

# *SILVA RERUM – “A BOOK OF EVERYTHING ON ANYTHING” AS A CYBERTEXTUAL EXPERIENCE*

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*Mariusz Pisarski*

## *Introduction*

One of the key words that accompanies many examples of Polish contemporary literature, both in a conceptual context of a given work/its structure, and in critical analyses is “silva”. Rooted back in ancient Roman literature, where as a blend of literary strategies and genres it was called “silva rerum” (a forest of things), silva was re-born in some parts of Europe, especially in Poland during the Baroque, thrived in the 17th and 18th centuries and then slowly fell back into oblivion. The contemporary career of the term, a phenomenon hardly to be found anywhere else outside of Poland, is so strong that silva has become a synonym for almost any heterogeneous work that is resistant to generic classifications and is “open”, in the most popular sense, as referred to by Umberto Eco.

A structure consisting of loosely related pieces of narrative, interwoven with fragments of poetry, diary entries and citations has become a trademark of the silvic mode of writing from the mid-1970s. After it gained critical recognition in the highly influential book *Sylwy Współczesne* by Ryszard Nycz (Nycz 1996), where the “contemporary silvae” were associated with literary postmodernism, a modern mutation of the ancient genre began to thrive. Even nowadays this has remained unchanged. Young Polish writers still aspire towards silva as one of the most attractive forms.

But there is more to a silvic structure than openness, heterogeneity, and textual scrap-booking. Its past can reveal features that



Figure 1. *Silva rerum* of the Krassowsky family from Ziemia Drohicka in Podlasie (source: Wikipedia): an illuminated manuscript.

could be highly interesting from the cybertext perspective proposed by Espen Aarseth. When we look at the works of literature as machines, and if we try to put *silvae*<sup>1</sup> in line with the examples of cybertexts and ergodic works, some intriguing features emerge.

These features, carried by some obscure examples of fictionalized family chronicles and almanacs of Old Polish noblemen, bring into play the collaboration and textonic activity of the reader, making *silvae* a curious example of an analogue textonic machine of non-procedural nature. More interesting, when looking at these fictionalized family chronicles as a historical model of a “living book”, which by definition simultaneously transforms the readers into characters and authors, we can even find an interesting kind of personal, or pseudo-personal reader perspective as well as pseudo-dynamics. But first let us take a look at the history of *silva rerum* as a genre.

Roman Tradition

*Silva rerum* is a form of literature in which genres and styles are mixed together: fictional fragments are accompanied by practical household advice. Unfinished amateur narratives of citations from the great classics and hand-written diary entries are accompanied by newspaper clippings, postcards, and other trivia. Its most direct predecessors were found in literary the “garden” and “patio” (pl. “wirydarz”), popular in Poland during the 17th and 18th centuries (Walczak 1997). The idea of “garden” relates to the fact that in a silvic form, as in a garden, one can grow whatever one wishes and it still forms a distinguishable whole. But the form in question dates back not only to Polish “gardens” or “patios” but also to an ancient Roman genre, originated in one of the works of Publius Papinius Statius (ca. 45-96) entitled *Silvae*.

Statius’s *Silvae* was a collection of odes, panegyrics, descriptions of villas and even catalogues of gifts the emperor gave to the citizens of Rome on the occasion of Saturnalia. Its unique and novel character was the sole heterogeneity of the entire work: poetry was mixed with prose, fiction with non-fiction, and there was a broad scope of generic mixture from flattery poems to lamentations for deaths. As one work, written by a single author but containing heterogeneous textual elements, *Silvae* became a precedent that awaited long centuries to be succeeded. When Latin literature was being rediscovered in the West by founders of the Renaissance culture, what was to be taken from the deep pool of literary tradition in the first place was generic purity. As it so happened, it was only in the late Renaissance and Baroque that Statius work would gain its followers.

Old Polish *Silvae*: A Book of “Everything on Anything”

The literary form of *silva* that had emerged at the end of the 17th century among Polish noble families was a departure from the

course given to the genre by Statius. The main difference being that *silva rerum* was no longer written by a single author. It could be the work of a compiler who in one place, under a single title (if there was any) and in a single volume, gathered different texts by different authors, or it could also be a collaborative family project: a “book of everything”:

It was added to by many generations, and contained various information: diary-type entries on current events, memoirs, letters, political speeches, copies of legal documents, gossips, jokes and anecdotes, financial documents, economic information (price of grain, etc.), philosophical musings, poems, genealogical trees, advice (agricultural, medical, moral) for the descendants and others. (Niedźwiedz 2001)

The generic matrix of an ancient *silva* shifted: in its Polonized shape it changed into a literary almanac or even a scrapbook: collection of citations, poems and pieces of prose by different authors. Such was the first example of Polish *silvae*: an anonymous manuscript written between 1560 and 1570. It contained odes, trifles, and erotic poems of the two most prominent authors of the era: Jan Kochanowski and Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński (Walczak 1997), as well as three unidentified Latin poems and a Latin-Polish school draft.

Other sources mention that some *silvae* contained such peculiar artefacts as recipes for a long lasting writing ink and hints for killing rats; also found were hair locks of family members. The popularity of the form was so widespread, that - according to historians – in the 17th and 18th centuries, there was no noble household without a *silva rerum*: a big leather bound book regarded as a sacred family relic that served as a bond with the past, but of which the function was also that of an encyclopaedia and in some cases even of a whole library.



Figure 2. Silva rerum of Ambroży Grabowski. He titled one of his numerous volumes: “a book of everything on anything” (Grabowski 1864)

For the scholars of electronic literature and those exploring the ergodic field in particular, the most interesting aspect of silvae could be their textonic and collaborative features. Kazimierz Bartoszewski, an author who had himself inherited a silva from his father at the beginning of the last century, writes:

It was not uncommon that “authors” of these volumes were the whole family, sometimes even the entire generation. Hence, quite often one could see in them many different “characters” of handwriting, ranging from those that could easily delight calligraphers to some scribbles made by trembling old men or by the hands just taken off a sabre or a plough. (Bartoszewski 1913, 236-237)

Bartoszewski speaks about the golden age of an Old Polish silva rerum that fell on the 18th and early 19th centuries, where some silvae took the form of a collaborative family chronicle. But we

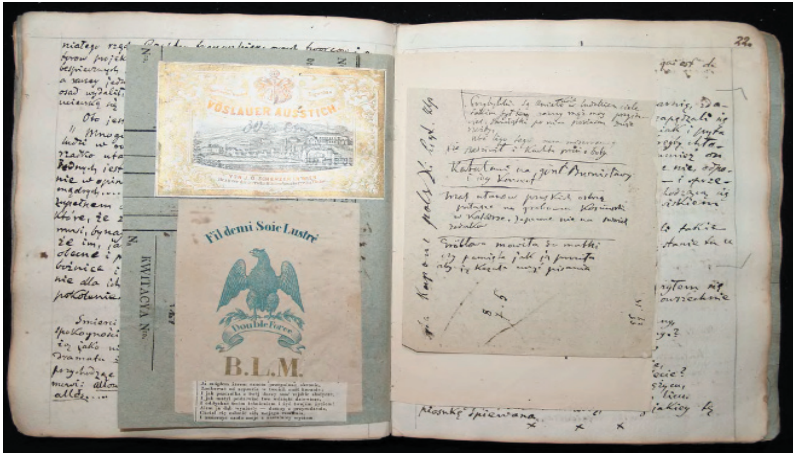


Figure 3. Silva of Adam Bartoszewski, published from the manuscript and edited by his son (Bartoszewski 1913). The heterogeneous elements of the manuscript: a poem, a letter, and a main text, merge into a more or less unified body of text.

must remember that this form of silva was not the only one, with the most popular being a work written and compiled by a single chronicler and was meant to be read, and not written, by the next generations<sup>2</sup>. That is why it is worth distinguishing between the two forms. After Roland Barthes<sup>3</sup>, let me call the former (collaborative family chronicle) a writerly silva and the latter – a single authored silva – a readerly one.

The golden age of silvae rerum ends with the Industrial Revolution and advances of printing technology that gave way to the popularity of newspapers in Poland. Silva did become a literary oddity, written mainly by traditionalists, as Bartoszewski's father, or eccentrics and originals like the colourful work (consisting of over forty volumes) by Ambroży Grabowski (1782-1868), a book of – as he put it in the title of one of the volumes – “anything about everything”.

By the end of the 19th century, silvae overcame a process of decline and petrification. In the context of several failed national uprisings and long periods of foreign occupation they became more important as a historical testimony than a living work of literature.

### *Electronic Literature and Silva Rerum*

As a centre of literary activity for many families of the Polish szlachta (nobility), silvic works were passed from hand to hand. Their readers were allowed to add comments to the silvae's content and many of them were handed the task of writing the next chapters of this domestic grand narrative. In this sense the Old Polish silvae can be regarded not only as precursors for collaborative forms of electronic literature, but they could also be placed among the literary examples of works with readers' textonic activity, as seen by Espen Aarseth and his cybertext typology.

Moreover, although a sense of order was definitely welcomed in a family chronicle, an exemplary silva was hard to read in a linear fashion. Some of them had almost two thousand pages. Reading them from page to page would be impractical. We can guess that skipping through material was common practice. If a reader wanted to browse the family history in regards to financial aspects, he must have omitted occasional poems and focused just on economic information. If we consider that comments written by fathers could be followed by comments written by sons and this process could go on through generations, a single silva appears as a huge axial hypertext (the axis being formed by the temporal framework of the family chronicle and the physical boundaries of a manuscript), more compound and complicated than contemporary Internet blogs.

Two Approaches To Silva: Monument and a Living Work

Silvae are now literary monuments. Some of the examples of the genre are printed works of a single author and form a canon of Old Polish Literature, like *Wirydarz poetycki* (The Poetic Viridarium) by Jakub Teodor Trębecki (1675), a work which quite notably was devoid of its heterogeneous, visual elements by the 19th century editions (Pająk 2008, 5). But most of the Old Polish silvae, especially in its writerly form, are manuscripts which until recently have been available only in the archives of National Libraries. More and more of them are now being put online and accessed from anywhere thanks to the digitalization of old literature. Regardless of their form (printed or in manuscripts, modernized or left untouched and far from being any kind of machines), they are just monuments one can admire and read. The only difference between them and traditional novels, from a cybertext perspective, is the possibility for more advanced use of random access while reading silvae. A reading session of the vast body of work comprised of many disparate elements in the case of silvae more closely resembles reading a copy of the *Bible* than *Moby Dick*. One must find his/her own clues and his/her own way to move through the text, as the chronological order is not essential. There is actually nothing more to tell about silvae than that they are regarded as monuments. As frozen, historically closed forms they are as far from *I-Ching*, for example, as can be. The latter is a book comprising rules of its own use. Once written they can be activated anytime and anywhere making the texts work in the most literal way..

Yet, if we look at *silva rerum* as a genre from a less pragmatic and more historical perspective, its cybertextual contexts can change dramatically. The rules of the genre, expressed by many silvic family chronicles, make them by definition work in *statu nascendi*. *Silva* is written and read by a specific group of people, it changes as their lives change, and it ends when there is no one



to write the story further. During the time of writing it has many features of a multiple text, open to additions, comments and corrections. It is literally a work in progress, ready to be read but also to be written. Most notably, the specificity of a silva puts the reader in a quite unparalleled position: as a character whose story waits to be told and at the same time a writer who actually tells this story. This perspective encourages us to look at a given work from the moment of its appearance as a bounded manuscript with blank pages, through the times when a group of relatives insert their own additions and pass this duty on to younger generations, until the manuscript, for whatever reason, is no longer expanded. What emerges is an intriguing model of a living work of literature, quite limited in terms of its audience, but making many members of this small readers' community also characters and writers of the manuscript.

Which silvae should be included in cybertext typology: its readerly or writerly variation, silva as a monument or silva as a work that lives within a specific historical timeframe in an equally specific social environment? The preferred option is to focus on the historical model, derived from the examples of co-authored family chronicles. But one must also remember that it was a readerly silva that became a generic blueprint for postmodern works of contemporary authors. They took heterogeneity and openness for its genre defining characteristics, with collaboration and textonic activity of the reader pushed aside. Within a world still ruled by the paradigm of the printed book, this is not surprising at all. That is why it is worth comparing both forms from a cybertextual perspective.

### *Silvic Situation: Personal Or Impersonal?*

One of the most intriguing consequences of placing the historical model of silva rerum into the cybertextual context is potentially the

most controversial issue of the reader's personal engagement with the work. According to Espen Aarseth:

If the text requires a user to play a strategic role as a character in a world described by the text, then the text's perspective is personal; if not, then it is impersonal. A text such as Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller...* [...] pretends to involve the reader as a participant but there is nothing for the real reader to do but read. In a MUD, on the other hand, the reader is (in part) personally responsible for what happens to his or her character. (1997, 63)

Where one locates the place of *silva* among the triangle formed by the traditional novel (let us stick to *Moby Dick*), Calvino's experimental second person narrative and a MUD, depends solely on our interpretation of Aarseth's definition of personal involvement of the reader. In the case of family almanacs in forms of *silva* this involvement is implied by the rules of the genre which assign its readers a role that looks quite unusual if we take into consideration the traditional fictional "pacts", "contracts" or agreements between the writer and the reader (Eco 1997, Lejeune 1988). To be more accurate, one must distinguish three different kinds of readers of *silva rerum* with three different co-authorial privileges. Non-relatives could only read; all members of the family could add comments and artifactual insertions, but probably not all of them could be actual chroniclers. Expressed in the second person mode of the text adventures popular in 1980s, this unusual role ascribed to the hypothetical privileged readers (Jennings 1992) of *silvae*, would sound as follows:

You are a member of noble family whose history is presented in this book by written words, pictures, citations and small artefacts related to it. Your task is to continue this chronicle and you will do it in two ways. Firstly, by writing down events from your live and the lives of your closest relatives. Secondly, by commenting and supplementing the already written histories of your ancestors. You are a reader, a writer and a character of the chronicle and you also

must prepare it for those readers, writers and characters who will succeed you.

Putting aside the text adventure stylization of this silvic situation and focusing on the historically proven tasks of the reader/writer of silvae, we must finally ask as to whether or not this is a personal or impersonal activity. Or maybe, is it something else? Personal perspective, found in cybertext typology, applies to text adventures, MUDs, conversational programs like Eliza and Racter and to *I-Ching*. On the one hand it would seem that MUDs are closest to silvae in terms of personal perspective. In both cases a number of participants form a (fictional and non-fictional) world and each of them writes his fragments of text by means of his character. But one would soon face some problems in making the two equal in terms of perspective. They would not primarily lie in the procedural character of MUDS or in the status of the world inhabited by the characters (the fact that silvae's worlds are non-fictional). Personal perspective is medium independent and can happen in both digital and analogue environments (see *I-Ching*). Exaggeration and fictionalization of facts were common practices among Old Polish diarists (Hernas, 1989, pp. 76–77), so one can also look at a family chronicle as a fictional one to some extent. A much bigger and more interesting challenge is related to the ontological problem of “having” and “being” a character in a MUD and silva respectively. “Being” but not “having” a character in this context draws a deeper division line between the two forms.

A character in a MUD is an entity placed outside of the player/reader/writer and inside a fictional world. It is a token that can rearrange the shape of the work, the course of events, and the behavior of other characters. A character in a silvic work is something different, and belongs to a more metaphorical than structural level. Silva, in this context, seems to be an expanded form of autobiography, a multi-autobiography. Both MUDs and silva are textonic, but is the

writer of an autobiography “personally responsible for what happens to his or her character”?

On the other hand, the silvic situation clearly differs from situations of an implied reader of any texts included in Aarseth’s typology. It does not pretend to involve the reader as a participant, as with *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller...*, it just makes him/her one. But one can sense that it does so in a somehow different manner than interactive text adventures or MUDs. That is why, when agreeing that silva is neither personal nor impersonal as a whole, I propose to call the silvic situation a quasi-personal perspective.

Silva Rerum And Cybertext Variables

Staying with the division of readerly and writerly silva, their position within the cybertext typology and its variables would look as follows:

	READERLY SILVA	WRITERLY SILVA
Dynamics	Static	<b>Dynamic</b>
Determinability	Determinable	Indeterminable
Transiency	Intransient	Intransient
Perspective	Impersonal	<b>Quasi-personal</b>
Access	Random	Random
Linking	None	None
User Function	Interpretative	<b>Textonic</b>

As one can see, the readerly silva does not differ from a traditional written novel (for example, *Moby Dick*) **in this typology**. It matches all the variables attributed to Melville’s fiction. The only variable that could set it apart from printed narratives is a user function. At

first it seems to be an explorative one: the reader simply does not read *silva* from page to page. It can have thousands of pages and many volumes filled with a variety of textual and non-textual material. It is dubious that readers do not “explore” the text. But if we want to be strict in following cybertextual typology in its definition of “exploration” we must grant a readerly *silva*’s reader a solely interpretative role. As a literary relic, a readerly *silva* is almost like a printed novel with just a higher degree of heterogeneity, and of collage-like nature.

In the case of a writerly *silva*, I hope that its quasi personal qualities, as I have shown in a previous chapter, are now clear. As for the other variables, the first two – dynamics and determinability – are crucial. The position of a writerly, commentable, collaborative *silva* on the cybertextual grid depends on which perspective we are willing to take. “In a dynamic text the contents of scriptons may change while the number of textons remains fixed” – writes Aarseth – “or the number (and content) of textons may vary as well” (Aarseth 1997, 63). At this point the attributes of the first two variables depend on what is the role of a given reader and what value we will give to its additions and comments. Are they just short snippets of secondary information or do they contribute to the whole, serving as segments of text equally important for the work as additional segments? If the reader is a part of the family whose history a given *silva* describes, and is obliged not only to read but to write his own story, to include his own literary efforts, citations, favorite poems, gossips, jokes and anecdotes, and on top of these to comment on the already existing material, then a *silva* will have to be called dynamic. The attribute of the second variable, determinability, will depend on the first one. If the model in question is dynamic in the sense just described, then it will also be indeterminable.

We must always take into account at what stage of a *silva*’s life we examine. *Silvae* can be dynamic and indeterminable only when they are – in Marshal MacLuhan words – a cold medium where “so

little is given and so much has to be filled” (McLuhan 2001, 24-25), and when the work of literature functions as an open-ended, living document whose readers are writers at the same time.

One could conclude that in the period up until the 19th century, in Poland there were some ergodic, dynamic texts with textonic user functions, and which were distributed among noble families whose members were at the same time readers, characters, writers, commentators and editors of the given work. Although this conclusion might be interesting, gap-filling and inspiring as such, there is more to learn from *silva rerum* than simply this, and implications of this peculiar form can be much wider. Let us hope that the digitalization of old manuscripts and old prints will soon give cybertext scholars easy access to a much wider range of these fascinating works of an ergodic and cybertextual kind.

### Notes

1. Speaking of ”*silvae*” I refer to *silva* in plural. Speaking of *silva* refers both to a single work and to a generic term.
2. K. Bartoszewski is only an editor of his father’s *silva*, treating the work as a closed one, and not daring to add anything himself.
3. To be precise, after Roland Barthes, as interpreted by George Landow whose reading of Barthes reading of Balzac, and the French scholar’s notions of readerly and writerly texts have influenced reflection on hypertext literature (Landow 2006, 4–6).

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