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The Theater of Death in early Polish drama

The relatively small collection of Polish vernacular writing from before 1500 includes two outstanding pieces of poetry, both of which concern matters of death.¹

I.

The dialogue poem *De morte prologus* (*Prologue on death*)² reached the 20th century in one copy written down in 1463.³ **Four aspects** of this text are important for the student of medieval drama: (1) its Latin source, (2) its theatricality, (3) its relations to pictures of the death dance and to other text sources in general, and (4) its translations into Russian and Ukrainian.⁴

(1) The Latin source has a significant delivery (21 extant codices) and reception, confined to the Central European region. This mid-14th cen. prose treaty (inc. *Venite ad scholas meas*) was given the title *Dialogus magistri Polycarpi cum morte* by its editor, Czesława Pirożyńska.⁵ She divided the delivery into two streams; redaction I (inc. *Venite ad scholas meas*) with 16 copies, and redaction II, closest to the Polish translation (Inc. *Nota quod quidam magister nomine Policarpus*), with five codices — one Austrian,⁶ two Czech (with the oldest from ca. 1414), and two Polish, 1430 and ca. 1450 (both Cistercian).⁷

A comparison of the Latin source with the Polish translation allowed Pirożyńska to establish the latter as a quite advanced piece of poetry which exceeds its source's frame significantly. In contrast to the source (held in simple prose), its octosyllabic distichs are in vivid, fluent Polish, and their author created quite long passages: an interesting *invocatio Dei* (1-18), an explanation of Death's origin (113-144; "And I was in that apple", 140), followed by the Master's question, "Why do you want to take people's lives?" and his childish effort to bribe the Death with "a good cake"⁸ (149-156). As the final part of the "death dance" the Polish version has an original passage on virgin martyrs (480-495).⁹

Only the first 50 sentences of the Latin original are covered by the extant Polish text.¹⁰ From what

¹ A more complete study of this topic should include the liturgical context (*depositio*, processions, funerals — *pompa funebris*; early modern *novissima*-celebrations in churches), and other performances of more or less regular dramas, as well as pantomime, mock-funerals, interludes, recreational and ritual folklore; it goes without saying that narratives, church and lay songs, and painting cannot remain beyond the scope of study.

² Another interpunction of the title is possible: *De morte. Prologus* (as done by the editor, M. Włodarski, in the anthology *Polska poezja świecka XV wieku*, oprac. M. Włodarski, Wrocław etc. 1997). It is known in Polish as *Rozmowa Mistrza Polikarpa ze Śmiercią* (Master Polycarpus's Conversation with Death; inc. *Gospodzinie wszechmogący*), which translates the title given by the editor, Czesława Pirożyńska, to its Latin source (see next notes).

³ According to Wiesław Wydra 2003: 73, who allows the year 1465 as the latest possibility. It should be noted that the year 1463 appears in two Latin *Polycarpus* manuscripts, Prague U. library code. XIV C 8 (2032) — on pp. 128b, 224a, 258a, the year 1462 on pp. 282a, 1465 on pp. 164 and 305b; the *Polycarpus* dialogue on pp. 205b-206b; also a Kraków MS, BJ 1961 (with *Polycarpus* on pp. 99-100), has the year 1463 on p. 340 (Pirożyńska pp. 128 and 130).

⁴ The terms *Russian* and *Ukrainian* mean only northern and southern dialects of the early Rus' (before ca. 1700), the latter for the most part within the realms of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

⁵ Her edition was based on the extensive Central-European manuscript tradition of 21 codices from the libraries of Bohemia (6), Germany (5), Poland (5), Austria (3), Switzerland (1), and the Vatican (1); the provenience: canons, regular (5), Franciscan (4), otherwise Dominican, Benedictine, Augustine, and finally chapters and individuals. She edited three of them, one for each redaction: IA (St Florian), IB (Prague) and II (ib.), pp. 140-182. I have made the Latin text of Pirożyńska's edition of red. II (without her apparatus) available on the net (see bibliography).

⁶ Vienna, National Lib. 14447 — from Slovenia's Časna.

⁷ In the first (cod. 63 Bibl. Kapituły Włocławskiej) *Polycarpus* is found (reads) on pp. 126b-128b. In the second (Archiwum Archidiecezjalne Poznań, cod. 30) on ff. 248b-249a.

⁸ Both the Russian and the Ukrainian adaptations have the three inventions of the Polish author: the *invocatio*, the origin of Death, and the bribing proposal. The latter is fully present in Ukrainian, but only in part in Russian; it is omitted in the Master's question, but Death reacts to this indecency with anger: *razdrażniesz mja* (Dmitrijeva, p. 200).

⁹ The Russian omits the Polish passage on the martyr-virgins; we don't have the full Ukrainian text.

¹⁰ Pirożyńska, p. 118, gives a synoptic concordance of all Latin sentences and the corresponding lines of the translation.

we know only minor motifs are omitted, such as personal data concerning Polycarpus's family, or the five-year reprieve given the Master by Death (l. 29).¹¹ However, it is not impossible to also find some correspondences in the further part of the Latin.¹²

Apart from this Polish branch of vernacular versions (one preserved copy of a lost original with its Russian and Ukrainian translations — see below) there were independent Czech¹³ and Croatian¹⁴ adaptations of the Latin source.

(2) Next to direct speech, a necessary but insufficient feature of drama, this dialogue has many places with narrated or implied action. As has earlier been noticed, the stage remarks *Mors dicit* or *Magister dicit* are not incorporated into the syntax of the main text, so they were not meant to be recited in front of an audience. The speaking turns are marked in the text, allowing the actors to speak as persons. We can call it an almost complete dramatization. Only a couple of places contain narrative sentences referring to a person's action, e.g.

"Stand up, you can trust me;
I don't want to betray you today!"
*The Master stood up with effort, staggering,
His legs trembled; he was frightened.* (transl. by M.Mikoś)

Actions referred to in this passage could be effectively acted by a player, and they have the value of serving as stage remarks. Otherwise we have regular dramatic first person speech introduced by the stage text *Mors dicit*.

Everyone jumps in front of my scythe (...)
I hold my scythe in readiness (...)
My scythe cuts rushes, grass (transl. by M.Mikoś)

This is, however, spoken self-presentation, not necessarily acted — we don't see Death on stage acting as haymaker, cutting down — attention! — the vegetal participants of the death dance.¹⁵ In general, the

¹¹ It is a misunderstanding to say that the original stress given to Death's cruelty is absent from the Polish — not covering the lines starting with "O mors quam amara es infantulis, amarior iuvenibus, amarissima senibus." We don't necessarily have an omission here, because the passage on the bitterness of Death (Ins. 22-25 in redaction II) is absent from redaction I; but the distinction between both redactions is not clear-cut, and we don't know which Latin text was used by the Polish translator. Perhaps it was the one close to red. II, but without the questionable passage. A comparison of 21 MSS, described by Pirożyńska on pp. 128-139, would possibly give a solution. Siatkowska (p. 8) is wrong saying that the passage concerns "cruelty against children and youth." Children are referred to in Ins. 202-3, and 367-370, the cruelty was exposed in the exordial part as the topic of the poem: *Learn about the cruelty of death!* (l. 8); the Ukrainian translator used it as the title, while the Russian put it in the second sentence: *лютость смерти познайте* (Dmitrijeva, p. 198).

¹² Cf. *dives et pauper* (54-5) vs. *Polyc.*: *ubodzy i bogaci* (178); *nobilis et ignobilis* (61-62) — *szlachtę, kmiecie* (346); mention of pope, emperor, princes (76-77) vs. *Polyc.*: *świeckie miłośniki, /Bądź książęta...* (181-2); *cesarz 186, papież 402*; *facio mihi ludum* (81) vs. *toć me nawiększe wiesiele* (165); *malis et bonis* (83) vs.: *Mam moc nad ludźmi dobremi, / Ale więcej nade złemi* (215-216).

¹³ S. Vrtel-Wierczyński, *Rozmowa człowieka ze śmiercią w literaturze średniowiecznej polskiej i czeskiej*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 22-23, 1926, pp. 56-103. E. Siatkowska, *Elementy kultury duchowej i materialnej w wybranych tekstach czeskich i polskich z XV wieku (O rozdělení duše s tělem – Skarga umierającego; Rozmlauvání člověka se smrtí – Dialog mistrza Polikarpa ze śmiercią)*, „Studia Slavica” VI, Ostrava 2002, pp. 241-250.

¹⁴ This one is based on redaction I, to quote one paragraph (from Siatkowska 2005, p. 7): „Pridite v školu moju, pověm vam čudesa. Neki mojstar imenom Polikarp v Cipriji (v Brnii) Boga na to dlgo prosi kako bi mogal s Smrtju govoriti. Tako kako po molitvah nastojanja ot Boga vrėdan bę uslišati. Zač v jedan dan v čas pete godine po mise javi mu se kip vele strašan, opasan lanenu rizu bedra, bleđa velika obraza i tužna vele, groznu kosu v rukah držeći”. *Razgovor meštra Polikarpa sa smerću* exists in two copies (incomplete in the codex *Petrisov zbornik* of 1468, National Library of Ljubljana, MS no. 368, 3): ed. By R. Strohal in: *Stare hrvatske apokrifne priče i legende* (pp. 114-120). *Hrvatska književnost srednjega vijeka* (Zagreb 1969, s. 226-229).

¹⁵ We see an image of Death as haymaker on a tile from prior to 1495, Gniezno, Muzeum Początków Państwa Polskiego, Inventory number 1994, published by Tomasz Janiak in *Śmierć w kulturze dawnej Polski od średniowiecza do końca XVIII*

figures of the dialogue replace actions with words. Accidentally they reflect on their feelings, as in l. 370: *My head is turning around, my eyes are going to fall out.*¹⁶ In other cases we see actual interaction between figures:

Mors dicit: (...)
 You are frightened, poor soul!
 Now recover your senses, pitiable man;
 Speak to me, poor cleric; (l. 84-6)
Magister dicit: (...)
 We want to bring you gifts,
 So that you can be appeased.
Mors dicit
 Keep your gifts yourself;
 You only anger me twice as much! (149-154; transl. by M.Mikoś)

As soon as the speaking persons start referring to interaction with other figures and mentioning objects anybody can see, we are nearing dramatic speech and actual acting — like the following in Death's words (221-2, transl. by M.Mikoś):

I'll tell you about my scythe; / Just sniff it with your nose;

It seems almost forbidden for a narrative, as it implies actual interaction and behavior of acting persons using objects on stage.

(3) The second theatrical aspect concerns the death dance motif. In a regular *totentanz* there are two parallel levels of action: one written (to be read) and the other drawn or painted (to be seen). In drama, this second level is made visual by acting figures whose speech has been given on the written level. The action itself goes along two lines as a series of speaking turns between living representatives of social groups and some death figures — people who died recently, or personified death embodied as a moving corpse or skeleton. For the definition of the Totentanz it is essential that there be dancing pairs, i.e. a special interaction between Death and the Living, the latter being caught by the former and taken by force to the realm of death, frequently called "school."¹⁷ It is this and only this interaction which bears the name *death dance*, an ironical metaphor. The metaphor may become quite realistic and no less ironic when a figure refers to dancing literally, as does the child in the Totentanz of Lübeck:

O Death, how should I understand this?
 I should dance while I cannot walk yet. 18

But this seems an exception. In Holbein's woodcuts we see Death not dancing, but fighting with her victims; they are involved in a Todesstreit rather than a Totentanz. These pictures are not metaphors, but just the opposite, vulgar overstatements of depictions of killing.

To stay as close as possibly to the *ironic* definition, we should not speak of *Totentanz* if there is no visible death-prey interaction, but only talk of it. In such works the Death figure talks about the task of catching all sorts of people, without their being introduced as persons on stage. Such is the case in the drama of Polycarpus talking with Death. In the Latin prose source only one sentence refers to death

wieku. Katalog wystawy pod kierunkiem i redakcją Przemysława Mrozowskiego, 15 grudnia 2000-15 marca 2001, Zamek Królewski w Warszawie, p. 88. Cf. also a drawing in one of the Russian MS of the *Prenije* from the 16th cen., Dmitrijeva p. 77 (death mowing five heads); the printed leaflet *Dyaloghus Vite et Mortis* (Magdeburg 1480/81-1484) also has a woodcut with the death figure mowing six people (Skvairs p. 116). Vita from this dialogue quite cleverly puts Mors to shame (non bonus messor esses), because she doesn't wait for her harvest to become ripe (stanza 7, Skvairs p. 119).

¹⁶ Głowa mi się wkłóło toczy, / S niej chcą wypaść oczy. Cf. Decrepitis de oculis respicio (l. 57); oculi intrant (72).

¹⁷ See the drawing in the Russian MS with a 17th c. version of the *Prenije*, Dmitrijeva p. 53.

¹⁸ O Dot, wo schal ik dat vorstan? / Ik schal danssen unde kan nicht ghan. (Freytag 1993, p. 338).

dancing:

Et tunc facio mihi ludum et choream.

This is, to be sure, not actual dancing, but an expression of a somewhat topical wish for recreation, or rather a triumphant display after having finished with killing everybody — the Polish poem has a fully narrated dance parade. A large part of Death's role is a *danse macabre*, admittedly not *performed* or arranged as an continuous event, but only *spoken*. It starts with 140 vivacious lines (156-240), and Death proceeds until line 479, but she takes mostly more time for the next victims. In 241-265 and 343-371 the Master himself is taken under scrutiny; in 266-294 clergy and laymen, canons and parish priests, merchants, ladies, girls, widows and married women, nobility, scholars and courtiers, knights and warriors, murderers, and torturers. Then a longer passage follows about medics (295-328). No less bitter is the next one about unjust judges and assessors (329-342), and part 372-389 could be called a *danse macabre des animaux*. The final part comes back to the highest clergy (the pope, "as much worth as a beggar," cardinals, bishops), monks and abbots, separately good monks (411-433), bad ones (440-467), and cloister officials (custodian, prior, abbot, 468-479).

Speech is kept to the simple present or the future tense, the only exceptions being for her biblical victims, Absalom, Samson, Goliath, Annas, Caiaphas, and Judas,¹⁹ for old heroes in general,²⁰ one mentioned in particular,²¹ and for her only invincible victim, Christ.²² Death refers to her own works in terms of pleasure and dance (166-9), but it is only a general name for her sequential activities, not of an actual event happening in time and space:

This is my greatest joy, When I have many to kill:
When I start to dance with my scythe, I want to bite a thousand of them —

So this is in no way actual dancing, whether playful or ritual, nor triumphal, it is just a metaphor — it is her scythe that Death is "dancing" with, not the people she is going to kill.²³ She is mocking a sword-dancer,²⁴ presenting herself as a scythe-dancer, and otherwise, when talking about people to be killed.

Craftsmen, merchants, and ploughmen,
Everyone jumps before my scythe²⁵

Death uses almost the same metaphor²⁶ to describe the movement of the prey being chased,²⁷ no "dancing interaction" between the killer and the victims. To sum up, thus far the spoken "dancing" separately covers the movements of Death handling her scythe, or the behavior of people running away, but not the interactive parade of death seizing people and taking them one by one to her "school," which

¹⁹ „Ja zabiła Golijasza, / Annasza i Kajifasza, / Ja Judasza obiesiła / I dwu łotru na krzyż wbiła”;

²⁰ Obrzemy (today: olbrzymy) – explained by the editors as 'great heroes', but it means literally 'giants', in some mythologies prehistoric figures.

²¹ „Wietrzych” — Dietrich of Bern (=Verona), king of the Ostrogoths.

²² Alem kosy naruszyła, / Gdym Krystusa umorzyła, /Bo w niem była Boska siła. /Ten jeden mą kosę zwyciężył

²³ The same in the Ukrainian version which has also *joy* and — less sure — *dancing* or *jumping* ([ska]kati): Bo moje to najbol'szee weselja / gdy moru liudskoe pokolenja (218-219). 209 Jak vozmy kosoju kositi (...) 211 A kogdy ja pocznu skakati, już trudno ot niej [!] v'tekati (211-212); Janów 1958, p. 200. Only lines 166-7 have been translated into Russian, lines 168-170 are omitted; the translation goes through lines 171-2, and then to 175-183 (Van der Kop 1907: 51-52).

²⁴ In sentence 37 of the Latin *Polycarpus*, Death speaks of two swords she had before Christ took one away from her: duos gladios prius habui, sed iam unum recepit mihi Christus, quia mortificavi eum in humana natura, quia voluntarie mori voluit pro homine et scolas meas intravit. In Polish the swords are gone; Death says Christ has damaged her scythe (208-212).

²⁵ Rzemieślniki, kupce i oracze, / Każdy przed mą kosą skacze (190-1).

²⁶ Polish *plęsać* 'to dance' and *skakać* 'to jump' are both included in the Latin *saltare*.

²⁷ Jedwo ji pogonię z kosą! (459); A wždy za niem biegać muszę (464); the whole original episode about bad monks (440-467) uses the chasing metaphor.

is the only meaning of the death dance in painting.

The imagery of the Latin source places more explicit stress on Death taking people by force to her "school," as in the following:

ad meas scolas accipio (6)
potuit scolas meas evadere (12)
recipio ad scolas meas spirituales, papam,... (19)
omnis homo intret scolas meas (20)
quos ... ad tuas scolas vocasti (24)
in scolis meis omnes requiescunt (31)
amicos meos separas et trahis ad scolas tuas (33)
meliores te in scolis meis habui (36)
Christus ... scolas meas intravit (37)
Omnes coligo et ad scolas meas transire compello (40)
ad scolas meas recipiam et maxime potentes (43)
intranat scolarum meam (63)
cum eum vis ducere ad tuas scolas (66)
ego mors principes mundi ad meas scolas adduxi (77)
duco eum [=hominem] ad scolas meas (79)

The Polish text has more images expressing killing explicitly, using different synonyms or hyponyms of killing or dying. First those kept in the past tense:

przez mię umrzeć musiał 142
Ja zabiła 204-5
obiesiła 206
na krzyż wbiła 207
Krystusa umorzyła 209, 230, 232-6, 329
Z tegom się żywotem biedziła 213

In the present tense:

Siekę doktory i mistrze 106
Morzę 162, 167, 171, 172, 268
wieszam, 240
ścinam 240

In the future tense or conditional mood:

żywota zbawię 58, 146, 175, 267
umorzyła 95, 161
w żywocie zaniszczę 156
jich ... pokęsać 169
kosa potraci 179, 242
zdawić 201, 202
posieczesz 243, 280, 282, 286
zetnę szyję 251, 255
umrzeć każdy musi 309

Killings may be also expressed metaphorically, or by comparison

Rzucę się jako kot na myszy 65
czyść epistoły 88 {odpytywać z pracy domowej}
nic po mnie 99 {już po mnie}
łupię 268
moja kosa skarże 276
koniec temu będzie 313

There are also implicit expressions, sometimes simple euphemisms, but not infrequently amazingly

subtle or ironic understatements:

przydę k tobie 61
 cię z nią [miłośnicą] rozdzielię 74
 Przed nią [kosą] nikt nie uciecze 80
 przyniosę jadu garnek 68
 duszę by wypędziła 96
 Dzirzę kosę na rejestrze 105
 noclegu proszę 108
 przed tobą uciec 152
 A umiem to działa ... 163
 z kosą plęsać 168
 Każdemu ma kosa zgodzi 177
 pobierzę k sobie 183
 pod kosę wemknę 185
 bywam w cesarskiej sieni 186
 na swej stawiam sparze [] 189
 przed mą kosą skacze 191
 Zostawię je nieboszczyki 193
 mą kosę poznają 197
 nawiedzą mą szkołę 198
 Mam moc nad ludźmi 215
 słamię kości 218
 Zapłacz nad tobą siostra 224
 wezdrzysz nogą 226
 kosę ucieszyła 238
 Będą w mojej szkole 271
 ostawiam je w jenej koszulce 284
 Biegam za nimi s pogonią 288
 Rozdzielię ji [s] swoją miłą 291
 z twej mocy nie wybawiają 298
 Poki nietu czasu mego 304
 w mej szkole siędzie 314

The passage about the killing of animals is quite picturesque, starting from the general statement, *Nobody can hide from me; I'll cut the necks of all the living*,²⁸ it develops into a depiction of common hunting (foxes, martens, ermines, squirrels, wolves, roe deer, cranes and great bustards),²⁹ and, finally, to presenting practical tasks such as butchery in animal husbandry, including disemboweling geese and using feathers to make pillows.³⁰

Almost each line has to be quoted here, for each contains another expression for killing or dying. It is difficult to agree with Siatkowska's opinion that the Polish translation inherited the stylistic poverty of the Latin with its small number of synonyms.³¹ Quite the contrary, as we have seen, even today it is almost impossible until today to find more synonyms or metaphors for dying in Polish which had not been used by the author of the poem.³²

Cokoli martwym niosą,

²⁸ Nikt się przede mną nie skryje, / Wszytkiem żywem utnę szyje (374-5).

²⁹ In the lines 376-389: Sama w lisie jamy łążę, / Wszytki liszki w zdrowiu każę; // Za kunami łążę w dzienie, / Łupieże dam na odzienie; // Ja dawię gronostaje / I wiewiorkam się dostaje; // Jać też kosą siekę wilki, / Sarny łapam drugiej filki; // Przez płoty chłopie / Gonię żorawie i dropie;

³⁰ Z gęsi też wypędzam <kruszki>, / Pierze dawam na poduszki (l. 386-7).

³¹ „Styl dialogu jest ubogi, mało spotyka się synonimów, przeważają wyrazy o znaczeniach konkretnych. Cechy te przejęło m.in. polskie tłumaczenie.” Siatkowska 2006, p. 6.

³² Closer to the facts was Janów 1958: autor... posługuje się szeregiem doskonałych obrazów poetyckich, które skrzą się od przeciwstawień, porównań, przenośni, dosadnych epitetów itd. (p. 190). Also Pirożyńska, agreeing about the scarcity of ornate style in the Latin text, stated the frequent use of metaphor, antithesis, as well as of synonyms in the Polish poem.

Ci byli pod mą kosa.
Przeć ten przykład przywodę,
Kaźdego w ژیwocie szkodę:
By się podnosił na powietrze,
Musisz płacić świętopietrze;
Jen ma grody i pałace,
Kaźdy przed mą kosa skacze;
By też miał ژیelazna wrota,
Nie udzie se mną kłopotu.
Wszystki sobie za nic waźę,
Z kaźdego duszę wyłłabię:

The same is true in the following dance with the usual “partners,” each of whom gets “another dance,” i.e. another verb or a phrase:

Stojić za mało papież
I naliszsy ژیebak takież,
Kardynali i biskupi -
Zadam jim wielikie łupy,
Pogniatam ci kanoniki,
Proboszcze, sufragany,
Ani mam o to przygany;
Wszystki mnichy i opaty
Posiekę przez zapłaty.
Dobrzy mniszy się nie boją,
Ktorzy ژیwot dobry maja,
Acz mą kosę poznają,
Ale się jej nie lękają.
To wszystkim dobrem pospolno -
Jidą przed mą kosa rowno (...)

There is even one mysterious place where the *Polycarpus* drama becomes a regular death dance, with the victims speaking for themselves in the six lines (434-439)

Co nam pomogło odzienie
Albo obłudne jimienie,
Cośmy się w niem kochali,
A swe dusze za nie dali?
Przeminęło jak obłoki,
A my jidziem przez otwłoki.

They are part of Death’s role, but grammatically (1st person plural) it is not her speech; it must be understood as a quotation. Death is retelling what she is hearing, or she is speaking (in the manner of *prosopopoeia*) in name of the “worldly people” who were earlier laughing at the simple, devout monks. Are we obliged to imagine an earlier version of the text with regular separate roles, one of which, that of the Laymen (collective personification?), has not been transformed into Death’s 1st person speech? A simpler solution would be a mistake by a scribe who mixed up his source, but it is difficult to point to a place in the extant text that would be better except for another, not delivered passage found in the monologue about good and bad monks in their social context. The words of the hypothetical Laymen resemble the speaking turn of Death addressing the King in the Reval Totentanz:

You have all your thoughts directed
Towards worldly splendor.
What is the use of it now? You have to go to earth.³³

³³ Al dyne danken heftu geleyt / Na werliker herlicheyt / Wat batet du most in den slik (Freytag 1993, p. 196-7). Also in the role of the Curate (Kaplan, vicarius) we hear the self-accusation, “What is the use of the riches for me if I have to leave them here?” Wat schal mi nu dat Gut./ Wente ik it hir al laten mot? (275-6, p. 248).

(4) There are two **translations** of the Polish Polycarpus dialogue, one into Russian, and one into Ukrainian. As Anna Catharina Croiset van der Kop (1907) has convincingly shown, the Russian translation³⁴ *Skazanie o smerti nekoego mistra filozofa* was based on another Polish text that was more complete and closer to or identical with the unknown autograph, although the differences are minor. Where the known Płock MS has single lines, the Russian prose translation has more text allowing a quite simple reconstruction (“back translation”) of the missing line to a full distich. This also works for the Ukrainian verse translation.³⁵

The Ukrainian poem *Slovo o ljutoj smerti*³⁶ (A word about the harsh Death, inc. Хочу вам о смирти приклад поведати, Choču vam o smirti prikklad povedati) is a quite literal translation of the Polish *Polycarpus*, written down in continuo, although the initials of each distich are marked with a red underline. The long title is red, as are the stage remarks (*reče smert* for *mors dicit*), which are in the vernacular, not in Latin as in the Polish text. Latin was the obligatory language for the drama’s *rubrics* such as *Mors dicit*, or *magister dicit*. This was a general, but not an absolute, rule in vernacular writing in the Middle Ages in all of Europe.

The Ukrainian translator displays no great ambition of making a regularly-rhymed poem, but most couplets are rhymed, though there is no regularity in prosody. Unfortunately this translation was written down on the last folios of the codex that was lost, leaving us with only 220 lines. Had it been preserved, reconstruction of the lost final part of the Polish original would have been very easy because the Ukrainian version follows its source very closely starting with distich 17-18.³⁷

II.

Lament Of a Dying Man (*Skarga umierającego*) is a Polish text preserved in two forms. (A) a stanzaic song written down in 1463 in Płock (inc.: Ach mój smętku),³⁸ and (B) a short dramatized ars moriendi, written down ca. 1465 in Wrocław (inc. Ej, mój smętku).³⁹ So we can compare the narrative with the

³⁴ *Сказание о смерти некоего мистра философа*, ed. by Dmitrijeva, 1964: 197-200; Inc. Milostivij boze, pomozhi mi... Милостивый боже помози ми...; based on the Moscow manuscript, compared with two Petersburg copies from the Saltikov-Ščedrin Public Library, Q.I. 1007, and O.I. 426. Ed. first by Van der Kop 1907, in her edition see pp. 30-54, and 72. This Russian text M (from Moscow, where it was found in the collection of the Volokolamsk cloister no. 573, now in the State Library) is about 80 years younger than the Polish copy; for the part of M covering the lines 1-164 of the Polish original, there are two copies (in Petersburg), P I and P II, the latter from the beginning of the 18th cen., the former from the 17th cen. *Skazanije* was also written in the cloister of Volokolamsk.

³⁵ An exemplary case is the “half distich” of line 159 with no rhymed match, line 160 starting the next pair rhyming with 161. Van der Kop reconstructed Adamowa pokolenia from the Russian; the Ukrainian translation has (l. 200) *Že ot adamowa prestuplenija / 201 dał mi bog tuju moc, / 202 žebych liudej [morila (?)] / 203 w den i w noc* (Janów 1958: 199). Hence we can draw the conclusion that the Ukrainian translation was also based on another Polish MS, slightly different from that of the Płock version we know.

³⁶ Original written in the Cyrillic alphabet (with elements of the old church Slavonic): *Слово о лютой смирти*, inc. Хочу вам о смрти приклад повѣдати; see Janów (1958: 194-200) for a typographic transcription and a simple edition: *Słowo o Ljutoj Smerty Pred Kotorajusja Nichto Ne Možet Skryti* (A word about the harsh Death from whom nobody can hide; cf. here line 374 of the Polish source: *Nikt się przede mną nie skryje*); this early Ukrainian translation of the Polish *Polycarpus* comes from the codex No 16, ff.182-7, the Library of the Nation’s House in Lvov (collection Petruszewicz No 217). For the description of this codex see I. Swiencicki, *Opys rukopysiw Narodnoho Domu*, vol. 2, Lvov 1911, p. 264 ff. Among the texts in the collection there are other translations from Polish.

³⁷ *Przykład o tem chcę powiedzieć, / Słuchaj tego, kto chce wiedzieć!*

³⁸ MS Seminary Library of Płock, shelf No. 91 (lost since WW II), f. 277-277v after blank folio 276 with space left for the unfinished copy of *De morte prologus*, f. 272v-275v. The ABC-song was written down at the same time (September 17, 1463), and most probably by the same scribe, David. The codex, owned by David’s uncle, Nicholas, was devoted mostly (ff. 2-272, 350-462) to the “sermones Succii,” by Conrad of Brundelsheim, abbot of the Cistercians of Heilbronn (†1321).

³⁹ *Skarga umierającego*, ca. 1465 (after 1461, before 1470?), Chapter Library Wrocław, MS 2, f. 12v-r. Data from Woronczak 1949 (with transliteration on pp.33-35) and 1950. The codex is a collection of 29 separately existing files written down by four different hands between 1409 and ca. 1470. About this time it was bound together into the form preserved until today, but not without some damage, the worst being from the Thirty Years’ War, 1632. In the first part (inc. *Legitur quod quedam puella religiosa*, ff. 1-26) it had three exempla, two sermons for the Holy Week, one on the Immaculate Conception and the

drama form and follow the poet using memorative couplets of *ars moriendi* to make a short morality play enacting a dialogue between the dying man (Infirmus), the surrounding people (Homines), and an angel.

A. The Polish song (translated from the Czech⁴⁰), is arranged as an abecedarius (ABC-acrostic). As a song it had quite a rich delivery in Polish folklore until the 20th cen. The presumed original Czech source was identified in a long dialogue poem from ca. 1423, called *Rozmlouvání člověka se smrtí*;⁴¹ which consists of four parts, four scenes, as it were, in a dramatic “meeting” between a man and Death: lines 1-1118 — their conversation through the door follows the Latin *Polycarpus* dialogue; 1119-1170 — Death entering and intimidating the man; 1171-1312 — the lament of the dying man; 1313-1399 — the description of the agony and the corpse. The third part was a model of a Czech ABC-acrostic (ca. 20 quoted lines) which circulated independently as *O rozdělení duše z tělem* (ca. 1430, about a soul’s parting from the body),⁴² and was translated into Polish. From this unknown, lost translation we have: a relative good copy from 1463,⁴³ notice of another copy now lost, and a recently discovered complete copy from ca. 1600.⁴⁴ It is not impossible that a copy of the earlier Hussitic version of *Rozmlouvání* was known of in Płock, because in 1452 two canons of the Płock chapter did research to prepare rules for proceeding with local parish priests suspected of Hussitism.⁴⁵ One of the canons was a doctor of law, Nicholas (Mikołaj z Mirzyńca, today Mierzeniec), the uncle of David of Mirzyńiec, and the young scribe of both the Polish abecedarius and the *Polycarpus*-dialogue.⁴⁶ Another “dramatic” stream of reception is the *Lament* discussed in next paragraph.

B. The only manuscript of the drama is a free adaptation of the ABC-poem. First, it omits some passages and changes the order of the stanzas. Secondly, it permits variants in the text for cases when the dying person has no children who could be heirs. The “children” in the text are preceded by a reference sign [“], or double slash [//], and the marginal gloss (repeating the same sign) says: “friends” (*przijaciela*), while in another place the alternative for *children* is *the poor* (gloss on lower margin of p. 12r: *ubogijm*). This means that the drama was aimed at showing the art of dying well in practice, and that it was performed *in situ* as a ritual drama of penitence to be held when someone was actually going to die. The third important difference is a 10-line addition at the end, a sort of extra act of the drama following the death of Infirmus, introducing his soul, which after leaving the body stands on a green pasture not knowing where to go. The Usurer (from the *Death dance* of Lübeck) says, “I have to die: it is

Lament, followed by a first draft of a sermon about St Hedwig (with two Polish words). In the whole codex of 355 ff. sermons prevail, most of them *de tempore*, but also *de sanctis*. There are many modern editions, including digital and some available in the web (see bibliography).

⁴⁰ This idea of S. Dobrzycki has been definitively proved by Woronczak 1950:164-170.

⁴¹ About 1400 lines long. We know two redactions, one from 1507?, and other from the end of the 16th cen. printed in Prague. The first is Hussitic, the other (re)Catholicized; both are incomplete, edited first by S. Vrtel-Wierczyński, *Staročeský dialog moralizující z počátku XVI w. Rozmlouvání člověka se Smrtí*, Praha 1928. František Všetíčka, *Kompozice staročeského Rozmlouvání člověka se Smrtí*, “Listy filologické” 91, 1968, s. 198-206, suggests the 2nd half of the 15th c.

⁴² Preserved only in much later carol versions, from 1541, 1601, and 1606; all of them have only parts of the original abecedarius form.

⁴³ Also lost during WW II, but well described from experience earlier. It preserves the abecedarius form with the omission of the S-stanza, which fortunately is delivered in the drama version. See next note.

⁴⁴ *Pieśń o śmierci i niepewnym żywocie ludzkim*, discovered by Wydra in codex 20/R of the library of the Kraków Province of the Observants, pp. 167-175, edited in: Wydra 2003: 78-82. For further tradition see also W. Wydra, *Dwa XVIII-wieczne przekazy „Skargi umierającego”*, „Studia Polonistyczne” 14/15, 1987.

⁴⁵ S.M. Szacherska, *Mikołaj z Mirzyńca* [in:] *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 21, s.127.

⁴⁶ David must have been then a young master of arts, as he became canon of the Płock chapter ca. 1490 (Szacherska). His signatures under the two Polish texts have been identified as the work of the same hand (by paleographer Mąkowski before 1939 when the manuscript still existed in Płock, and recently by Wydra, who analyzed photographs: 1979; 2003: 73). It should be added that both of David’s signatures are “stylistically” similar to each other as they use the current date (in 1463): *XVII Septembris – Prima Octobris*, while the other scribe of the codex (Mikołaj of Płock, son of Jakub) signed his work with the liturgical date: *sabbato ante dominicam letare*.

so hard to leave everything without knowing the destination. I do not know where to go.”⁴⁷ Death gives an answer, “Nu mustu int ander lant.” (267, p. 244), and this –“*other world*” is the actual name of Death’s realm, not the metaphoric *school*, mentioned so many times in the Latin *Polycarpus* and its vernacular translations.

III.

Interpretation. In both presented cases multiple delivery of the same subject matter, and actually of the text itself, asks for an explanation and allows us to draw general conclusions. The delivery may be in two ways: first, by way of reception (the line from a simple source via an artistic original to translations and adaptations); secondly, by way of intertextuality, genre switch, or intermediality.

Delivery by transfer (external reception in different milieus). The *Polycarpus* translations in Russia and the Ukraine preserve the plot (a conversation between the two protagonists), but abandon the most essential aspect of the death dance – the sequential presentation of the social structure: emperor, pope, kings, dukes, counts, merchants, artisans, physicians, plowmen, knights, clergy, monks, nuns, and lest we forget, beggars, with special attention to innkeepers who deceive when serving beer. Most of these characters are missing from the translations, only dukes and kings from the Latin core remain, otherwise the translators work with general opposing types: young v. old, rich v. poor, or doctors v. masters. The latter are present in the Polish source next to the following: the wise and the foolish, sick and healthy (172-8), boys and girls, and clergy and laity. There are additions and repetitions: voivodes and court butlers, judges and assessors, nobility and peasants, cardinals and bishops, canons, parish priests and suffragans, monks and abbots, priors, good monks and bad monks separately, ladies and fat women, virgins, married women and widows, knights and warriors, courtiers and students, philosophers and astrologists, good merchants and horse sellers, traitors and usurers, murderers and tormentors. We are left in the middle of the passage with the courage of martyr-virgins, the only moment when Death shows admiration.

The reception milieu modifies the manner in which the work is received, adapting it to local conditions and needs. The adaptation mechanism works partly as a filter, stopping unknown elements outside. They appear as impossible to understand and, in a sense, they remain imperceptible.⁴⁸ It is an analogy to the cognitive-constructivist model of “understanding equals inventing” (Piaget), that is, reducing or tailoring incoming ideas to a person’s mental capabilities, allowing unassisted and fully functional reproduction. You haven’t understood an idea if you cannot invent it with your own thinking apparatus to fit it to your own ideas and to explain it to others. Even if the individual mind is capable of understanding an acquired idea properly thanks to versatile education, further transmission will be ever more dependent on the text’s function in the receiving community; if the community has another system of values, it will never transmit the adapted work in the received form, but will change it in order to express the community’s own experiences, values, imagery, and cognitive apparatus.

These **two reasons** explain the abandonment of the advanced description of social estates, professions, and roles where they were different, absent, or didn’t matter. I think this is the case in the Ukrainian translation, which follows the Polish original quite closely and correctly⁴⁹ until it starts the death dance with its sophisticated depiction of society. Here the translator gets lost in the details of a lesser known social structure and gets no support from the imaginary structure of the death dance

⁴⁷ Der Wucherer: Mot ik nu sterven, dat is mi swar. / Unde latent hir, unde wet nicht war. / Ik en wet nicht, war ik henne mot (*Der Lübeck-Revaler Totentanz*, 257-9, p. 238)

⁴⁸ Maria Corti pointed to such “invisible” elements in culture: non-systemic contents are there existentially, but are not perceived as meaningful as long as they don’t fit into the system of culture. This could be called the non-behavior of which Watzlavick spoke it would not exist. His thesis “there is no non-behavior” can be reconciled with Corti’s position if we take the ‘non-behavior’ to mean ‘non-systemic behavior’.

⁴⁹ The recent opinion by Siatkowska (2005: 14), who doubts it was a translation from Polish, should be strongly opposed. Otherwise we would have to accept the possibility of the independent creation of a text that for about 200 lines repeats the plot of another text, following it sentence by sentence thematically, distributing a similar content of sentences analogically by two identical speakers, repeating rhymes in most pairs, etc. — all this to be explained by common inspiration only.

(absent from the iconography of the Orthodox Church), which would have enabled him to embed the subject matter in a cognitive-artistic frame. These two reasons explain why the death dance imagery with its rich social motifs was excluded in the translation of the Polish original both into Russian and Ukrainian. Still, both translations differ considerably from each other. The Ukrainian text dissipates after about line 200; the subsequent preserved 20 lines are variations on the earlier passage.⁵⁰ The translator seems to have got lost and it is most intriguing how he could have possibly proceeded further, but it would be no surprise if he didn't.

The Russian translator chose another technique, that of summarizing. His text seems a synopsis of the Polish one, not vice versa; in its prose there are enough preserved rhyme pairs to make us quite sure it is a translation.⁵¹ Thanks to the method applied, the translator was able to omit all details he didn't need for his readers, or which he simply didn't understand. He extracted only the most essential information and morals, made a short summary without any narrative or dramatic ambition. However, he at least finished his work and even enlarged it with three quotations from the early ("orthodox") Church Fathers. The method applied by the Russian translator brings us to the other type of cultural text-processing.

Delivery by text-processing within a cultural system involves dynamics of source-and-target adaptation, which results in multiple delivery, parallel existence of same subject matters thanks to genre switch, polymorphism, intertextuality, and intermediality.

The medieval drama of the Netherlands gives us a fine example of multiple delivery of a Eucharistic miracle play. It was delivered in a small codex (before 1540) with regulations of a confraternity established in a town church in Breda (Dutch Brabant) after a miraculous host was transferred there from the village parish of Nieuwewaert, where the cult had started in 1373. The codex contains a collection of *miracula*, a series of poems enarrating paintings presenting the host's history on the church walls, a full drama based on the *miracula* — *Tspel van mirakel vanden heilighen sacramente vander nyeuwewaert*, Eucharistic prayers, and an anthem. The drama was performed by the confraternity.⁵²

As we have seen, the Polish *Lament* has also been preserved in two genre forms, quite different in structure. They coexisted in time, but had diverging functionality. The alphabet song served as an envelope to pack the message (essentials of an *ars moriendi*) in order to send it into the future, so that people would come. The future of the message may be the sender's own, and as a matter of fact we deal with this text-processing all the time, even when we try to remember movie plots. All "bigger" content packages, larger amounts of knowledge, need smaller representatives for transmission. It was general practice in medieval education and creative and scholarly writing to add short poems to longer treatises or narratives. The scarce medieval literature in Polish features an example of a poem in Polish as an abbreviation of a Latin treatise on orthography (1440).⁵³ This is the synchronic aspect of multiple delivery. I want to draw attention to its diachronic dimension.

Looking closer at *cultural text processing* in its diachronic dimension, we refer to memory and oral delivery.⁵⁴ Studying products of inspiration of different Muses, we forget that they were daughters of the goddess of memory Mnemosyne. We easily admit an active cultivation of tradition in modern times, but forget that people of the Middle Ages also developed art and life forms, rituals and even

⁵⁰ Lines 166-176, from Polish II. 159-162, 166-9, 170-173, 176, 177, 223-4.

⁵¹ Against Siatkowska 2005: 13.

⁵² I devote chap. 19 of my *Teatr i sacrum w średniowieczu*, Wrocław 2001, pp. 350-360 to an analysis of this case. Most parts of the Dutch codex have been edited together with the drama in: *Het Spel vanden Heiligen Sacramente van der Nyeuwewaert*, W.J.M.A. Asselbergs, A.P. Huysmans (eds.), Culemborg 1955; earlier ed. by P. Leendertz, *Middelnederlandsche dramatische poezie*, Leiden 1907, vol. I:213-276.

⁵³ Jakub Parkoszowic, *Obiecado* [in:] W. Wydra, W.R. Rzepka (eds.), *Chrestomatia staropolska*, Wrocław 2019, p. 299.

⁵⁴ 'Cultural' means aimed at the memorative delivery of a given community's heritage; it has to be a unit capable of encoding, containing, and transmitting experience and knowledge, including the arts.

artifacts serving tradition and social memory.⁵⁵ This is nothing new for any medievalist; we are now well aware of the sophisticated techniques of mnemonics,⁵⁶ serving the tasks of *memoria* as the fourth canon of rhetoric. Successful application of *memoria*'s devices was a condition for the adequate presentation of the memorized content (the fifth canon). As a rule, the rhetorical procedures of text production from the beginning to the presentation are applied by the same person, i.e. the same preacher who created his sermon, memorized it, and reproduced it afterwards. In one mind both creative forces, retrospective cognitive memory and prospective creative imagination, meet and help each other.⁵⁷

In cultural text processing this identity is lost. The mechanisms of *artificial memory* must be objective and recognizable across time and space to guarantee their identification by neighbor- recipients and next generations in order to allow the reconstruction of their heritage, which in a cognitive sense is always a new *construction* or even (partly) a re-invention, not only elocution. Within the cultural heritage of the Middle Ages we can discern a stream of texts/contents encoded by mnemonics (and written down incidentally with a low level of *elocutio*), and another stream – that of texts (bearers of content) decoded from the compressed form to fully functional or artistic modalities.

Maybe this is the case of the *Lament*, the topic of *ars moriendi*, given first a narrative form in part three of the Czech *Rozmlouvání*). It was encoded as an abecedarius, and in such form reached other milieus, languages, and generations, so it could be decoded as a prompt for private meditation or recollection exercises, for scholarly commentary, or as teaching material, a teacher's syllabus, as a song, a sermon, or as a ritual drama. Each of the genre possibilities was multiplied by a number of rhetorical *modi tractandi*.

However, let's recall what the Russian translator of *Polycarpus* did. He took a long poem (quite advanced artistically but foreign culturally) and made a short narrative summary in prose not ambitious artistically and purged of the cognitive burden of an alien background. This was also *encoding* by way of reducing to essentials, up to losing the hero's name. The result could safely wait for a recipient who would want to extract a draft from it and develop it to a fully-fledged poem. We do at least know of one such a user. In a codex written down as late as 1782⁵⁸ we find a long passage from *Skazanije*.⁵⁹ The passage was inserted into a copy of the prose, "Controversy between Life and Death" — *Prenije života i smerti*, the newest and last version of the 130 known variants,⁶⁰ covering a span of almost 300 years and beginning with a literal translation of the Low German dialogue *Leven und Dod*, which was brought to Novgorod by the printer, Bartholomeus Ghotan after 1484.⁶¹ That short dialogue had a much longer German counterpart, one that was possibly a source for this abridged version.⁶²

⁵⁵ More about this prospective "cultural memory" as a working area of the daughters of Menemosyne in my *Średniowiecze. Korzenie*, Warszawa 2005, chap. 12, pp. 179-185. There is another notion of "cultural memory" (J. Assman) which I would call retrospective. It consists of constructing a community's own past as a way of pursuing its identity. See below for "aesthetic memory" — a different interpretation of arts as daughters of Mnemosyne, but "not yet born," memory being self as "Art, in which all the various arts are united".

⁵⁶ At least since the seminal work of Francis Yates, cf. more recent contributions, esp. of Mary Carruthers.

⁵⁷ Similar is the medieval difference between the sense of fantasy (retaining knowledge) and the sense of imagination (creating an image of known objects). They were conceived of as internal senses, ordering the data of the five external senses (Kuksewicz 1996). See also Praz referring to the ideas of Antonio Russi on the affinity of memory and imagination (*L'Arte e le Arti*, Pisa 1960).

⁵⁸ Ed. by Dmitrijeva, p. 163

⁵⁹ Ca. 20 lines of print, which makes up about 20% of the whole; it is the passage covering the Polish lines (113-156) on the origin of Death, and the following question of the Master "Why do you want to take all people's lives?" with the same angry words of Death: *razdrażniesz mja* (Dmitrijeva, p. 163, cf. 200).

⁶⁰ All of them edited by Dmitrijeva 1964.

⁶¹ Theodor Lewandowski, *Das mittelniederdeutsche Zwiegespräch zwischen dem Leben und dem Tode und seine altrussische Übersetzung*, Köln 1972. Norbert Angermann, *Bartholomäus Ghotan in Novgorod*, in: "Zeitschrift des Vereins für Lübeckische Geschichte und Altertumskunde" 45, 1965, pp. 141-149.

⁶² Dmitrijeva, p. 18 referring to different opinions on the "literary family" of the short dialogue. If the Low German text were itself a translation from Latin, the long German poem must have been an amplification of the short one. An earlier print of

The Russian *Polycarpus* waited incognito from ca. 1540⁶³ for more than 240 years to be rediscovered and put to partial use again before it went defunct. It is one of the accidental ironies of Russian literary history that an important text, after centuries of delivery, crosses the life line of another extremely popular text that has lasted even longer, since ca. 1500. *Habent sua fata libelli...*

“And in most of them dancing is not shown either”.⁶⁴ Research on death dances in the medieval period brought no hard proof of their being actually performed as a dance parade; however, their supposed connections with theater were believed to be strong.⁶⁵ There is an example of the staging of a royal entry as “The triumph of Death,” as the Regent of the Netherlands, Margaret of Austria, entered Geneva in 1501 along a route whose program had more elements expressing the warning *memento mori* than the earthly glory of the ruler. The funereal tone of the celebration was most visible in the last pageant at the door of the princess’s lodging, where Death kept his court (Kipling 1998: 182-3). *Memento mori?* Yes. *Vado mori?* Perhaps. Death dance? No, just a personified representation.

As a matter of fact even the famous depictions of the “death dances” of the 15th cen. are very unlikely to represent actual dances.⁶⁶ The representations of actual dances can more easily be recognized or expected to be painted in palaces rather than in churches.

Conversely, Death in the text of paintings by Lübeck and Reval never mentions school. Dance and school seem to be incompatible scripts.⁶⁷ Dance can be associated with court culture, but school — with the church. In both cases an easy semantic mechanism underlies the metaphoric transfer of meaning from dancing as an emblem of court life to its opposite, and from church schools to the morgues situated in churchyards. Starting in the 15th cen. the two streams are subsumed into the town culture, which only in the 19th cen. becomes dominant over the previous two, not surprisingly developing both a dance culture of its own (dance house and city-ball) and a school system. ⁶⁸

Death, being one of the Four Last Things, can be a main figure in morality plays and mystery plays that do not end with Ascension but deal with apocalyptic issues and include one or another form of the Last Judgment. One such mystery play is the Low-German *Redentiner Osterspiel* from Lübeck, which has recently been shown to rely on the verse subscriptions of the Death dance painted on the church wall in Lübeck (Clausnitzer et al., 2003).⁶⁹

the short Latin poem: Bartholomäus Ghotan: *Dyaloghus vite et mortis* = *Zwiegespräch zwischen Leben und Tod*, Magdeburg um 1480 [leaflet with woodcut: death as haymaker], introd. E. Skvairs, Magdeburg, 2006; Catherine Squires (2005) — this was not the source of the Low German translation published by Ghotan in Lübeck 1484); with thanks to Professor Squires (Moscow) for her help.

⁶³ Dmitrijeva, 1964: 31, dates the MS for the two decennia 1530-50 (thirties-forties of the 16th cen.). See also R.P. Dmitrijeva, *Russkij perevod XVI v. polskovo socinenija XV v. „Razgovor magistra Polikarpa co smertju”*, “Trudy Otdela Drevnerusskoj Literatury” t. 19, Moskva 1963, 303-317.

⁶⁴ This is the position of Malcolm Boyd, who was skeptical about the iconography of the medieval death dance as a source for dance history: M. Boyd, *Art, Dance of Death* [in:] *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, London 1980; for a rebuttal (not convincing in my opinion), see Grosskreutz 2003.

⁶⁵ The priority of drama for the illustrated death dance was defended by Wilhelm Seelmann, *Die Totentänze des Mittelalters*, „Niederdeutsches Jahrbuch” 17 (1891), pp. 1-80.

⁶⁶ Peter Grosskreutz (2003) refers mostly to later dances and pictures, but is not convincing in most cases anyway, as he draws conclusions from one crossed leg here and a looking/walking direction there. “Der Tod weicht vom Schrittmodus [des Tanzes Carole] durch seine Sprünge ab, die Handfassungen entfallen teilweise, weil die Sterblichen sich dem Zugriff des Todes zu entziehen suchen”, p. 70.

⁶⁷ Until the 19th cen. and the Brazilian samba, that is...

⁶⁸ In Arnhem around 1430 there were two places to dance, one of them might have been a school; the other — a *danshuus* with sitting places and a small stage for (music)players has been repaired in 1426: “Dirck van Vinceler dat *danshuus* te bereiden, te ribben, ende te plancken, die *zitten* dair op te maken ende dat *sulreken* wair die *spoellude* op stunden”; Dabrówka 1994, pp. 86-88 (note 20 for more references to town accounts of Arnhem), quote from: *De stadsrekeningen van Arnhem 1353-1432*, vols. I-V, W. J. Alberts (ed.), Groningen 1967-1985. Recently cf. L. Søndergaard, *Die Tänze der mittelalterlichen Gilden zur Fastnacht* [in:] «*Et respondeat*»: *Studien zum deutschen Theater des Mittelalters*. Festschrift für Prof. Dr. Johan Nowé anlässlich seiner Emeritierung, K. Scheel (ed.), Leuven 2002, pp. 215-236.

⁶⁹ *Der Totentanz der Marienkirche in Lübeck und der Nikolaikirche in Reval (Tallinn)*, H. Freytag (ed.), Köln 1993;

The role of Death in the subscriptions to the Lübeck canvas is not that often explicit in referring to dance, for example when addressing the Canon (Kannonik, tret her an den Dans, l. 204 p. 212.), or “Virgin, I want to dance with you” (Junkvrow, mit di ik danssen beghinne (380, p. 320). The Hermit is allowed, “you may dance with joy now, yours is a heavenly city” (Du machst wol danssen blidelik, Di hort dat hemmelse Rik, 341-2, p. 296); but does *dance* here mean actually dying, or delight?

Only a couple of the 24 figures on the canvas use the word ‘dance’, e.g. the King “hasn’t learnt this dance” (l. 94: dussen dans en hebbe ik niht gelert, p. 192). The Young Lady is also negative, “I would prefer to avoid this parade” (381, Des Reiges were ik onich gherne, p. 330). The child depicted as a baby in its cradle points cunningly at the absurdity of the dance convention; we find this effect in many versions, as in this 14th cen. English one, “I cannot walk, no dance for me.”⁷⁰

The wicked irony of the dance convention is shown when a person simply begs, “let me live” (the Empress: och lat mi noch leven: l.68), but Death ignores it and forces the metaphor, “and you have to join this game” (du most myt to dessem spele, l. 74 p. 180). Conversely, Death shouts the invitation, “*her keiser, we have to dance*” (l. 44, p. 162), but the Emperor rejects the dance convention and scolds “ugly Death” for destroying his grandeur and turning him into fodder for worms (l. 45-52, p. 166).

No wonder most persons spoken to by Death don’t use the word *dance*; they rather speak instead of suffering, of anger (Ach leider, p. 282); the Cardinal “feels death nearby” and regrets his soon becoming “more unworthy than a dirty dog” (l. 80-85, p. 184); the Merchant makes negative comparisons, “no journey was that difficult” (l. 289, p. 258); the busy Peasant has no time to think about death (356). The Youth accuses Death of trying to net him using trickery (Du kumpst slikende her geghan, /Unde wult mi in din Nette beslan, 367-8, p. 312).

Death itself at times drops the dance convention (which was ironic anyway) and speaks seriously, denying the playful convention of dance, “you are being parted against your will” (l.283, p. 254), “it is no joke” (Amtman, tret an, it is nen Spot; es ist kein Spass, l. 316, p. 276). The greater part of Death’s addresses to the people consists of serious reproaches and condemnations. Even the convention of personal interaction with separate people is abandoned once, while the Craftsman is answered as one of many, “you craftsmen all together” (Gi Amtes Lude alghemeine, 325, p. 285). In two cases Death anticipates a positive judgment of God, who will pay off the Peasant “in His most high chambers” (God wilt di betalen, in sinen oversten Salen, 361-2, p. 308; the other case is that of the Hermit, 333-347, pp. 296-305).

The same contradiction as in the text can be seen in the difference between the iconographic game convention and the tragic meaning of the scenes for the figures presented, who are going to die and who know it well, such as the Sacristan, “Death will swallow me” (Küster, De Dot wil mi vorsluken, l. 308, p. 270). As a matter of fact only death figures (skeletons) may be said to make dance movements, most figures cannot. The emperor is shown with the insignia of his power, a sword and an orb (*globus cruciger*) used during coronations, not at court feasts. The physician displaying the urine glass (called a matula) was not expected to appear with this special flask at dancing parties.

The function of the Lübeck canvas covering the walls of the confession chapel (*bychthus*, Vogeler 1993, p. 76) was not a resolution of death’s anger, but a spur for the penitents to contrition. Indeed, Death calls, “Wultu umme dine Sunde ruwich syn” (l. 235, p.222); some of the figures actually seem to make open confession, “openbar ik di bekenne mine Sund” (l. 338-9, p. 290); while others admit neglecting an accurate examination of conscience, so the moral balance of their deeds may be wrong, which is why they cannot follow Death lightheartedly (Merchant: Mine Rekenscop is nicht klar./ Hadde ik mine Rekenscop ghedan./ So mochte ik vrolik mede ghan, l. 290-3).

The unnoticed fact that the Polish texts discussed above were written down in Plock one month after the first presentation of the painted Totentanz of Lübeck, and half a year before the possible

Claussnitzer et al. 2003.

⁷⁰ An illustrated poem, quoted in: *The Dance of Death*, F. Warren (ed.), London 1931, p. XX, [from:] Freytag ed. 1993, p. 342.

performance of the *Redentiner Osterspiel* (April 1, 1464/71), is most intriguing. A possible explanation could be the shared expectations in Northern and Eastern parts of Europe with regard to the pestilence coming from the South in the early 1460's.⁷² At that time, actually since ca. 1440, xylographic prints of illustrated texts explaining the *ars moriendi* — many treatises and countless leaflets — were becoming popular, and since the 1460's, thanks to the development of printing, common in Western Christianity.⁷³ Almost at the same time prints emerged in the vernacular containing texts and woodcuts representing the *danse macabre*.

The scarcity of iconographic imagery of the death dance in 15th century Poland was responsible for a weak presence of the dance motifs in the Polish *Polycarp* dialogue, and for their complete being filtered out on the way to Russia and the Ukraine, as the imagery of the death dance was not absorbed by Orthodox culture. In Poland the school metaphor was used, allowing the dance only a marginal place; in the Eastern Slavonic area the dance imagery was almost totally avoided, and the school script from the Polish source became marginal, because the school as an idea and an institution was not so deeply rooted in the language as it was in the societies of the Latin church, where the word *school* covered different organizations, not only educational but also corporative, confraternal, and societal.

In Poland itself in the 17th-18th centuries a rich collection of performances was produced with death personified walking on stage with her scythe and "mowing down" the sinners.⁷⁴ The European repertory of Jesuit colleges showed a great deal of interest in the death figure and the death dance.⁷⁵

Aesthetic Memory: a constructivist synthesis? ⁷⁶ Different methods of compressing narratives use a visual element (e.g. *imagines agentes*). They are useful if not necessary for narrative matters to be transferred into abridged forms (encoding). The contribution of iconographic devices of memory is equally vital for "decompressing" encoded messages.

Art historians have described some abbreviating techniques. Auerbach (1976: 125-130), looking at figures on late antique sarcophagi, interpreted their apparent equality and disconnectedness from their own reality as the isolation of subject matter from its micro-history, which must precede its new application. Sheingorn and Bevington identified a "shortcut," e.g. the symbolic co-appearance of sun and moon in a picture as a device for putting together the time of creation and the end of time, and called it "the principle of recapitulation." The composition of works created according to this principle shows "symmetry, hieratic ordering, non-illusionist rendering of space, and a portraiture that is at once personalized and generic" (1985: 134). Peter Parshall introduced the notion of a repertory of iconographic variants, which are trans-narrative because they don't depict any segment of presented events but are the product of selection, modification, and unification of different details in one picture (1999: 464).

The creative power of visual abridging techniques lies not in their visuality alone, but also in the fact that they are visual *in a systematic way*, almost something like *memoria ut pictura*. Recalling Praz's and Russi's idea of *aesthetic memory*, we can try to unify the cognitive and the anthropological (or individual and social) dimensions of the creative work of art. The cultural transmission of a community's experience and values found worthy of being treasured in its heritage depends on devices of

⁷¹ The performance as such is not confirmed by sources.

⁷² Connections between that pestilence and religious literature has been established by Clausnitzer et al. (2003).

⁷³ Rosenfeld 1994, vol. 4, pp. 343-347. M. Włodarski, *Obraz i słowo. O powiązaniach w sztuce i literaturze XV-XVI wieku na przykładzie ars moriendi*, Kraków 1991, p. 4.

⁷⁴ It would take a whole monograph to present the registered performances, preserved summaries, and full texts of dialogues and dramas containing the death dance motif, mostly in Jesuit colleges, but also in churches. One example: a cycle enacting the Four Last Things performed on three following days in the Shrovetide of 1705 (*in theatro templi Calisiensis exhibita*) and consisting of (1) *Novissima hominis mors*, (2) *Feria secunda, iudicium Dei*, (3) *Feria tertia, coelum et infernum* (MS Ossolineum Bibl. Pawl. 204) – all with vernacular songs.

⁷⁵ For a general review see A. Dürrwächter, *Die Darstellung des Todes und des Totentanzes auf der Jesuitenbühne*, „Forschungen zur Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte Bayerns” 5, 1897 :89-115.

⁷⁶ These final paragraphs are a preliminary abstract of theoretical conclusions, in progress.

compressing knowledge⁷⁷ in ways that allow its decoding, decompression or extraction later or elsewhere. The same is valid for works of art. Decoding means a new construction, new invention, frequently done by authors distant or different, but applying the old rules. This constructivist mechanism of aesthetic memory is a neglected aspect of the multi-medial performance of multiple delivery.

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⁷⁷ On this cognitive and memorative type of tales or narratives, and their connection with topics and rhetoric, see Carruthers (1998, p. 27), who especially stresses their function in preserving knowledge. (28).