

Boundaries as Norms

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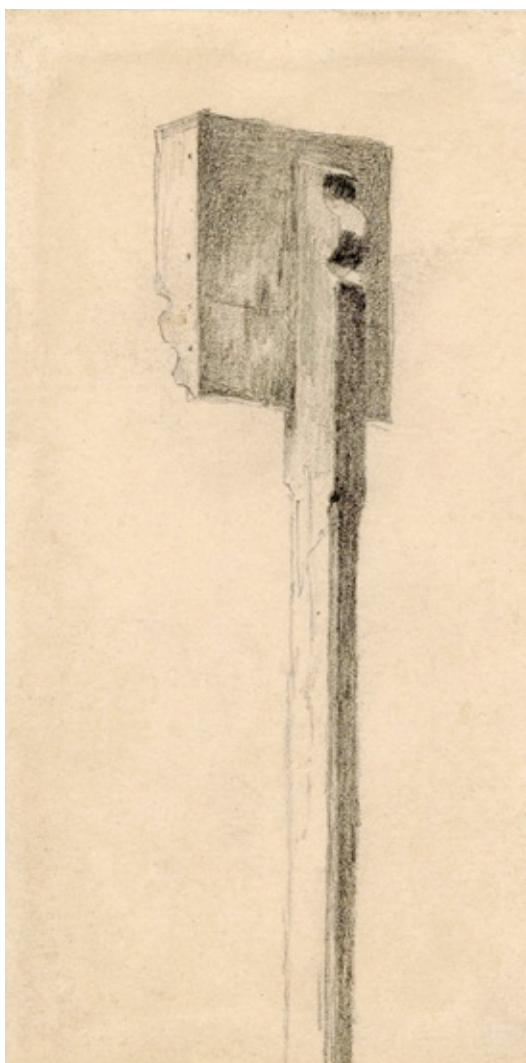
The concept of a boundary, border, or limit – some of the various shades of meaning of the Polish word *granica* – is inseparably tied up with the notion of a certain zone or area marked out by it. That area may be understood literally or metaphorically. In the literal understanding, it may be the territory of a country or province. In the abstract sense, it might pertain to a set of norms (e.g. laws or good customs), numerical values (e.g. age or salary), or something that might be called our “ego.” These are all spaces that are delimited by boundaries of one sort or another.

In its most basic sense, a *granica* or boundary is any place where two zones meet (e.g. two different countries). It is sometimes a place of exchange between individuals living on either side, of friendly meetings and joint activity, etc. Polish phraseology, however, mainly captures a very different aspect – perhaps unsurprisingly, given that history is largely made up of turf wars. “Borders – walls, barbed wire, barriers / Borders – steel rivers, steel mountains / People without faces, people without hearts” the Polish singer Kora sang back in the 1980s, at a time when such international borders were the gloomy reality. Such boundaries were meant to be *strzeżone* – defended, safeguarded, protected.

Boundaries are also something one can *stawiać* “set up” or *wyznaczać* “mark out” – especially when that means objecting to someone’s behavior that makes us feel uncomfortable. Such uses emerge from a human being, from his or her emotions and physicality, as being conceptualized as a kind of space only they have the right to decide about. Boundaries understood in this way are there so that we can protect ourselves, and crossing them causes discomfort.

The phrase *przekroczenie granic* (boundary-crossing) can mean not only trespassing on someone else’s territory (both literally, as a piece of land, and figuratively, as a personal space), but also breaking certain rules. If someone has acted in an unacceptable way, we can say that they have *przekroczył wszelkie granice* (crossed all boundaries). In turn, a person who has been so treated that it is difficult for them to control themselves has been *doprowadzony do ostatecznych granic* (pushed to their ultimate boundaries).

We can also speak of *granice przyzwoitości* (the boundaries of decency), *granice dobrych obyczajów* (the boundaries of good manners), *granice prawa* (the boundaries of the law) to refer to the limits we set for



Julius Scholtz, “Boundry Marker,” 1866, paper (13.4×7.2 cm), pencil,
National Museum in Warsaw

ourselves, or which our culture sets for us. As we can see, boundaries are an important ingredient to the notion of a norm – as an abstract, imaginary line surrounding the set of what is acceptable, it imparts a certain shape to this set in our minds. As such, boundaries not only protect us from intruders but also help us to organize our mental reality – it is thanks to them our world of concepts is not a shapeless, magmic mass, but a relatively ordered space. ■

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