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A Container with an Insect Corpse: On Essays by Marek Bieńczyk

In his volume of essays titled *Kontener (A Container)*, Marek Bieńczyk once again undertakes the topic of death, transiency, ageing, dying of people and things. This time, however, he does so while uncovering primarily his own personal perspective on the issue which inspires melancholy, sorrow, sadness, and despair. In stories constructed around the death of his mother, the author places disparate ‘texts of mourning’ of other authors struggling with that loss in the horizon of his thoughts. He also unambiguously indicates which of them represent a pattern of his own attempts, writing about *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes:

Like in the case of Proust, who set his mourning in a novel-river, in this book on photography Barthes finds the best form of literature – for his way of writing and for the given moment of his life – to which he is led perhaps by the death of his mother: the essay settled in culture and experienced very personally, full of cultural references, legible for others but fuelled by the ardour of the intimate experience of loss¹.

This way, he stresses the significance of his own choices of speech genres: it is not diary entries from the period of mourning or the plot line of the

¹ M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 115-116 [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

novel, but an essay set in the cultural tradition and yet personal and full of intimate emotions that is the “form of literature” capable of holding real, extra-textual experience of loss.

The leitmotif of the collection is the breath, sigh, choking of the larynx, stuffiness, as well as all the works on the subject of all forms of ‘breathing’, so different as the short story of William Faulkner *Red Leaves*, or a poem by Stanisław Barańczak titled *Jednym tchem (In One Breath)*. Breath, both as an eternal yet constant sign of life and the as the last ante mortem ‘border’ sigh, becomes a physiological and metaphysical signal of existence in Bieńczyk’s essays. Existence that may and should be written down. In his essay titled *On Aging*, Jean Améry also made references to Proust’s life and his concomitant struggle with creating and breathing:

When tormented with asthma, in an insulated room, with his throat wrapped in woolen scarves Proust was writing *In Search of Lost Time*, he supposed that he would succeed in possessing a more real reality in a memory, and together with it some sort of timelessness or even eternity; a great work was created but it was of no use to him when he took his last breath before breathing, in agony, his last².

An immensely pessimistic view of human condition in the world after the civilisational disaster resulted in Améry not being able to see the point in writing even the greatest works, which – from the perspective of human mortality – turned out to be a gesture not only elusive, but also devoid of the rescuing power. In Bieńczyk’s book, however, it is possible to find another repartition of the traditional topic of ‘creating against death’: cultural traces of prominent creative existence remain a signpost for the descendants as well as masterpieces captured in words, picture, or music. It is important not only for those who, like the subject of the stories collected in *Kontener*, are aware that the moment of breathing “their last breath” is inevitably drawing near.

Writing makes it possible to capture and save the essence of subjectivity. Interpreting other people’s texts allows one to transform individual ways of comprehending oneself and the surrounding reality: as Ryszard Nycz wrote, this results from “the need to reject artificial oppositions: emotion and intellect, experience and understanding. We understand what the text is about as long as we experience it; we are capable of experiencing it as long as it reactivates and changes the acquired structures of understanding in us”³. We are able to understand ourselves in more depth as long as we are both open to what other people tell us and capable of internalising it.

There are numerous descriptions of insects and insect death in *Kontener*: their short existence in the world allows one to capture the nature of transiency and represents its clear cultural sign. The memory of a holiday experience – meeting at night a swarm of mayflies which almost instantly vanish into the current of the river – became an axis of the collection on leaving

² J. Améry, *On Aging. Revolt and Resignation*, transl. B. Baran, Warszawa 2007, p. 37.

³ R. Nycz, *Tekstowe doświadczenia, Teksty Drugie*, 2010, no. 1/2, p. 12.

this world. The first and last chapters of volume, both titled *Jętki* (*Mayflies*), represent a frame for considerations on the frailty of existence included in the book. The history of personal, physical (organoleptic) meeting with the short-lasting insect life cycle appears in *Kontener* in six variants. Each part begins with the same sentence: "The mother had been dead for six months when mayflies came flying"⁴. The continuations and endings are, however, different:

The river turned white, we waited in silence until the whiteness disappeared and the black current came back.

And then, when the mayflies had gone, when they had collapsed into their cemetery rushing with the river, flashes of little torches appeared on the river bank on the other side like the final, patient but already irregular notes as if their irregularity had allowed the tempest to resound in the silence, to introduce its non-human steady drill in the direction of human, more and more human chaos.

Although perhaps, I thought, it is too strongly felt, it is too strongly said, perhaps only the flashing echo of whiteness.

Later I felt gratitude to Dosso Dossi and Mickiewicz that at least for a moment they helped me stay in this story and tell this story; they came from another corner of my home – from books and paintings – to take part in it, put their two cents in. Though they came in vain as it is not this story.

And then on the other side of the river, in the once again smooth surface of the night, little lights lit up, tiny, isolated, casting explorative flashes into the blackness, like the first eyes open after the flood.

And then the white smudges from the little torches sketching incomplete circles over the river acted out our meeting in the distance, and you were a smudge and I was a shadow⁵.

The farewell transcribed on the variant play with the 'ephemeral' experience is not limited to illustrating the common knowledge about the finiteness and elusiveness of life as well as about Nature being indifferent towards transiency. It allows one to follow the path on which the transcript of an 'ordinary' experience going through stages of intertextual mediations becomes an intimate confession. Yet, uncovering the stages of constituting the text may also inspire anxiety and doubt with regard to the real status of the "confession", i.e. to what extent it is a personal confession and to what degree it is an ingeniously constructed element of essayistic argument.

⁴ M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 58, 140, 196, 259, 297.

Bieńczyk is a self-conscious author, one that reveals the sources of his artistic choices and even secrets of his workshop. In his earlier volume of essays, titled *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida* (*Olga's Apple, David's Feet*), Bieńczyk wrote about *Sylvie* by Gérard de Nerval and the author's variant of melancholic non-reconciliation with the loss:

something that is the space of silence, something that remains in the whiteness for guesswork has its contours, clearly marked boundaries. Nerval's aesthetics of melancholy, and after Nerval the aesthetics of melancholy *tout court*, using vagueness, understatement, it consists in balancing the fogginess of the mood, unspeakable longing, the vagueness of feelings, geometric measurability. Indefiniteness takes place in the concrete, finite place, the elusiveness of feelings concerns perceptible space and it does not wish to cross it; *beyond, somewhere else, another world* are not an inspiration for melancholy at all⁶.

In *Kontener* it is, not only the place of epiphany, the river bank in the darkness of the night, that acquires clear outlines further defined in each of the scenes. Also the experience alone is transformed into a perceptible 'geometric' shape. Already in the first scene of *Jętki*, one can see the picture:

When I took a closer look at them, it began to dawn on me that they are assembled in almost geometric figures. Each mayfly, vibrating in the air, projected a separate, quavering and angular phantom and, gathered in one space, all those phantoms formed a network of cubicles united by some visible turmoil. A new form of the world uncovered so suddenly. As if we were shown its construction which so far had been hidden, its factual pattern or picture⁷.

This way, death ceases to be a shapeless horror looming beyond the boundaries of cognition: it is locked in words and images. It acquires the place in the concrete space of individual experience. And an insect corpse disappears in the depth of the river, as it does annually.

Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida and, most of all, *Kontener* are the volumes in which Bieńczyk, creating his essays, shifts the weight of interest from the 'domestication in culture' to the personal dimension of existence. In earlier volumes, such as, for instance, *Melancholia. O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty* (*Melancholy: On Those Who Will Never Find Their Loss*) from 1998 or *Oczy Dürera. O melancholii romantycznej* (*Dürer's Eyes: On Romantic Melancholy*) from 2002, elements constitutive for the essay, namely discursiveness and auto-reflexivity, were manifested in different proportions. Those collections surely broke the rigid boundaries of academic discourse, repeating gestures of genealogical subversion from the early 20th century. As Andrzej Zawadzki wrote:

⁶ M. Bieńczyk, *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, Warszawa 2015, p. 233.

⁷ M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, p. 6.

In the non-literary universe, the essay performs, most of all, destabilising and complementary functions: it breaks the closed system of canonical genres, reorganising its layout [...] The essay on non-literary grounds, i.e. non-fictional, is a testimony of the tendency which goes beyond structural limitations imposed by traditional genres, a symptom of the need to supplement the present repertoire of discourse forms⁸.

Reflections on melancholy created by Bieńczyk could function as a discourse on the character of a scientific identification even though the principles of academic discourse were destabilised in it.

With the passage of time, Bieńczyk's texts are beginning to manifest autobiographical elements, which was already visible in *Przezroczystość*⁹ (*Transparency*), and particularly in *Książka twarzy*¹⁰ (*Facebook*). Countless memories of reading experiences depicted as a vital factor in shaping his personality were marked autobiographically even stronger. Many a time the evoked works, events, characters (including characters of collective imagination) were treated more as a clear code of generational affiliation than the subject of research. Establishing contact with the recipient was beginning to shift to gestures of finding an emotional community rather than imposing intellectual orders. Yet, the previously exploited textual practice resulted in the content of the essayistic genre to become a message which belonged more to the literary rather than documentary order even though its framework began to be filled with matter.

If one considers the currently common turn towards autobiographical writing as a kind of safe recognisable convention, in the variant of Marek Bieńczyk this tendency is manifested through a process of conscious moving towards literariness based on the need to fit individual experiences in the network of textual testimonies of existence. His oenological confessions were subject to similar transformations, which is easy to notice in the collection of texts of this kind of writing¹¹. It would be necessary to consider to what extent such a strategy enables one to maintain balance between the element of private confession and interpretation distanced towards the object, as well as which of the elements will finally turn out to be more vivid and which will be subordinated to the main intention of the unfolding narrative.

In the contemporary manifestation of the autobiographical aspect in texts of culture, the classic autobiographical convention has become, most of all, a point of reference which is ironic and subjected to various narrative games. The diversity and hybridity of today's autobiographical literary forms is often combined with critical reflection on the textual representation of elapsed time. The reflection on the stability of the autobiographical subject, identity, and memory often makes the balance point of an

⁸ A. Zawadzki, *Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna w piśmiennictwie polskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku*, Kraków 2001, p. 176.

⁹ M. Bieńczyk, *Przezroczystość*, Warszawa 2007.

¹⁰ M. Bieńczyk, *Książka twarzy*, Warszawa 2011. Bieńczyk received the Nike Prize for this work.

¹¹ Cf. M. Bieńczyk, *Wszystkie kroniki wina*, Warszawa 2018.

autobiographical text (particularly in the case of already acclaimed authors with a considerable output) shift from relating life to the process of writing¹². Autobiography as a study of auto-reflection accounts for the creational and processual character of producing identity, and the constructional aspect of shaping the vision of the past and present, which is perfectly enhanced by recording/reproducing the processes of reading different cultural texts.

Such an activity can be considered one of the types of "self-writing", which Foucault defined in opposition to ignorance: "Writing, as a way of gathering in the reading that was done and of collecting one's thoughts about it, is an exercise of reason that counters the great deficiency of stultitia, which endless reading may favor"¹³. The record of the reading experiences is transformed, therefore, into auto-creation in which one of the more important elements is the compulsion to record heavily subjectivised acts of interpretation, identical to both the record of the subsequent stages of cognition/exploration of what is external and the processual clarification of one's own identity. Such an attitude makes it easier to give accounts of breakthrough moments on the way to self-cognition. They may also 'come in handy' when creating a consciously adopted role of an author immersed in tradition; an intellectual, a connoisseur of works of art and, at the same time, a human being keenly interested in the present¹⁴.

The creation of the reader-writer – a tireless interpreter of substantially heterogeneous 'reality' mediated in works – is also a creation of a 'textualised' person who constructs the fragile foundations of their autonomous existence in the world of texts (their own and those of other authors) and who is also capable of noticing the network of dependencies entangling them. Activities in text spaces depicted as 'out-of-date', as they are generally considered anachronistic, will enable one to produce vivid creations of the Author, who reads to write and writes to be read. The figure of the creator preserving the separateness and independence in the era of expansion of all kinds of virtual communication is a creation of a writer using consciously all the strategies (also autobiographical ones) in order to establish contact with the reader, to involve the hypothetical recipient in the space of his own essential experiences, which are both very personal and universal.

Writing can also be manifested as the aim and point of existence coming to an end. Making references to his own texts, interpreting texts of others, placing them in the vast intimist space, Bieńczyk may treat them as clear signs of transformations in the collective history, which at the same time was the space of his personal experiences. The discontinuity of presented,

¹² Cf. M. Marszałek, *Autobiografia*, [in:] *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci*, ed. M. Saryusz-Wolska and R. Traba, Warszawa 2014, p. 56.

¹³ M. Foucault, *SelfWriting*, [in:] id.: *Szaleństwo i literatura. Powiedziane, napisane*, ed. T. Komendant, transl. B. Banasiak et al., Warszawa 1999, p. 312. Foucault elaborated on it further: "Stultitia is defined by mental agitation, distraction, change of opinions and wishes, and consequently weakness in the face of all the events that may occur; it is also characterized by the fact that it turns the mind toward the future, makes it interested in novel ideas, and prevents it from providing a fixed point for itself in the possession of an acquired truth."

¹⁴ Cf. A. Czyżak, *Dziennik, esej, interpretacja jako narzędzia autokreacji (staroświeckich) inteligentów w dobie Internetu*, [in:] *Autobiografie (po)graniczne*, ed. I. Iwasiów, T. Czarska, Kraków 2016.

as if by the way, series of autobiographical experiences seems to represent the fragmentary nature of the matter of memories, their selective functioning in the processes of creating identity. The auto-portrait of the writer being a reader and an ardent literature lover at the same time, becomes, as a consequence, a literarily negotiable public property and a recognisable 'brand'. Therefore, adding continuations of the stories written or just signalled earlier can represent both a comprehensible complementation, stylising, and transformation of the existing picture, and the following chapter of the same story anticipated by the recipient.

If, however, writing a diary – even with the awareness that it will eventually be published in print – can be an escape from literature, then writing essays is connected with directing the discourse to the concrete (if only hypothetical) recipient and as such requires conscious ordering and founding of the text. A book composed of heterogeneous particles turns out to be a work which is coherent due to its author's clear auto-creation, but also as part of reception oriented at filling in the gaps. Finding their own experiences not only on the plane of personal confessions of the subject, but also in the order of evoked common books, films, or media events, the recipient will always manage to find testimonies and challenges (simultaneously) in the volume of autobiographical confession, and will make the text coherent within the recognised convention.

Already in the first reviews of *Książka twarzy*, a collection of "literary profiles", it was stressed that this was also a kind of meta-story: a story on both reading and the reader. As Tadeusz Sobolewski argued, "Bieńczyk's essays form a passionate autobiography of a reader of literature and a connoisseur of life at the same time"¹⁵. Hence the book "is like a mirror which reflects the author's face, the contemporary world, and the vast space of literature"¹⁶. The uncovered face is not, however, similar to a 'profile photo' chosen for the purposes of social media, but, rather, it becomes an auto-portrait chiselled in the subsequent scenes of literary and cultural peregrinations.

On the occasion of reviewing another volume of the author of *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, Dariusz Nowacki, putting forward a thesis about a writing formula crystallised in Bieńczyk's work – which is impossible to be forged and which combines the advantages of novel, essayistic, and autobiographical prose – confessed to his terminological helplessness:

How to call what we deal with in *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, since it is impossible to separate what is creative from what is reproductive, writing fiction from commenting on other authors' writing, quotation from the original? I do not know how to call it, but I do know who practices this kind of bordering masterfully: Marek Bieńczyk, needless to say¹⁷.

¹⁵ T. Sobolewski, *Nagroda dla sztuki opowiadania*, [in:] Wyborcza.pl/Kultura, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,12626885> [accessed: 26.05.2016].

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ D. Nowacki, *Czary, mary, Bieńczyk!*, [in:] Wyborcza.pl/Kultura, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,17647094> [accessed: 26.05.2016].

In the book *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida* – similarly to the case of *Kontener* – the essayistic element leaning towards fiction is closely interwoven with the autobiographical matter, which, however, is treated primarily as a set of elements to be used in the text. One important difference recognisable to the recipient is the time of writing the texts: before and after the author's mother's death. For the recipient, these are the moments of the biography treated at the same time as literary concepts ready to be transformed.

One example of this seeming¹⁸ 'difference' may be a fragment from *Jabłko Olgi...*, titled *Gruba (The Fat One)* and devoted, as it seems at the beginning, to the history of cultural (rarely foregrounded) imaging of obesity, which eventually turns out to be a tale dedicated to the author's mother, a special melancholic textual conceptualisation of her fate and various 'worries' which accompanied her life and also her son. It was books that warded off the mother's weight loss (she was remembered by her son as "always fat") resulting from depression and being a clear manifestation of losing her willingness to live. The process of returning to health was also a process of devouring: "She read, she read more and more, and she ate more and more, ate reading, read eating"¹⁹.

The reflection of the son, surely happy with the improvement of his mother's health, is transformed into the praise of literature, its not so much cognitive as rescuing dimension:

She gained twenty kilograms, she ate again, and I had positive opinion on literature again, that it may have some point even if we are all finished. Yes, it had a point, a smile sometimes returned to her cold lips, something happened in her eyes when she spoke of what she had been reading, the shadow from the armchair, the animal from the burrow was here again, among words and letters, among other people; they came to the daylight, returned to human shape²⁰.

The story about a "return to life" with the help of literature is the point of departure for signalling the determining impact of the trauma from childhood, which was the deepest reason for the author's mother's subsequent both emotional and mental as well as physical and physiological problems. The story told this way is aimed at both uncovering and covering past experiences. Hidden behind the curtain of thick narrative saturated with intertextual references, they remain signals which the reader has to fill in accordance with their own knowledge, less existential and more 'textualised', discursive – although these are still stories about defeating the fate, the limitations of the human condition, weakness, or resignation.

¹⁸ Explaining the difference between the socially sanctioned 'mourning' and – closer to the author emotionally – deeply internalised 'worrying', Bieńczyk writes in *Kontener*: "Worrying begins earlier, before the nearest and dearest pass away, and as opposed to mourning it has no social intention, it does not send the world any conventional signs. It is hard, compact, not to be diluted. It is anarchist, unsystematic, straying unhooked by the passing time" (p. 21).

¹⁹ M. Bieńczyk, *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, p. 123.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

In *Kontener*, in turn, the moving images of death (not only that of insects), transiency, and old age acquire the dimension of the vision of the final end. They are aimed, however, at revealing the condition of the subject and hiding it behind the veil of artfully constructed stories at the same time. The poignant fragment titled *Dzielnica* (*The District*) features the eponymous “container” to which people throw away objects belonging to a lonely old woman who is neglected, ill, and affected by the mania for collecting unnecessary things. The act of removing unnecessary stinky, musty, disintegrating rubbish is transformed into a gesture of rejecting equally ‘redundant’ existence:

The courtyard remained in quarantine, not a soul in sight. Not counting the pigeons. It could be felt, not knowing why, that everyone around hated the old woman; perhaps we all did. It serves her right, for those pigeons and the nightmare of her old age, for her shabby crooked shrivelled body and for the fact that she is going to die soon, because she is plodding here and sitting here. She sat still on her bench, facing the container²¹.

The suffocating odour lingering in the air for a longer time is the only ‘tangible’ testimony to the existence of the old woman at death’s door, the only remnants of her life. Could a literary record of the events turn out to be a more durable ‘trace’?

In turn, in the essay also ‘insect-ly’ titled *Pszczoty i osy* (*Bees and Wasps*), which depicts a seemingly innocent picture of feasting together in the open air, the central point consisted in the gesture of killing the insect “unlawfully” wandering on the plate with the dessert. The grandmother of one of the characters of this story used a fork to exterminate the creature that was disturbing her:

Suddenly, with a movement as clumsy as it was ruthless and decisive, she lowered it onto the bee dabbling in melted ice-cream and she began to mash it. The way you mash a soft potato, only worse. She apparently had no skill in mashing a bee with a fork. This not wholly crushed abdomen, the remains of the head like crackling. In the meantime the other bee sat on a puddle closer to the edge of the plate, it must have had an equally important mission, the antennae swooshed briskly, tiny sticks caressing the surface of the drum. The fork skidded down its body and pressed its very edge into the cream. The bee crawled out of the liquid, froze for a moment and we had a passing thought that out of a sudden there was something human in it and this something was surprise²².

The surprise, which accompanies death despite all the preparations or cultural domestication, and thus counterpoints its inevitability, was multiplied in the essay through showing the reaction of the eye witnesses of the incident,

²¹ M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, p. 132.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 251-252.

'surprised', like the killed bee was, by the need to inflict death revealed in the action of the old woman at the end of her life.

The project of creating specific textual amalgamates in which different inhomogeneous types and genres of discourse are mixed poses a challenge for the reader who is sometimes lost in the tangle of quoted and interpreted works, portraits of people who are fictional and real, historical and contemporary. Surely, however, such a strategy makes simple empathetic reading more difficult. It does not lead only to evoking a reaction of sympathy, but also to active decoding and, at the same time, co-creating the message (or rather depicting one's own version of it). In the variant created by Bieńczyk, as years pass, it is the reception directives inscribed in the essays that are changing above all.

The contemporary status of the subject, described with such adjectives as nomadic, processual, or performative, is defined with regard to the categories of changeability, becoming, and making. The level of biography still remains the easiest way to establish contact with the reader within communication circuits functioning today. In the variant created by Bieńczyk in his latest books, this is a half-fictional essayistic confession created on the basis of an autobiographical pact which is subject to review. In this case, the traces of the author – defined by Małgorzata Czermińska as a reflection of the polyphonic structure of 'I' composed of different voices²³ – include consciously left trails whose interpretation is supposed to lead to the active participation of the recipient not only in the biographical matter, but also in the universe of the author's cultural experiences.

The Model Reader of works of the writer-erudite is surely similar to him, namely a well-read lover of books. Being able to understand this, the reading experience becomes fully-fledged and capable of decoding the signs left in interpretations of works. Yet, also a recipient who is less sophisticated in the space of countless texts, conventions, and pacts can find a space of communication in the confessions created this way – in the sphere of hidden and covered existential feelings which are to be extracted and reconstructed, and which are aimed, nonetheless, at seeking general rules and principles of human existence in the world. The identity created processually and relationally can become an identity which is clear and recognizable precisely through exposing the act of auto-creation – signals of the subjective, individual subordination of the matter of common (communal and species-wide) experiences.

Essay-writing, understood as a specific kind of auto-reflexivity aimed at revealing the deepened, variously contextualised reflection on the condition of the human kind, requires an adoption of a certain analytical perspective as well as focusing attention on ways of manifesting the subject. Roma Sendyka stresses that attempts at reconstructing the individual experience of reality within the framework of the essay led to the condition in which "the broken, indefinite «thinking self» trying to determine its identity and

²³ Cf. M. Czermińska, *Autor – podmiot – osoba. Fikcjonalność i niefikcjonalność*, [in:] *Polonistyka w przebudowie*, vol. 1, ed. M. Czermińska, Kraków 2005, p. 216.

related to Montaigne's 'I' was in the centre of attention²⁴. The connection with the activities of the founders of the genre inclined to filter all reality elements through 'I' being constituted still in different ways (during tireless 'attempts') marks the range of activities undertaken by its successors, even though it does not limit the shape of individual realisations. Today, it is clear without any doubt that creating essay poetics constructed with the use of traditional tools is impossible. As Katarzyna Szalewska ascertained, such attempts are accompanied by "a threat of disintegration of the theoretical construct into a catalogue of exceptions, schools, philosophical and axiological systems of individual authors", and this happens as there are "too many variables to be able to reconstruct from them a solvable equation, a universal formula for the essay *sui generis*"²⁵. Essay researchers are, therefore, left with no choice but to establish each time the relations between the very general output assumptions of the genre and its concrete realisation, between the fossil of the existing clearest models and the element of an individual experience transformed into text.

In the case of Bieńczyk, it became clear in the 2010s that, despite his recurrent declarations that he longs the storyline, it is essay-writing that became his primary (the only) formula of his (literary) expression. Essays are not a complement of other types of works (as it was in the times of the essayistic *Melancholia*, which performed certain explanatory functions with regard to the novel *Tworki*), but a frame of his participation/presence in the world. His essayistic texts remain a clearly articulated discourse on the contemporary times challenging the norms of community communication in power. The contemporary principles and circulations of collective polylogues encourage the creation of artistic discourse connected with the public space; nowadays, probably nobody writes with the aim of storing the work in a drawer, or counts on the hypothetical recognition from their 'grandchildren'.

Marek Bieńczyk invites one both to contemplate the artistic shape of the discourse and reflect on the topics which are discussed or rather knocked out from stabilised interpretations. The sphere of subjective relations with the world becomes the vehicular plane for artistic objectives understood this way. As explained by Sendyka, the category of 'self' now defines the new understanding of the subject and its "reflexivity, processuality, social rooting, symbolic/discursive placement, and interactivity"²⁶. In the differentiations between various forms of textual 'I' formulated before – for instance in the findings presented by Agata Bielik-Robson – 'ego' comprised increased awareness, clearly articulated arguments, the principle of conformity, and defensive adaptation. In turn, the 'self' (*selbst*) conversely "represents the creative element of the human psyche in the perspective of

²⁴ R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, Kraków 2006, pp. 202-203.

²⁵ K. Szalewska, *Pasaż tekstowy. Czytanie miasta jako doświadczania przeszłości we współczesnym esejku polskim*, Universitas, Kraków 2012, p. 27.

²⁶ R. Sendyka, *Od kultury ja do kultury siebie. O zwrotnych formach w projektach tożsamościowych*, Kraków 2015, p. 52.

which the world appears as open and non-determined, prone to fantasies and creative interpretations"²⁷.

It should be remembered that the essayistic subject always remains not only auto-reflexive, but also mediating the matter of existential experiences. According to Sendyka, it is characterised by reflexivity understood twofold, i.e. "the recurrent need for auto-reference and the compulsion for auto-interpretation at the same tie"²⁸. Sendyka concludes: "As the interpretation of *self* will never be completed (each attempt at this, each contact, interaction with the aim of the auto-reference shapes, and therefore changes, the *self*), the *self* will have to undertake its work of auto-identification"²⁹. However, the reconstructible stages of constituting *self* in the subsequent volumes of Bieńczyk's essays uncover a certain constant "increased awareness" of the subject.

The essayistic subject – changeable, processual, interactive, auto-reflexive – reveals itself performatively in each act of writing and tends to be placed in a "symbolic, social and biological constitution"³⁰. Yet, in the case of Bieńczyk there is a special displacement: the biographical processuality of the self-cognition act seems to remain outside the text. Having contact with essays, the recipient has only access to the reflection on 'processuality' (already transformed into literary records, artistically reformulated and ordered), understood here more as a category which is specifically vehicular, allowing the recipient not so much to have contact with a series of somebody else's experiences, as get to know their intricately processed twists and tangles. Similarly, irony (and auto-irony) or melancholy are not means of expressions for showing individual experiences or revealing personal confessions; rather, they represent categories that make it possible to explore the issue of limitations and frailty of the human condition as well as the principles of human existence in the world.

Nowadays, recognising categories such as essayistic writing or auto-biographicality may turn out to be not so much about finding formal indicators of depicted perspectives as about a search for intentional actions of the discourse subject. In the past, the Cartesian subject was trying to take control of the place given to him in the world, whereas contemporary authors are aiming at negotiating the changeable relations with the unstable space which escapes cognition and does not provide any point of support. Under such conditions, the sphere of necessary and available or more measurable explorations comes in the form of 'internal worlds', treated as a specific laboratory of traits, styles, conventions, models, and poetics. In his *Melancholia*, Marek Bieńczyk – somewhat prophetically when one considers his later literary achievements – ascertained: "Mothers, the Satan, Irony, and Laughter – those different companions of the melancholic retreat, regress, if you will, open to the gaze cast inside «I» different, be it benevolent or sinister, ways

²⁷ A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*, Kraków 2000, p. 58.

²⁸ R. Sendyka, *Od kultury ja do kultury siebie*, p. 76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

of interpretation of the mirror reflection"³¹. Hence the writer's essays depict not a record of the stages of searching for 'I', but, rather, a game revealed under his own principles between the constructs of 'ego' and *self*, and, primarily, their (auto)interpretations which have already been accomplished.

There is a series of questions in the penultimate part of *Kontener*, titled *Jutro w Bogocie (Tomorrow in Bogota)*: "Tell me: what is this all for? This worry, those returns, those melancholies? Those graves, this brooding?"³². There may be only one answer: "This is because I so much don't want to die" (in the version of a personal confession) or "This is because we so much want to live"³³ (in the variant leaning towards a supra-individual and supra-species generalisation). In the whole volume, the closeness of one's own death, felt deeper after the loss of a close person, becomes a point of reference for the narrative which can be interpreted as a tale about life, its inalienable value, and existential need to find one's own places – or a discursive record of the deepest convictions about the irreducible role of art and the constancy and timelessness of literary testimonies of existence.

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³¹ M. Bieńczyk, *Melancholia. O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty*, Warszawa 1998, p. 74.

³² M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, p. 295.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

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SUMMARY

The article contains considerations on Marek Bieńczyk's literary output and his book *Kontener*, published in 2018. All essays from the volume manifest their auto-biographical and literary character. The main aim of the paper is to make a diagnosis connected with the particular and common (mis)understanding of the relations between death and life, mourning and vitality, melancholy and literature. This objective is accomplished through essay strategies. In texts that are part of *Kontener*, the suggestive and expressive subject makes continual new inquiries in order to find the essence of their (Bieńczyk's) personal, and especially textual, identity.

Keywords

essay, autobiography, speech genres, subject, identity

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