely become a significant part of literary production. These creations may primarily fall into two categories: popular literature and exclusive experimental literature. However, I believe neither will directly influence the evolution of literature. Mass literature already relies on pre-fabricated elements (structures, plots, dialogues, vocabulary, etc.), even when developed by human authors. And while experimental avant-garde e-literature can be intriguing, the initial fascination might ultimately lead to disappointment (just as – and the comparison may be quite eccentric, but not arbitrary – at first fascinating and finally disappointing were the attempts to teach sign language to apes<sup>8</sup>). Debates will certainly arise about algorithm-generated literature, and it will find devoted admirers, including scholars. However, critics of this form will point to the original sin – the lack of intentionality. While machine-generated literature may resemble human-created works, it does not possess any artistic

---

8 Cf. Herbert S. Terrace, *Why Chimpanzees Can't Learn Language and Only Humans Can* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

intuition, intention, and personal experience. And if not based on these, what are the essential components of quality art? Replacing these elements with a set of instructions undermines the credibility of the synthesis.<sup>9</sup> And as in mass literature credibility is often less crucial, so the absence of intentionality might not significantly impact it. However, this is not true for more ambitious literary endeavors.

Furthermore, I am uninterested in literature of low artistic value, which, despite increasing competition, will likely continue to be produced by humans in the coming decades. This disinterest is not a result of elitism, real or imagined, but rather because we possess adequate knowledge about the future of low-value popular literature. Let us examine the mass-market popular literature of a hundred years ago and today. Although there are some differences (and let us set aside certain aspects of social didacticism), they are akin to the distinctions between a hammer from a century ago and a modern hammer. For basic tools, substantial changes are challenging (and therefore unlikely) – a hammer remains a hammer, a practical and handy tool with limited room for development, much like a knife or a stool, simple utilitarian objects. The low-value popular literature of the next decades will remain a familiar hammer, albeit with a better-profiled handle and a lighter shank. This means that we might find in it some elements (or some devices) characteristic of literature with more creative and intellectual aspirations, just as contemporary popular bestsellers sometimes incorporate structural solutions that would have been groundbreaking a century ago. I am convinced that this type of literature – typically schematic, lacking innovation, adhering to familiar forms, not requiring much from itself or its readers, and fulfilling the need for accessible simplicity – serves a societal purpose. It provides relaxation and occasional subtle moral as well as other lessons. It is also valuable for sociological research as it reflects societal and individual desires and requirements. However, it is unlikely to significantly influence the trajectory of literary evolution, neither today nor in the future.

I have no expectations of popular literature, and I am also not interested in literature of artistic value that merely replicates outdated structural patterns or “models already obsolete a hundred years ago.”<sup>10</sup> I have just dis-

9 Cf. Arkadiusz Żychliński, *Woraus wird die Literatur von morgen gemacht? Künstliche Kreativität in der (nicht nur österreichischen) Gegenwartsprosa*, in *Trajektorien der österreichischen Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. Beate Sommerfeld (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2023), 249–266.

10 Cf. Enrique Vila-Matas, *The Future*, trans. Thomas Bunstead, accessed July 23, 2023, <http://www.enriquevilamatas.com/textos/textodiscursoTheFuture.html>. It is originally author's

cussed literature of diverse value, and now I would like to introduce the idea of modernisms of various – looking for an apt term I would ultimately say – generations. If we would call modernist most generally a literature whose main feature becomes diversification, the planned making of differences, then instead of labeling its subsequent phases as premodernism, modernism and the later problematic post-, post-post-, hyper-, meta-, etc., -modernisms, I prefer to speak of modernism in the first, second, and subsequent generations, much like successive generations in technology development. Within these modernisms, we find bands or directional ranges. For instance, literary realism, a prevalent creative disposition in modern literature, presents itself slightly differently in the modernism of each generation, as do other isms. It is important to note that while generations follow each other in an evolutionary sense, they coexist synchronically. In the twentieth century, we still encounter literature rooted in the spirit of the nineteenth century. Javier Cercas once aptly referred to such literature as “a nineteenth-century novel written in the twentieth.”<sup>11</sup> However, I am not concerned with nineteenth- or twentieth-century literature written in the twenty-first century because it does not align with contemporary modernity and tends to lose relevance within its time. While this literature may retain value – one can continue to use their pocket mobile phone until it falls apart, while everyone around them has long since upgraded to smartphones – it has often ceased to be a driving force for change from an evolutionary perspective. Its time as a beacon of innovation has usually passed (though not necessarily irreversibly).

Lastly, I am not particularly interested (again, only here and now) in literature of the future that merely emerges as a utilitarian consequence of inevitable technological change. This aspect represents the most porous side of my rectangle. To be more precise, I am uninterested in one aspect of this literature, while another dimension is indeed of the utmost importance, as I will discuss shortly. Undeniably, the impact of technological advancements on literature, though at times imperceptible, has been immense. Without printing, the widespread dissemination of books would not have occurred. The advent of the daily press facilitated the modern serialization of stories. The development of photography played a role in the rise of literary realism

---

acceptance speech after awarded the FIL Literary Award in Romance Languages in Guadalajara in 2015.

11 Cf. Javier Cercas, *Even the Darkest Night*, trans. by Anne McLean (New York: MacLehose Press, 2022), 220. Incidentally, the crime novel by Cercas is itself an excellent example of the mentioned “nineteenth-century novel written in the twentieth” (or, to be precise, twenty-first).

in the mid-nineteenth century. The late-twentieth century “murder of reality” has fueled the hunger for the very reality in literature.<sup>12</sup> And so on. Hence, it is evident that the literature of the second half of the twenty-first century will also be shaped by the technologies and media of the era. Literature is primarily composed of words, although not exclusively, and these words can be presented to the audience in various formats: on traditional sheets of paper, on e-readers that replicate the printed page, on screens through various applications, or even in auditory form after conversion into speech, among others. These shifts might undoubtedly impact the economic models of the book market, but do they fundamentally alter literature? In most instances, they continue to primarily impact mass literature.<sup>13</sup>

However, the exponential pace of technological transformation leaves us with limited knowledge today, except that future changes will likely further divide and connect societies and intensify immersion, immersing people more deeply in virtuality. As we contemplate the (probable) future, it is reasonable to assume that our understanding of real presence will evolve. How will our thinking about it change when, instead of sending voice and image into the ether, we start traversing space as holographic avatars? When, at even a second glance, it will be difficult to distinguish whether we have before us a flesh-and-blood human being or rather one but without flesh and blood, though actually no less real after all? This is poised to accelerate the ongoing corrosion of reality.<sup>14</sup> And for those deeply immersed in virtual reality – they will become more and more numerous – it may be increasingly challenging to find compelling reasons to disconnect from it. Future literature, without a near expiration date, will likely hold limited appeal to those socialized in an environment of immediate reactions and an absolute present. So what can we say with confidence about the deeper implications of future technological changes? They will likely render high-art literature even more niche, diminishing its relevance and impact. While many may hope for the spread of affordable and effective tools for self-development and societal empowerment, the Enlightenment’s assumption about the inherent allure of self-knowledge and higher consciousness seems overly optimistic. We observe a daily retreat not just from freedom (sometimes ironically in the name of freedom, this

12 Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (1996), trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso Books, 2008), xi and David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (New York: Knopf, 2010).

13 Cf. Mark McGurl, *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* (London: Verso Books, 2021).

14 Cf. David Chalmers, *Reality +: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022).

time freedom from social solidarity) but also from knowledge, often under the banner of alternative knowledge, for example serving Q-drops little by little in the inner circles of networked insiders.<sup>15</sup> The ongoing use of technological progress in the service of societal decline will continue to preoccupy the small republics of scholars. This issue is pertinent to our considerations insofar, as societies plagued by demagoguery and irrationalism may not nurture a large audience for slightly more demanding literature.

I conclude this discussion of future literature outside the hazy rectangle and shift my focus to the literature of particular interest within it. This literature may be quantitatively limited, but it plays a pivotal role in shaping the literary landscape. It is far-reaching, with primarily artistic and non-commercial aspirations. It effectively engages with the branches of the canonical tree (i.e., literature from the past) as well as our evolving cognitive abilities. It genuinely broadens our capacity for perception and understanding of our world, including literature itself. This form of literature is relatively independent of the medium, mode of presentation, or formal institutionalization. Its ontological status remains consistent before and after being made available to the public. The overall evaluation of this literature hinges on several threshold categories. I could perhaps compare this literature to a Swiss pocket knife, which, while its fundamental functions persist, continually evolves, incorporating new tools and discarding obsolete ones. The driving force behind this literature remains the creating of space for non-trivial responses to questions about the beings we are.<sup>16</sup> (As Deborah Eisenberg succinctly put it: “I think of fiction as a kind of inquiry into what it is to be a human and what it is to be a human now.”<sup>17</sup>) To date, no other entities, whether living or inanimate, have created anything comparable for self-exploration. However, the framework within which these questions are posed is constantly evolving and expanding by inclusion.<sup>18</sup> I am optimistic that an audience large enough to sustain this literature will persist even half a century from now, thanks in part to changes

15 Cf. Mike Rothschild, *The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (London: Melville House, 2022).

16 Cf. Arkadiusz Żychliński, *Laboratorium antropofkji. Dociekania filologiczne* [Anthropofiction laboratory. Philological investigations] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, 2014).

17 Deborah Eisenberg, *The Art of Fiction No. 218*, accessed July 23, 2023, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6203/the-art-of-fiction-no-218-deborah-eisenberg>.

18 Furthermore, the only change in the content and themes of future literature that can be predicted with some certainty is the continued and progressive inclusion of subjects and entities, including those that are presently socially excluded for various reasons.



in the social sphere around literature, which facilitates the gathering of scattered readers. It will likely continue to develop, albeit within a niche. But can we predict, at this moment, the potential directions of its development?

If literature not only changes but also develops, we can perceive this development as guided by the principles of literary evolution.<sup>19</sup> In the process of creative “descent with modification”<sup>20</sup> – in this case it is a slightly more technical description of openness to and fear of influence – the authors and their works strive to align with the changing spirit of their times, encompassing both societal and artistic aspects. In fortunate cases, this adaptation leads to progress, defined operationally by introducing formal innovation with cognitive implications.<sup>21</sup> While novelty without consequences can be intriguing, it will not be our focus here. On the other hand, the absence of novelty leads to stagnation, which, though there may occasionally be exceptions to this rule, rarely propels art forward. It is important to note that evolution need not always correlate with progress, as it can also entail regressive development. However, I will exclude that aspect from our discussion. The literary evolution I have in mind does not primarily emphasize progress as acceleration or exaltation but as expansion – extending the space of writing and, consequently, the possibilities of expression.

As I survey the literature of the last half century, I discern an evolutionary moment characterized by – I would venture to simplify it this way – four closely intertwined principles. I will refer to them as the principle of indeterminacy, the principle of unexpectedness, the principle of semi-avant-gardism, and the principle of transitivity. I cautiously anticipate that these principles will also persist in shaping the literature of the near future. In the next part of my stroll of exploration, I will delve further into these ideas.

Let us commence with the principle of indeterminacy. It posits that literature has intentionally grown more indeterminate in its genealogical sense since the first wave of modernism. While we still rely on established classifications to divide the literary landscape into genres and subgenres, their practical utility has increasingly come into question. A century ago, Virginia Woolf

19 One of the pioneering scholars to consider the progression of literature in the context of evolutionary development was Yuri Tynianov. Cf. *On Literary Evolution* (1927), in Yuri Tynianov, *Permanent Evolution: Selected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film*, trans. Ainsley Morse and Philp Redko (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019), 267–282.

20 I deliberately employ the Darwinian framework to summarize the evolutionary process. Cf. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), ed. Gillian Beer (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), 243.

21 Cf. Arkadiusz Żychliński, *Zwrot przez współczesną. Pryzmaty* [A turn by contemporary. Prisms] (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2020), 81.

keenly envisioned a “further panorama in the course of evolution,”<sup>22</sup> when she speculated about the literature of the future. She noted that it “will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play. It will be read, not acted. By what name we are to call it is not a matter of very great importance.”<sup>23</sup> The subsequent century has not only upheld these speculations but also intensified this process significantly. Therefore, it is not surprising that we can reiterate these ideas with some modifications today, recognizing that these are ongoing processes occurring over extended periods. It is reasonable to assume that the valuable literature of the future will be even more intentionally indefinite, blending familiar genres from the past with elements yet unknown to us today. The end result will be a literature so diverse that attempting to label it would be a futile exercise. Despite this, traditional literary models will continue to persist. Even in the second half of the twenty-first century, we may still encounter works resembling most ordinary poetry and prose from the twentieth and ninetieth centuries. However, these conservative enclaves will likely resemble the gatherings of hobbyists, akin to friendly philatelists’ clubs, rather than serving as the catalysts for broader artistic transformations.

The principle of indeterminacy aligns with the principle of unexpectedness, which posits that new and influential artistic forms emerge in the most unexpected places.<sup>24</sup> Consider, for instance, what Virginia Woolf, despite her remarkable insight, could not have foreseen: that literature would progressively become more visual in the literal sense, with text increasingly intertwined with images as an integral component. The most noteworthy development, of course, was the rise of strip cartoons and graphic novels. Who could have predicted in the first half of the twentieth century that this form of drawn literature, once associated with superficial, low-value stories, would evolve into one of the most captivating, rapidly expanding, and innovative literary realms, starting no later than the late 1980s? In their introduction to the graphic novel in 2015, Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey noted that, “if awarding

22 In his thought-provoking comments on future literature, Enrique Vila-Matas cites certain writers who perceived “el panorama más allá en la evolución.” He specifically mentioned Franz Kafka, but it’s evident that Virginia Woolf also belongs to this rare breed of writers. Cf. Enrique Vila-Matas, *Perder teorías* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2010), 47.

23 Woolf, *Poetry, Fiction and the Future*, 80.

24 Cf. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Theaterprobleme*, in Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Theater: Essays und Reden* (Zürich: Verlag der Arche, 1980), 72. Dürrenmatt discusses in his essay how he, as an author, stumbled upon the crime novel in the 1950s. During that period, almost no one anticipated that it could also serve as a platform for high-art fiction.

a 'Special' Pulitzer Prize to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* in 1992 had been controversial at the time, for many reasons one can quietly state today that giving the Nobel Prize for Literature to Chris Ware in 2016, announced in advance here as a scoop by the authors of this book, will no longer be received as a subject of comparable surprise."<sup>25</sup> Despite the fact that, as we know, the Nobel Prize for Literature was ultimately awarded to Bob Dylan in 2016, this does not undermine the accuracy of Baetens and Frey's observation. It is worth noting, though, that the Nobel Prize for Literature tends to lag behind the spirit of the times by a couple of decades. So, the recognition of Chris Ware (or his artistic successors and peers) may still be on the horizon.

The case of the graphic novel vividly illustrates Viktor Shklovsky's assertion: "new forms of art are created by the canonization of low forms of art."<sup>26</sup> However, identifying which contemporary low art might potentially gain significance through creative treatment in the coming half-century is challenging, not only for obvious reasons but also because the concept of low art has lost its meaning. In today's expansive literary landscape, it is difficult to pinpoint art of little value solely based on its origin. I, for one, struggle to find such branch of art within the broader literary context. However, it might be functionally valuable to differentiate between established literature, which has been legitimized by a long evolutionary tradition, and literature in the early stages of development, such as electronic literature.<sup>27</sup> This newly opened space is undoubtedly vast, but it still predominantly serves as a testing ground for emerging and advanced authors, as well as a playground for aspiring artists, rather than being the primary venue for creating or presenting the literature of the future. This genre's situation might parallel that of graphic literature during its initial phase. So, despite my reservations, is this form of literature poised to surprise us in the second half of the twenty-first century? I do not believe so. But I may have taken my skepticism a bit too far because ongoing technological changes are also expanding the literary landscape and according to the principle of unexpectedness, it is precisely the as-yet-unexpected form that will leave future readers in awe and wonder.

The principle of semi-avant-gardism suggests that the era of extreme or radical transformations in literature has largely passed, giving way to a period

25 Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

26 Viktor Shklovsky, *A Reader*, ed. and trans. Alexandra Berlina (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 150. The remark comes originally from the book *Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917-1922* (1923).

27 Cf. Philipp Schönthaler, *Die Automatisierung des Schreibens & Gegenprogramme der Literatur* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2022).

of continuous modulation that will persist indefinitely. Early modernist authors fervently manipulated the cranks and switches of the literary machine, drastically altering its settings and even venturing into entirely uncharted territories. These great innovators pioneered new paths in literary development, making significant breakthroughs. However, contemporary masters of the craft, equally gifted, now fine-tune literary instruments in different scales. They engage in regulation, modulation, and nuanced adjustments, recognizing that the extremes have already been explored, and the era of the first literary explorers has drawn to a close. The time has come for innovators working within narrower ranges, contributing no less vital developments to literature. Their discoveries and innovations, while profound, may be less immediately apparent in their originality compared to the groundbreaking inventions of earlier pioneers. The most intriguing developments in contemporary literature, which are likely to exert significant influence on its future, often occur not within the realm of radical experiments or conventional continuity. Instead, they unfold along a third path, which does not merely bridge the gap between the two but rather runs parallel to them. This path emphasizes comprehensible originality. While contemporary authors continue to seek new and uncharted literary territories, they are less inclined to demand that readers suspend their desire for comprehensibility. Innovative contemporary literature tends to be less hermetic and demanding than its counterparts from a century or even half a century ago. It is literature that holds the potential to captivate a broader audience, even if ultimately only a minority within the majority. This is the trajectory that much of the unconventional and fresh literature from the early decades of the twenty-first century seems to be following. I believe this observation will hold true for literature emerging in the coming decades as well.

The final principle, the principle of transitivity, underscores the growing permeability between different spheres. It involves intentionally breaking down boundaries, particularly the one that separates the diegesis (the reality portrayed in literature) and the non-diegesis (the actual reality beyond literature). This trend has given rise to a clear effect: the rise of literature that conceals its fictitious nature, adopting various techniques, ranging from the straightforward to the sophisticated, to present itself as a “true story” based on facts. Consequently, literature has at times drawn remarkably close to participatory journalism, and, conversely, journalism has adopted a notably literary character. Another indicator of this trend is the thriving popularity of autofiction, characterized by the presumption that the narrator is (almost) identical to the author.<sup>28</sup>

---

28 Cf. Arkadiusz Żychliński, *Autozapis. Z historii najnowszej (literackiego) pisania o sobie* [Autosave. From the classic (literary) history of writing about yourself], in Mateusz Falkowski,

The principle of transitivity is both a result of the crisis surrounding ideas of truthfulness, credibility, and authenticity and a reflection of the liquid nature of contemporary daily life. It is in this environment that previously tightly sealed boundaries, at least in our perception, have started to become permeable. (It is essential to recognize, though, that our approach to this permeability is selective. While some solid boundaries seem indeed to melt into air, others are being continually established, both in our imagination and in reality.)<sup>29</sup>

I have previously touched on genre transitivity in the context of the principle of indeterminacy. Now I will briefly mention media transitivity. It is likely that the literature of the near future will more extensively integrate various media, a trend that is already underway. Literary works with a discreetly modular approach, combining text, images, and sound in a disjointed manner, as well as literary installations striving to transcend or expand beyond literature, will become increasingly common.<sup>30</sup> What is noteworthy is that these developments will largely originate from within literature itself rather than being imposed from external sources. This evolution represents the flip side of the ongoing technical changes that include other literary forms that are gaining importance. Therefore, we should expect to see literature interwoven with cinematic imagery and other interactive forms of engagement. This multifaceted realm of fiction will not simply replicate one medium in another but will strive to offer intriguing complementary experiences.<sup>31</sup> J. Hillis Miller once

---

Piotr Graczyk, Cezary Woźniak, eds., *Estetyka/inestetyka. Współczesne teorie działań artystycznych* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020), 89–105.

- 29 Cf. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2000).
- 30 An instructive example from contemporary Polish literature is the work *Inni ludzie* [Other people] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2018) by Dorota Masłowska. The book itself takes the form of a compact disc and contains text and graphic modules. The digital edition partially omits the graphic module, suggesting it is an optional feature. Additionally, there is an audiobook with its own audio module. While these modules can be experienced separately, they are clearly designed to complement each other. Engaging with all three aspects results in a more rewarding and enduring reading experience. In 2022, a film adaptation directed by Aleksandra Terpińska was released, but it doesn't quite fit as a fourth module; it's more of a film version of the book.
- 31 One might consider the expansive universe of Margaret Atwood's handmaids as an example. It began with the book *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which, while highly influential, is by no means an easy read. It then evolved into an mediocre ongoing television series (2017–) for which Atwood serves as a consulting producer. This adaptation eventually led the author to write the sequel novel, *The Testaments* (2019), which is penned in a wholly different, very accessible style. What's particularly intriguing, from my perspective, is

suggested that if “Shakespeare were resurrected today, he might be creating video games or ad spots, not writing plays.”<sup>32</sup> While I hold the American critic in the highest regard, I do not find this remark particularly convincing: the Shakespeares of the future would create literature augmented by new media rather than abandoning it in favor of those media.

Certainly, it is evident that these individual principles partially overlap, staying closely intertwined as I previously mentioned. This interconnectedness might be attributed to the fact that they are simply the four inner sides of the same imaginary rectangle. And this interwoven interplay serves in essence as the overarching metaprinciple. The guiding motto of modernity itself underscores an unspoken directive to unite elements that have traditionally been kept distinct.<sup>33</sup> When viewed from the perspective of literary evolution, this assembling leads to a somewhat paradoxical outcome: it involves both a simultaneous narrowing (or the illusion of narrowing) and an expansion (sometimes genuine and sometimes only apparent) of the literary space.<sup>34</sup>

I am heading towards the end, and I have left out so much unspoken. Like a program of delayed self-updating inscribed in certain works, causing them to become suddenly relevant, regardless of – or with – the passage of time. “It is from the notebooks of the present that the masterpieces of the future are made,”<sup>35</sup> as Virginia Woolf astutely observed. Yet, the notebooks of the present can be read distinctively both in the present and in the future. Some works seem untimely, requiring patience to find their moment: the literature of tomorrow will partly consist of the newly read literature of yesterday.<sup>36</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, in an essay, aptly noted:

---

how the first book, the series, and the second book intentionally overlap. To fully grasp the intricate web of plots, one can’t avoid experiencing all three. While such expansive universes have been popular in mass culture for some time, there are still relatively few examples of them in high-art literature.

32 J. Hillis Miller, *Literature Matters Today* (2012), in *An Innocent Abroad: Lectures in China* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 267.

33 One could, perhaps somewhat exaggeratedly, summarize the formula of modern literary evolution as “merge,” akin to Chomsky’s basic operation in the Minimalist Program.

34 The narrowing happens because, for instance, genres lose their significance, and the expansion occurs as literature incorporates new forms of expression, such as graphic ones.

35 Virginia Woolf, *How it Strikes a Contemporary*, in *Selected Essays*, 30.

36 To illustrate this point, consider the curious case of Tove Ditlevsen. Her autofictional novels were somewhat ill-timed when they emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, they have become remarkably relevant and timely on a global scale, particularly in the Western world, by the end of the 2020s and the beginning of the 2030s.

Literature is not exhaustible, for the sufficient and simple reason that no single book is. A book is not an isolated being: it is a relationship, an axis of innumerable relationships. One literature differs from another, prior or posterior, less because of the text than because of the way in which it is read: if I were granted the possibility of reading any present-day page – this one, for example – as it will be read in the year two thousand, I would know what the literature of the year two thousand will be like.<sup>37</sup>

We are unable to predict the new genealogies that the not-too-distant future will craft or the precursors that the posterity of writers will identify for themselves. We also cannot foresee which events and authors will compel our descendants to view our contemporaries through a different lens, recognizing in their works what may seem less pertinent to us today.

That much – very little, almost nothing – I was able to discern on my stroll through literature of tomorrow. In conclusion, I will echo Italo Calvino's succinctly apt words from over three decades ago: "my faith in the future of literature rests on the knowledge that there are things that only literature, with its particular capacities, can give us."<sup>38</sup> One could attempt to expound upon that remark, or one could engage in discourse with it. I endorse it with confidence, looking ahead to the century to come. We need not fret about the literature of the future. Let us take care of the world of ours and literature will take care of itself. It will likely unfold, as anticipated, into something markedly different from what we envision today. My modest and vague speculations during this walk have revolved around how we might contemplate the trajectories of its impending development, and the principles that steer its evolution, transforming it before our very eyes. May the reader continue to ponder these thoughts on their own stroll.

---

37 Jorge Luis Borges, *For Bernard Shaw* (1951), trans. James East Irby, in Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 213f.

38 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), trans. Geoffrey Brock (Boston: Penguin Books, 2016), 1.

## Abstract

---

**Arkadiusz Żychliński**

INSTITUTE OF GERMAN PHILOLOGY, ADAM MICKIEWICZ UNIVERSITY

*A Stroll Through Literature of Tomorrow: A Brief (Futurological) Speculation*

This article offers some modest speculations on the possible literature of the not-too-distant future. It is based on the observation that literature not only changes but also evolves, and this evolution can be seen as guided by certain principles. Such four closely intertwined contemporary principles that may continue to shape the literature of the near future are the principle of indeterminacy, the principle of unexpectedness, the principle of semi-avant-gardism, and the principle of transitivity. The article explores these principles and also discusses potential dead ends in current literary development.

## Keywords

---

comparative literature, contemporary fiction, literary evolution, future of literature