Chapter 7

Has This Hectacomb Been Over?

Literary Texts of Young Polish and German Authors on Jewish Existence in the Shoa

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents various forms and functions of subversion referring to three literary examples which come from the recent Polish and German fiction. Subversion in this study is comprehended as a transgression of all textual boundaries; as such, it is present in a wide range of narrative strategies and artistic techniques which contest and deconstruct the accepted established cultural forms of transmission of the Holocaust memory. The three analyzed examples are: Polish author Igor Ostachowicz's Noc żywych Żydów/ Night of the Living Jews (2012); Polish author Mariusz Sieniewicz's Żydówek nie obsługujemy/ We Don't Serve Jewesses (2006); and German author Maxim Biller's In Kopf von Bruno Schulz/ Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz (2013; translated - 2015).

INTRODUCTION

Belgian Political Philosopher Chantal Mouffe defined the public space as a battleground on which different hegemonic projects are confronted, with no chance for any final reconciliation. According to Mouffe, critical artistic practices play an important role in subverting the dominant hegemony in the public space, visualizing that which is repressed and destroyed by the consensus of post-political democracy (Mouffe, 2000). Subversion as a term in art appears quite frequently ever since the 1980s, particularly in reference to practices and strategies of critical art. Subversion can be understood as a method or technique for creating a work of art through the de-contextualization and re-contextualization of existing images from art or from the broader visual culture. However, a more common understanding of the term posits a critical stance, usually toward the dominant culture (Becker, 2014). Specifically in literature, subversion is probably as old as literature itself, with relevant examples dating back at least to fourteen century's Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. The various techniques that authors use in their subversion vary and are a subject matter for research all over the world (Booker, 1991). Contemporary critiques have noted how the Polish avant-garde art movement of the 1970s which resulted in a never before seen pluralization of attitudes and actions in Polish art, took a subversive course as its leading social concept (Ronduda, 2009).

Hence, subversion, as used here, has been variously defined by cultural and literary studies. The members of the Polish-German research team of the project that generated this study, have started their work from the Latin meaning of the word *subversor*, which may be translated as "an over-thrower." Subversion as an artistic strategy consists in imitating, or nearly

identifying with the criticized object, and the subsequent subtle shift of its meanings. The moment of the shift is not always immediately available to the audience. It is neither a straightforward nor open criticism; rather, it is marked by certain ambivalence. Subversion is conceptualized in this study as a transgression of all textual boundaries. As such, it is present in a wide range of narrative strategies and artistic techniques. These performances of subversion contest and deconstruct the established, commonly accepted or even sanctified cultural forms of transmission of the Holocaust memory, proliferated by the highly ritualized official discourse.

This essay discusses three aspects of subversion that appear in recent Polish and German literary texts: first - the construction of the represented world; second – the characters; and third – the language used in narration and plot. These three aspects are discussed through the analyses of three books - Polish author Igor Ostachowicz's *Noc żywych Żydów/ Night of the Living Jews* (2012); Polish author Mariusz Sieniewicz's *Żydówek nie obsługujemy/ We Don't Serve Jewesses* (2006); and German author Maxim Biller's *In Kopf von Bruno Schulz/ Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz* (2013; translated - 2015).

The first, *Night of the Living Jews* by Igor Ostachowicz (born in 1968), written in Polish, is a story featuring the representatives of the youngest generation of Polish intelligentsia who were born in the 1980s. The main character of this novel is Glazurnik (his nick-name can be translated as "a tiler" into English). He lives together with his girl-friend Chuda (her nick-name, in turn, can be translated as "Skinny" into English) in the present-day Muranów (a district of Warsaw) – the quarter where during the Second World War the largest ghetto in Europe was placed. One day the protagonist discovers in his cellar the entrance to the historical Jewish closed district in Warsaw (as the Germans used to call the ghetto). Seventy years after the Holocaust, this underground area of the capital of Poland is full of Jewish people, who exist on the border of life and death. As a result of different plot twists the Jewish characters living below the foundations of the building move into contemporary Warsaw. First of all they come in touch with the present-day inhabitants of this district, who do not belong to the high society and in many cases are very anti-Semitic.

The second book, *We Don't Serve Jewesses* by Mariusz Sieniewicz (born in 1972), written in Polish, is a collection of surrealistic stories, the last of which gave the title to the whole collection. It provides the reader with an absurd picture of a contemporary hypermarket in Poland, governed by the laws resembling those of a totalitarian country. The narrator of Sieniewicz's story employs the point of view of a common character that represents all the possible minorities and has the awareness of the descendants of the Holocaust survivors. Step by step the represented world of all the stories of the collection starts to resemble the Nazi world of the Shoah.

The third text analyzed here is the German novel *Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz* written by Maxim Biller (born in 1961). This book is a kind of a provocation and criticism of the status of Jews in contemporary Austria and Germany. Biller connects it intertextually to the figures of Bruno Schulz (a Polish-Jewish writer of the interwar period who lived in Drohobych – in today's Ukraine) and Thomas Mann (the famous German writer), who are the main characters of his text. In this work, which is a kind of a traditional epistolary novel, fictional Schulz writes a long letter to Mann on the threshold of the Second World War, in which he asks Mann for help with the publication of his texts in Germany and using this opportunity, informs

him about a stranger roaming the streets of Drohobych. The stranger allegedly claims to be the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann himself, and his strange behavior towards the Jewish inhabitants of the town anticipates the Nazi Holocaust.

FIRST ASPECT OF SUBVERSION: CONSTRUCTION OF THE REPRESENTED WORLD

Subversion is a striking feature in the represented world of *Night of the Living Jews* – the novel by Ostachowicz which is a kind of a conglomerate combining the conventions of fantasy and computer games, and mixing historical, adventure and romance subplots. The author moves his Jewish characters from the Holocaust world to the Warsaw of the twenty first century, but at the same time, he recreates the reality of the Nazi time and moves the contemporary protagonists into it. On one hand, these two temporal layers are contrasted with each other, but on the other hand – they are very similar. The two worlds – contemporary and historical – turn out completely different from their standard representations known to contemporary readers. Both the occupied Poland (Warsaw and Auschwitz) and the contemporary Warsaw (Muranów and the Arcadia shopping mall) are portrayed differently than in historical records and modern experience. The occupied town during the Second World War is a kind of a bloody sea, where Jewish people are oppressed from two sides, Polish and German. In Auschwitz – in contrast to historical records – Jewish people are kept in cages and forced to take part in an incessant sexual intercourse. The brutality and humiliation inflicted on man by man are thus rendered via sexuality. The novel shows all historical areas as a place of torment and a hell on earth. Interestingly, however, the contemporary Warsaw is not much better. Muranów is a place of linguistic abuse, violence, primitive behavior, sexual malpractice and total indifference. The Arcadia shopping mall is, ironically, a sanctuary of consumerism, where a human-being is only an element of the mercantile machine.

The last story of the collection *We Don't Serve Jewesses* by Sieniewicz also focuses on two interpenetrating areas – a typical hypermarket and a ghetto or a concentration camp. What can one say about these contemporary visions of the Shoah in the texts written by the representatives of the post-Holocaust generation? Where do they come from? They are cultural artefacts, images formed and transmitted by culture and its conventions rather than by genuine personal memory, impossible in the case of the second and third post-Shoah generation. Sieniewicz describes the hypermarket as if it were a closed district under the Nazi orders. These descriptions are full of elements which are very characteristic of the memories or witness accounts of Nazi crimes, but at the same time they link us to the modern world and its popular culture, like popular TV war-series.

The represented world in Biller's novel *Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz* is full of intertextual allusions to both writers' works – Schulz's and Mann's. The text takes advantage of the historical, cultural and social context of the European situation in 1938. In this way Biller constructs a metaphorical portrayal of an identity of a Polish-Jewish writer. Simultaneously, this portrait becomes a metonymic representation of the madness that befell Europe in the twentieth century. Literary and artistic works by Bruno Schulz, along with frequent symbolic allusions to other twenty-century writers (Mann and Kafka) or historical events, function in Biller's short story as iconic abbreviations and a "material," which he freely and sometimes shockingly uses to open new semantic spaces for the contemporary memory of the Holocaust.

Thus, his narrative and aesthetic strategies open a discussion on other forms, genres and subversive narratives used to challenge the contemporary cultural memory.

The represented world of the novel anticipates the approaching Holocaust. For example, the hotel bathroom of the apartment, where the false Mann lives, is portrayed as follows:

[...It] contained no wash basins, no lavatory, no bathtub, only several showers fitted into the bare concrete ceiling, two benches and a long rail with clothes-hooks hanging from it (Biller, 2013: 30-31).

This picture vividly resembles the shower room in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, where people had to wash before their death in a gas-chamber. The Jewish characters who visit the apartment of the false Mann are described accordingly:

[They] stripped necked. They had hung their clothes on hooks, and they sat in silence, or engaged in excessively low-voiced conversation with each other, on the two benches, waiting (Biller, 2013: 31-32).

Soon the narrator-protagonist can see reality along this line of thought:

[...] The smoke, and finally the cloud turned, coalesced and climbed to the ceiling, where it disappeared with the loud hiss into the jets of the showers – thus revealing a great heap of naked bodies lying lifeless around the false Thomas Mann as he knelt there, exhausted (Biller, 2013: 35-36).

The novel is closed with the apocalyptic vision of Drohobych burning among "the sound of motor engines and loud orders" (Biller, 2013: 55) and the arrival of the eschatological Abimelech as a huge, black, pre-historical insect, "running past on feet that rattled like tank tracks" (Biller, 2013: 56).

SECOND ASPECT OF SUBVERSION: CHARACTERS

The main protagonist of *Night of the Living Jews*, a plumber – Glazurnik, lives with his anorexic girlfriend Chuda in the Warsaw district of Muranów, shown in detail with all the petty realities of living in a contemporary block-house district. The male character tries to cope with his work and his partner. One day he visits the cellar and finds a trapdoor. Opening it, he discovers another city, hidden in the labyrinths of canals under the contemporary Muranów and inhabited by the Jews murdered during the Second World War. These Jews are supposedly dead, but in fact they are alive and for various reasons remain unable to spiritually and physically leave Warsaw. Hidden in the underground world, the Jews are waiting for a chance for the last action, which would allow them to leave for good. They are zombies – the second kind of characters in this book. Various events, which are connected with them, lead to the main protagonist's transformation from an average citizen into a helper of the Jews. As time passes by, more and more Jews turn out to inhabit the undergrounds of Muranów; dressed in old-fashioned tattered clothes, they start walking the streets paying no attention to its contemporary inhabitants. The Arcadia shopping mall becomes their favorite joint, in which they discover things patently

familiar to contemporary people: music records, mp3 players or contemporary clothes. As the plot unfolds, a regular battle is fought with anti-Semites about Arcadia, in which only few of the contemporaries fight along with the Jews. The battle takes place on the only night of the year when the underground people can really die.

Sieniewicz's collection (*We Don't Serve Jewesses*) consists of ten short stories, five of which are story arcs, and another five (which precede them) are a kind of commentaries. In the explanatory parts the narrator tries to define the eponymous "Jewess" – the main protagonist of the collection. In the first story, entitled *Myśl* ("Thought") he says:

The Jewess was a thought. It has been perfectly known, seemingly harmless, unchanged for ages. At twilight it hovered over the earth and cried: "death! death!" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 5).

In the second story, $Panna\ Mloda$ ("Bride") there appears another image: "The Jewess was a bride. A pretty woman, just a raspberry – the world hasn't seen one like her!" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 27). In contrast, in the third story Urzednik ("Clerk"), the Jewess is not a female but a male "of quite ordinary appearance" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 78), and in the story Mumin ("Moomin") the Jewess is a Moomin (the name of central characters in a series of books for children written by Tove Jansson) – a thirty-year old fellow with a face of a newborn baby, smiling all the time with a trust towards the whole world (Sieniewicz, 2006: 136). This stream of associations connected with the figure of the main protagonist, points to the final sentence in the story Pies ("Dog"): "The Jewess is a dog – a huge mongrel from a little toft" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 181). Thus, the narrator constructs a farcical chain of connotations – the Jewess is, respectively, a thought \rightarrow a bride \rightarrow a male \rightarrow a Moomin \rightarrow a dog. Of course, the narrator himself is aware of this grotesque situation and frequently uses significant words before the definitions of the Jewess: "rubbish", "nonsense" or "Just a moment, that's a foolish supposition!" Thus constructing the protagonist, the narrator draws attention to the anti-Semitic mentality of many people who see Jews everywhere.

In the closing story this obsession touches the narrator as well, a thirty five-year old male. One day he is doing shopping in the hypermarket just the way he does it on every other day. Then, when he is standing in the line to the cash-desk and puts his shopping on the counter he can hear the voice of the shop-assistant: "We Don't Serve Jewesses". The narrator-protagonist is shocked; it is "a cultural and genetic absurd" – he comments. He is looking at other customers in the hypermarket, expecting some sympathy from them, but in vain:

[...] These "others" are ominously looking at you. What's going on, holly shit?! You — a Jewess? [...] You are intuitively glancing over your shoulder and [...] perspiration is flooding you; the blood is fuddling to the brain, resounding, ringing in the arteries. The Star of David is visible on your arm [...]. For fuck's sake, it's impossible! One more revolted look [...] there is the Zion Star on your arm! Two triangles drawn by a black line, neither more nor less! Down — up, plaited. Up — down, well-knit inside on a yellow background, a little soiled [...] As if this weren't bad enough, right above the star, on the right side — the "R" logo in a little circle, confirming its originality. As if The Great Race Consortium guarded its property; and you, at this very moment, among these brilliant goods, became a part of it, a livestock, which was stamped. What's a drag! (Sieniewicz, 2006: 190-191).

The Jewess starts to be perceived as goods, as a kind of an attraction in the hypermarket. A moment later the customers can hear a loudspeaker announcement:

Attention! Attention! A Jewess in our shop! A promotional pre-view at cash-desk number one! Welcome! A Jewess; cash-desk number one! (Sieniewicz, 2006: 191).

A crowd of hypermarket customers surrounds now the protagonist. They are pushing each other, looking at the Jewess-narrator and waiting for his/her careless action. The narrator tries to diagnose the state of the protagonist and he calls it "caught by the Other." He feels a Pole and a male but deep inside he starts to feel a Jew and a female.

The hypermarket is a figure of contemporary Auschwitz: "Postmodernismus macht frei!!!" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 194). In the mentality of the young generation of Poles the Holocaust has not been over yet. Somebody in the Auschwitz-hypermarket suggests calling the Gestapo. The narrator comments: "Apparently the war was over a half century ago. Apparently!" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 194). At this moment all stereotypes come back alive. A girl asks her father why the Jewish woman is so ugly, whereupon he answers her that this Jewess is simply a witch. In the hypermarket world a lynching begins and a symbolic stake is being burned. The customers cry: "Disgrace! Christ's killers!", "Free Palestine! Jews, out of Palestine!", "We don't want Jews here", "Scrap liberals, they are a tumor in the body of our Motherland!", "Feminists, keep off our women!", "Peace not war!", "Iraq for Iraqis! Bush to Washington!", "Scrap deviants", "Fuckers from Holland!" The insults focus on the stereotype of the Jew, which after the Holocaust (and of course, also before it in the anti-Semitic propaganda) connects Jewishness with all fears of the middle-class. Seen from this point of view, Jewishness is a synonym of disliked politicians of many options and countries (not only from Israel), just as it epitomizes homosexuality, wars, feminism and all the worries of the world. Jews can be everybody and the Jewish context is everywhere. The Holocaust has started a European trauma, which is real not only for the Jews, but for everybody. It would be difficult to believe that after seventy years since the Holocaust the next generations of Europeans have been under the influence of the Nazi propaganda. The situation of Poles is special due to the strong role of the Catholic Church. In the mentality of many Polish people Jews are simultaneously "assigned and holy" and "curved and redeemed" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 198).

The Jewess in the hypermarket makes archetypical gestures – she strips and covers her eyes with the band with the Star of David. She looks like a synagogue represented in medieval art. At this very moment the character-customers begin to stone her, yet not with stones but with hypermarket articles. The picture is very grotesque: an old lady, for instance, is horrified and makes the sign of the cross, yet not because the human being is being killed, but because people throw bread at the Jewess (an unacceptable waste in Polish culture). Suddenly the hypermarket clients can hear a voice from the loudspeakers: "Dear Customers, please don't destroy an exhibit!" But the customers do not stop and start to cry: "Let's not be deceived! It's a trick. Let's go and kill this horrible Jewess!" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 201). A moment before her approaching death, after a loud scream of the murdered woman, the hypermarket bodyguards arrest the Jewess (they gag her and close her in the storehouse). The figure of the Jewess, marching along shop shelves, echoes the passion of Christ. An unknown lady wipes his/her face

and another offers him/her a Coca-Cola to drink. The narrator himself says: "You are sick and tired of this Calvary" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 202). The next Jewess is infracted by the bodyguards and closed in a refrigerator, where she starts to decompose.

The system of the hypermarket is a place where each human being is an object. As the narrator comments, "a Gestapo officer or a trader – what is the difference? A gas chamber or a working refrigerator, well, what is the difference? None!" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 225). At the end of the story the Jewish woman is binning at the back of the hypermarket, where there are heaps of rubbish. The story closes with an apocalyptic vision of the town, which is under the control of Nazi hit squads.

The main protagonists of Max Biller's novel are – as I stressed above – Bruno Schulz and the false Tomas Mann. The latter is the icon of a contemporary intellectual – everybody knows him for his great texts, but when he arrives at Drohobych, he seems to be a trivial and ordinary man, with many afflictions (for instance, he loves to pinch women's bottoms and to trash Jewish citizens of the town). Nevertheless, first of all he is very anti-Semitic, and together with the man in a black coat they spy on Jewish people. Bruno Schulz and the false Thomas Mann are shown by the narrator in a bizarre way. For instance, in Biller's pre-Holocaust vision Schulz goes out into the street completely naked and starts to pull the cab in which the false Mann is sitting. He looks like a horse with a horse-collar on his neck and a bit in his muzzle (Biller, 2013: 41-42). The anthropological difference is stressed frequently in Biller's text – Schulz is called "a Jew" while the false Mann is "Aryan," and only these two are aware of the approaching hecatomb of the Holocaust.

At the end of Biller's novel Schulz becomes an animal. Finishing to write a letter to the true Mann, he acts the following way, before pigeons, which represent his students, escort him to the place where he would be executed:

He took the thick envelope between his teeth, growled impatiently, put out the light and fell on his knees. [... And] after he had opened the door he crawled on all fours, as quietly as possible (Biller, 2013: 54).

THIRD ASPECT OF SUBVERSION: LANGUAGE

The language of the novels written by the authors of the second and third generation is purposefully crass, obscene, brutal and grotesque. It is a mixture of contemporary vulgarity, abbreviations and neologisms, often leading to misunderstandings between characters.

In *We don't serve Jewesses*, the language is full of curses – the narrator and many of the protagonists swear as sailors, for instance: "Yep, you important dick, do you not recognize me? It's me, your damp Jewish pussy! (Sieniewicz, 2006: 233); "How nice, in a moment you'll start talking bullshit in Yiddish" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 193). Numerous fragments of the text include ironic comments, in which vulgar words appear side by side with religious phrases, for example – "And Yahweh is fucking the White Goddess and ordering the Son to do the same" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 229-230) or, taking another example, "Fuck the rough Polishness, fuck the glass Catholicism, but why a woman, a Jewess, the nigger of history?" (Sieniewicz, 2006: 193).

In *Night of the Living Jews* the language employed in the fragments describing Auschwitz is simply horrifying. Thus, used rhetorical devices help readers understand the process of the dehumanization of human life:

"You are not human beings! There is no such thing as a human being! You are animals! You did not deserve anything you've got! It was unjust! You are animals! You are feeling what animals feel! Repeat!" [...] I am crying together with the others, I am opening my cracked and arid mouth to cry as loudly as possible: "I am an animal! Only an animal! I feel only what animals feel!" (Ostachowicz, 2012: 138).

The terror of the Holocaust is connected with oneiric visions of brutal sexuality. In one of the episodes, the narrator shows prisoners closed in cages, where the females are described as follows:

[They are] completely naked chicks, [...] who are shaved off as males, also bruised and sometimes without teeth, but they refuse nobody, they twist and make eyes until mucus is pouring down their legs, they are so ready! (Ostachowicz, 2012: 139).

These meetings of females and males in the Auschwitz concentration camp are called "ruts" by the narrator. This scene shows that also in a liminal situation contemporary men can behave as wild and uncivilized people. In the reality of Auschwitz, a protagonist from the reality of contemporary Warsaw is waiting, together with others, in line to the cage, and he does not wipe the spit pouring down from his lips. When he starts to copulate with a female, he is looking at his spit dropping on female jumping boobs in the rhythm of copulation. Her strangeness and indifferences only harden his phallus; in his mind the cry resonates and he does not know himself when he repeats it loudly moving his mouth: "I am an animal," and more: "you dirty whore". When he finishes copulation, he stands up at once and puts a foot in the door; he does not even turn to have a look at the female (Ostachowicz, 2012: 140).

The depiction of the Holocaust world is full of vulgar, obscene and brutal language. But so are also the fragments describing contemporary Warsaw as a horrible area overcome by wild elements with Nazi roots. One day the narrator can see two skin-heads who are pulling out dead Jewish girls together with an old woman who was hiding them. The narrator-protagonist starts to fear for his own safety and that is why he speeds up his steps (Ostachowicz, 2012: 235). These scenes are far from funny. The elements of grotesque clowning accompany only the scenes of the activity of Jewish Zombies in the Arcadia hypermarket:

They are real pre-war Warsaw chancers in checked caps. At each line the so-called jockey is standing with a bar; you bet on the number of the cash-desk. One moment a signal is given and the jockeys are standing in lines, the end of betting, the race and emotion has begun. [...] The winner is who first receives the bill for the bar. [...] I bet the slyboots fix these races, too (Ostachowicz, 2012: 212).

In max Biller's novel the language of narration is beautiful and sophisticated – like the style of Bruno Schulz's prose. Only in the parts of the text which relate to the aberrations of the false Mann the language changes and can become surprising for the readers:

[...] he began fending off the naked men who were pestering him with short, sharps cracks of the whip. [...] He whipped the men, then the women, then even the children [...], he seemed to be coming to enjoy all this whipping, pushing and cursing (Biller, 2013: 34).

In the part of text where the narrator describes the sexual orgy, he uses an original style, completely different from the official language: "showing and a small, wildly twitching snake between his legs" (Biller, 2013: 42). Nevertheless, also shortly before his death the narrator in his dream uses the language of sexual masochism. He dreams about a woman who at the beginning of a sexual intercourse puts on the black mask of Columbine on his eyes, binds his hands with riding crops and "the rest is up to her" (Biller, 2013: 56).

CONCLUSION

The three books, Night of the Living Jews, We Don't Serve Jewesses and Inside the Head of Bruno Schulz illustrate in various ways the strategy of subversion and deconstruction of the represented world, characters and language. All three works of art not only shuffle time levels, but also mix realism with fantasy and incorporate elements of computer games (particularly in the case of the Polish texts). In the books by Ostachowicz and Sieniewicz, this subversive drive is further emphasized by the clear pop-culture stylization. All the novels aim to shock and provoke, thus breaking the established literary ways of representing the Holocaust. Writers introduce sexuality, brutality and the carnivalization of the represented world. Showing the degradation of all values, they suggest that the contemporary world seems to have lost all axiological systems. Biller's novel is based on metonymy – the narrator does not use the word Shoah, but the readers of his novel understand the allusions which were born in the head of Bruno Schulz. In all texts one can find larger-than-life, improbable events and figures that play the leading role in the stories. The aesthetic reception of Polish books is far from pleasant – the authors show a brutal truth about both contemporary characters and those who come from the time of the Holocaust, about both – our and their worlds. The represented world, characters and language in Biller's novel are also transgressed, but this kind of subversion does not question the literally convention or all values. The subversion has been born in the head of the great writer and concerns our common reality. The literary transgressions in the texts discussed above are the areas of many operations: aesthetic and axiological provocations, taboo breaking, the criticism of pathos, kitsch and the media. The theme of the Holocaust is still very important for the young generation of writers; it means that this hecatomb has not been over yet.

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