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Poesis of experience. About Ryszard Krynicki's almost-haiku poetry

Poesis doświadczenia. O (prawie) haiku Ryszarda Krynickiego

Keywords: Krynicki, haiku, haiku in Poland, poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first century, experience, language

Abstract

This article is an attempt to analyse the late poems of Ryszard Krynicki, especially those similar, in structure and themes, to Japanese short-form poetry, haiku. In addition, the article is a synthesis of haiku's history and its influence on Polish literature. It shows how poetic miniatures from the Land of the Rising Sun influenced the "Nowa Fala" (New Wave of Polish Poetry). The article focuses on *Haiku. Haiku Mistrzów* [*Haiku. Haiku of the Masters*], Krynicki's last collection of poems, but also refers to the earlier works (from the 1970s and 80s). It also discusses the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, which became the main influence on Krynicki's late works. Poems became shorter and shorter, the gnomic form began to prevail, until they finally reached its final stage, haiku (or, in Krynicki case, often silence). The article also presents Krynicki as a fully-fledged metaphysical poet who wishes to express the inexpressible. It aims to explain why the poet describes his works as "almost haiku". The author deals with subjects such as: transgression, language, haiku, metaphysics and silence.

Że jestem... żyję...
wszak to rzecz niesłychana
kwitnących wiśni cienie
[to be alive like this
is a wonder...
blossom shade]¹
Issa

¹ English translation by David G. Lanoue, <http://haikuguy.com/issa/index.html> [accessed: 15.06.2020] – translator's note.

trzeba przejść
 przez niejasność
 wszystkie barwy są
 złamane nawet niewidzialna
 [must pass
 through opacity
 all colours are
 off even the invisible one]
 Jakub Ekier

1.

Reading Ryszard Krynicki's late poems, it is noticeable that the author of *Akt urodzenia* [*Act of Birth*] does not multiply words, but very carefully divides them, taking all the more responsibility for each. In an interview, Krynicki confesses:

No, I don't believe in the power of words. I believe in the power of silence and the power of refusal. [...] I don't believe it's possible to save the world with words, our words can't save anyone. I don't trust words, I strive to discern their true meaning. I use them, but I know that they can use us too, that they can be means of manipulating us. There are also words which frighten me and which I try not to speak, even in my thoughts (Krzywania 2014: 95).

A sort of transformation in Krynicki's poetics is noted by his fellow poet, Stanisław Barańczak, who writes: "This poetry contains fewer and fewer words – but each word has greater and greater weight"². According to Marian Stala, Krynicki's concise poems should be read as sources of contemplation, signs of *inner struggle* (Stala 199: 175 – italics K. M.). In fact, this scholarly opinion can be juxtaposed with the thought expressed by the forerunner of "transgressive fiction", Georges Bataille, who in his *Inner Experience* writes thus about inner struggle, or, more precisely, about the essence of inner experience:

I wanted experience to lead where it would, not to lead me to some endpoint given in advance. And I say at once that it leads to no harbor (but to a place of bewilderment, of nonsense). I wanted non-knowledge to be its principle [...]. Experience reveals nothing and cannot found belief nor set out from it. Experience is, in fever and anguish, the putting into question (to the test) of that which a man knows of being. [...] If poetry introduces the strange, it does so by means of the familiar.

² Quoted as on the fourth page of the book cover, see: Krynicki (2009).

The poetic is the familiar dissolving into the strange, and ourselves with it. It never dispossesses us entirely, for the words, the images (once dissolved) are charged with emotions already experienced, attached to the objects which link them to the known (Bataille 1998: 53–56 [English translation after Bataille 1988: 3–5]).

Bataille's proposed phenomenon of inner experience fits well with Ryszard Krynicki's poetic experience. The "strange" in the above description by the French philosopher connotes with "nothingness". The described dualism, long present in Ryszard Krynicki's poetic language, furthermore constitutes a major part of the author's lyrical experience (a theme of his poetry). The impulse for this discussion is Krynicki's latest volume of poetry, *Haiku. Haiku mistrzów* [*Haiku. Haiku of the Masters*], as well as the poet's selected earlier pieces which directly tie into his pursuits in literary miniature.

2.

The latest volume of Ryszard Krynicki's poetry, a self-contained and, in a way, autonomous book, is a small collection of miniatures devoted to classical haiku. The booklet *Haiku. Haiku mistrzów* had its premiere in 2014. It is no accident to describe this collection with a diminutive since the volume neatly fits European publishing conventions with its small size (12 x 16,3 cm), solid-colour cover and pages, and ascetic front cover graphics design (Sengai Gibon's *Circle-triangle-square / The Universe*). This visual introduction foregrounds the Zen aesthetic which, virtually before opening the book, allows one to anticipate what kind of poems can be found within. The volume is comprised of three very deliberate parts. As the author remarks in the afterword, part one contains a small collection of his gnomic poems dating as far back as the 1960s, which the author previously published in volumes of poetry and in magazines, or which had not been published before. The first series is titled *Prawie haiku* [*Almost Haiku*] and contains twenty poems of different syllabic structures. The poems decidedly bear a relationship to the poetic miniatures of Japan, since the meanings they express are very deep, often vague, multi-faceted, and momentary. The second series contains 29 poems with 5 + 7 + 5 syllabic structure and is titled *Haiku z minionej zimy* [*Haiku From Past Winter*]. These are texts which Krynicki wrote during the winter of 2009/2010, a time which was especially difficult for him, and which increasingly resemble classical haiku (Krynicki 2014: 122). The final, third part of the collection is devoted to the greatest, universally recognised masters of the genre. Here, Krynicki presents his translations of Bashō (thirty-three poems),

Buson (twenty-four poems), Issa – Krynicki’s favourite *haijin* (fifty poems), and Shiki, who has not been well known in Poland before (forty poems). However, as the author writes himself in the volume’s afterword, these are rather paraphrases of translations, since he did not use original texts, but German, Czech, and Russian translations. The division into three parts, then, has a specific design behind it. Part one is a kind of preparation to be able to speak about – or read – haiku, since the poems are not haiku proper, but “almost” haiku, forms bearing resemblance to the genre, but not belonging to it yet, in a way deconstructed. Only in part two does Krynicki offer the reader his real haiku, conforming to the requirements of the genre: a verse of 5+7+5 syllables. Finally, part three contains translated haiku of great masters, which round off the volume and constitute a literary form of meditation.

3.

The Oriental genre that is haiku was born in Japan, deriving from the country’s medieval poetry tradition, probably reaching as far back as the 14th century (Michałowski 1999: 67).

The word *haiku* itself, which denotes the Japanese genre of poetry today, is only an abbreviation. The full name is *haikai-no ku*. Starting the explanation at the end, *ku* means ‘stanza’ or ‘verse’, the particle *-no* denotes a possessive relationship between two nouns, while *haikai* may become the key to understanding not only a particular genre of literature, but also of the Japanese way of thinking. The semantic equivalent of *haikai* is ‘joke’. In China, and later in Japan, this was the name of a style of poetry and prose characterised by wit, understatement, and artful surprise (Żuławska-Umeda 2006: 8).

The history of the seemingly simple literary form with a defined verse structure were not as obvious as one might imagine today. Its meandering origins may serve us as interesting side-paths of transcultural analyses, which to some degree may point to deeper interpretations.

Haikai etymologically means “funny, comical, witty, a joke” and initially referred to “jocular songs”, which were longer forms (*haikai ka*), as well as “jocular linked verse” (*haikai-no renga*). Only in the 17th century, a time of vibrant development in Japanese literature, did *renga* poems’ first stanza, named *hokku*, begin to stand on its own – a three-line non-rhyming epigram with a 5 + 7 + 5 syllabic structure. Initially, these poems were called *haikai*, and only later started to be commonly referred to as *haiku*. After its transformation from *hokku*, *haiku*

gained utmost freedom for imagination and a sense of being, in a way, “unfinished”. As Agnieszka Żuławska-Umeda writes in her introduction to the collection *Haiku*:

This poetry is a discovery and a new look on how our world is made – it allows the poet to see the beauty and richness which exists in his own nature. It awakens the sense of connectedness with the natural world which dwells in the deepest recesses of the soul, and may help us find the truth about ourselves. The poem is short and quick as a flash; it sneaks in irony and will laugh at the solemn sentimentality of a lyricist. [...] That is why we, Europeans, who lay all phenomena in logical sequences, and value benefits which come from the real world above that which happens within ourselves, often find it so difficult to fully understand haiku – a poetry which speaks rather about the spirit of nature than its outer surface; more clearly about the mood of its object than that of the poet (ibid.: 17–27).

Roland Barthes, critic, semiologist, a representative of French structuralism and post-structuralism, expressed similar remarks about Japanese haiku in his book *Empire of Signs*. As he writes, the simplicity of the Japanese benchmark testifies to its depth (Barthes 1999: 25). The aspect especially drawing the author's attention is the “breach of meaning”.

This precious, vital meaning, desirable as fortune (chance and money), the haiku, being without metrical constraints (in our translations), seems to afford in profusion, cheaply and made to order; in the haiku, one might say, symbol, metaphor, and moral cost almost nothing: scarcely a few words, an image, a sentiment – where our literature ordinarily requires a poem, a development or (in the genres of brevity) a chiselled thought; in short, a long rhetorical labor. Hence, the haiku seems to give the West certain rights which its own literature denies it, and certain commodities which are parsimoniously granted. You are entitled, says the haiku, to be trivial, short, ordinary; enclose what you see, what you feel, in a slender horizon of words, and you will be interesting; you yourself (and starting from yourself) are entitled to establish your own notability; your sentence, whatever it may be, will enunciate a moral, will liberate a symbol, you will be profound; at the least possible cost, your writing will be *filled* (ibid.: 126 [English translation after Barthes 1982: 70]).

Haiku itself interfaces with the source of meaning (ibid.: 134), it has a purity, sphericity, and even the emptiness of a musical note (ibid.: 135), haiku is not a rich thought reduced to a short form, but a brief event, which instantly finds its proper form (ibid.). In a word, haiku encompasses in itself an “ineffable” moment, and its form is dominated by happening in the purest sense. Brevity and conciseness of the text puts the encompassed world into the order of infinity

(ibid.: 138). The object enclosed becomes an event which happens “here and now”. The poem does not describe reality. The reality in the poem lacks meaning; what is more, even reality does not have the meaning of reality at its disposal (ibid.: 145). Without describing and without defining, the Japanese lyricism shrinks down to a pure and exclusive designation. This is it, it is so, says the haiku, it is what it is, nothing special – it says, in accordance with the spirit of Zen (ibid.: 145–146).

It becomes apparent that this Japanese genre is characterised by a certain indefiniteness. It supplies a kind of balance, a state midway between that which is durable and fleeting. Indefiniteness is the richest poetic style since it allows itself to be constantly rediscovered (Jullien 2006: 73). It is commonly considered the simplest poetry in the world, focusing on itself its ineffability and nothingness. It is an instant, non-intellectual record of a moment (Śniecikowska 2013: 107). Or, in the words of the scholar and commentator of Japanese culture, R. H. Blyth: “A haiku is not a poem, it is not literature; it is a hand beckoning, a door half-opened, a mirror wiped clean.” (Miłosz 1992: 8). The author’s addition of the adverb “almost” before the name of the Japanese poetic genre makes us differentiate it from the classical haiku, which it surely is, but in another – exploratory – and transgressive way. Interestingly, the difference in understanding of this genre is tied with language, which, as the poet himself remarks, is most important to him. “To me, what is most important in literature is the individual language and individual style of expression” (Krzywiania 2014: 119).

4.

About the mid-70s, I began to write differently, not because I wanted to be translated into foreign languages, but because I felt a need for change. I do feel this need often. *I try a certain way of expression, I reach a certain boundary – and I leave* (ibid.: 41, italics K. M.).

Poetry has room for everything because its essence is life. It deals with everything that concerns and involves the human being; so to limit it to only a single issue would be a violation of its essence. *I think that true poetry protests with each pure word* (ibid.: 23, italics K. M.).

Ryszard Krynicki’s remarks quoted above seem to be a motto and a postscript all at once. Why, then, would one place a postscript in the main body of the text? Perhaps because all has already been written/said, and all that is left is nothingness – born out of the sense of the fragility of human life, fear, and

anguish of the final approach to the boundary of existence? Does such a formulation of the problem not resemble the Eastern reasoning on reality – so different from the one we know in the West, which is encapsulated in words, enclosing philosophy in the boundaries of rationality, thereby precluding an approach to the sphere of non-existence. Words bind into sentences which, coupled with facts, create a discourse, allowing manipulation of reality with the use of words, neutralising in the human the sense of dread of controlling the world (Bataille 1998: 8–9). The key to this labyrinth of contradictions lies, paradoxically, in words, but “pure words” – those which the poet speaks about. But what is the relation between “pure word” to haiku itself, which was originally a type of play with words? Haiku, as a non-intellectual record of a moment, “contains in itself the whole philosophy of life developed over centuries, and therefore points to something other than words and images alone” (Miłosz 1992: 9). Haiku, being an image, a sketch, a fragment, an expression of imperfection, leads to poetry which “uses words as an imperfect record of wordless meditation on life and the world” (ibid.: 9).

Stripped of detail on which the reflexive thought of the reader could find purchase, [haiku] seems to bring nothing new to their treasury of spiritual experience, but, in reality, it forces them to engage in intense mental work and to detect in the author's portrayed microcosm the generalised features of the whole universe (Kotanski 1975: 7–8).

Multiple meanings, multiple layers, and sensitivity. These three rules form the defining principle of the genre that is haiku. If we categorise this peculiar miniature into one of the three major literary forms, namely poetry, this allows us a certain ordering and placing haiku in the system of genres. What is interesting, is that it conforms in large measure to the formulations of Roman Ingarden. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that long before Ingarden, it was “Bashō, showing in his works the quotidian events and natural phenomena seen through the lens of small sensual experiences, who created his own style (*shōfū*) ‘combining the dignity and sublimeness of the best classical forerunners of Japan and China with great sensitivity to the changes in the natural world’ and simplicity of expression” (Śniecikowska 2016: 63). The Buddhist philosophy of Zen, seeded in the genre as far back as the writing of the most well-known haiku (about a frog leaping into an old pond), continues to be a realm which escapes definition. Practically any attempt to describe this philosophy, religion, or way of living becomes entangled in a labyrinth of paradoxes and self-contradictions (Michałowski 1995: 45). To conclude, haiku is “beyond” and “above” literature,

which makes this form of presenting the revealed reality a perfect tautology. Words are merely means, a tool in the hand of the poet, who not so much creates new images/meanings as transcends them and projects the whole from the external part. As written by Derrida in the essay *Force and Signification*: “[...] what is in question, in this case, is meaning rethought as form; and structure is the *formal* unity of form and meaning” (Derrida 2004: 12 [English translation after Derrida 1978: 5]). Perhaps haiku by itself is supposed to only be supplemental reading, nothing new, as suggested by Mallarmé in *A Throw of the Dice*.

5.

If we inspect Ryszard Krynicki’s poetic oeuvre carefully, as early as in his volume *Nasze życie rośnie* [*Our Life Grows*] of 1978 we may find a large number of short poems which, although they are not haiku, do share the mentality and “spirit” characteristic of the Eastern prototype. Let us read two poems from this volume:

BUDDO, CHRYSYDUSIE

Buddo, Chrystusie,
nadaremnie się ukrywasz
w tylu wcieleniach

[BUDDA, CHRIST

Budda, Christ,
in vain you hide
in so many incarnations]

(Krynicki 1987: 11)

JAKŻE DALEKO

Składam się z komórek:
jakże mi daleko
do ich niehumannej doskonałości

[HOW FAR

I am composed of cells:
how far I am
from their inhuman perfection]

(ibid.: 51)

The verse form of the first of these is (5 + 8 + 5). It is, therefore, a syllable away from a canonical haiku. But the thought expressed by the poem – an ecumenical dialogue of both cultures and an attempt at the syncretic union of the concept of faith makes it a direct invitation to a philosophical reflection. Krynicki's poem, rooted deeply in Eastern culture and displaying broad intellectual horizons, fits in the convention of haiku, or, as the author might say, "almost" haiku. Ecumenical intermingling, which is this poem's theme, is the result of cogitation – it results from cultural knowledge. The poet is not being exclusively aesthetic nor ethical, he does not attempt to categorise the work or place it on a scale of a particular value, but affirms its insight. Literature received in this way will encounter affirmation and trust "in the unpredictability of reading, its openness to the future. From this reading, of course, a responsible instrumentality may follow, perhaps one with modified methods or goals." (Attridge 2007: 180 [English text: Attridge 2017]).

The second poem is not so close to the generic form of haiku. It is composed of 23 syllables (7 + 6 + 10), but it is still laconical, economical in its thinking, elliptical and trivially insightful: "I am composed of cells". The thought expressed after the colon gives the poem a philosophical, contemplative character – it is the result of reflection, of pondering over the human condition, not of empirical learning. The topic of the poem is a specific situation – the discovery of the cell, the smallest structural and formal unit of the organism capable of performing all life functions. As far as this event is concerned, the poem does not surprise, it is merely a description of this discovery. On the other hand, looking at the poem from a metaliterary perspective, a certain parallelism emerges. The scrutinised human cell and its ascribed biological function bring to mind the characteristics of haiku. It is "the smallest structural and formal unit capable of performing life functions". We are capable, in this case using abstract thinking instead of a microscope, of perceiving the cell as a short poem, a flash, which possesses enormous power. Krynicki's limerick is a simple discovery of expression and the indicated theme. The connection between literature (haiku) and reality (the cell) is discerned through the consistency leading from biology to metaphysics. The discovery: I am composed of cells is clear, but it is not a revelation. Not so when we see discovery: I am composed of infinities bounded by some finiteness.

Krynicki's short poems from the final twenty years of the 20th century, as well as those most recent, resemble approaches to the boundaries of metaphysical understanding. In sparing two, three, sometimes four or five lines, they belong to the poetics of experiencing a revelation. They are

words and thoughts which cling not to Things, but to Nothingness. In the poetic world of Krynicki's, the poems which do not fulfil the generic requirements of haiku are called by him deliberately (almost) haiku. Individual imitations which approach the Japanese original are oftentimes quite distant. It can also be surmised that the author did not particularly care to follow haiku's form. The poems do not show a maniacal will to match the Eastern blueprint. Quite the opposite, one might think that the poet, more or less consciously, maintains his autonomy, an "independence" of his poetic style, only taking inspiration in the classical haiku. It is possible that Krynicki as a poet and translator of poetry, in transporting meanings from one language to another, plants something much more important in the texts: the philosophy, culture, and spirit of Eastern poetry. A similar observation is made by Iwona Misiak: "The principal impulse in Ryszard Krynicki's poetry is a pre-philosophical drive to investigate things and phenomena which lie beyond the bounds of empirical understanding, between the magnetic points of existence/non-existence" (Misiak 2015: 239–240). The selected works of the Polish poet which pose a reference to Japanese poetry constitute a separate monad and encapsulate the transience of the external world, as well as the transience of the subject experiencing it. In other words, this poetic world brings to life the moment in which the transience of the experiencing subject meets the transience of the experienced object. This meeting, which happens in the realm of phenomenal reality, is an expression of Nothingness – the non-articulated whole, the source of existence (Izutsu 2001: 195–196).

6.

Can we, therefore, speak of a kinship, of a particular closeness of the original haiku (the *Haiku of the Masters*) with the poetry written by Krynicki over the years? The author himself says that his past poems were close to gnomic poetry, others to haiku – but never were classical haiku. In fact, some of those poems could be made into haiku, but from the beginning, as we read, "the poem didn't want to be a haiku" (Krynicki 2014: 122). Nevertheless, the small volume *Haiku. Haiku mistrzów* does contain a series of poems which conform both to the metre and genre requirements of the original haiku. The poet published these with the title *Haiku z minionej zimy* [*Haiku From Past Winter*]. The series is additionally inscribed with the date of composition (December 2009 / January-March 2010). However, the poet added the title only after finishing the series, which may suggest the poems became haiku without being originally intended as such. Still, the

poems are infused with the spirit of Ineffability, of the eternal present, “forever now”. This imbues them with a magical power, since they “reclaim” reality from the seeming emptiness. The aesthetic of *Haiku z minionej zimy* is very close to the original anthologies. Although it contains fewer than thirty poems, it possesses a certain composition. It is, however, not built around the four seasons, as is typical of Japanese collections. In spite of the shortness of the series, this might even be feasible, but the poems were all written during a single season – winter. Reading Krynicki's poems we can notice six sensual, symbolic portrayals of reality, which may be grouped in a specific hierarchy. The theme of the majority of the poems are birds – as many as eleven haiku. We encounter cranes, tortoiseshells, swans, sparrows, crows, rooks, tits, blackbirds, and turtle doves. The second thematic group are atmospheric phenomena (mostly Moon phases and snow) present five poems. Four poems are dedicated to the masters of the genre (Issa, Shiki, Bashō). Cats, whom Krynicki is fond of, make an appearance in three poems. Other animals – a squirrel, a ladybug, and a spider – also appear in three. The catalogue of themes is rather broad. These poems resonate strongly compared to the other ones and evoke the principles close to the original haiku. They and Krynicki's “almost” haiku “may be represented by a space containing within it a single dot of a positive ‘figure’ of a phenomenal event” (Izutsu 2001: 201 [English translation after Izutsu 2013: 74]). This poetry is the universe contained in miniature. Perhaps suffice it to repeat the thought of Tadeusz Nyczek, who wrote: “a long poem expresses the world's existence, a short poem – its essence” (Nyczek 1985: 83).

A close examination of the texts comprised in this series reveals a certain design. In the three-line poems, the author encloses the structure of the world – the cosmos. He oscillates between Nothingness and Completeness. In Krynicki's works, everything undergoes constant change, becoming transparent. Some texts are more steeped in the “spirit” of the East, some less so. For instance, the opening and closing poems of the series are very close to typical haiku.

This is the initial poem:

Witaj, mój wróblu!

Obu nam się udało

przeżyć tę mroźną noc.

[Welcome, my sparrow!

We both managed

to live through this frosty night.]

(Krynicki 2014: 35)

And this is the final one:

Dzień, dobry wróblu!
 Czy to nie ciebie widziałem
 pod koniec grudnia?
 [Good, morning sparrow!
 Was it not you I saw
 in late December?]
 (ibid.: 44)

These poems unite the subject and the object. Both poems connect, creating a frame which opens and closes the series *Haiku z minionej zimy*. In the first poem, the lyrical subject expresses elation for a seemingly trivial reason: both he and the sparrow managed to live through “this frosty night”. Interestingly, the poet reveals in the afterword that the poems were written over “an especially difficult winter” (ibid.: 122). Thus, the possibility of further existence, of being in the world with someone else, even if only with a being so fragile and delicate as a sparrow in winter, brings the speaker relief, or even joy. In the second poem, the lyrical subject’s joy grows, since after a difficult winter he once again gets to meet a little sparrow. The common experience of survival brings them closer to one another, which allows the speaker to reach the state of internal peace – harmony with himself and the surrounding world. The uniqueness and momentariness of “this” particular moment brings the speakers of the poems to an identical “living through”, an experience of re-birth, and, ultimately, to a sustaining, lasting (even if fleeting...) existence.

7.

The poetry of Ryszard Krynicki transcends the boundaries of logic, in order to experience that which is great in that which is small – enclosed in a miniature (Bachelard 1999: 156). Krynicki’s texts are filled with the desire to transgress. The poet wants them to remain open and never definitively end.

I want my poem to be something which develops in time and evolves because I myself change and pass, and my language changes as well. The essence of things – the question of meaning – remains the same, what changes is my understanding of the world and ways of describing it. *I strived at ever greater sublimation and ever greater precision of description, eventually I reached a certain boundary, the boundary of two words separated by a comma, and I had the choice either to be*

silent, or to return to the beginning, in a way, although in another place, in another time, in a different language (Krzywania 2014: 93).

Krynicki's short, ever shorter and more concise poems, abuzz with words, are like electrical arcs, short bursts of energy, strikes of flint against the steel, which spill forth individual sparks of meaning. The oeuvre of Ryszard Krynicki contains many poems whose sparsity of words is, paradoxically, an added value. Discussing these concise poems, Jacek Łukasiewicz uses the metaphor of the single foot of a snail, which is sensitive and eminently versatile (Łukasiewicz 2013: 92).

Whether we use the metaphor of a snail's foot or a flint striking the steel, one thing remains certain. Ryszard Krynicki's poetics draws its strength from the unique language which the poet employs with a Roman severity, imperious succinctness and decisiveness. Krynicki's linguistic precision goes hand-in-hand with the mindfulness of the uttered words, and this uttering becomes "a pronouncement for others, for those who listen" (Gadamer 2001: 17).

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