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THE URBAN RIVER IN DICKENS, DOSTOEVSKY AND PRUS

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A river is a space that flows¹. It triggers associations with fertility, fluidity and constant movement, but at the same time with an obstacle, barrier, fear, or mystery. Whether used as the physical setting for a story, a character, a powerful symbol or a complex metaphor, rivers have been widely and frequently employed in literature². Nineteenth-century fiction features a number of examples where rivers are used in different ways. Our aim is to look more closely at three such presentations and to examine them in a comparative light. The three depictions come from the most significant 19th-century European fiction writers: Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Bolesław Prus.

There have been a number of critical studies showing Charles Dickens's influence on Fyodor Dostoevsky in terms of the styles, characters and the plotting of their work³, as well as studies comparing the aesthetics of the two authors'

¹ *Rzeki: antologia poetycka*, ed. Jacek Kolbuszewski (Wrocław: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Polonistyki Wrocławskiej, 1998), s. 5.

² As such, for example, it was discussed in a variety of ways in a volume *Urzeczenie. Locje literatury i wyobraźni*, ed. Mariusz Jochemczyk, Miłosz Piotrowiak (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego 2013).

³ Lorelee MacPike, *Dostoevsky's Dickens: a study of literary influence* (London: Prior 1981); Laurie Langbauer, *Ethics and Theory: Suffering Children in Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Le Guin* (ELH. Spring 2008), vol. 75, issue 1, p. 89-108. Talking about the impact of Dickens on Russian literature we should also remember about Dostoevsky's great predecessor Nicolai Gogol. His *Dead Souls*, for example, were often compared to Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* mostly due to the constructions of both texts. See for example Michael H. Futrell, "Gogol and Dickens", *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 34, no. 83 (1956): 443-459). According to Florence Clerc, Gogol's *Petersburg Tales* can also be seen as a Russian equivalent of Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* because

works⁴, their political and social attitudes⁵ or shared metaphors⁶. With regard to *Crime and Punishment*, George Gissing saw “Dickens-like touches in its lighter passages”⁷. In a letter to his niece, Dostoevsky talked about Dickens’s skilful creation of comic characters⁸; whilst in an article about the death of George Sand he noted that Dickens’s characters were “humble, righteous, yielding, foolish, seeing, downtrodden”⁹. Bolesław Prus, one of Poland’s greatest novelists, has often been compared to Dickens. Scholars saw similarities between the two writers in terms of their humour or child characters as well as their devotion to the political and social issues of their respective countries¹⁰. Prus openly admitted that he was a passionate reader of Dickens’s novels.

My purpose is not to trace all of the parallels between these authors but to focus on the way the three writers engaged river imagery, three rivers and three cities they presented in their novels, and what this may tell us about Dickens’s

of “a type of grotesque expressivity” (F. Clerc, “Grotesque Extravagance in the Fictional Worlds of Charles Dickens and Nicolai Gogol from the perspectives of ‘Fantastic Realism’ and the European grotesque tradition”, in *The Grotesque in the Fiction of Charles Dickens and Other 19th-century European Novelists*, ed. Isabelle Hervouet-Farrar et Max Vega-Ritter (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 66). See also Wiktor Skrunda, *Z dziejów opisowości literackiej. Rosyjski szkic fizjologiczny lat czterdziestych XIX wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1988).

⁴ John Sloan interestingly points to a shared vision of suffering in the novels of Dickens and Dostoevsky (as well as in Gissing, whom he also includes in his comparative analysis), but the purposes of such presentation are different. According to Sloan, Dostoevsky’s was a metaphysical goal, Gissing’s secular, whereas in Dickens suffering is shown as a moral issue. J. Sloan, “The Literary Affinity of Gissing and Dostoevsky: Revising Dickens”, *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 32, no. 4 (1989): 446 [440-453].

⁵ M. D. Aeschliman, “Dickens At 200”, *National Review*, 64, no. 19 (2012): 62 [62-63].

⁶ In what starts as a political essay on the capture of Saddam Hussein (the opening sentence reads: “Some find true freedom when they are confined; others, like Saddam Hussein, meet their nemesis”), Jason Cowley links the two authors pointing to the way they used holes metaphorically to stand for either isolation or safety (“Dickens in Hard Times and Dostoevsky”, in *Notes from the Underground*). Cowley’s paper is short but interestingly shows how a “hole” may be viewed and used in literature, and how literature and politics can be discussed together. J. Cowley, “The underground men”, *New Statesman*, 133, no. 4670 (2004): 50-51.

⁷ G. Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (London: Blackie and Son, 1898), 222.

⁸ F. Dostoevsky, *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*, trans. Ethel Golburn Mayne (London, 1914), 136.

⁹ N. M. Lary, “Dostoevsky’s Dickens (Book)”, [a review of Lorelee MacPike’s *Dostoevsky’s Dickens: A Study of Literary Influence*], *Victorian Studies*, Winter 1983, vol. 26, issue 2, p. 242.

¹⁰ For example, Janina Kulczycka-Saloni, “Z dziejów Dickensa w Polsce: ‘Emancypantki’ a ‘Bleak House’”, *Prace Polonistyczne*, V (1947): 145-182; Dawid Maria Osiński, “Czy język ulicy da się wysławić i zapisać? Londyńczycy, wilniuchy, warszawiacy, paryżanie i dublinerzy – pisarze dziewiętnastowieczni wobec problemów reprezentacji (na przykładzie szkiców i obrazków)”, in *Ulica, zaułek, bruk. Z problematyki miasta w literaturze drugiej połowy XIX i początku XX wieku*, ed. Katarzyna Badowska, Agnieszka Janiak-Staszek (Łódź: Wydział Filologiczny Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2013), 213-250; Aleksandra Budrewicz, *Dickens w Polsce. Pierwsze stulecie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, 2015), 186-190.

influence on the modes of representing the city in literature: Dickens and the Thames in London, Dostoevsky and the Neva in Petersburg, and Bolesław Prus with his presentation of the Wisła in Warsaw. All three rivers were integral to these cities' histories, architecture and transportation; in terms of their literary depictions they all played crucial roles in shaping the plot and in the characterisation of the figures within their works.

In order to introduce these rivers, let us provide a short geographical outline in order to situate the rivers on the map of Europe, and to give readers a better understanding of what they look like. The Thames, 346 km (215 miles) long, runs, with its 134 bridges, along the borders of nine English counties, with both rural and urban regions. Peter Ackroyd calls it "the river of dreams and the river of suicide"¹¹. The Neva, in turn, is the shortest of the three rivers: it is only 74 km (46 miles) long. Petersburg was built on the Neva (on what was then marshland) and on its tributary, the Fontanka. The city is often called the "Venice of the North" because of the importance of the river, and there are as many as 350 bridges in the city (in the 18th century, however, there were no bridges at all, and people were ferried from one bank to the other¹⁹). The Wisła is the longest of these rivers, with its 1047 km (651 miles). It is the longest and the most important river in Poland; it passes through several large cities. It runs from the mountains in the south to the Baltic Sea in the north.

1. The writers near the river

Dickens was fascinated with the world existing around the river. As a child he crossed London Bridge every day when going to the Warren Blacking factory. In his adult life, access to the river became more restricted due to the construction of embankments in the 1860s¹³. The London he had arrived in,

¹¹ P. Ackroyd, *Thames. Sacred River* (London: Vintage Book's 2008), 6. The author uses other apt metaphorical phrases, e.g. that of the river as a "liquid history because within itself it dissolves and carries all epochs and generations. They ebb and flow like water" (p. 6); "A Museum of Englishness" (p. 10); "a perpetual remembrance of the past", "timeless river" (p. 12).

¹² In art, the Neva is often depicted in winter time, when it is completely frozen and therefore not used for navigation (Edward Strachan, Roy Bolton, *Russia and Europe in the 19th Century* (London: Sphinx Fine Art 2008), 81). See, for example, the painting by Joseph Iosefovich Charlemagne *Ice Fair on the Neva River, St. Petersburg* (1860).

¹³ L. Litvack, "Images of the River in 'Our Mutual Friend'", *Dickens Quarterly* 20:1 (2003): 35-55. Litvack also comments that in detailed descriptions of different places near the river, Dickens tried to recall specific locations, occupations and circumstances to connect the Thames with verisimilitude, to connect a literary work with a given historical and geographical time, to share recognition of the flavours, smells, and even dangers of riverside life (p. 43). On Dickens's topographical circumstantialities, in particular on *Pickwick's Papers*, see Joseph Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 105.

at the age of eleven, was different than the London he lived in as an adult. Urban activity (new buildings, institutions) transformed it into a modernised city. According to Joseph Hillis Miller, Dickens was obsessed with the Thames: he found it both fascinating and repellent¹⁴. By the time Dickens was writing *Our Mutual Friend*, the Thames had been transformed into a pleasing promenade via the great embankment projects¹⁵. Dickens's son, Charles Jr., authored the "Dictionary of the Thames" (1887), which was a collection of various entries related to the Thames (boat races, water parties, treatment in case of drowning, rules for preventing collisions at sea, poetry of the Thames, and one of the most entertaining and longest entries – ornithology (12 pages long).

In "The River", a story from *Sketches by Boz*, the Thames functions as an amusement: a site for recreation that is teeming with people, boats, colours and noises accompanying a rowing competition. A different image of the Thames is presented in Dickens's essay "Down with the Tide"¹⁶ ("Household Words", 5 February 1853). Dickens described a night walk with the River Police near the Thames when "it was very very dark upon the Thames, and it was bitter bitter cold"¹⁷. Looking at the "water-rats of human growth" and the ponderous shadow of the massive iron girders, the narrator compares the Thames to the Parisian river the Seine by saying that

the Seine is probably the scene of far more crime and greater wickedness, but this river [the Thames] looks so broad and vast, so murky and silent, seems such an image of death in the midst of the great city's life that...¹⁸.

The sentence breaks off here, but on the basis of frequent depictions of the Thames in Dickens's fiction we could easily try to 'fill in' this gap with a quotation

¹⁴ J. H. Miller, op. cit., 40-41.

¹⁵ Murray Baumgarten, "Fictions of the city", in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 106 [106-119]. In his book on fluids in the Victorian novel, Jules Law also sees the embankment as a crucial transformation of the space in London (it changed "the muddy tidal wash and sewer basin into nearly 1 billion tons of sculpted concrete, brickwork, and granite, interlaced with dozens of acres of new public park land, opening up new spaces for public leisure, accelerating and rationalizing commercial life, exiling thousands of people from traditional livelihoods on the river, and intimating new forms of technological and social control") as well as a huge experiment in biotechnology (it established "the social circulation of fluids as the domain of the state"). J. Law, *The Social Life of Fluids. Blood, Milk, and the Water in the Victorian Novel* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 46-47.

¹⁶ I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Michael Slater for an inspirational talk related to river imagery in Dickens's fictional and non-fictional work which we had in the Dickens Museum in London in 2010.

¹⁷ *Charles Dickens*, 113.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

taken either from the scary scene in which Nancy goes to London Bridge to meet with Rose and Mr Brownlow to give away the secret connected with Oliver or one of the many descriptions from *Our Mutual Friend* where the murky Thames acts as one of the characters.

Dostoevsky also loved to wander aimlessly around “his” city – Petersburg. This is how his daughter described one of these trips: “He would roam down the darkest and most remote streets of Petersburg. In the course of his walking he would converse with himself and gesticulate, so that passers-by would turn around to watch. Friends who ran into him considered him a madman”. He would stop “unexpectedly struck by the glance or smile of a stranger, which impressed itself on his brain”¹⁹. He was, as we see, interested in the secluded and sinister parts of Petersburg, with the muddy Neva rather than its bustling centre. Bolesław Prus was also famous for his long strolls around Warsaw and the river Wisła, in particular when he was young. Later, when he grew older, going out became more and more difficult, as his agoraphobia developed. His *Chronicles*, however, feature a number of walks near the river bank and his comments connected with the Wisła. Compared with Dickens and Dostoevsky, however, Prus was less interested in the aesthetics of the river; his was a practical attitude. He commented on the flooding of the Wisła; he described his dream about a drought in Warsaw in which people were forced to drink the river’s water. The aim of this story was, again, purely utilitarian: he wanted to make people realise the necessity and urgency of speeding up the building of the waterworks. Prus also looks at the Wisła River through art when he describes, in detail, a painting by the Polish realist painter Aleksander Gierymski (*Jews praying at the bank of the Wisła river, during the Feast of Trumpets*, showing the Jewish tradition of the casting off of “sins” into a river on Rosh Hashanah), and then goes to the left bank of the river to verify if it does indeed look the same as in Gierymski’s painting. While both Dostoevsky and Dickens were deeply concerned about the effect the industrial revolution was having on people’s lives, Prus was trying to hasten the industrialisation.

In his comparative study of Dostoevsky, Dickens and other writers, Donald Fanger noticed “a Balzacian personification of Petersburg infused with a rare Dickensian note” in Dostoevsky’s sketch on Petersburg:

It was a raw misty morning. Petersburg had got up ill-tempered and angry, like an irritated society maid turned yellow from spire at last night’s ball. He was angry from head to foot. Whether he had slept badly, whether his bile had flowed in disproportionate quantity during the night, whether he had caught a chill or got a head cold, whether he had lost all his money at cards the night before like a boy, to the point where he had to get up in the morning with utterly empty pockets, with vexation at his foolish spoiled wives, at his lazy oafs of children,

¹⁹ N. P. Antsiferov, *Peterburg Dostoevskogo* (Petrograd: Brokgauz-Efron, 1923), 20.

at his unshaven stern crowd of menials [...]; he was so angry that it was depressing to look at his huge damp walls, at his marbles. The whole Petersburg horizon looked so sour, so sour... Petersburg sulked²⁰.

This descriptive animism points to the mental feelings of anger and sulkiness, triggered by a cold, damp and gloomy city. Such unpleasant and disturbing emotions will accompany the many characters of Dickens, Dostoevsky and Prus when they walk through the given city's streets, bridges, and river banks. What I find they have in common is the feeling of being in a labyrinthine city surrounded or cut by a river; whether their destination is a bridge or the banks of the river, going towards the water is symbolic, and always portends the necessity of an important decision. Resurrection or renewal occurs around, next to, or in the river, and functions as a climax to the novel.

2. The river in the novels

My discussion on river imagery will focus primarily on the following novels: *Our Mutual Friend* (OMF)²¹, *Crime and Punishment* (CP)²², and Prus' *The Doll* (D)²³. I have chosen these three because of the similar ways in which rivers are portrayed in them, their function and the impact they have on the plot and the characters' decisions. Their authors were among the leading novelists in their countries and were engaged in the burning social issues of their time. What attracted Dostoevsky to Dickens was the wish to save and regenerate society²⁴; a similar point could be made about Prus. All three authors used their writing as a means of engaging in the burning problems of their time. In this, Dickens may have influenced both Dostoevsky and Prus.

*Crime and Punishment*²⁵ (1866) is one of Dostoevsky's major novels. It tells the dramatic story of Rodion Raskolnikov, a law student who is alienated from

²⁰ F. Dostoevsky, *Statyi za 1845–1868 gody* – vol. XIII of B. Tomashevsky, K. Khalabayev, ed., *Polnoye sobranie khudozhestvennykh sochinenii*, Moscow – Leningrad 1930, in Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism. A Study of Dostoevsky in relation to Balzac, Dickens and Gogol*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1967, 12-13, 140-141.

²¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, intr. Deborah Wynne (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2002).

²² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Jessie Coulson (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1998).

²³ Bolesław Prus, *The Doll*, trans. David Walsh (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1966).

²⁴ N. M. Lary, *Dostoevsky and Dickens. A Study of Literary Influence* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), XIII.

²⁵ The novel's original title was supposed to be "The Drunkards", as Dostoevsky was hoping to write a piece on what he called "the current problem of drunkenness".

society, who sees himself as superior to other people and treats them as a means to his own ends. He murders an old pawnbroker and her sister but is unable to confess his sin. Raskolnikov tries to justify and rationalise his crime by believing in the importance of the happiness of the whole society rather than of individual people. The novel offers a devastating picture of the psychology of the murderer, his hesitation, guilt, deliria and overwhelming fear. This takes place only at the very end of the novel when Raskolnikov is imprisoned and about to experience “punishment” for his crime. The river Neva plays an important role in *CP*, for it acts as a place which “responds” to Raskolnikov’s fears but at the same time (at the end of the novel) helps him to experience redemption.

Prus’ *The Doll* (1889) is one of Poland’s greatest novels and Prus’ most critically acclaimed work. Set in the second half of the 19th century, it offers a social, political and cultural panorama of Warsaw and its inhabitants. The main character is Stanislaw Wokulski, a highly successful self-made owner of a department store who falls in love with Izabela Lecka, a proud aristocratic beauty who holds him in contempt. He goes to the theatre and the salons to see her more often and helps her bankrupt father financially to win her love. To Izabela, however, Wokulski remains an intruder in the aristocratic world. He is torn between emotions and reason, and eventually fails, trying to commit suicide (he does not succeed in this attempt as a man from the countryside saves him from falling in front of a train). Prus’ idea was to present three Polish idealists “against the background of society’s decay”²⁶. The decay he had in mind related to both the ideas of Romanticism and Positivism. In the introduction to the English translation of the novel, Stanislaw Barańczak emphasised that *The Doll’s* landscape looks as if it was presented “after a lost battle: after the defeat of the Polish version of Romantic ideology”²⁷.

Our Mutual Friend (1864–1865), Dickens’s last completed novel, is a complexly plotted panorama of English society in the mid-19th century. Among its themes are class, money, education and the clash between the rich and the poor. There are also frequent mentions of the Thames River’s scavengers, of dead bodies in the river being searched for, found and robbed. The Thames is a symbol and source of death, rebirth, and resurrection (John Harmon’s and Eugene Wrayburn’s story²⁸), as well as a spatial setting for crucial events.

²⁶ This is why the first title of this novel was supposed to be *Three Generations* (*Trzy pokolenia*). The official title, however, still puzzles critics, who identify “the doll” with either Izabela or with the actual doll, a toy that was broken and allegedly stolen, leading to a trial in court. Prus read about such a real event in a newspaper and decided to use it in his novel; this is also how he was inspired to give his novel this title.

²⁷ S. Barańczak, “Introduction”, in Bolesław Prus, *The Doll*, trans. David Walsh (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1966), XII.

The symbolic use of the river in *OMF* has been thoroughly discussed by Leon Litvack, who also talked about the river's symbolism in relation to biblical rivers (the Nile, the Euphrates²⁹). According to Litvack, one of the functions of the river was as a site of resurrection (others are related to baptism, life and death, healing). He argues that *OMF* brings together different elements of the river as a means of rendering a complexity which expands the potential for the symbol to embody several, sometimes conflicting, ideas simultaneously³⁰.

The first sentences in *OMF* and *CP* already point to the proximity of the water (the bridge on the Neva in Dostoevsky, the Thames in Dickens) as well as to the time and season (a boiling summer day in *CP*, an autumn evening in *OMF*). Generally speaking, London in *OMF* is unified by the river, which flows through the city and is shared by all³¹. The novel is dominated by death and loss³²; it is "dark" with a sense of social estrangement³³. Violence, corruption and the brutality of the river life in *OMF* are similar to those near the river in Prus' novel, in which the Wisła river appears as an area of poverty – filthy, unhealthy and smelly (in this case we could probably adopt a metaphor that Dickens used in *Little Dorrit* when he referred to the Thames as a "deadly sewer", LD, 1,3), but at the same time as something other characters would like to change so that it will beautify the city and serve the practical purpose of helping in the poor urban sanitation.

The Thames is murky, dark and scary, especially at night. The most violent scenes happen near the river. *OMF*'s opening scene shows Lizzy's "dread and terror"³⁴, her father's "half savage" look, the boat's slime and ooze, the filthy water and the search for corpses. *OMF* is full of descriptions of moisture, dampness and humidity. Book Three starts with an image of the London area covered in a dark, heavy fog, the colour of which depends on the proximity to the city centre: it is grey in the surrounding areas, dark yellow with a little

²⁸ L. Litvack, "Our Mutual Friend", in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. David Paroissien (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 434; Paul Schlicke, "Our Mutual Friend", in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. P. Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 444.

²⁹ L. Litvack, "Images of the River in 'Our Mutual Friend'", 47.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 48.

³¹ J. H. Miller, *op. cit.*, 290.

³² Geraldine Godsil, "Reflections on death and mourning in relation to Dickens's novel 'Our Mutual Friend'", *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 50 (2005), 475.

³³ Brian Cheadle, "The late novels: 'Great Expectations' and 'Our Mutual Friend'", in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 78.

³⁴ The Thames is associated with both death (the dead bodies which Lizzie and Gaffer take out of the river) and resurrection (John Harmon and Rogue Riderhood survive a near drowning). Victoria Williams points to the Grimm brothers' version of *Little Red Riding Hood* and suggests that Dickens depicts the Thames as "a menacing wolf". V. Williams, "Dickens's Use of the Fairy Tale in 'Our Mutual Friend'", *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, 2, no. 2 (2010): 56.

brown in the city, “and then browner, and then browner until at the heart of the city it was rusty black” (III, 1). When Jenny Wren and Riah re-crossed the Thames by way of London Bridge, “they were struck down by the river, and held their still foggier course that way” (*OMF* 410). The fog is so thick that it causes an accident in which a steamship hits Riderhood’s boat, and he almost dies in the Thames. The darkness fades only at the end of the novel (when the mysteries are resolved, and the bad deeds are punished), when the river looks peaceful and pretty: “A soft air stirred the leaves of the fresh green trees, and passed like a smooth shadow over the river, and like a smoother shadow over the yielding grass” (*OMF* 596).

The Doll presents a different atmosphere. The scenes in which Wokulski walks near the river take place in the early spring, just before Easter, on a chilly but sunny day. The surroundings look bright, which allows Wokulski to notice the filthy corners, the dirt and rubbish everywhere.

Wokulski reached the Wisła bank, and looked about it surprise. Here, occupying several acres of space, was a hill of the most hideous garbage, stinking, almost moving under the sun, while only a few dozen yards away lay the reservoirs from which Warsaw drank [...]. On the side and in the ravines of the hideous hill he saw what looked like people. Several drunkards, or criminals, were dozing in the sun, there were two women street-sweepers and a loving couple, consisting of a leprous woman and a consumptive man without a nose. They looked like phantoms of diseases unearthed here, rather than human beings, that had dressed themselves in rags. All these individuals sniffed the scent of an intruder: even the sleepers lifted their heads and gazed at the visitor with the look of mad dogs [*D* 75-76].

The above quotation reveals Wokulski’s disgust in looking at the river bank and its inhabitants. The language Prus used in this fragment dehumanises the people of the river and personifies the rubbish. The verbs indicate the behaviour of the dogs (they sniffed, lifted their heads, gazed), and the final phrase unambiguously points to the characters’ “look of mad dogs”. The river bank welcomed people from the so-called lower classes of Warsaw’s society; two of them make love, which triggers Wokulski’s sarcastic thoughts (“What fine children you will have, my homeland, born and brought up in this garbage heap, with a mother covered in sores and a father with no nose!...” (*D* 75)).

Wokulski is disgusted when he sees a pile of rotting rubbish next to the river, which provides the inhabitants of Warsaw with water to drink. His disgust gives way to personal inspiration, which was Prus’ way of engaging in social change inspired by what was awful. In doing this he may resemble Dickens. Wokulski thinks of the lack of hygiene and of a possible remedy – of boulevards and canals that could save thousands of people from death. Moments like this trigger Wokulski’s self-reflection, similarly to Raskolnikov’s ponderings near the Neva river. Thoughts like these were related to the fact that many European rivers underwent a thorough transformation in the 19th century – modification

and engineering of the banks signified important changes in the functions of the rivers³⁵.

Petersburg is depicted as a terribly hot, stuffy, dirty and packed city. The ubiquitous dust on its streets helps to create an unhealthy and muggy climate in which the characters live. Most of the action of *CP* takes place during an unbearably hot and stuffy summer. Raskolnikov's walks towards the river or a bridge serve several functions: they allow him to feel mental relief and peace from his remorse but also physical rest from the dusty and odorous city. The cold waters of the Neva clean and moisten the tiring, dry air of the city, and they refresh Raskolnikov physically and mentally. The contrast between the stuffy, dusty city and its invigorating river, the dryness of the city air and the humidity of the Neva emphasise a struggle in Raskolnikov's soul (his name in Russian means a split or a schism; 'crime' in Russian is 'prestuplenije', which stands for stepping across, transgression, overstepping). It is at the river where Raskolnikov is looking for an answer (does he or does he not have a right to kill); it is near the river bank where he witnesses a suicide attempt; it is also at the river where the greatest change takes place and he is reborn as a human being, and as a Christian. As was mentioned above, Litvack presented a similar idea connected with the river's relation to various religions and procedures (e.g. Baptism).

The climate in the city greatly affects Raskolnikov's mental state:

The heat in the streets was stifling. The stuffiness, the jostling crowds, the bricks and mortar, scaffolding and dust everywhere, and that peculiar summer stench so familiar to everyone who cannot get away from St. Petersburg into the country, all combined to aggravate the disturbance of the young man's nerves. The intolerable reek from the public houses, so numerous in that part of the city, and the sight of the drunken men encountered at every turn, even though this was not a holiday, completed the mournfully repellent picture [*CP* 2].

The morning after the crime has taken place is described as an unpleasantly dry and extremely hot day: "The heat outside was again overpowering; not so much as a drop of rain had fallen all this time" (*CP* 89). The narration and the characters' statements point to the unbearably heavy atmosphere of the city: "It's a town of half-crazy people", Swidrigajlov says, and adds: "There are few places which exercise such strange, harsh, and sombre influences on the human spirit as St. Petersburg" (*CP* 448).

After the murder, Raskolnikov considers throwing the stolen money into the river ("There were fewer people there and he would be less noticeable; besides, it would be more convenient there, and, most important of all, it was farther

³⁵ Isabel Backouche, "From Parisian River to National Waterway. The Social Functions of the Seine, 1750–1850", in *Rivers in History: Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America*, ed. Christof Mauch, Thomas Zelle (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2008), 27.

away” (CP 102). Later he hesitates, but at the same time Raskolnikov knows that at this point he is not capable of thinking clearly:

He walked along the Voznesensky Prospect towards the Neva, but another idea came to him on the way: ‘Why in the Neva? Why in the water at all? Would it not be better to go somewhere a long way off, perhaps as far as the Islands again, and, in a solitary place in a wood, bury everything under a bush, and perhaps mark the spot?’ He could find no fault with this idea, although he felt that he was not at this moment capable of judging clearly and soundly [CP 102].

The most peaceful description of the Neva River is provided later in the same chapter. Raskolnikov stands facing the Neva and looking towards the Palace, and he experiences a short but intense moment of relief and safety. The sky is bright blue, the cathedral glimmers in the sunlight, and the air seems pure. The peaceful surroundings relax and soothe Raskolnikov: “He felt that he had in that moment cut himself off from everybody and everything, as if with a knife” (CP 109).

The above quotations show that the Neva functions as an echo of Raskolnikov’s thoughts and actions. The fresh water offers a moment of (mental and physical) rest and solace, standing out in the scorching Petersburg as a relief from the urban heat but, more importantly, from human remorse. Raskolnikov goes towards it unconsciously, in search of consolation or rescue. As we will see, the Neva will eventually reward him with these feelings (Epilogue), after he has confessed his sin and humbly accepted punishment (a prison in Siberia).

All three rivers trigger self-reflection. Lizzie feels that she cannot be too far from the river, whereas Charley says he gives it a wide berth (OMF 215). With the frequent music references to the majestic tones of the Dead March in Handel’s oratorio *Saul* in the background, Bella and her father’s expedition down the river is described as “delightful” (this adjective is repeated eight times in a short paragraph in relation to people and objects). After this Bella reflects on her behaviour (“I am the most mercenary little wretch that ever lived in the world”).

As we have seen, the Neva River has a calming effect on Raskolnikov, who goes towards it when he is incapable of thinking clearly or precisely. He witnesses a suicide attempt near the river, which he perhaps unconsciously associates with his own contemplation of a way out for his guilt or as part of a journey to his eventual conversion. Wokulski also meditates when he reaches the Powiśle area (near the riverside), imagining – like Raskolnikov – how to change and improve the general look of the city he is living in. Another factor which links Wokulski and Raskolnikov are their God-like thoughts on creation and the adjustment of the surrounding landscape so that it “helps mankind” in the spirit of utilitarianism. They both perceive the river as a necessary urban element in need of modification and regulation. These calls come from the Positivistic

interpretation of the nation as one whole organism, in which all parts are important to the proper functioning of the whole system; a belief that is shared by both Prus and Dostoevsky.

The river in *The Doll* is an important element of the city. Like Dostoevsky, Prus tended to depict the poorer areas near the river bank rather than the elegant districts. Powiśle, which was frequented by Wokulski, was such a district; it was an impoverished area by the river which stood in striking contrast to the wealth of the city centre. The novel is deeply rooted in the history and politics of the second half of the 19th century, therefore many of the characters' discussions concern the social and economic problems of the time. One of these was a famous project to build boulevards along the Wisła area (the project was never completed). Wokulski wonders how Warsaw would look after such a transformation, and imagines a beautiful district full of shops, alleys and buildings (chapter 8):

'Here', he thought, 'is the centre of all infection. What a man throws out of his house today, he drinks tomorrow. Later he's moved to the Powazki cemetery, and then again from the other side of the city he infects those of his dear ones who are still alive... A boulevard here, drains and water from the hill-top – several thousand people could be saved from death, and tens of thousands from diseases... Not much work, but an inestimable profit; nature would know how to compensate for it [D 75].

Wokulski sees in the river all that is wrong with society. The Wisła is a metaphor for self-perpetuating evil. Wokulski wants to find a solution; building boulevards seems to be a remedy. This is probably an echo of a Positivistic presentation of society as a complex organism in which all parts work in order to create a happy and healthy nation.

The river may also offer an escape to a new life. To John Harmon, the river is both life and death, and therefore a form of rebirth (similarly for Raskolnikov). The river acts as a sort of salvation: it guides old Betty towards 'the end of a long journey'. Betty took "the upward course of the river Thames as her general track; it was the track in which her last home lay, and of which she had last had local love and knowledge" (*OMF* 477). It nearly kills Eugene, whom Lizzy rescues from drowning. The Thames is then a source of salvation for some characters and a retributive power for others³⁶.

The river in *CP* is associated with both death and resurrection. Before he kills himself, Swidrigailov goes near the river. The weather changes slowly but dramatically: there is thunder, wind, and heavy rain. Looking at the river, Svidrigailov is shivering and feels terribly cold. He crosses the river one more time, on the way to the hotel in which he commits suicide.

³⁶ Paul Goetsh, "The Thames River Valley and London. An Ecological Theme", in *Modernisierung und Literatur. Festschrift für Hans Ulrich Seeber*, ed. Walter Göberl, Stephan Kohl, Hubert Zapf (Tübingen: Narr, 2000), 131.

The Neva River, like for Sonia, is a saving grace for Raskolnikov. It is at the river where he first wants to hide the stolen valuables, and it is there where he contemplates killing himself. When observing a young woman's suicide attempt, Raskolnikov considers doing the same, out of fear of being caught and facing the consequences of his murder; and it is eventually a Siberian river at the end of the novel where Raskolnikov's full transformation and resurrection take place.

Sonia, to whom he first confesses his crime, also acts like a saviour. The two are united at the very end of the novel when Raskolnikov is sitting near the river and pondering. This is the first and only time in the novel when the river has such a calming effect: "Freedom was there, there other people lived, so utterly unlike those on this side of the river that it seemed as though with them time had stood still, and the age of Abraham and his flocks was still the present" (*CP* 525). Meeting Sonia at the riverbank symbolically emphasises the powerful change that is taking place inside him: "in their white sick faces there glowed the dawn of a new future, a perfect resurrection into a new life. Love had raised them from the dead, and the heart of each held endless springs of life for the heart of the other" (*CP* 526). The narrator asks rhetorically, "ought not everything to be changed now?" (*CP* 526). Wyman H. Herendeen stated that the river motif often served as a border joining and dividing the two psychological realms of grief and joy, representing, on the one hand, nature's mutability and, on the other, its constancy³⁷. The river in this scene of *CP* seems to perform such a "joining" and "dividing" function for Raskolnikov. It is his mute alter ego that is always with him in the crucial moments of his life. Its presence helps him to make decisions and to experience and verbalise his fear; the river even almost took part in his crime, but at the end it allowed him to repent for his wrongs and to start an inner transformation.

3. The bridges

There is an object that is closely related to rivers, both urban and rural – bridges. These³⁸ may have an economic, cultural and symbolic meaning (as a means of communication or agreement between people). With the urban river, bridges take on a symbolic significance. The physical link they provide, e.g. between neighbourhoods and uniting (and distancing) communities and individuals, becomes a link between worlds – stages in the characters' development

³⁷ W. H. Herendeen, *From Landscape to Literature. The River and the Myth of Geography* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1986), 268.

³⁸ Little Dorrit's favourite resting place is the Iron Bridge, from where she can observe the river; Artur Clennam meditates at the river (I, 16: to flow monotonously like the river; I, 28).

that must be crossed³⁹. Charley and Bradley Headstone meet Eugene on Vauxhall Bridge (*OMF* II, 1). Commenting on this scene, Jeremy Tambling wrote that the bridge is a place of the suspension of social identities and a point of tension between safety and death by water⁴⁰. This statement points to two symbolic meanings of a bridge: a place where identities and social hierarchies blend (there is no escape: one can go forward or turn back), and a situation in which we, consciously or not, think about death. Similar use of the bridge was made in *Oliver Twist*, when Nancy goes to tell Mr Brownlow and Rose where Oliver is. By doing so, she crossed the physical barrier dividing the gang's area from the rest of the world, as well as the mental barrier of loyalty to Fagin and Sykes⁴¹.

The first sentence in *CP* sets the scene for the upcoming tragedy: "Towards the end of a sultry afternoon early in July a young man [Raskolnikov] came out of his little room in Stolyarny Lane and turned slowly and somewhat irresolutely in the direction of Kamenny Bridge" (*CP* 1). The Neva River with its bridges seems to haunt Raskolnikov, who frequently heads towards them in search of either consolation or a solution. It is on a bridge where Raskolnikov makes the final decision to commit his crime and is overwhelmed with the sudden feeling of freedom and peace:

He was pale, his eyes glittered, exhaustion filled every limb, but he had suddenly begun to breathe more easily. He felt that he had thrown off the terrible burden that had weighed him down for so long, and his heart was light and tranquil. [...] As he crossed the bridge he gazed with quiet tranquility at the river Neva and the clear red sunset. Although he was so weak, he was not conscious even of being tired. It was as though the sore that had festered in his heart for a month had burst at last. Freedom! He was free now from the evil spells, from the sorcery and fascination, from the temptation [*CP* 57].

After murdering the pawnbroker, Raskolnikov goes towards the river and stops at a bridge, leans over it and looks into the water. First he feels giddy and weak. Then, looking at a woman who tries to commit suicide by jumping into the river, he thinks of doing the same but feels disgusted, changes his mind, and suddenly feels his inner strength: "His pride and self-confidence grew with every minute; in each succeeding minute he was a different man from what he had been in the preceding one" (*CP* 182).

³⁹ Gillian Mary Hanson, *Riverbank and Seashore in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century British Literature* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006), 44.

⁴⁰ Jeremy Tambling, *Going Astray. Dickens and London* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2009), 245.

⁴¹ A. Budrewicz, "Near the Riverbank: women, danger and place in Dickens", in *Crossroads in Literature and Culture*, ed. Jacek Fabiszak, Ewa Urbaniak-Rybicka, Bartosz Wolski (Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer, 2013), 59-72.

It is the bridge which offers him a moment of self-reflection, and eventually the chance to feel stronger and more confident in the choices he has made. We may thus see the bridge and the Neva as Raskolnikov's alter ego, reassuring him that he did the right thing in killing the old woman, or only enticing him to rationalise the murder. In his crime-induced daze, shock and confusion, Raskolnikov walks around the Haymarket area in Petersburg, visiting the dirty, stifling and oppressive streets, stuffy apartments and stinky taverns. The slum, overcrowded area around Haymarket was known for its cholera epidemics, prostitution, drunkenness, and infectious diseases. The Haymarket forms a background for Raskolnikov's thoughts and actions⁴².

Every now and again these trips are cut by climbing bridges or walking near the river bank. Urban anonymity allows Raskolnikov to feel partially safe, but it also emphasises his inability to confess his sin, as there is no one, except for Sonia, whom he trusts. According to the hydraulic theory of the origins of cities, water and the river were a primary determinant in establishing cities⁴³ because the shape and flow of the rivers often dictated their further architecture so that people could use and take advantage of them. London, Petersburg and Warsaw were all located on rivers. What is common in the depictions of these rivers is the feeling of anxiety and misgivings which accompany the characters when approaching the rivers. Symbolising either death or life, suffering through drowning, or cleansing and healing, rivers are often a physical and psychological background for the catharsis of the characters.

The function of the river in the city often means interaction with the urban features pertaining to the river, such as the embankment, the bridge and the canal, rather than the submergence of the self to the rhythms of nature which can be observed when a rural river is depicted⁴⁴. These three rivers, i.e. the Thames, the Neva and the Wisła, share regenerative possibilities for the characters and for the city they are a part of. The rivers played different roles in the novels in question: they bring rebirth and death (*OMF*, *CP*); they trigger feelings of fear (*OMF*), disgust (*D*) and power (*CP*); they allow for a deeper understanding of how society works and what could be done in order to improve its conditions (*D*).

During Dostoevsky's four-year imprisonment at the Omsk prison in Siberia (1850–1854), he read *The Pickwick Papers* and *David Copperfield*, and shared many of Dickens's prime concerns (the miseries of urban life, the conditions

⁴² Adele Lindenmeyr, *Raskolnikov's City and the Napoleonic Plan*, in *F. Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment. A Casebook*, ed. Richard Arthur Peace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 39.

⁴³ Danuta Kłosek-Kozłowska, "Rola rzeki w rozwoju miasta", in *Miasto po obu stronach rzeki. Różne oblicza kultury*, ed. Andrzej Stawarz (Warszawa: Polskie Towarzystwo Etnologii Miasta, 2007), 11.

⁴⁴ G. M. Hanson, op. cit., 33.

of the children, the causes and effects of crime, and the suffering endured by innocent humanity; in the *Introduction* to *CP*). Siberian imprisonment was for Dostoevsky what the Warren Blacking experience was for Dickens⁴⁵ and what the January Uprising was for Prus: a traumatic event but also a spiritual development, triggering sympathy for the lower classes. Rivers do “run through them” and their novels, as an “attraction of repulsion”⁴⁶, disturbing, mysterious and deep waters, hiding secrets, but more importantly, giving these secrets away.

The urban river in Dickens, Dostoevsky and Prus

Summary

The article offers a comparative analysis of the literary presentations of three rivers (the Thames in London, the Neva in Petersburg, and the Wisła in Warsaw) in the following novels: Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and Bolesław Prus's *The Doll*. The author discusses the presentations of these rivers and the ways the writers engaged river imagery with the cities. The rivers played crucial roles in shaping the plot and in the characterisation of the protagonists. The Thames serves a crucial part in *Our Mutual Friend*: it offers safety to some characters, but it is also a deadly power to others. The Neva and the Wisła are related to self-exploration of the main characters who find it necessary to wander around the river banks; it is near the river bank when they undergo an internal transformation (Raskolnikov) or reflect upon humanity (Wokulski).

Rzeka miejska u Dickensa, Dostojewskiego i Prusa

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest komparatystyczną analizą trzech literackich przedstawień rzeki w powieściach: *Nasz wspólny przyjaciel* Charlesa Dickensa, *Zbrodnia i kara* Fiodora Dostojewskiego i *Lalka* Bolesława Prusa. Elementem wspólnym w wymienionych tekstach jest udział Tamizy, Newy i Wisły w rozwoju fabuły analizowanych powieści i w strukturze urbanistycznej opisywanych miast, a także ich funkcje metaforyczne. Tamiza jest kluczowym elementem

⁴⁵ Leaving the prison he said: “How much did I understand people and their characters from prison! I lived with them and it seems that I know them well. How many stories of vagabonds and criminals, of all severe, hapless lives! It is enough to write many volumes. What a wonderful people!” (http://www.litmuseum.ru/dost_omsk_en.htm accessed 17th of January 2012).

⁴⁶ Rick Allen, “John Fisher Murray, Dickens, and the ‘Attraction of Repulsion’”, *Dickens Quarterly*, 16:3 (1999), 139-159.

Naszego wspólnego przyjaciela, życiodajną siłą dla jednych bohaterów i równocześnie śmiercią dla innych. W przypadku powieści Dostojewskiego i Prusa rzeki współkreują przestrzeń akcji, przyciągają nad swoje brzegi głównych bohaterów (S. Wokulskiego i R. Raskolnikowa). Umożliwiają czy też ułatwiają im doświadczanie stanów głębokich refleksji o ludzkości i dalszych możliwościach rozwoju i poprawy funkcjonowania miasta (Wokulski) oraz wewnętrzną przemianę (Raskolnikow).

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