The Reconciliatory Potential of Objects in Stefan Chwin's novel *Death in Danzig*

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Introduction

In his essay "Deutschland: The Image of Germans in Polish Literature," literary critic Przemysław Czapliński highlights the pioneering role of Stefan Chwin's 1995 novel *Hanemann* [Death in Danzig] in shifting the Polish readership's focus from World War II to the forced migrations of the postwar period. Set in Danzig (now Gdańsk) immediately after the war, Chwin's novel tells the story of a displaced German doctor named Hanemann and a family of Polish migrants from Warsaw, who find themselves under the same roof and grappling with similar feelings of loss and uprootedness. Czapliński underscores that Chwin's major contribution to the literary representation of postwar reality is his description of the Polish and German resettlements as simultaneous events. Before 1995, Polish prose was dominated by war narratives, and on the rare occasions when postwar mass migrations were discussed, the focus was almost exclusively on the Polish exodus from the eastern borderlands annexed by the Soviet Union in fulfillment of the Yalta and Potsdam conferences agreements. Chwin's novel transcended the narrow boundaries of the national perspective and sought to paint a more comprehensive picture of the postwar experience, which meant including German stories of forced migration.[1] Related to this thematic expansion are Chwin's two other breakthroughs: de-stereotyping the figure of the German and legitimating the narrative of German civilians as war victims in Polish literature.[2] Paradoxically, Chwin foregrounds German characters without emphasizing or eliding their nationality. He focuses instead on universal psychological experiences of forced displacement, in particular on the loss of a sense of self and belonging. To that end, the author applies two strategies: he centers portions of the narrative on objects and human-object entanglements and employs an imaginative child's perspective. The question that logically arises is: what do these strategies afford Chwin that the purely realistic mode of narration and the direct focus on Polish-German relations does not? The short answer is that, seen through the lens of a child, the human-nonhuman interactions in the novel

[1] Chwin defines this inclusive approach as his writing's mission: "The literature of the borderlands attempts to enter the point of view of the other and respects one's right for an ambiguous identity" ("Literatura pogranicza" 166).

[2] Chwin's non-military and melancholic doctor Hanemann breaks with the negative stereotype of the German as a Nazi criminal in Polish literature. Before Chwin, only one postwar Polish writer included a sympathetic German protagonist in his prose—Andrzej Szczypiorski, in his 1986 novel *Początek* [The Beginning]. Czapliński explains that "while Szczypiorski de-Nazified the German, Chwin demilitarized him" ("The Image of Germans"). For a more detailed overview of the portrayal of the German in post-World War II Polish literature, see Wiktoria Tichomirowa.

provide an opportunity for the reader to imaginatively and affectively experience a world in which the nonhuman is partly human without having to believe that objects can think and talk in any literal sense. This transgression of centuries-old conceptual and perceptual boundaries allows Chwin to subtly suggest that objects can have effects that are independent of our awareness of them, e.g. heightening tensions or facilitating reconciliation between warring ethnic groups.

In utilizing these narrative strategies, Chwin's novel resonates with the works of the key representatives of the field of new materialism. Interestingly enough, for them, using "fiction is not a mark of disqualification, but a preferred way to assert new ontologies of vibrant, intra-active, trans-corporeal and sympoetic matterings" (Skiveren 188). New materialism is a relatively recent theoretical inquiry in the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences that emphasizes the materiality of both the natural and the social world.[3] It emerged as a backlash against Western thought's preoccupation with representation, ideology, and discourse and the exclusion of lived experience and corporeality from consideration (Domańska). Its goal is to reappraise the poststructuralist and postmodernist paradigms in such a way that they can more productively account for the agency of bodies and nature. Defined by Deleuze and Guattari as "a capacity to affect and be affected," agency, according to new materialists, is a characteristic of all matter: human, non-human, animate, and inanimate (127-128). For Jane Bennett, inanimate things are invested with vitality and liveliness. She calls their ability to animate, act, and produce effects both dramatic and subtle *Thing-Power* (6). Rosi Braidotti describes the defining characteristics of the new theory as post-anthropocentrism and post-humanism (86).[4] New materialists not only decenter the human being—challenging humanity's position of ontological primacy—and emancipate the material world from its inertia and passivity, but also open up the possibility to explore how the human and nonhuman affect each other. The new ontology that they propose is devoid of dualisms, hierarchies, structures, and systems. It is unfixed, relational, and contingent, and it emerges in unpredictable ways. For new materialists, human bodies and all other material and abstract entities exist "in a kind of chaotic network of habitual and non-habitual connections, always in a flux, always reassembling in different ways" (Potts 19).

I argue that Chwin's post-anthropocentrism reveals itself in the writer's deliberate focus on human and nonhuman materiality in depicting the historical transformation of Danzig/Gdańsk from a German to a Polish city. Opening the novel with the titular character, a professor of anatomy, facing the challenge of performing an autopsy on the cadaver of his beloved is, undoubtedly, an effective way of bringing the idea of human corporeality to the forefront of readers' attention, but Chwin does not stop there. He reveals that both humans and material objects are part of the larger material structure of the world and its open-ended formation. This implies that every material being always partly constitutes and is partly constituted by what it encounters. In the specific context of post-World War II forced migrations, both displaced Germans and Poles—as well as the German material objects around them—are presented as active entities that come into contact with each other with loosened, uncertain identities. The affects that the humans and

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[3] For a more comprehensive overview of new materialism theories, see Fox and Alldred.

[4] See also Gamble et al.

the objects discharge or respond to involve them in mutually transformative relations.[5] In the historical moment captured by Chwin, the German evacuees connect with their material possessions for one final time before the flight in order to reinforce their human sense of being and belonging. In that moment of encounter, the objects receive not only a reassurance of their utility, but also the last tangible and intangible imprints of their cohabitation with the original owners. These lingering traces of German presence on the material objects, in turn, prove repulsive and threatening (in the sense of *unheimlich*) for the new Polish settlers, prompting them to keep these objects at the outer contours of the new sociality and subjectivity that they are trying to establish. As a result of the lack of care on the part of the Poles, the post-German objects become more susceptible to the destructive forces of time and assume a more vulnerable position, which eventually facilitates their assimilation. Thus, by focusing on the process of human-nonhuman reconciliation, Chwin's novel subtly suggests a possibility for a similar outcome in Polish-German relations, even though it is not yet perceptible. In that sense the new materialist approach allows for the illumination of the often unseen, unnoticed and unrecognized embodied interactions between humans and non-humans and the agentic properties of objects.

Undoubtedly, one of the most controversial decisions of the Yalta and the Potsdam Conferences was the revision of German-Polish-Soviet borders, which triggered a large migration wave in Europe. As a result of the Soviet Union's annexation of Poland's eastern borderlands, 1.7 million Poles were forced to leave their homes and belongings and relocate. Most commonly, their paths took them to the new Polish western and northern borderlands, or the so-called "Regained Lands," where these Poles had to make new homes in the houses formerly occupied by Germans. The Communist authorities, charged with overseeing this resettlement, discouraged the migrants from dwelling on their losses in the East and urged them to focus on making a new life in the post-German territories for the sake of overcoming the atrocities of the war as quickly as possible and beginning the process of rebuilding Poland. To speed up the acculturation of the new settlers, the government promoted the idea of the Polish origin of the "Regained Lands" because of their belonging to a Poland ruled by the Piast dynasty in the Middle Ages. Moreover, the authorities undertook a massive campaign to erase as many traces of Germanness as possible in the new western territories: street names were Polonized, monuments were destroyed and replaced with Polish ones, and German inscriptions and coats of arms were removed from the facades of buildings (Thum, "Wrocław and the Myth" 232). Despite the efforts of Polish communist propaganda to manipulate the past and conceal the foreignness of the public spaces, a great deal of German material culture remained visible and played an active role in the private life of the new Polish settlers. I have in mind here the personal and domestic objects of everyday use, which are popularly referred to with the colloquialism *rzeczy poniemieckie* (post-German things).

There is no official definition of the term post-German (poniemiecki), and various authors have attempted to explain its formation and meaning. In her recent book

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[5] The word affect derives from the Latin *afficere*, which means to have had something done to one. The general agreement is that affect encompasses the various capacities of bodies to affect and be affected, i.e., it refers to forces and intensities that are visceral. The interest in affect is an interest in the "very fabric of the body and those forms of embodied experience that often remain unseen, unnoticed, and unrecognized" (Åhäll and Gregory 5).

Poniemieckie Karolina Kuszyk includes a brief discussion of the word by the renowned Polish linguist Jan Miodek. He notes that "poniemiecki" is a typical Polish word, created on the model of such adjectives as powojenny (post-war) and pożydowski (post-Jewish). Miodek explains: "Poniemieckie is something German that has been appropriated by the Poles; something that used to belong to the Germans, but that is not German anymore" (Kuszyk 88-89). Literary scholar Joanna Niżyńska defines post-German things as objects ranging from "buildings to kitchen utensils left behind by German civilians who were evacuated by the Nazis at the end of WWII or who were deported after the border changes of 1945" ("Things Post-German"). Because of the morally ambiguous circumstances of the Poles' encounter with the post-German objects and the communist officials' attempts to obscure the pre-war history of the western borderlands, for a long time this was a taboo topic in Polish public discourse. In her monograph *The Polish Wild West*, cultural historian Beata Halicka notes that the topic of *domestic* post-German material culture has attracted very little to no interest among historians, ethnographers, sociologists, and culture studies specialists, leaving it almost completely to Polish writers (Kuszyk 20).

Since the fall of communism, there has been an upsurge in literary texts that relate stories of growing up among post-German household objects. Most recently, the third-generation post-war writers Tomasz Różycki and Joanna Bator evoked the convoluted history of Silesia in their respective works *Dwanaście stacji* (2004) [Twelve Stations] and *Ciemno, prawie noc* (2012) [Dark, almost night], in which post-German materiality plays a special role. In his trilogy *Ulice Szczecina* (1995) [The Streets of Szczecin], *Cukiernica pani Kirsch* (1998) [Mrs. Kirsch's sugar bowl], and *Eine kleine* (2000) [A Little Night Music] writer Artur Daniel Liskowacki explores the Polish-German identity of the city of Stettin/Szczecin through his connections to the material environment in which he was destined to live. The origins of this trend should be sought in the works of the Gdańsk-born writers and representatives of the second generation of forced migrants Paweł Huelle and Stefan Chwin and their works *Opowiadania na czas przeprowadzki* (1991) [Moving House and Other Stories] and *Hanemann* [Death in Danzig], respectively. Chwin's novel has now become the most popular example of a Polish literary work engaging the topic of post-German objects.

It is no wonder then that the majority of the scholarship on *Death in Danzig* is devoted to Chwin's preoccupation with materiality. Bożena Shallcross calls Chwin's method "an archeology of occupation with its layers of emotional and material significance" ("The Archeology of Occupation" 121). Joanna Niżyńska similarly notes that "there is an ethical charge in his [Chwin's] descriptions of the objects' vulnerability to history, their mute participation in the German and Polish quotidian, and their contact with the skin of German and Polish hands" ("Things Post-German"). Czapliński labels the material objects in *Death in Danzig* "human objects" (*rzeczy ludzkie*) because of their human-like properties, which are revealed only in their interactions with people or other material entities. He underscores that Chwin does not simply use anthropomorphization, but positions the German objects alongside the novel's human characters as both life partners and narrative subjects in their own right (Czapliński, "Rzecz w literaturze" 229-232).

This article builds upon the existing scholarship on the post-German objects in *Death in Danzig* and proposes to further explore the meaning of their artistic representation by employing a new materialist theoretical framework. I argue that, seen through the non-

dualist and non-hierarchical ontology of new materialism, the human-object relations in Chwin's novel reveal the reconciliatory potential of materiality, in particular its ability to level hierarchies and soothe animosity.

German human-object entanglements

In his artistic interpretation of the postwar forced migrations and their long-term effects in European history, Chwin grants the German material objects a prominent status, thus proposing a new reading protocol.[6] It is worth pointing out that, in his treatment of post-German objects, Chwin had his influential precursors in the longstanding tradition of material mourning in Polish and Polish-Jewish writing (e.g., Władysław Szlengel, Tadeusz Różewicz, Czesław Miłosz, and others). However, he took the representation of materiality a step further by challenging the traditional anthropocentric model and asking us to see objects not only as commodities and tools for use, but as interactive agents on par with humans. In *Death in Danzig*, set in the aftermath of World War II, the writer presents the subject-object relationship as mutually constitutive. As Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra observe, in the context of war and displacement, the meaning of things to individuals is often magnified or transformed entirely (4). To convey the idea of intense material presence, Chwin estranges the German household and personal objects by anthropomorphizing them, i.e., endowing them with human characteristics. As I noted in the introduction, many new materialism scholars utilize anthropomorphism in their writings to advance the argument about the vitality of things, e.g., Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*, Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures*, and Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble*. Anthropomorphism, according to Bennett, does not have to always mean instrumentalization of nonhuman entities as mirrors of human conundrums; it can work the other way around: to open human perception to a whole world of unnoticed activities and processes of the nonhuman that resemble those of the human (Skiveren 190). "In revealing similarities across categorical divides," contends Bennett, "and lighting up structural parallels between material forms in 'nature' and those in 'culture,' anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms (99)."

To return to the objects in *Death in Danzig*: they are shown as active participants in the flight preparations, shouldering the enormous emotional distress of the evacuation together with their owners. Chwin compares the painful process of selecting a handful of indispensable items for the trip to "the last judgment." However, in this process, the objects are not passively awaiting their fate, but are invested with the capacity to make their own self-selection: "[T]hings that were indispensable separated themselves from things slated for destruction" (*Death in Danzig* 26). As much as the objects desire to stay with their German owners, they seem to be aware of the abnormal circumstances and that "only small objects, ones easily grabbed in an escape, along with potentially life-saving valuables, are likely to find a place in the suitcases and cloth bundles" (Ibid 28). In the upside-down reality of the war, safety concerns dictate both human and object behavior and necessitate

[6] For more on material mourning in Polish and Polish-Jewish culture and in the branch of Holocaust studies investigating the material dimension of the murder of the Jews, see Gross and Grudzińska-Gross, Shallcross (*The Holocaust Object*), and Meng.

difficult choices, such as prioritizing the oldest, cheapest, and most unflattering garments to avoid unwanted attention on the road. Terrified by the approaching tanks and the specter of Soviet soldiers raping German women, Mrs. Walmann chooses to wear her dirty, gray, battered, and bulky wool coat, which she had inherited from her grandmother Henriette (Ibid 38). Similarly, the "things [are] readying themselves for the road" (Ibid 25) "to look after [their owners], to watch out for [them] (Ibid 29):

> The thick green woolen coat lying folded and forgotten on the bottom of the armoire in the main room at Hundegasse 12, unfashionable, discarded, and disdained, the coat that Anneliese Leimann fought wearing so many times because it made her look older was already stirring in its storage place, promising deliverance at the moment when men in uniforms dark with dust and soot would force open the door and stand at the threshold (Ibid 28-9).

In the descriptions of the domestic and personal objects, Chwin places a special emphasis on their ability to self-organize. The parallel presentation of the human and nonhuman actions illuminates the similarities between the Germans and their material possessions and challenges the conceptual and perceptual boundary dividing them.

Turning the focus to the materialities at play in the narrative of migration serves to highlight the embodied nature of the experiences of being and belonging. Thus, Chwin provides a poignant account of the fleeing Germans' instinctive urge to preserve the memory of the home through tactile sensations, kinetic perceptions, and olfactory and visual interactions with the material world in which they were embedded.

> Her heart twinged as she sank her hand into the cool white linens, the crisp flowery chiffons, the soft flannels, the airy cottons, her fingers feeling subtle differences she had never before noticed, for now, as she knelt in front of the lowest shelf, it seemed to her that even with her eyes closed she could discern the softness of the fabric, the coarseness of the wave, the sleekness of the thread, that she could feel which blouse was Eva's and which Maria's, which sheets were from the double bed and which belonged to the girls. Lifting the stiff, starched edges, she slid her hand inside the sheets, up to her wrist, until her fingers uncovered the Walmann family monogram… (Ibid 37)

Sara Ahmed calls the sensory associations that influence an individual's relationship to a place *skin memories*. These skin, or embodied, memories of intimate interactions with familiar material objects, according to Ahmed, are of paramount importance in recreating the old home in the new place and sustaining the continuity of the self among the uprooted and dispossessed (89). Some of the Germans, however, are unable to articulate a sense of coherent selfhood through the bodily experience of their material possessions, as they are completely obsessed with the nauseating image of the incoming Russians and Poles appropriating their household objects. This image activates the last traces of agency left in the German evacuees who then demolish their property before the flight, thus destroying any possibility for the continuity of the self:

> It was Erich Schulz himself smashing the china with his own hand, his own heels stomping on the brittle glass…

> Rosa Schulz had grabbed his hand: "No, don't do it! We're coming back!" But he just shook her off and struck at the chest with slanting blows, crushing the carved mahogany frame on the glassed cabinet, smashing the crystal pieces that adorned the shelves, snapping the miniature columns of the dresses. Mrs. Schulz had stood in the doorway, hugging Gunter, watching with terrified eyes, following the flashing bayonet, but her husband was blind to her tears; he stepped into the entry room and calmly and deliberately began to bash the metal pommel against the mirror until it burst into starry lines. Then he tore down the curtain and opened the door to the bathroom. Mrs. Schulz tried to pull him away, but he whispered sharply, "They're not getting anything, you understand? You think I could live in the same house once those eastern pigs had stayed here? You're not going to bathe in the same tub where some swine of a Polack has just bathed with his louse-ridden wife (*Death in Danzig* 57).

With every tear and every act of breaking and smashing, Erich Schulz ruptures the intimate bond between himself and the material environment that had shaped his sense of being and belonging. By stripping himself of all the characteristics that define his distinctive personhood (nationality, social status, family history, fine taste, and creativity)—embodied by his material possessions—he voluntarily deconstitutes himself as a human being. The terror in Mrs. Schulz's eyes, the disgust with which Hanemann examines the vandalized apartment, as well as the animalistic projections onto the new Polish settlers allude to Erich's total depersonalization and dehumanization.

In their final interactions before the flight, the Germans and their material objects seem to bleed into each other: as the objects become saturated with humanity, the humans begin to lose their personhood and become dehumanized and ultimately objectified (i.e., they come to terms with the limitations of their autonomous human will and agency). What is emphasized here is both the humanity of materiality and materiality of humanity (Celis 127). Humans and objects are mutually interconnected: the objects belong to the Germans, but the Germans belong to their objects, as well.[7] This is revealed in the scenes where the German civilians are already gone, but their belongings remain. Through their materiality, the objects expose the marks of the human-object co-dwelling and shaping of one another:

> She was about to put her own soap in the iron mesh basket that straddled the edge of the tub when she saw that there was already a piece there, dried up and flattened with use. When she noticed a few hairs stuck to it, she felt a slight revulsion as if she'd found a dead snail, but it turned out they were only hair-line cracks […] Without thinking, she reached for the faded hand towel on the hanger, but when she noticed a blue embroidered W she stopped. She took down the towel, placed it in the linen closet, and hung up her own—white with a green stripe. When she had finished she again held her hand up to her nose.

[7] Archeologist Christopher Tilley argues in the same vein: "… we touch the things and the things simultaneously touch us. The relationship is reciprocal. Object and subject are indelibly conjoined in a dialectical relationship. They form part of each other while not collapsing into or being subsumed into the other" (61).

> The tub was clean, though the bottom had been worn matte by frequent scouring. In the strainer, however, she found a clump of blond hair. A child's? She fished it out and dropped it in the toilet (*Death in Danzig* 82).

As the last intimate witnesses of the German evacuees' presence on earth (most of them died during the Soviet torpedoing of the steamer *Bernhoff*, which was supposed to take them to Hamburg), the household objects are uniquely equipped to tell their owners' life stories. This specific practice of material mourning once again highlights and narrates the mutual constitution between human beings and nonhuman material objects and thus broadens our understanding of human belonging. The material mourning also universalizes human suffering and evokes readerly empathy toward the Other.

Polish-German human-object entanglements

The arrival of the new Polish settlers, however, interrupts this nostalgic storytelling and disrupts the horizontality of the human-object relationship. In the objectifying gaze of the Poles, the German human-nonhuman vibrant assemblage disaggregates into nonhuman matter: the Germans are reduced to their material remnants and possessions, and the material objects to their specific practical functions. In the interactions between the post-German objects and their new Polish owners, human needs are prioritized over those of nonhuman entities. The Polish migrants' struggle to fully inhabit their newly occupied place is presented as discomfort, communicated not through words, but through body language. Bodily reactions betray Poles' fear and disgust. When the subject encounters the *unheimlich*—the foreign yet familiar post-German objects—its integrity is threatened and emotions are expressed somatically. Thus, the Polish migrants make every effort to keep the boundaries separating them from the German material world impenetrable. As the above quote demonstrates, the items that bear the traces of the most recent interactions with their previous owners have a nauseating effect on the narrator's mother and are immediately discarded or replaced with Polish ones. In another scene, the narrator's father takes down and puts away a German family portrait, as it is preventing him and his wife from falling asleep. Yet, the clash of familiar and foreign scents proves irremediable and ultimately destroys the Polish couple's sleep on their first night in the German place:

> And in the evening, as they lay on their newly made bed in the middle room—Mama in her nightgown from their home on Nowogrodzka Street and Father in his striped UNRA pajamas—the smell of their street from the outskirts of Warsaw collided with that of the monogrammed bedcovers that Elsa Walmann had bought in 1940 in Julius Mehler's shop at Ahornweg 12, two incompatible scents upsetting their sleep (*Death in Danzig* 85).

The post-German things trigger an affect in the new Polish settlers that relies on the interplay of the objects' ordinariness and extraordinariness, familiarity and estrangement. This intensity can hardly be verbalized but is nonetheless viscerally felt and acted upon. Failing to recognize the post-German materiality as homey reveals the new Polish settlers' internal struggle to create a positive affective atmosphere for restoring their own sense of being and belonging. For the Poles, the German houses are not just foreign places, but the dwellings of Poland's historical enemies, which complicates their resettlement process.

The deserted houses and household objects are perceived as metonyms of their previous owners, and these strong associations threaten the Polish migrants' fragile sense of self. Therefore, the new owners deliberately refrain from developing affective attachments to the post-German material world as a means of self-protection.

With the passage of time, the fear and disgust subside and give way to less intense emotions. In the descriptions of their afterlife, the objects are presented as "indifferent to [the human] concerns" and "patiently yielding to [their] waiting hands," while the Poles are shown as resentful of the objects' "constant demand to be pampered" (*Death in Danzig* 148). The lack of bonding becomes a factor in determining the fate of the former German possessions. The most materially valuable of them (china pieces, silverware) change ownership frequently and end up in antique shops and private collections. While the more trivial household objects are left to disintegrate naturally, the house's new inhabitants having no desire to take better care of them and prolong their life:

> Each morning when we came into the kitchen we were greeted by an embroidered hanging […] with the phrase in German that said "Welcome Morning/ May You Bring / Joy To Every Home." But time stained the white fabric with apple and carrot juice, until finally, one day, the hanging sank to the green linoleum, and from then on it was used to mop the floor (Ibid 152).

For the German objects, transitioning to Polish hands means a loss of identity and status, but the objects do not resist the inevitable. Losing parts, getting repurposed, sharing space with "proletarian aluminum forks and bakelite ashtrays," or disappearing without a trace are all part of their taming process (Ibid). In that process, the former German possessions lose their perceived sense of superiority and become more fragile and vulnerable. This new status makes them more acceptable, but their full assimilation happens when they become invisible, i.e., normalized and no longer recognized as a threat. Anthropologist Daniel Miller defines the invisibility of household objects as their ability to fade out of focus and remain peripheral to our vision because we usually take them for granted (50). Only once that invisibility is attained are Poles able to feel empathy for the post-German objects:

> In actuality they were invisible, because who ever paid attention to the color of air, light trapped in glass, the song of drawers pulled open, or the high-pitched notes of the mahogany armoire? But then they would be remembered, and a desperate search would ensue. A hunt for lost textures and forgotten surfaces. Regrets for having shown so little care, so little heart. For having only existed among them with no feelings, doing nothing more than picking up, wiping dry, putting down (*Death in Danzig* 148).

This poignant description of the painfully achieved reconciliation of human-object relations can be interpreted as a hint to readers of *Death in Danzig* to imagine a similar, although not yet perceptible, positive development in Polish-German relations. Many years later, when evaluating the role of the abandoned German objects in the Polish-German conflict, historian Gregor Thum went as far as to suggest that "the Poles' rapprochement with the Germans following the traumatic experience of the Second World War began with these everyday household objects of the German era" (*Uprooted* 384). Through these objects the Polish inhabitants of the western territories were able to perceive the Germans

not only as cruel occupiers, "but also as private individuals who had lovingly furnished their apartments and had led lives as civil and as normal as their own" (Ibid).

Conclusion

The publication of Chwin's influential novel *Death in Danzig* coincided with some positive developments on the Polish-German diplomatic front. In the early 1990s, two fundamental treaties were signed, setting in motion a process of reconciliation between the two neighboring countries: a border treaty, which acknowledged the finality and inviolability of the Oder/Neisse border, and a treaty on good neighborly relations and cooperation (Lutomski 245). Chwin reflected the thaw in Polish-German relations after the ideological freeze of the Cold War by rejecting the stereotypical Communist propaganda image of the cruel German aggressor and the innocent Polish victim and focusing on the common experiences of displacement and dispossession in the aftermath of the war. Centering large portions of the narrative on human-object interactions provided a safe means to discuss topics that were considered taboo or contentious in Polish postwar culture.

New materialism, in turn, provided a helpful critical lens for examining the intricacies of Chwin's strategy of accentuating the role of material objects as co-actors in the traumatic process of forced migration. He did that by stepping away from the anthropocentric view of agency as a human privilege, instead endowing German material culture with liveliness and vitality. This anthropomorphic approach to materiality aligns with the child narrator's perspective which tends to perceive reality in animistic terms. The perception of the agentic properties of post-German things in *Death in Danzig* is also supported by the historical time in which the novel is set. The period between the end of World War II and the beginning of socialism in Poland was one of profound political, social, economic, and material transformations. Archeologist Chris Gosden claims that "if one is interested in how objects shape people and their social relations, then periods in which objects change their forms and types markedly and rapidly should be of considerable interest" (197).

Chwin recognizes this historical dynamic by giving visibility and a voice to the material possessions that are usually invisible and mute and thus taken for granted. His novel unveils a whole new world of embodied interactions which are difficult to name and grasp, and which therefore take place outside of the linguistic and reflexive realm. The choice to set the narrative at the bodily level and illuminate the range of sensory and affective responses which the material objects elicit from both Germans and Poles produces a humbling effect. Chwin's narrative technique not only levels hierarchies and bridges divides between humans and their surrounding material environment, but also between people(s). By privileging the material body over the body politic in his account of the post-World War II forced migrations, the Polish writer sends a powerful reconciliatory message to his readers on both sides of the Oder/Neisse border.

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