

Krzysztof M. Maj

**Centre of Commandments and Peripheries of Disobedience.  
The City and The Outlands in Janusz A. Zajdel's Dystopian Fiction**

**Introduction**

*Every salutary idea, when executed literally,  
results in an outcome contradictory to the intended.*

“Zajdel's 1st Law” from Janusz A. Zajdel's *New-Found Thoughts*.

However elaborate the differences between literary utopias and dystopias may be, they generally come down to a fundamental opposition between the verisimilitude and credibility. Whereas in almost every classical and postclassical utopia it is the ideal depiction of the state which throughout its figurative imaginarieness challenges the counterpart reality, thereby raising a question about possible differences between the actual reality and the counterfactual fiction, modern and postmodern dystopia usually deconstructs such binary oppositions to obfuscate the clarity of such black-and-white reasoning. In both genres nonetheless one can observe a tendency to draw a distinction between the *world within*, serving as a frontier for the literary topos, i. e. a depiction of an ideal or non-ideal place (Cousins and Grace, 1995), and the *world without*, providing a necessary field of reference for the dialogue or transgression between the real and the imagined.

Yet neither dialogue, nor transgression can dissolve this utopian two-worldliness: every attempt to reconcile utopian and real world in terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2013, p. 317) fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*), even though may prove its practical application, destroys not only a self-undermining, ironical tension of utopia, but also greatly diminishes its philosophical value. Every utopia, both ideal (eutopia) and non-ideal (dystopia), is moved by a teleological force associated by Fred Standley with *nous* as “a progression toward an attainable perfection” (1995, p. 121). To realise the utopia in a quotidian practice (instead of only striving for it), means therefore not only to contradict the very foundation of utopia—epitomised in its unattainability—but also to deform or distort an original “idea preserved in logos” (Leś 2008, p. 19), to an impoverished ideology. Consequently, it appears that this unsteady balance between eutopia or dystopia blurs genre boundaries insofar that the only solid basis for differing one from another remains the diastasis of empirical and counterempirical

reality that allow either to transcend the realm of empeiria and to enter eutopian “sphere of idolum” (Mumford 1959, p. 13)—or to act completely otherwise, while trapped within a dystopian mockery of perfectness.

### **Janusz A. Zajdel as Polish dystopian novelist**

Janusz A. Zajdel is one of the most notable Polish dystopist and speculative fiction writer of the late 20th century, widely regarded as a precursor of the social fiction genre. Even though he became particularly known for his unparalleled dystopian imagination, he initially—i. e. from early 1960s to 1980s—scarcely experimented on this field. Having debuted in 1961 with novella *Tau Wieloryba* [*Tau of the Whale*]<sup>1</sup>, he started writing multiple science fiction short stories and, till the end of 1970s, he managed also to complete two minor SF novels (*Lalande 21185* in 1966 and *Prawo do powrotu* [*The Right to Return*] in 1975), in none of them however accomplishing any success due to the widespread acclaim for Stanisław Lem’s futurological fiction at that time. The year 1980 was though a turning point: having finished his first social fiction novel, *Cylinder van Troffa* [*The Cylinder of Van Troff*], Zajdel wrote five novels contributing to the genre: *Limes inferior* (1982), *Cała prawda o planecie Ksi* [*A Complete Truth about the Planet Xi*] (1983), *Wyjście z cienia* [*Out of the Shadow*] (1983), *Paradyzja* [*Paradisja*]<sup>2</sup> (1984) and *A Second Look on the Planet Ksi* (2005), regrettably unfinished and published posthumously. Those six novels, which greatly influenced the later works of Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński, Maciej Parowski, Rafał A. Ziemkiewicz, or (to some extent) Jacek Dukaj, were also accompanied by six anthologies of short stories, rendered recently in *Relacja z pierwszej ręki* [*A Firsthand Report*] (2010). In all of those works Zajdel managed to combine a dystopian narrative from the beginning of the 20th century with the science and social fiction genres in a way that makes his novels not only visionary and universal (despite some obvious allusions to the Polish political situation of that time), but also greatly engaging and immersive. In comparison with classical dystopists, Janusz A. Zajdels is both artistically and imaginatively closest to Evgenij Zamiatin and George Orwell,

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<sup>1</sup> Translations given in square brackets are philological and should not be treated legitimately. There has been only one Zajdel’s short story translated to English yet: *Particularly Difficult Territory* from Frederik Pohl and Elizabeth Anne Hullult (ed.) anthology *Tales of The Planet Earth* (St. Martin’s Press 1986).

<sup>2</sup> There is an awkward translation quoted extensively on the Internet: *Paradise: The World in Orbit*, which is not only a far too perplexing variant of original neologism, but also a dreadful spoiler of the ending of the book.

since the dominant of his fiction is to reveal the hidden linguistic and discursive mechanisms of totalitarian control, accurately associated by Michael Foucault with the “microphysics of power” (1980, pp. 26-29).

However difficult it may seem to summarise seven concise novels and several dozen of diversified short stories, it could be claimed that there are two major characteristics of Janusz Zajdel’s writing, conveniently dependent of each other: (1) a continuous study over the nature of social isolation (2) a predilection towards designing manifold urban landscapes and complex agglomerations. Both of these phenomena peculiarly apply to the poetics of dystopia hence they address a question of the difference between eutopian isolation (as a *condition*) and dystopian isolationism (as a *principle*). Famous emissaries dispatched from eutopian Bensalem in Bacon’s *New Atlantis* “not for any commodity or matter, but only for God’s first creature, which was Light” (2011, p. 722) were classical examples of how the epistemological will of enlightenment can break through the ontological isolation of an island. Conversely, in a dystopian world it is illegitimate to rely on any *external* paradigm when justifying the *internal* affairs: isolation turns here into isolationism, a pernicious doctrine of epistemological autarky that leads nowhere but to the continuous inhibition of freedom. Figuratively speaking, the dystopian logosphere is ruled not by the Father but the Lord of Logos: a discursive instance standing as the first and final source for truth and knowledge which are neither obtainable from elsewhere, nor justified by any means of comparison. Although in Janusz A. Zajdel’s fiction there are no such visibly autocratic figures like Big Brother from Orwell’s *1984* or One from Zamiatin’s *Us*, a typical dystopian confrontation between equally impersonal instances of The Lord of Logos and The Enemy of the State remains utterly important. What is especially interesting about Zajdel’s variation on dystopian theme is the way it collides with the classical SF motif of alien invasion. In *Out of The Shadow* or *Limes inferior* the social order is preserved chiefly by channelling public hatred from the actual oppressors on Earth to the counterfactual invaders from space—because there can be no proof seen from within the state that such an alien invasion ever did or did not occur.

Generally speaking, Zajdel’s dystopian fiction distinguishes itself in transfictional (here particularly: not limited to only one work)<sup>3</sup> project of outlining the philosophico-

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<sup>3</sup> As explains Richard Saint-Gelais, the coiner of the term, “The concept of transfictionality covers those practices that expand fiction beyond the boundaries of the work: sequels and continuations, return of the protagonists, biographies of characters, cycles and series, shared universes etc. Transfictionality crosses historical periods as well as boundaries between national literature or literary genres, it affects literature as well as other media (film,

ideological grounding of so-to-be-called *sociostasis*: i. e. the petrification of a vivid, dynamic society in a confined, static space under the permanent control of oppressive authorities. Consequently, for Zajdel it becomes irrelevant *who* actually rules the society because he considers far more interesting the way *how* the sociostasis arise and *where* it may endure. This is why in *Paradisica*, *The Cylinder of Van Troff*, *Limes inferior* or *A Complete Truth About the Planet Ksi*he endeavours to examine the development of transformative ideas in a controlled, urban environment rather than to only depict or describe a variety of actual or counterfactual cities. An orbital station, a palimpsest (sensu de Certeau) city, a network of overpopulated agglomerations or a space colony challenge here the boundaries of, respectively, postclassical *voyage imaginaire*, metafictional memoir, and social or science fiction to prove the irrationality of drawing artificial distinctions between real (actual, empirical, unimagined) and unreal (counterfactual, counterempirical and imagined) cities. And here comes the advantage of this peculiar type of dystopian narrative: instead of just juxtaposing fiction and reality to foresee the “future” and forget the “present”, Zajdel forces his reader to claim the perspective of the otherworld, to feel the restraint of will along with the confinement of space, and, finally, to reason not from without, but from within of the sociostasis—as anyone would do in their real world, equally limited by the lack of any external, objective, and third-person perspective.

### **Two dystopias in *The Cylinder of Van Troff***

The topography of *The Cylinder of Van Troff*'s storyworld comprises two parallel landscapes: a futuristic lunar facility on the Moon and the devastated, postapocalyptic, though still inhabited Earth as its counterpart, challenge both conventionally fantastic clash of two different realities (here referred to as The Split) and dialogic structure of utopia (deployment of three narrators, with Le Djaz—Zajdel backwards—amongst, causing the effect of story-within-a-story). Over the course of a plot, divided respectively into the part devoted to the Moon and the Earth, it is revealed that the Split which modelled the world of *The Cylinder* was a side effect of so called “procreation blockage” (Zajdel, 2008, p. 98): a radical depopulation policy (obligatory contraception, restricted birth control, child remuneration program) introduced in the apogee of human civilisation to prevent overcrowding of the Earth. The dystopian aspect of this policy was that it involved grievous genetic manipulations; after the mu-

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television, comics, etc.), and it penetrates mainstream or experimental literature as well as popular culture” (2005, cited in Ryan, 2008, p. 386).

tagenic sterilisation of the whole adult population only few were allowed to use so called “fecundity activators” (Zajdel, 2008, pp. 98-99) that temporarily stimulated generative cells to be soon inhibited and egested. However initially the idea had earned general acclaim, resolving once and for all many ideological controversies around contraception or abortion, it soon encouraged scientists to take the next step towards genetic purity and to isolate a certain percentage of genetically “clean” population from the rest of humanity that had been already suffering from genetic mutations. Meanwhile—as the process of dividing a society between fertile minority and infertile majority continued, affecting the worldwide distribution of privileges—a whole surface of Earth was covered with the large stretches of so called “Grill’s tiles” (Zajdel, 2008, p. 100) to provide a fully renewable and nearly infinite source of a solar energy for the underground, multi-levelled cities chiefly corresponding to Michel de Certeau’s metaphor of the palimpsest. Simultaneously, however, it turned out that a certain part of the mankind proved resistance to sterilising effects of the mutagen, discrediting the efficiency of the depopulating program and causing a massive growth of the birth rate among genetically deprived margin of society. And this is where the actual Split occurred: having realised that the idea of controlling Earth population had entirely failed, a privileged class of the society decided to take refuge on the Moon and spread in Earth’s atmosphere another mutagen which for a change made all of remaining people unable to... sire female children. The irony is that both societies, that is the genetically “pure” lunar (in book also called “lunanthropists”) and the genetically deprived terran, were in consequence condemned to a long-term extinction<sup>4</sup>.

In *The Cylinder of Van Troff* the Split is not only the part of the storyworld, but it is also mirrored by the structure of the storyline. Since whereas the first part of the book covers typically dystopian plot where the protagonist aims to reveal the truth about the “founding lie” (Ćwikła, 2006, p. 9) of sociostasis and escape from it or sacrifice himself for the greater good, the second part is formally and aesthetically closer to the postapocalyptic narrative, immersed in the imaginary landscape of gigantic, fully automated megalopolises with gradually shrinking human population. Here, below the surface of Grill’s tiles, the only order could have been sustained by machines since the scattered, aggressive gangs of half-wit, purposeless people shared no common cause but to wage a Sisyphean war against AI-controlled cities. Theoretically, people should have felt happy in those underground agglomerations: all basic needs

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<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the novel it is said that the lunar colony suffered from lacks of oxygen and thus continued to master population control systems even further, developing an ideology that legitimised obligatory euthanasia (renamed as an “retirement”) and manipulating people with the prospect of returning to their homeland.

satisfied, artificially synthesised food, equal redistribution of goods, non-compulsory education, no work and infinite income—nevertheless there were also those who suspected this cheerful anarchy to be only an explanatory fiction, an artificial world designed to conceal a proceeding genocide of the inconvenient part of humanity. Even the half-wit mob—which gradually overcame the remnants of well-educated middle-class (nicknamed “docents” since the higher-degree scholars had been all transported to the Moon)—could have actually sensed the treachery and subconsciously decide to fought with The System in its very own way. Even though, those efforts were equally Sisyphean as intelligence’s reasoning: whenever they managed to sabotage any of city’s automated circuits, dozens of robots were ready to repair whatever had been devastated, moved by the very same electricity that kept alive the dwindling human population in the most perfidious manner of unconditional custody.

Dreary, sullen, and apocalyptic world of *The Cylinder of Van Troff* bears a striking resemblance to New Wave’s short stories of J. G. Ballard’s (*The Concentration City*) or E. M. Foster (*The Machine Stops*) ilk, where people were indeed immobilised in some kind of stasis, not even unable but unwilling to escape the overwhelming state of permanent confinement. It should not be neglected that quoted Foucaultian “microphysics of power”, however now nearly colloquialised, primarily originated from the analysis of the ideal prison—a prison which did not require any guards but the one located in the central tower and hidden behind the one-way glass so that no-one could actually verify whether the prison was guarded or not (cf. Foucault, 1995, p. 195-209). This is why both in the lunar and the earthian dystopia it was impossible to transgress the system and gain a metasystemic overview of the sociostasis—which was why Janusz Zajdel, much like Stanisław Lem in *The Return from the Stars*, decided to introduce an unconventional dystopian protagonist, i. e. the one who comes from the outside of dystopia and is naturally bestowed with that kind of “allochthonic” supervision which is unobtainable for any of dystopian “autochthons” steeped in the falsehood of dystopian founding lie. “A Unit works without human supervision” (Zajdel, 2008, p. 79), answers videophone to inquisitive questions of *The Cylinder of Van Troff*’s protagonist, because there is no need for any *supervision* since the permanent *surveillance* has already been granted. One could figuratively say, that utopia turns into dystopia when the supervision of an eminent ruler turns into the surveillance of a grey eminence—who can wear the robes of Big Brother, lunanthropist, or alien invader alike.

## Urban topographies of *Limes inferior*

*Limes Inferior* is one of the most ironical and allusive books Janusz A. Zajdel has ever wrote. Over the past 30 years nearly all of the critics and interpreters has usually been tracking various political allusions to the Polish political system of that time which as a result paradoxically undermined a more universal, dystopian aspect of the novel. The core concept of the book is quite different from the one of *The Cylinder of Van Troff*: despite using the third-person narrative again, Zajdel focalises it this time on a single character of Sneer, who entirely deserves his aptronym as a cunning, mistrustful, and unsubmitive man of the underworld. Sneer is a lifter: a person who makes his living from “lifting” one’s IQ for a certain fee and passing for him the national test of intelligence in the city of Argoland. This queer profession was the side effect of Argoland’s founding idea of dismantling social classes system and introducing equal treatment of people not only in terms of their race, gender, religion, education, wealth, or social status in general, but also—level of intelligence which was no more inborn or earned through education but achievable via the trustworthy system of tests. After passing the test, people were divided into 7 classes corresponding with their verified IQ level and granted a cheering prospect of easy migration from class to class—either unassisted, or supported by the lifter. People with 0 class of intelligence, commonly known as “Zeroes”, were supposed to work harder than the rest of the society whilst those bearing 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, or 5th level of intelligence were given an advantage over overworked Zeroes and could enjoy unlimited leisure of the city. Moreover, only those with class higher than 4 were paid in the most valuable currency of points: “yellows”, allowing to buy all the best and luxurious commodities of Argoland, whilst “reds” and “greens” could have only been spend on basic needs like synthetic food or tasteless beverages. The irony of such over-sophisticated stratification rooted however even deeper. Having graduated as a physicist, Janusz Zajdel found especially amusing to correlate Argoland’s social system with the model of atom where only *negatively charged* electrons are bound to the nucleus owing to the electromagnetic force—and the further from nucleus an electron is, the weaker its attraction becomes. This means that 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th class were actually *lesser* than diminutively treated Zeroes and the whole system based on the verification of intelligence was a mummery farce and explanatory fiction given to the citizens only to hide the founding lie of sociostasis beneath a fictional truth of propaganda.

The only disturbing and unclear thing about the Argoland, superficially striving to become the best polis of all times, was so called “Key” which served both as an ID, driving

licence and credit card—much like modern microchips or universal ID's. Notwithstanding, it turns out that the name of this omni-device was quite metaphoric since for more politically conscious classes of Argoland it was indeed a key, but rather to a mystery of the founding circumstances of agglomeration. And this is where actual Sneer's history begins: after a series of unusual happenings that coincide with classically utopian *tour de monde* (i. e. the description of utopia, given either from a point of view of the "allochthonic" protagonist, or the "autochthonic" guide), he ends among "Zeroes" in a top-secret facility trying to resolve the secret of the Key which—quite surprisingly—seems to be absolutely impenetrable by any known technology. Meanwhile, it turns out that that someone managed to bypass the Key's security circuit and change it into an unlimited source of income since the "hacked" Key allowed its user to pay for everything in Argoland, no matter the currency, which grievously threatened a whole economic system. And just after the very basis of Argoland's sociostasis had been breached, Sneer made an overwhelming discovery: that, basically, "Zeroes" were not the highest intellectual class in Argoland (despite being lowest in the common sense), but—accordingly to the paradox of a watchman (Juvenal's "quis custodiet ipsos custodiet")—were being gravely outwitted by the people beyond the eponymous "limes inferior"—those, basically, who lived outside the borders of Argoland and whose level of intelligence was evaluated from equally external paradigm. In other words, the "limes inferior" was not necessarily a border, but a line of false symmetry drawn between the two unequal parts of the society. Borders can be crossed, erased, or transgressed—and yet, private cars' engines automatically went off whenever citizens of Argoland tried to reach the suburbs where their unseen rulers lived. And so, the only time Sneer managed to get outside the Argoland was when he got deported by a secret service.

And so, while being taken to charming, rural dwellings of actual rulers of Argoland, Sneer quickly learned that the economical autarky of the city and its kin agglomerations was achieved through a full automation of agriculture, energy, and commodity production, which in consequence was meant to irrationalise every possible attempt of escape. Why to leave the city where everything is available and where one can become a half-god able to buy everything everywhere (possibility of hacking the Key could be also interpreted as an element of the master plan of manipulating people's hedonistic inclinations)—and, more importantly, why leave at all, whence everywhere are *identical* cities! (Zajdel 2004, 183). But the founding idea of Argoland, its economy, politics, and stratification was even more complicated—or so it was presented by the secret service commanding officer, Vito Rascalli, who is tantamount to all dystopian figures of power like Mustafa Mond from *Brave New World* or O'Brien from



1984 and for that particular reason neither Sneer, nor the reader can actually know whether he could be trusted or not. Anyway, it is the Rascalli's version which is the very last element in a jigsaw puzzle of *Limes inferior*: after he revealed to Sneer that the brave new order was introduced as a part of a difficult agreement between world government and space invaders as a last mean of protection against the threat of the mass genocide of mankind—it was too illogical even for Sneer to defy such a terrible but no less convincing truth. On the other hand though, and this is what an ambiguous ending of the novel seems to suggest, a fictional truth cannot be verified from within the system it is referring to—and this is why people seek for something Alfred Tarski would call a metalanguage (1994, pp. 341-375), a language circumscribed over our own: unspoiled, undistorted, static, logical and truly utopian dream for dystopian times.

### **Centre of Commandments and Peripheries of Disobedience**

*The Cylinder of Van Troff* and *Limes inferior* well epitomise Stanisław Lem's accurate concept of socioinvolution, i. e. "the process of isolating a certain social class via taking it out of the empirical context and embedding in new, predefined conditions for the purposes of a relatively long-term observation" (Lem, 1996, 203)—and, moreover, prove the efficiency of topographico-literary studies in science and social fiction. In both of these novels a monocentric and logocentric idea is embodied in either palimpsestic (automated agglomerations in *The Cylinder of Van Troff*), or concentric (Argoland and cities akin in *Limes inferior*) frontier, yet always self-centred around the symbolic figure of the Lord of Logos. This is why the absurdity of massive agglomerations in *The Cylinder of Van Troff* could have been visible only for an outsider and this is also why Sneer's quest in *Limes inferior* must have forced him to strive for a transgression; it is no coincidence that just after seeing the city of Argoland from its rulers' external perspective, Sneer was immediately encouraged to reach for even more outside point of view, no matter whether extraterrestrial or not. Figuratively speaking, one could say that in Zajdel's fiction the dystopian centre of commandments in the City is juxtaposed with the peripheries of disobedience in its Outlands—which serve as an epistemological space where one can not only rebel against the system, but also find answers to the questions arose in a state of confinement. What is however peculiar about Zajdel's contribution to the genre of dystopia is that his protagonists not always come from within the sociostasis as it happens in Orwell's *1984* with Winston Smith or in Zamiatin's *Us* with Δ-503—who, by the way, are both significantly engaged in writing memoirs that even more internalise their mental im-

prisonment. Conversely, Zajdel's protagonists usually remain on (or regain) the position of an outsider and thus they usually succeed in securing not only their freedom, but also—identity. Actually, none of Zajdel's characters undergoes such a severe (and sometimes, like in *Brave New World*, lethal) indoctrination as those known from classical dystopian novels: they may be not entirely victorious, but they are definitely able to oppose incapacitation. In general, the mankind in Zajdel's fiction is depicted as naturally resistant towards something Stanisław Lem would call “procrustic” attitude of any logocentric power that focuses on “tailoring human nature to aprioric theories” (Lem 1998, p. 69). This primary characteristic of Janusz A. Zajdel's characterology proves that he did put trust in human's ability to transcend various states of physical enclosure and mental confinement alike. Henceforth, Zajdel's fiction distinguishes itself as seeking for consolation rather than to drawing pejorative conclusions from the way society is apt to act when imprisoned in the cage some Lord of Logos could have named the embodiment of his utopian idea.

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