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Matthias FREISE
(University of Göttingen)

POISONOUS BOOKS

Abstract. *Books can be poisonous in a literal, metaphorical, metonymical or symbolic sense. Literally, for protection; metonymically, in fiction, for killing; metaphorically, in metalepsis, as revealing reality as being fictitious; symbolically, as a danger to readers. The article examines examples of all four possibilities. Often metaphor, metonymy and symbols are used to convey a metapoetic message about the relationship between fiction and reality, about the political, social or psychological power of literature, about literature as temptation or a narcotic, or about the ambivalence of a literary message, and thus fundamentally different modes of reading. In particular, the article argues that David Damrosch's reading in What is World Literature? of Pavić's Dictionary of the Khazars, which he declares to be poisoned by Serbian nationalism, is subverted by the book itself which differentiates a poisonous from a non-poisonous copy of itself, meaning alternative modes of reading.*

Keywords: *forbidden books, Milorad Pavić, Arabian Nights, Adam Mickiewicz, Walter Moers, Zoran Živković, Umberto Eco*

Матиас ФРАЙЗЕ
(Гьотингенски университет)

ОТРОВНИТЕ КНИГИ

Резюме. *Книгите могат да бъдат отровни буквално, метафорично или метонимично. Буквално – с цел предпазване; метонимично, в художествената литература – с цел причиняване на смърт; метафорично, при металепсис – като едновременно разкриващи реалността и представляващи фикция, символно – като заплаха за читателите. Статията изследва примери и за четирите описани възможности. Често метафората, метонимията, символите биват употребявани с цел пренасяне на метапоетическо послание относно взаимовръзката между фикция и реалност, относно политическата, социалната или психологическата власт на литературата, относно литературата като*

изкушение или опиат или относно амбивалентността на литературното послание и в този смисъл – относно фундаментално различните модуси на четене. В частност статията защитава тезата, че прочитът на Дейвид Дамрош в „Що е световна литература?“ на „Хазарски речник“ от Милорад Павич, за която Дамрош твърди, че е отровена от сръбски национализъм, бива подкопан от самата книга, която разграничава отровното от неотровното свое копие, предполагайки алтернативни начини на четене.

Ключови думи: *забранени книги, Милорад Павич, „Приказки от хиляда и една нощ“, Адам Мицкевич, Валтер Мьорс, Зоран Живкович, Умберто Еко*

Books can be poisonous in different ways. Of course, everyone initially thinks of the metaphorical meaning of this expression. However, there are also very real books that are poisonous in a chemical sense. In the 19th century, for example, a color known as Paris green was used for book bindings. This was an arsenic compound and therefore highly toxic. Why was a poisonous color used for book bindings? Was it to poison the people who picked up these books? No, this variant was only used in literary fiction. Books such as *Tallis's History and Description of the Crystal Palace* (London/New York 1851) were not bound in Paris green with malicious intent, but because they were considered particularly valuable. The reason is pest control. Today, bookworms are only known metaphorically. In the 19th century, however, these insects posed a serious physical threat to books and the books were protected from them by the poisonous binding.

In addition to this useful reason for poisoning books, there is also a completely reprehensible one: killing people with poisonous books. However, despite intensive research, I have not found a single criminal case in which a poisonous book was actually used to kill. Not even Milica Vukobranovics, the secretary of the Austrian publisher Ernst Stülpnagel, who came from an old Serbian noble family, used a poisonous book to poison the family of her boss, by whom she was pregnant. She put arsenic into the sugar bowl instead. She later became a celebrated journalist in Austria.

So when poisonous books appear in literary fiction with which people are supposed to have been killed, this obviously has a metapoetic rather than a realistic function. The oldest version of a book with poisonous pages can be found in the fairy tales of *1001 Nights*. In Night four the story tells of a doctor who cures the sultan of a skin disease and thus rises to high honors. The sultan's vizier envies the doctor's success and persuades the sultan to kill the doctor because his magic powers are dangerous. The

sultan then tells the doctor that he will have him beheaded. However, when the doctor mentions that he has a book containing all his secret knowledge, the Sultan orders it to be brought to him. The following dialog ensues:

> *"O King, take this book but do not open it till my head falls; then set it upon this tray, and bid press it down upon the powder, when forthright the blood will cease flowing. That is the time to open the book." The King thereupon took the book and made a sign to the Executioner, who arose and struck off the physician's head, and placing it in the middle of the tray, pressed it down upon the powder. The blood stopped flowing, and the Sage Duban opened his eyes and said, "Now open the book, O King!" The King opened the book, and found the leaves stuck together; so he put his finger to his mouth and, by moistening it, he easily turned over the first leaf, and in like way the second, and the third, each leaf opening with much trouble; and when he had unstuck six leaves he looked over them and, finding nothing written thereon, said, "O physician, there is no writing here!" Duban replied, "Turn over yet more;" and he turned over three others in the same way. Now the book was poisonous; and before long the venom penetrated his system, and he fell into strong convulsions and he cried out, "The poison hath done its work!" (n.a. 1885: vol.1, fourth night)*

Paradoxically, the vizier was both right and wrong. The secret knowledge of a doctor metonymically encoded in the book with the blank pages can be useful or harmful, depending on how it is handled. The metapoetic message of this episode is: books contain knowledge, and this knowledge can be beneficial or harmful. It depends on the use you make of it.

Umberto Eco, whose version of the poisonous book in his novel *The Name of the Rose (Eco 1983)* is the best-known case of a poisonous book, has thus drawn on this story, albeit with an important shift. The librarian Jorge considers the book he has poisoned to be dangerous for ideological reasons. The book, whose pages Jorge has prepared with poison so that the monks, who, like the king in 1001 Nights, moisten their fingers with their tongues to turn the pages, is thus poisonous in a double sense: not only in real terms, but also metonymically with the culture of laughter contained in this second part of Aristotle's Poetics, imagined by Eco, which deals with comedy. The culture of laughter could, Jorge fears, destroy the religious world of the Middle Ages. Here, too, the result is paradoxical. Jorge achieves his goal by eating the book and burning the monastery library, and at the same time he does not achieve it because, as Mikhail Bakhtin has shown, the culture of laughter is already present everywhere in the

medieval world. Eco follows on from Bakhtin with a metapoetic message: his black comedy of crime shows that the poison of comedy had already penetrated the medieval monastic world.

Next, we encounter the topos of the poisonous book in Adam Mickiewicz. In the fourth part of *Dziady* (Forefathers Eve), the undead visitor, who we later learn is called Gustaw, leafs through a priest's book and wonders why the priest is reading "secular" books. These are "książki zbójeckie", literally robbery books, but not in the literal sense that these books are robbed, but metonymically that these books rob you of your life. First of all, Mickiewicz alludes to Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther (Goethe 1787) as a poisonous book in this sense:

> *Oh, jeśli tzy Getego znasz w oryginale...*
> *Ah, had you but heared that, in Goethe's words...*
> *(Mickiewicz 2016: 348)*

Goethe's Werther is said to have led to suicides for unhappy love all over Europe (Cf. Phillips 1974). Mickiewicz conceived Gustaw in Dziady part 4 as such a suicide out of unhappy love. In this respect, he interprets Goethe's Werther as a deadly book. In Dziady, however, the view of books extends beyond Werther, to a general dangerousness of books that Cervantes was already aware of. Don Quixote's friends see the reading of chivalric novels as the cause of his mental confusion and therefore have his library walled up. Fictional literature, so the conclusion goes, makes readers lose touch with reality and become unfit for life. This is also Gustaw's argument in Mickiewicz's drama:

> ***ciska książką***
> *Młodości mojej niebo i tortury!*
> *One zwichnęły osadę mych skrzydeł I wyłamały do góry,*
> *Że już nie mogłem na dół skręcić lotu.*
> ***Tossing the book away***
> *Heavenly tortures of my youth!*
> *Those books wrenched out my wings at the very roots Twisting them to upward flight,*
> *foiling descent, strain howsoever I might! (ibid.)*

Mickiewicz expresses the ambivalence of the usefulness and harmfulness of literature through a twofold paradox. Firstly, Mickiewicz metapoetically reinterprets the topos that has been erotic since antiquity, and since the advent of Christianity also religious, dealing simultaneously with heaven and torture. This is even clearer in the original than in the

translation due to the inversion and the juxtaposition of two nouns. Literature replaces erotic love and Christian martyrdom. But this is more than mere psychical sublimation. As in *Don Quixote,* the warning against literature is a hymn of praise for and a warning against the risk of intellectual freedom. Here too, as in *1001 Nights*, books are a curse and a blessing, they kill and bring to life. Their poison is the poison of intellectual and spiritual freedom. Secondly, he does it through estranging the topos of the broken wings, which since Icarus has connoted the fall and not, as in *Dzady*, its impossibility.

Considering the fact that *Dziady* part 3 followed part 4, the impossibility to fall is in itself ambivalent. In part 3, by turning into Konrad, Gustaw in fact out of unrequited love seems to fall from heaven into down-to-earth political action. But since in a further development a priest has to exorcise Konrad, it turns out that he did not fall down to earth, but straight into hell. Thus, the impossibility of coming back to earth is eventually confirmed: from the transcendence of heaven, as in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the hero's only way out of the hybris of heaven is via the transcendence of hell.

The next novel I would like to mention which contains a poisonous book, is also a hymn of praise for the book. *The City of Dreaming Books* (Moers 2007*)* is a fantasy novel by Walter Moers. In it, budding poet Hildegunst von Mythenmetz searches for the author of a brilliant manuscript he has inherited, in Buchheim, a town consisting only of second-hand bookshops. The antiquarian bookseller Smeik sees the manuscript as a threat to the mass production of mediocre books and drugs Hildegunst with a poisonous book. Smeik abuses the naive curiosity of Hildegunst, who is enchanted by the rare books in Smeik's antiquarian bookshop. The pages of the poisonous book are blank, but on page 333 appears the sentence: "You have just been poisoned". And this is exactly what happens – Hildegunst ends up in the catacombs beneath the town of Buchheim, which are filled with antiquarian books and all kinds of strange creatures. There are also dangerous book hunters looking for bibliophile rarities such as the "Bloody Book".

The novel by Walter Moers is not only a parody of the literary world, but above all a homage to literature, especially the classics, many of which haunt the catacombs as so-called booklings. It also tells of a tragic hero, the Shadow King, who must burn to death if he leaves the catacombs. He turns out to be the sought after author of the ingenious manuscript.

So here you are poisoned simply by reading the sentence “You have just been poisoned”. A text functions as a performative act that unfolds its effect like a curse. The magical world into which Hildegunst falls, the world of literature, is narcotic, and the dream world into which one falls is a labyrinth from which one must find one's way out again. In the end, Hildegunst rescues himself from the burning Buchheim and is able to save two things: the “Bloody Book”, which he quickly snatches from Smeik's second-hand bookshop, and the Orm, the poetic inspiration that enables him to write the book *The City of Dreaming Books*. We only get to know this book, the contents of both the ingenious manuscript and the “Bloody Book” remain unknown to us. According to the metapoetic message, literature moves in the space between high poetry and bloody action, between the art of language and the art of storytelling.

The postmodern version of a literally deadly book can be found in the work of Serbian author Zoran Živković. In his novel *The Last Book* (Živković 2017), there are a number of fatalities in a Serbian bookshop with no outward signs of a cause of death. There seems to be no connection between the victims. It then turns out that the dead in the bookshop were all reading the same book entitled *The Last Book*. The investigating detective has studied literature before his police career and therefore comes to an unconventional conclusion as to how the “last book” kills. First, however, he has to justify his choice of profession to the bookseller:

> *“My degree is in literature.” “And you went to work for the police?” “I went to work where there was a job. Being well-versed in literature wasn't a handicap. On the contrary. It's often helped me.”*

According to the metapoetic message, deconstructive text analysis is related to criminalistic work. But in *The Last Book* Živković goes beyond this kinship. Here, the book does not kill through poison as in Eco, to whom Živković's novel alludes several times. The poison hypothesis is refuted in a grotesque exaggeration – wearing a protective suit and helmet, a member of the criminal investigation department inspects the book and yet, like the readers before her, dies a sudden death with no apparent cause.

The true cause is, however, that the book kills through a literary process. Those who read the book, which bears the same title as Živković's novel, realize that they are only part of a literary fiction. At this moment, their real existence is erased. This is how the literary educated inspector explains it:

> *When you write prose, there is your reality as an author and the reality of the book. They are strictly separate. Think of them as analogous to the world, which consists of matter and antimatter. Do you know that from physics? They must not come into contact, otherwise they will be completely destroyed. If the two realities cross, the part that comes into contact with the artifact from the other world perishes. No physical contact. No one would be harmed if they just kept the last book closed. But as soon as people started reading it, the realities became hopelessly intertwined and were extinguished.*

However, there is also an inner-Serbian intertextuality in Živković's *The last book*.[1] Milorad Pavić's novel *The Dictionary of the Khazars (Pavić 1988)* also contains itself as a poisonous book. In its fictional world, there is a mysterious original of the dictionary in two copies, one silver and one gold. The golden copy is poisonous, the silver one is not. You have to decide which copy to open. On the level of metafiction, which is constantly present in the novel, we understand that every literary fiction can be understood in a poisonous and a non-poisonous way. The poisonous golden copy of every literary work contains the beliefs, ideology, stereotypes and clichés that the author personally holds. Deconstructivist literary studies once set itself the goal of "uncovering" them and thus "unmasking" literary works.

However, there is also the non-poisonous silver copy of every literary text. This copy does not contain the convictions of the real author that can be recognized in the work, but the semantic space of this work, which is much richer and more open than any ideology personally held by an author. This metafictional significance of the two copies of the dictionary in Pavić's novel can be demonstrated by analyzing the circumstances of their reading as described in the novel.

The readers of the poisonous copy die precisely when they read the Latin phrase *verbum caro factum est* (the word has become flesh). This quotation from the Gospel of John also has a metapoetic meaning. If you read the golden copy, the earthly, "incarnate" sense of the book, the *sensus literalis*, then you are poisoned by the facts processed in the book, the opinions expressed in it and the social reality responsible for its creation.

[1] The dispute with Damrosch has been previously published in *Four perspectives on world literature from a functional point of view*. In: Weigui Fang (Ed.): *Tensions in World Literature*. Singapore (Palgrave Macmillan) 2018, p. 191 – 205. The present version has been enlarged and corrected.

Thus, the poisonous copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy* contains the slander of his enemies, whom he takes great pleasure in making suffer in hell. Dante himself explained in his letter to Cangrande, that the *Divine Comedy* allows for two readings, one literal and one figurative.[2] Why not *The Dictionary of the Khazars*?

This is not a rhetorical question, because Pavić's novel not only contains a poisonous book, but was also branded a poisonous book by the Harvard comparatist and founder of the modern concept of world literature David Damrosch in his book *What is World Literature? (Damrosh 2003)*.

In the chapter "The poisonous book", Damrosch criticizes Pavić's novel, which illuminates the conversion of the Khazar people to the Jewish faith in the 9th century from three perspectives.[3]

Damrosch writes that Pavić's book is celebrated internationally as a shining example of tolerance, interculturality and cultural multiperspectivity, while in reality it poisons its readers with the propaganda of Serbian nationalism. This nationalism had the goal of destroying Tito's multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, which happened a few years after the publication of this book during the Yugoslav Wars. The international readers who praised the multiculturalism of the book were blind to this "local" message. Interestingly, Damrosch consciously or unconsciously picks up on the metaphor that the book itself provides on its metafictional level. Let's look at Damrosch's argument a little closer. He provides a) nationalist statements in Pavić's essays and on his homepage. Yes, Pavić was an avowed Serbian nationalist, similar, by the way, to Dostoevsky who was an avowed Russian nationalist. Dostoevsky's novels are full of stereotypic Poles and Germans as minor characters. Nevertheless, Polish and German readers have always been enthusiastic about Dostoevsky as a writer. Polish émigré writer Czesław Miłosz, teaching Slavic literature at Berkeley, taught only Polish literature, with one exemption – Dostoevsky. Was he and are we all unaware of the nationalistic poison, which Dostoevsky's novels contain? Is this poison hidden under the sugar icing of metaphysics? Not at all. On the contrary, the

[2] More precisely he explains that the Bible allows four readings, and his *Divine Comedy* therefore two. He makes this inconsequential difference to avoid allegations of blasphemy against him.

[3] Shaul Stampfer has shown in *Did the Khazars Convert to Judaism?*, in: *Jewish Social Studies* vol. 19 no. 3 p. 172 that there are no reliable historical sources for this conversion, but as a myth, this conversion is nevertheless a cultural-historical fact that Pavić draws on.

use which is actually made of his work by Russian neo-nationalists irritates enthusiasts of Dostoevsky around the world.

Damrosch b) cites from Pavić's poem *Monument to an unknown poet* the first line "My eyes are full of blood and wine like plaster on Athos' walls" and the penultimate line "But my heart has tasted the rock of your homeland and found in it the flavor of hearth"[4]. From them he concludes that Pavić is a follower of "the pre-Nazi tradition of blood and soil, symbols of ethnic rootedness typically mobilized against Jews and other newcomers..." (Damrosch 2003: 270). This is, first, not a text from the *Dictionary* and therefore cannot prove the novel's political message and, second, does not convince me as an interpretation of the cited poem. "Blood" in the pre-Nazi and Nazi ideology is a metaphor for race or descent. In the poem, however, blood through the doubling with wine and through the comparison with plaster on Athos walls connotes Christ's sacrifice, and alludes to the Old Serbian epic *The Maiden of the Blackbird Field*, where the defeat of the Serbian warriers against the Ottoman army is symbolized as the Lord's Supper[5].

Damrosch c) concedes that the *Dictionary* treats Judaism with insight and sympathy, but, as it "implicitly identifies the Serbs with the Jews", it turns out that it does so merely to usurp Jewish victimhood. He d) reads the *Dictionary* partially as a *roman á clef*, which encrypts political statements like that the national identity of states on the periphery of Serbia (not of the Yugoslav Federation![6]) was merely invented, and that the Serbs

[4] In the original *Spomenik neznanom pesniku*, first published in 1967, which I cite from *Sabrana dela Milorada Pavića*, vol. 7, Beograd (Prosveta) 1990, p. 27 – 28, we read "укус огња", which translates correctly as "taste of fire". "Hearth" therefore is a high-handed interpretation by the translator into English with serious consequences for Damrosch's reading. Furthermore, the passage cited by Damrosch can be understood only through its ties within the paradigm of five-times-repeated "but my heart...", following "my eyes...", "my ears...", "my tongue..." "my legs..." and again "my tongue...", respectively. It is misleading to cite isolated lines from poems.

[5] First published by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić in *Pismenica serbskogo iezika, po govoru prostoga naroda*, Wien 1814 – 1815. Transl. by Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich in: *Songs of the Serbian People: From the Collections of Vuk Karadzic*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1997.

[6] Damrosch imputes an allegoric statement on the relations between Serbs and other nationalities in Yugoslavia. The "nation in the north", however, is part of the "biggest part of the Khazarian Empire" (meaning Serbia within the Yugoslav Federation). In this part "live only Khazars" (i.e. Serbs), but only one district of this part was called Khazaria (i.e. Serbia), while "the other districts" (i.e. the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo) "had different names" (Cf. Pavić 1985: 141 – 142, translation mine). Therefore,

were exploited by the minor members of the Federation. This is correct, but reading a text as a *roman á clef* makes its semantics one-dimensional. A multi-dimensional fictional text is transformed into a one to one representation of reality. In his play *The Wedding* (Wyspiański 1998), Stanisław Wyspiański reportedly portrayed his friend's wedding feast, and the premiere of the play was a big scandal, because the friend disliked the portrait. Nowadays, the scandal is forgotten, but "The Wedding" emerged as being Wyspiański's literary masterpiece because of its enormous semantic potential beyond portrayal.

The **Dictionary of the Khazars** is about more than just the question of which constituent republic of Yugoslavia received how much funding from Belgrade. Incidentally, although Tito was a Croat, Yugoslavia was the fulfillment of Greater Serbian dreams. So what interest should Pavić, as a Serbian nationalist, have in the disintegration of Yugoslavia? It did not disintegrate on Serbian initiative, but on the initiative of the non-Serbian periphery. The Serbian nationalists did not dream of the destruction of Yugoslavia; on the contrary, they fought to preserve the federation. The other peoples of the Western Balkans, however, were of the opinion that their dream of Yugoslavia as a confederation of equals had never been realized. In 1918, when the kingdom of Yugoslavia was formed, the Croatian poet Miroslav Krleža, later a close friend of Tito, commented:

> *The whore Croatia could not exist without a hustler. Giving the brush-off to Austria, she immediately threw herself at Serbia. (Krleža 1956, translation mine)*

Which copy of the *Dictionary* did Damrosch himself open? Because he unmasks the nationalistic subtext instead of falling victim to its poison, he claims to have opened the silver locked copy. However, within the metafictional logic of the book itself, Damrosch nevertheless opened the golden locked poisonous copy, because he himself from the words of *The Dictionary of the Khazars* made the flesh of Yugoslav reality. He does not realize that the poisonous copy is not the book itself but a mode of its reading. His mode of reading is on the literal level. Other than the figurative level, this is the one which is poisonous. Damrosch reads it as a key political novel and thus his reading is poisonous. Damrosch of course opened the

this entry is a statement on the relationships within the Serbian nation. One could argue about the status of A.P. Kosovo, where lived not only Serbs but also Albans. However, the Slavic nationality there was Serbian.

poisonous copy of the book for other reasons than Russian nationalists decided to re-open the 'poisonous copies' of Dostoevsky's novels. Both were in search for ideology – he to unmask it, they to reinstall it. Damrosch, coming upon the phrase *verbum caro factum est*, should have realized the warning and changed to the non-flesh silver copy of the book.

Its 'golden' copy poisons naive readers with nationalist ideology. The Latin phrase in it, however, means: attention, your reading is poisonous. On the other hand, the not poisonous silver-locked copy of the book according to Pavić, "enabled one to know when death would strike". It contains the phrase "when you awake and suffer no pain, know that you are no longer among the living". What exactly happens here? The paradox of "dead awakening" without pain points to resurrection. Indeed, the semantic space is the space into which we resurrect. We must die a symbolic death before we can enter the world of meaning, the semantic world. Pavić's book will not poison us if we go beyond its local nationalist message. The silver copy opens up the semantic space that makes the *Dictionary* of the Khazars world literature.

Another metaphorical meaning of books as poisonous are forbidden books. Every large library has a so-called poison cabinet in which books are kept that should not be generally accessible. In totalitarian countries, this is done for ideological reasons. However, the ban on free access to books is an ambivalent matter. After the war, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was a banned book in the Federal Republic of Germany for decades. Only after the publication of a historical-critical, extensively annotated edition was the ban lifted, but only for this edition (Hitler 2016). The ban was not motivated by ideology, but by anti-ideology. Nazi ideology was no longer to be disseminated in Germany.

Religious reasons have also qualified certain books as "poisonous" for centuries. Umberto Eco's novel alludes, amongst others, to the Catholic Church's *Index librorum prohibitorum*. Over the centuries, as the list of books on the index shows, the focus of the bans has changed. While religious heresies were in the foreground until Martin Luther, in the 16th and 17th centuries the ban was primarily directed at scientific and philosophical Enlightenment writings (Galileo, Kant). From the mid-18th to the mid-19th century, books classified as immoral increasingly came under scrutiny – from Richardson's *Pamela* to Casanova's *Memoirs* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The last shift targeted allegedly politically dangerous, mainly Marxist authors, right up to Jean Paul Sartre, the last victim of the book inquisition.

The *Index librorum prohibitorum* was abolished in 1965. No one forbids us to read certain books any more. Nabokov's novel *Lolita* is just as freely available as "Justine" by the Marquis de Sade. However, there is a crucial difference between the two works. For Nabokov's *Lolita*, as with the *Dictionary of the Khazars*, there is a poisonous "golden" reading and a reflective, non-poisonous "silver" reading. The novel can be read purely in terms of its content as pornography or via its artistic form as a modern tragedy. However, this does not apply to *Justine*. For an academic seminar on sadomasochism in literature, I examined this book in detail, but was unable to find a "silver" level of the novel that transcended the description and glorification of rape, coercion and incitement to murder. I can only interpret the enthusiasm of left-wing French intellectuals for this work as a concept of freedom misunderstood as the right to the satisfaction of boundless greed in situations of physical or psychological superiority. On this point, I refer to the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz. He writes in his essay-novel *The Land of Ulro*:

> *I thought with disgust of the Parisian surrealists who celebrated a young poisoner who had murdered her bourgeois parents. It was with disgust that I rejected the book The Philosophy of the Boudoir by the Marquis de Sade, which contains the scene of the rape of an underage girl. In the book, the girl is also made to help rape her bigoted mother and deliberately infect her with syphilis. What circumstances led to the collapse of all censorship in the 20th century? Is this the morality of libertines who see their own pleasure as the only measure of right and wrong? (Milosz 1984)*

Milosz concludes:

"No, I won't eat it, because it's harmful to me".

But how do we know which books are not just about perversions, but are perverted? Minors are no longer even protected from literary depictions of sexual violence. Adults are not warned of any potentially traumatizing content in fictional literature. Would that be censorship?

So, there are four types of poisonous books: real books that are physically poisonous for their own protection, fictive books that are poisonous with the intention of killing and thus transport a metapoetic message, books that are considered politically, morally or religiously dangerous, and finally books that are poisonous when they are meant or understood as a representation of reality.

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Prof. Dr. Matthias Freise
Ernst August Universität Göttingen
Göttingen, Germany
e-mail: mfreise@gwdg.de