

# The Concept of “Thrownness” in Algis Budrys’s Short Story “Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night”

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**Abstract.** This paper analyses the concept of thrownness and the related notions of immediacy and actuality in a 1961 short science fiction story “Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night” by Algis Budrys. It first defines the concept of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), created and coined by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger in his classic book *Being and Time*, and it explains how this notion can be employed in literary analysis in general and applied to this work in particular. The article then analyses how certain stylistic devices in the short story, namely similes, change of pace and the presentation of an inner conflict in the main character, contribute to the feeling of authenticity. In other words, it attempts to exhibit the means used in a prose work to make it seem more realistic and immediate. Finally, the work also argues that science fiction is in many ways more real than other fictional works. Although it belongs to the genre that has traditionally been denied serious literary merit, the novel view and interpretation of this story aims to disclose new horizons of artistic expression that illuminate human mental and physical frailty and stimulate a valuable inquiry into the meaning of life.

**Keywords:** Algis Budrys; Wall of Crystal; thrownness; stylistic devices.

## Introduction

Algirdas Jonas Budrys (1931–2008), better known by his pen name Algis Budrys, was a highly influential, award-winning Lithuanian-American science fiction writer, critic and editor. The son of a Lithuanian diplomat, born in Königsberg, East Prussia, emigrated with his family to the United States at five. He wrote only in English. Budrys published about 100 short stories and eight novels. He was recognised as one of the best teachers of fiction writing in the United States. The main themes in his stories and novels are isolation, exile, identity, nature of reality, artificial intelligence and mastery over technology and other humans. His stories have been anthologised in many collections, and his name figures prominently on every list of the most significant science fiction writers of the 20th century.

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This work analyses Budrys's 1961 short story, "Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night", applying Martin Heidegger's concept of *Geworfenheit*, or "thrownness," as defined in one of the most authoritative works of modern philosophy, his 1927 book *Being and Time*. First, the concept of "thrownness" and related terms will be defined, and their implications and conceptual reverberations identified. Then the plot of the story will be briefly summarized and evaluated. The way in which this ontological and epistemological idea can be used in literary analysis in general and in this story, in particular, will also be explained. The second part represents an analysis of the text itself. A close investigation of this work elucidates how the use of certain stylistic devices, like figures of speech and the length of sentences and paragraphs, convey a sense of immediacy and situatedness, both elicited by the concept of "thrownness." It explains how certain features of Budrys's style contribute to the feeling of immersion and the reader's participation in the plot.

The concept of "thrownness" is well known by theorists specializing in metaphysics and epistemology. It has even been used in hermeneutics, especially to explain the role of social constructs in language use, but it has never been linked to immediacy and actuality to analyze a work of fiction. Algis Budrys has recently attracted certain attention by two Lithuanian junior scholars (Vaičaitis, 2016; Kasparas, 2016a; 2016b), but they all deal with particular ideas enunciated in his prose. Thus, the novelty of this paper consists in modifying a philosophical idea to make it suitable for explaining the use of language in a literary work, in analysing Budrys' stylistics and in applying a multidimensional notion and its conceptual interpretation to evaluate a work of science fiction.

## 1. Thrownness

Heidegger introduces the concept of "thrownness" as part of his explanation of Being in the World, or *Dasein* (the German word *Dasein*, literally "being there," can be translated simply as "existence," or human presence in the world) (Heidegger, 2001, pp. 32–33). The awareness and acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of *Dasein* are described as a state of "thrown-ness" (Ger. *Geworfenheit*) in the present with all its accompanying frustrations, sufferings and demands that one does not choose, such as social conventions or ties of kinship and duty (Heidegger, 2001, p. 174). This means that all our choices and decisions in life are made relative to the concrete situations and circumstances and the vital and ever-changing relationship with other people we face daily.

One of the most important components of "thrownness" is the mood, state of mind, or *Stimmung*, in which we always find ourselves. The passions are, for Heidegger, fundamental ways in which we are attuned to the world (*Stimmung* in German also means attunement of a musical instrument). Therefore, our relationship towards our external condition is more a matter of mood and current interior, psychological state than rational perception. Heidegger calls the movement in which the human being can seize control of its possibilities "projection," the experience he later also equates with freedom. Humans demonstrate their potential through acting in the world, and to act in such a way, according to Heidegger, is to be authentic (Critchley and Schurman, 2008, p. 139).

Heidegger posits his contention that the crucial teleological structure standing at the base of each involvement in the world is culturally and historically conditioned against Cartesian tradition that takes theoretical knowledge to be primary and holds that the most significant epistemic contact occurs between the subject and the raw sense data. The interaction of Being-in-the-World occurs with the entity whose mode of Being comes laden with context-dependent significance, he contends. Thus, Dasein confronts every concrete situation in which it has been thrown as a range of possibilities for acting, and understanding and interpretation is the process by which it projects itself onto such possibilities (Wheeler, 2019). Interpretation is, therefore, our creative reaction to the world we encounter.

This understanding and interpretation can come as ready-made or already processed, or it can be normative. The philosopher Nikolas Kompridis (1994) divides Heidegger’s concept of world disclosure (Ger. *Erschlossenheit*), which explains how things become intelligible and meaningfully relevant to human beings, into two categories. *Prereflective disclosure* “refers to the disclosure of an already interpreted, symbolically structured world; the world that is, within which we already find ourselves,” and *reflective disclosure* opens up “new horizons of meaning as to the disclosure of previously hidden or unthematized dimensions of meaning” (Kompridis, 1994, p. 37). Therefore, reflective disclosure reworks the languages and structures used to make sense of ourselves and the world, and these interventions can take the form of normative arguments (Steele, 2020, p. 176). The form can be various, and one of them is artistic verbal expression. With its normative arguments built into a work of science fiction, Budrys’s story opens the boundaries of literary language and shows how fictional narratives can make an imaginary world palpable by conjuring up a socio-historical context and atmosphere using linguistic devices.

In translating philosophical ideas into their literary manifestation – or transferring theory into practice – the use of two other concepts closely related to “thrownness” can perhaps even better explain the intellectual and emotional effect engineered in Budrys’ fiction: immediacy and situatedness. Immediacy is a perception of an object, whether visual or cognitive, in which the awareness of the medium is lost. In the words of Henri Bergson (1956), art has the ability to brush aside “everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself” (p. 162). Hence, this immediacy, or directness, as it is also called, could also be described as a total immersion into the surroundings and condition depicted in a work of art.

Situatedness, on the other hand, presumes that the mind is ontologically and functionally intertwined within social, historical, geographical and cultural factors. Lev Vygotsky’s observation that, in a process of maturation, a child has to transform all his/her conceptual knowledge into meaningful concretisations (1978, pp. 54–56), was restructured by Hans Georg Gadamer, who recognised the reader’s unique point of view dependent on a train of cognitive and interpretative circumstances (2006, p. 83). Both of these notions – for our intents are purposes synonymous with “thrownness” – are more than evident in Budrys’ prose.

## 2. The story

Before turning to a more detailed analysis, the plot of the story “Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night” will be briefly summarized, and the distinctiveness of its narration explained.

Rufus Sollenaar is a media magnate who has just acquired the patent for a device that makes subliminal messages on TV, which can make him even more rich and powerful than he already is. He is visited by a Mr Ermine from his company’s public relations agency, who informs him that his arch business rival, Cortwright Burr, with whom he competed in trying to obtain the patent, has been in close contact with certain Martian engineers, and that the Martians made some sort of a machine for him that could spoil the profit from Sollenaar’s valuable acquisition.

As soon as Ermine leaves his office, Sollenaar flies on his “spinneret” to Burr’s office and cuts open the glass of the building, bursts in, and fires from his “riot gun” at Burr, who is holding a golden ball in his hands. Since Burr, surprisingly, remains alive, Sollenaar fires a few more times, but his business rival, all dismembered and mutilated, still shows signs of life, holding the golden ball tightly in his hands.

Back on the balcony of his office with a virtual woman, Sollenaar suddenly sees Burr holding on to the edge of the terrace, trying to climb up. He kicks Burr’s hands, Burr falls but disappears as he reaches the ground.

Sollenaar runs into his rival again the same evening at his company’s celebratory ball, where Burr appears with a hooded, disfigured face. Sollenaar concludes that the golden ball is an immortality instrument Burr had obtained from the Martians in addition to a new invention that would threaten his monopoly on the prized device. While leaving the reception, the disguised Ermine approaches him, telling him he knows everything about the murder attempt and that, since Sollenaar has not been able to get a hold of Burr’s device, he will have to advise the management of his agency to recommend the disposal of all the company stock. Sollenaar tries to hit Ermine, but Ermine bites his arm, and Sollenaar runs away.

The main protagonist of the story then boards a rocket to Mars, where he is joined by Ermine, who had apparently boarded the liner beforehand. He turns Sollenaar’s attention to Burr, or what is left of him, sitting on the same ship a little farther. After Sollenaar finds out Ermine intends to kill him if not allowed to follow his every step, he disables him in the corridor of the airport on Mars with a few heavy blows and leaves him panting for air.

Sollenaar soon finds the Martian engineers, who tell him they had sold Burr an entertainment device that converts the user’s imagination into reality. In the final scene, Sollenaar comes out with a golden ball stretched in front of him, but Ermine shoots him, buries him and leaves Mars.

In this story, the reader is thrown into a world where it takes time to get oriented. We find out the plot is taking place at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a good 40 years into the future. Budrys introduces us to a world of greedy corporate media magnates, accurately predicting the media-driven control of consumers and public opinion. Sollenaar’s decision to assassinate Burr is based on an emotional reaction that leads to his ultimate demise.

Not everything in this narrative is based on causality, though. The persecution by an immortal arch rival and a merciless, omnipotent agent makes this imaginary world nightmarishly threatening. Although ostensibly secure and protected, Sollenaar repeatedly finds himself in situations resembling Kafkian vulnerability and unpredictability. The reader is almost never sure whence or why the peril will appear.

Like every compelling science-fiction story, “Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night” drops us into a context in which we have to learn, discern, guess, conceptualise and even conjecture the contextual circumstances, which amplifies the sense of “thrownness.” With its various linguistic devices, it conveys a sense of immediacy and actuality. Finally, with its original discourse and structure, whimsical pace and distinct atmosphere or mood, it represents a work of reflective disclosure that opens new horizons on artistic expression, our mental and physical fragility, human place in the world and the meaning of life.

### 3. Stylistic analysis

One of the first things that might come to mind when thinking about devices that help usher immediacy is the use of present tense. It brings the illusion that the action is taking place here and now, as we are reading about them, and that the events are rolling out in front of our eyes. Budrys does not use present tense in his story. He utilises the simple past, but this does not disturb the reader’s feeling of “thrownness” and actuality; on the contrary. Perhaps this is so because the sentences are usually short and to the point. It might also have to do with the fact that the action is taking place in the future, and recounting it as if it had happened in the past renders the narrator omniscient and in control of storytelling. Finally, present tense in fiction sometimes sounds awkward, it draws too much attention to the style, and Budrys, like every skillful writer, wants to erase the reader’s awareness of the medium.

#### 3.1 *Similes*

Probably the first figure of speech that draws attention in this story is the simile. Budrys sometimes uses them as clichés, probably to stress the parodic and metafictional insinuations with which he constantly plays. Still, to prevent the clichés from sounding too hackneyed or banal, he changes them a bit. The story opens up with the following sentence: “Soft as the voice of a mourning dove, the telephone sounded at Rufus Sollenaar’s desk.” Doves are known as symbols of peace, and in one of the Gospels (Mt 10:16), they are described as “harmless” (KJV) or “innocent” (NIV). Making their voices “soft” as that of a “mourning dove” alters the familiar comparison and association just enough to make it less commonplace yet keep the well-known artistic effect of this technique.

In another simile, “He could as easily renege on the Ball as a king could on his coronation,” Budrys uses irony to express how Sollenaar could not miss the company reception. The comparison at first sounds coarse and corny. It is effective, regardless, because it precisely shows how imperative of him is to attend the ball. In general, irony

and sarcasm are potent in driving the point home, and Budrys does not shy away from using them frequently.

Other similes Budrys uses, apart from embellishing the style and displaying his unbridled imagination, are meant to conjure up the atmosphere of the setting. The sentence with which he closes the first paragraph, “A falling star—an interplanetary rocket—streaked down toward Long Island Facility like a scratch across the soot on the door of Hell”, is as outlandish as it is ominous. It is designed as a presentiment, foreboding or premonition of the brutal and convulsive events about to ensue. In this sentence, the author also names a falling star an interplanetary rocket, revealing what this phenomenon supposedly really represents, thus solidifying the stature of the narrator as all-knowing. The author furnishes the reader with this piece of information in a matter-of-fact and incidental manner, as if translating the common knowledge of the future to an ignorant ancestor in a condescending but patient way.

Budrys is capable of masterfully illustrating a scene with a simile. When Sollonar shoots Burr for the second time, for instance, Burr “tripped backward on tiptoe, his arms like windmills, and fell atop the prize.” The comparison enlivens the picture in front of us, and we can literally see the victim swinging his arms to keep the balance.

In the sentence “[...] the Martian city was a like a welter of broken pots.” Budrys uses an unusual, imaginative comparison to describe the extraterrestrial habitation. He continues: “Shards of wall and roof joined at savage angles and pointed to nothing. Underfoot, drifts of vitreous material, shaped to fit no sane configuration, and broken to fit such a mosaic as no church would contain, rocked and slid under Sollonar’s hurrying feet.” The passages in which the author describes the new setting, hitherto unfamiliar to the reader, are deftly converted into the briefly abandoned action and the protagonist’s absorbing exploit, thus endowing the written word with a movie-like quality.

When the Martians Sollonar meets convene to talk about his offer, one of them gestures “with what seemed a disgusted flip of his arm before he turned without further word and stalked away, his shoulders looking like a shawled back of a very old and very hungry woman.” Due to its sheer oddity, this simile ostensibly draws attention to its form, but it also vividly paints its peculiarity and thus contributes to sucking the reader into the action. The use of unusual and imaginative attributes is one of the most crucial devices of Budrys’ storytelling skills.

### ***3.2 Pace***

The second device Budrys uses to bring the action closer to the reader and get him more involved in the physical and emotional milieu is his masterful pacing, also known as tempo. The story represents a classical three-act drama, with the description of the office and the first conversation with Ermine as an introduction, the “assassination” and the events at the ball representing confrontation, and the final drama on Mars acting as resolution. The story consists of five parts, and they belong to the dramatic arc with the sharply delineated exposition, rising action, climax, fall and resolution (Frye, 1982).

Budrys alternates the relatively calm passages full of descriptions and dialogues with the fast-paced action. Gradually, though, the former become shorter and the latter longer and more intense. The author deftly moves toward the seemingly anticlimactic finale.

How does Budrys accomplish the alteration between the respites and the frenzied enterprises, intensifying the significance and the alacrity of action? Mainly by shortening the sentences and the paragraphs in which a race or a fight takes place. The descriptive paragraphs contain up to ten sentences; the action paragraphs only one or two. Some sentences that belong to the narrative parts consist of over thirty, even forty words and several dependent and independent clauses. Most sentences in the action paragraphs do not have more than four. Even the dialogues become choppy and unfinished toward the end.

This is a two-sentence sequence from the exposition when Sollenaar is trying to enjoy his accomplishment and relax with the virtual lady: “One layer of translucent drapery remained across the doorway, billowing lightly in the breeze from the terrace. Through it, he saw the taboret with its candle lit; the iced wine in the stand beside it; the two fragile chairs; Bess Allardyce, slender and regal, waiting in one of them—all these, through the misty curtain, like either the beginning or the end of a dream.” Compare that part to the two single-sentence paragraphs in the “assassination” passage: “Shuddering, Sollenaar fired again.” Or: “Sollenaar took a single backward step.” The first two sentences contain six adjectives – the parts of speech considered least necessary – and the last two barely one. The short sentences and paragraphs have the effect of intensifying the “thrownness” into the action.

The length of the single-sentence paragraphs become even shorter at the end of the story. After Ermine shoots Sollenaar, Budrys thus describes Ermine’s reaction: “He stopped, transfixed.” Then, “He lifted his head.” The passage of time seems much more drawn out during moments of heightened emotions. Overwhelmed by new impressions and acquaintances at a novel place, for example, one experiences minutes, hours and days as much more elongated. Amid intense passion and sentiment, we can almost hear the ticking of seconds.

On the other hand, when everything is familiar, and there is not much to do, time seems to pass much quicker. Budrys exemplifies this perception by forced pauses induced by concise paragraphs. He accelerates and holds back time by extending and shortening sentences and paragraphs, adding or eliminating words used only to embellish the narrative. Using this technique, the author creates the impression of protagonists themselves being thrown into an unexpected situation in which they have to think fast and act swiftly and decisively.

### ***3.3 Contradiction and ambivalence***

The reader almost always sides with the main protagonist in a story, no matter how evil he or she is. The consumer of a fictional work tends to identify with the hero of the tale immediately and never back away from that instant emotional commitment even when the villain’s sinister plans become clear. This is somehow embedded in human nature.

Richard III, the main protagonist of one of William Shakespeare's most famous histories, presents his depraved plans in the very first soliloquy, yet the audience still wants him to succeed (Mooney, 1990, p. 47).

When we are introduced to Sollenaar, we do not know what kind of a person he truly is, yet we find satisfaction because he has been able to become the master of his domain. Likewise, even if the reader had not encountered Cortwright before Sollenaar assaulted on him, he/she is bound to be troubled by his interference and challenge. The characters' names also contribute, at least subconsciously, to the decision regarding the reader's allegiance: The word "sun" is in the root of Sollenaar's name, thus he has to be associated with brightness, enlightenment and warmth. The word "burr" has several meanings, but none of them is positive or pleasant. "A rough or prickly envelope of a fruit"; "something that sticks or clings" as in "a burr in the throat", "a rough, humming sound, whir" are some of its meanings (Merriam-Webster, 2020).

From the very get-go, the reader has to assume that Sollenaar has some of the qualities of a calculated executive: slick, measured and rational. If he were to commit a crime, he would only order it and never do it himself. Hence, when we find out that he has set out to kill his opponent in cold blood in a secret-agent, hitman-like fashion, it takes us by surprise. Budrys spends five or six pages introducing the background and describing a decisive, skillful, confident hero, and he turns out to be an impulsive, unscrupulous and malevolent assassin. In other words, he proves to be an antihero. This transition from the description of Sollenaar's feeling of dominance and satisfaction, enforced by the ensuing serious conversation with the public relations agent, to the comic strip-like laser raid replete with rampant violence has several effects.

Most obviously, the contrast makes us delve into action with escalated bewilderment and alertness. The sheer astonishment at what is taking place renders the reader more attentive and riveted to the story.

Even though the gaping contrast between Sollenaar's assured demeanor and sudden vengeful spitefulness, or the discrepancy between his respectful status and the act of blatant homicide based on envy and competition perhaps appear inconceivable and almost farcical, it is more realistic than it might seem at first. Most successful characters in literature have an irreconcilable inner contradiction. From Shakespeare's Hamlet to Dostoevsky's Dmitry Karamazov, the most veracious protagonists appear like double-faced schizophrenics. This internal conflict is so innate and archetypal that some authors preferred to externalise it. Samuel Beckett, for example, always had the polar opposites physically separated into pseudo-couples. The reason for the credibility of such characters is because they are so truthful and life-like. The incompatibility of our antipodal desires, hopes, fears and abilities is one of the most significant factors in making humans so liable to suffering and periodic despair.

Sollenaar's unexpected, emotional reaction does not end with the "assassination"; it only intensifies. Even worse, when he attacks Ermine outside the ball, the agent "anticipated him," so he blocked his arm and "sank his teeth into it." The world in which we are "thrown" does not appear like a world of bandits and outlaws, where violence is expected

and even desired. Nevertheless, in the story reputable, and distinguished professionals turn into partakers of a cheap, deadly brawl in a matter of seconds. The surreal, allegorical and nightmarish *Stimmung* of this world is precisely what makes this story seem so real.

### 3.4 Science fiction as a lifelike genre

Finally, a possible challenging question has to be explained. For many readers, immediacy or authenticity is not compatible with science fiction because this genre is full of outlandish, futuristic speculations. It is usually not assigned a high literary value, and it is almost never included in the literary canon (Freedman 2000, p. 86). The main contention is that the genre is unrealistic, hence irrelevant. To challenge this prejudice, a couple of convincing assertions will be presented.

First, an argument by J. R. R. Tolkien (2007) expressed in his speech and essay: “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” will be summarized to counter the obstacle mentioned above. Even though it refers to a work of fantasy, not science fiction, the two genres are closely related and often clustered, together with horror, into the field of “speculative literature,” and they have traditionally battled similar criticism. In this influential essay, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, a prominent medieval scholar, confronts the earlier critics of *Beowulf*, who have only acknowledged the historical and linguistic significance of the early medieval poem, dismissed its monsters and magic, and hence its literary value. The main theme of the work is mortality and an authentic battle with evil spirits, or inner demons, Tolkien replied, and it is, therefore, preeminent and universal. Magic and magical creatures can be comprehended in a metaphorical sense and should not influence the ubiquity and truthfulness of the principle message.

Similarly, Arthur Clarke, the celebrated English writer and futurist, vehemently supported the underlying and essential reality of science fiction: “We all want to escape occasionally. But science fiction is often very far from escapism, in fact you might say that science fiction is escape into reality [...] It’s a fiction which does concern itself with real issues: the origin of man; our future. In fact, I can’t think of any form of literature which is more concerned with real issues, reality” (Terkel, 1959). If science fiction reflects and explains reality, then it has to purport the feeling of “thrownness,” actuality and immediacy. Moreover, its imaginary world of the future introduces the “reflective disclosure” of new, valuable existential meanings.

## Conclusion

Counter to the possible impression that it represents a feverish adventure replete with outlandish plot twists and dazzling futuristic gadgets and inventions, Algis Budrys’ short story “Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night” can also be seen as a clever, profound allegory of human frailty, greed and inner contradiction. No wonder some of the main science fiction anthologists place it at the top of their all-time selections (“Rich Horton” 2020).

Often intentionally over-the-top, Budrys's tale can also be seen as a parody of the genre and a meta SF story. In the words of James Wallace Harris (2020), the author knew exactly what kind of story would impress his fans. Nonetheless, his creation is also multidimensional; it is as enigmatic as it is intriguing, and therefore a good target for different interpretations. Harris, for example, believes that Cortwright Burr was never shot and that Sollenar only believed he was because the ball was a device for making one see what one wishes to see. In order to escape Ermine, who is waiting to shoot him at the close of the story, Sollenar buys the same Martian machine to give his pursuer the illusion that his nerves are functioning again and that he actually kills and buries Sollenar (Harris, 2020). Budrys never makes this explanation explicit, but the mere possibility of such an alternative ending makes the story highly original and imaginative, even for those saturated by the conventions of the genre.

Most importantly for this study, "Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night" exploits numerous stylistic devices that make the reader more absorbed in the characters and the plot. With its use of similes, abrupt and unexpected change of pace and the depiction of internal ambiguity, among others, it succeeds in erasing the medium of presentation, and it exerts the feeling of being "thrown" into an unfamiliar world. Therefore, the story can be seen as a convincing and explicit artistic embodiment of Heidegger's notion of Being-in-the-World.

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