

ALINA ŚWIEŚCIAK
Uniwersytet Śląski

Melancholy in the Later Works of Tadeusz Różewicz

Abstract

It is indeed rare to consider Tadeusz Różewicz's 'lyrical Self' as melancholic, but many interpreters and critics do point to the motif of 'lack' in Różewicz's poetry. Naturally, not all lack must be related to melancholy: we speak of melancholy only when the loss breaks away from the object and attaches itself to the subject, becoming its integral part. In Różewicz's poetry, however, from the beginning we can find yet another characteristic figure of melancholy. These problems are considered in this article on the basis of the later works of Tadeusz Różewicz in sections devoted to topics such as: the object of loss, the passage of time, 'the birth and death of God' as a double, the fundamental lack, the existence of the poet in 'time', 'worthlessness' and finally, the *kulturkritik* by Tadeusz Różewicz with a focus on repetition, melancholy and mourning.

Keywords: Tadeusz Różewicz, Polish poetry, melancholy, loss, lack.

It is indeed rare to consider Tadeusz Różewicz's "lyrical I" as melancholic, but many interpreters and critics do point to the motif of "lack" in Różewicz's poetry. Andrzej Falkiewicz went as far as to say that Różewicz's output "is actually organized around what it lacks rather than around what can be found in it."¹ According to these researchers the lack is visible not only in the metaphysical world presented and the poet's discourse relating to it (deprived of the mystery, in Różewicz's own terms), but also in the representation itself entangled in the paradox of accepting its own defeat.

Naturally, not all lack must be related to melancholy: we speak of melancholy only when the loss broke away from the object and attached itself to the subject, becoming its integral part.² As is well known, Freud treated melancholy as an illness; the loss inside of the "I" meant for him the degeneration of the subject who narcissistically identifies himself with the object. Freud contrasted it with "regular" mourning, capable of accepting loss. Although Freud "preferred" mourning,

¹ A. Falkiewicz, *Fragmenty o polskiej literaturze*, Warszawa 1982, s. 226–227.

² This in accordance with the classical approach of Freud, unchallenged at least in this respect. See S. Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, [in:] *The Nature of Melancholy*, ed. J. Radden, Oxford 2002, s. 283–294.

it is melancholy that affirms the object to a greater degree: it is more loyal, it saves the object from oblivion, while “natural” mourning equals giving up, betrayal, forgetting. Re-evaluating Freud’s conceptions Slavoj Žižek comes to the conclusion that melancholy actually surpasses mourning conceptually and ethically.³ Różewicz’s poetry seems to be attached to the lack, fixated on it; it constantly pursues to name it and commemorate it. It is not searching for a consolation in mourning, it is loyal to loss and conscious of its finality.

The object of loss

Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska, as she wrote about contemporary theories of aesthetics, divided its creators into the melancholics, that is those who expose and accuse, and the “workers of mourning”, who prefer to interpret the cultural revolutions (especially those connected with the new media) not as a crisis, but rather as a great opportunity.⁴ In doing this she discloses one more facet of twentieth century and postmodern melancholy: it’s critical attitude. This criticism is best to be seen in the melancholic character of Tadeusz Różewicz’s poetry. Thus, the first object of loss is for him (and that also outside of poetry) a model of culture as a domain of axiological order. From it follow, it seems, other, more serious, but derivative objects of loss and deprivation.

Most researchers would probably agree that the first turning point to be spoken of in terms of the fall of culture (and the author’s first trauma at the same time) is for Różewicz the Second World War. What then is his “world after the loss”? This seems obvious: it is a dispersing world, a world without any stable point of reference, a world dying (out) in pain, a world populated by wandering entities, half-dead half-alive. The poems published in the *Niepokój* volume do not only speak of the sadness of passing away; they also communicate the loss of a meaningful time, a time in which some sense was anchored.

The trouble with this interpretation is that even for the debuting Różewicz, from the very beginning the world was the world after loss. In the face of this we have basically two choices, we either believe that the memory of his narrator really holds traces of the old, “fuller” times or we have to conclude that these times are nothing more but a mythical construct created in order to sustain the feeling of loss, substantial, as it seems, to the poet’s identity. In the latter approach the lyrical I is actually appropriating something he did not possess. By suggesting the loss he proposes that he did possess the object (the set of values of the “fuller” times, the world suspended in a metaphysical mystery); the object that, as we shall believe, is no longer accessible. For Žižek this appropriation, this manipulation of reality is the very essence of melancholy, rather than the lack itself, as was suggested by Freud. Replacement of the Freudian “lack” with “loss”, suggested by Žižek, signifies the attachment to the loss rather than to its object. Thus, melancholy

³ S. Žižek, *Melancholy and the Act*, “Critical Inquiry” 2000, 26, s. 657–681.

⁴ A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, *Między melancholią a żałobą. Estetyka wobec przemian w kulturze współczesnej*, Warszawa 1996.

seems to be particularly well fitting to describe the human condition. As Lacan suggests, the human being is since the beginning, since infancy, accompanied by a lack, the inability to satisfy a desire. Although in time the primary need (*besoin*) is transformed into a speakable request (*demande*) a gap always remains, which is the result of an unsatisfied desire. Because satisfaction is only symbolic, language itself is also characterised by “lack” from the very beginning. Designed to fill the primal gap (*demande* in place of *besoin*) the language becomes the vehicle of lack and the symbolic satisfaction turns out to be the source of newer and newer desires.⁵ The presence in language is always going to be the trace of what was originally lost. This Lacanian “condition of loss” is to a great degree based on Freud’s intuitions. Freud was the first to point to the longing after something “originally lost”, to the lack that resides in the unconscious that triggers the hopeless search for original identicalness, identicalness that by now is only reflected in the stigma of the mythical occurrence.⁶ If we are to believe Žižek, both psychoanalysts overestimate the (mythical) object of loss, which can just be a representation of the source of desire beyond comprehension and expression. Žižek is actually even more disillusioning; according to him the absent, mythical object only manifests itself in the desire, it can be regained only in the loss construed in language.

“Early” Różewicz celebrates the gesture of loss and thus, in Žižek’s terms, establishes its object. The author of *Niepokój* repeats the gesture incessantly, he “simulates” the mourning rituals, which repeated as they are, have nothing to do with the work of mourning because they do not lead to recovery. And they are not supposed to; most often these are negative gestures. Yet this celebration does possess some positive aspects, namely the retrospective side of imagining the absence as presence and the attempt to nullify the lack by negating the desire. A road to reach this latter goal seems to be destruction: the destruction of other, of the world or destruction of self. In the poem titled *Rok 1939* (published in the *Niepokój*⁷ volume) we can find the following lines:

⁵ “Thus the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire.” J. Lacan, *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, [in:] idem, *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York–London 2006, p. 262. On the relation of language and desire in Lacan’s psychoanalysis see also: H. Lang, *The Language and the Unconscious*, trans. T. Brockelman, Amherst 1997.

⁶ See S. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. J. Strachey, New York 1975.

⁷ The originals of all poems published before 1989 come from the following anthology: T. Różewicz, *Poezja*, Kraków 1988; with names of source volumes in brackets. Prose is quoted after Różewicz, *Proza*, Kraków 1990. Beginning with *Płaskorzeźba* the following abbreviations are used for respective source volumes: P – *Płaskorzeźba*, Wrocław, 1991; zfr – *zawsze fragment recycling*, Wrocław 1999, np – *nożyk profesora*, Wrocław 2001; szs – *szara strefa*, Wrocław 2002, W – *Wyjście*, Wrocław 2004; kkw – *kup kota w worku (work in progress)*, Wrocław 2008.

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| Oszukany tak że możecie mi wręczyć białą laskę ślepcy bo nienawidzę was uchodzę z wczorajszego siebie | Deceived so that you can give me the white cane of the blind man because I hate you I leave yesterday's me |
| szukam cmentarza gdzie nie powstanę z martwych tu złożę niepotrzebne śmieszne rekwizyty Boga tak malutkiego jak lipowy światek orła białego który jest ptaszkiem na gałązce człowieka którym nie będę. | looking for a cemetery where I couldn't resurrect here, I lay the unnecessary, funny props God so little as a linden statuette the white eagle – a small birdie on a branch the human being I will not be. ⁸ |

The narrator of this poem is furious, full of hatred. Apparently the reason is the loss of values symbolised by the “statuettes.” But these “funny props” may well be just an echo of a more serious loss, perhaps the loss of the core of subjectivity. In Lacan’s terms, they may signal the consciousness of irrevocability of the condition of loss and desire. The latter is “satisfied” here by annihilation along with the anticipated annihilation of the subject. It may very well be the first time in this poetry that the motif of departure appears and from the very beginning it is the departure from self. But what was the “yesterday’s me” of Różewicz before the “disaster”? For us, the readers, it did not exist. The gesture of loss in the *Niepokój* is a founding gesture. Perhaps, as Stanisław Jaworski suggests, the “leaving of yesterday’s me” is really just one of Różewicz’s ways of searching for the authentic “me”.⁹ However, because the subject is given to us already as unauthentic (distorted, lost), the “real me” seems to be a mere phantasm, an anamorphous entity realised through various forms of absence or desire of “another” presence. Infelicitous as it may sound, the war is here an alibi thanks to which the founding lack can be convincingly replaced by loss.

In *Rok 1939* we can find yet another characteristic figure of melancholy, the motif of a grave one cannot be lifted up from. The mourning (for oneself) is bound to fail. Such mourning, assumed as infinite and therefore impossible, becomes a part of melancholic space. Maria Janion, who claims that the impossible resurrection is the most important feature of Różewicz’s “non-belief” links it to the death in war with its completely non-sacral character.¹⁰ A human being could perhaps be resurrected, but not the flesh (“furgony porąbanych ludzi / którzy nie zmartwychwstaną” – “truckfuls of chopped-up men / who will not be resurrected”¹¹ we read in *Ocalony*, from the volume *Niepokój*). Yet, as with non-belief, the non-resurrection is marked here with the sacred, even if only through its non-presence. It is a negation that keeps its object in existence. In “non-resur-

⁸ Translation mine, here and in all instances where the English translation is not specified.

⁹ S. Jaworski, *Skreślenia – gry tekstowe Tadeusza Różewicza*, [in:] *Przekraczanie granic: o twórczości Tadeusza Różewicza*, eds. W. Browarny, J. Orska, A. Poprawa, Wrocław 2007, p. 25–26.

¹⁰ M. Janion, *Nadmiar bólu*, [in:] eadem, *Żyjąc tracimy życie*, Warszawa 2001, p. 204–205.

¹¹ T. Różewicz, *They Came to See a Poet*, trans. Adam Czerniawski, London 1991, p. 30.

rection” (being the belief in nonresurrection rather than the non-belief in resurrection) there is no place for atheistic arrogance; it stands for the phenomenological insight into the complicated relation between belief and disbelief, the moment of unfathomableness that marks the crossroads to both. As many have suggested, Maria Janion among them, the unfathomable, the inexpressible and the insoluble are Różewicz’s *idée fixe*¹². Consenting to a solution (be it any) although limiting in itself would give the subject some sort of stability, the suspense in indecision in turn, has a melancholising effect. Another reason why we should perhaps consider the ethic superiority of melancholy over the resigned attitude of mourning is its “risky” character: it nullifies all certainty, it is not afraid of paradoxes.

Time – “When will the past finally end”

Różewicz uses Konwicki’s words: “Było, minęło” (“It’s past and gone”¹³) as a motto for his untitled poem that starts with the words “I znów zaczyna się / przeszłość” (“and once again / the past begins”) and closes with “kiedy wreszcie skończy się / przeszłość” (“when will the past / finally end”). The impossibility of freeing oneself from what used to be, the sinking into the past, are perhaps the strongest impressions communicated by Różewicz’s latest volumes of poetry. These are filled with dialogues with those he had known and those he hadn’t, with the living and the dead (“w snach mówią do mnie zmarli żywi” – “in dreams they speak to me / the dead the living”¹⁴ – “Na Wyspiańską nutę” in *Wjście*; “ja poeta – pasterz życia / zostałem pasterzem umarłych” – “I poet – shepherd of life / have become shepherd of the dead”¹⁵ – “budzik” in *szara strefa*), meditations on the expanding zone of silence, re-evaluations and complaints about the present times that the author views as a mess, a waste heap, a cosmic soup (“Regression in die Ursuppe” in *szara strefa*). Memory in the latest poems is a substitute life and a way of compensating at the same time; because of memory the lyrical I cannot get involved in the present, but it is thanks to the same memory that he is somehow able to cope with it. Since *nożyk profesora* the memory is before all an “internal haemorrhage” (Freud) of related persons. As all of them are “lacks” (in Różewicz’s poetry they are almost exclusively the dead or the “departing”), none can fill the gap in the life of the narrator and by their relations to one another they only make this gap deeper. As a result the narrator is almost hibernated: in response to the exaggerated civilizational progress he regresses, abstains from participation. The shape of this world gets blurred.

The emphasis on being in time, mainly realised through being anchored in the past, seems to substantiate the claim that time is the main environment of the unifying subjectivity. On the other hand, the same time, as the subject of reflec-

¹² A recent publication by D. Szczukowski, *Tadeusz Różewicz wobec niewyraźnego*, Kraków 2008 – testifies to that.

¹³ T. Różewicz, *New Poems*, trans. B. Johnston, New York 2007, s. 68.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, s. 137.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, s. 172.

tion and meditation appears to be the environment of deconstruction, desubjectivisation. This makes the autobiographical representation in the poems far from coherent.

Even the early texts of Różewicz testify to the truth that time is not a unifying element for him, an example being *Acheron w samo południe* from *Twarz trzecia* and its continuation of sorts, *Złowiony*.¹⁶ In these poems time resides outside of the lyrical I as an element he cannot cope with; it is a domain of discontinuity. Time is a trauma¹⁷; this thought being pictured very concretely in *Złowiony*: “Chwyciłem przynętę. Mam zupełną swobodę ruchów płynę przed siebie wypływam idę w głębinę” (“I caught the bait. I have total freedom of movement I go forward I surface I go deeper”). At the beginning it seems that the subject can win: he can experience what is going on as the perfect presence. The subject, interpreted from the perspective of Kant’s and Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, searches for the experience of now and tries to abolish time, because in the “absolute now” time is nullified. However, these are only appearances, of which the subject of *Acheron...* is aware; such presence caught in the moment is framed by relativising formulas and these very formulas put it back in the eternal flux. Being in time as an adventure of Acheron is obviously a simple metaphor of life being suspended in death, of life as leading to death.¹⁸ This is why the protagonist comes back and searches for the metaphysical principle that generates history (time), which itself is dependent on time, as it turns out.

In Różewicz’s poem the journey to the source (as the myth of time necessary for the existence of history) turns into a journey into oneself (“to ja byłem źródłem” – “I was the source”, *Acheron...*). However, immersion into oneself does not provide the power of rebirth and the resultant consciousness of the lack of source ends in the observation that the “self” immersed in time is inauthentic. The trauma of knowing about time leading to death and nothingness can be “defeated” only in one way: by pretending you don’t know, by agreeing to violence (“wtedy pojmuję / jeszcze raz / że moim zadaniem / jest zgoda” – “then i realise / once more / that my task at hand / is to agree”, *Acheron...*), by forgetting what you need to forget in order to be able to live. The strategies aiming at stopping the time that can be seen in the two poems reflect the melancholic attachment to the lost perception of presence, or rather, should we say, to the gesture of losing the present / presence that “I” has never actually experienced but craves it all the same).

The deconstruction of the myth of source signifies the postmodern awareness that the Romantic myth of return is but just a myth. In other words the subject of Różewicz’s poems deconstructs the metaphysics of presence, but is at the same time aware that it is functional, compensatory and in a way, yes, indispensable for

¹⁶ The two have been scrutinised together in T. Kłak, *W stronę Acheronu*, [in:] idem, *Spojrzenia. Szkice o poezji Tadeusza Różewicza*, Katowice 1999, p. 153–179.

¹⁷ The relation of time and trauma has been expounded by A. Bielik-Robson, *Słowo i trauma: czas, narracja, tożsamość*, “Teksty Drugie” 2004, no 4, p. 23–34.

¹⁸ There is a magnificent interpretation of *Acheron w samo południe* that shows the poem in the context of life and resurrection, see: M. Mrugalski, *Non-stop-Acheron. Raport o stanie śmierci w latach 60. według Różewicza*, [in:] *Przekraczanie granic...*, op. cit., p. 184–209.

the construct of self. The journey to the source that is nonexistent is destructive, the attempt to come back only makes us realise the nonexistence ever so clearly. The “idle motion” of the subject is repetitive, it is a movement to the past, a circular movement that pretends a non-movement (“Kto jest zbyt żywy ten rzuca się, płynie bardzo szybko do brzegu, odbiera sobie życie. Trzeba więc wyrzekać się życia, gwałtownych ruchów. Udawać bezruch. Nie przejawiać woli życia” – “The one who is too alive jumps into the waters, swims fast to the bank, takes his life away. You rather need to renounce life, renounce rapid movements. Pretend immobility. Don’t show will of life” – *Złowiony*). Thus the subject of *Złowiony* experiences another melancholic paradox: every effort of melancholy to stop, nullify time is actually counterproductive: it does not substantiate the subjectivity (through the “possession of a past”, a nostalgic return), but rather isolates the subject more and more from an inaccessible source. The melancholic formula “not to live, in order to live” is deconstructed in *Złowiony*. On the one hand the subject affirms the *empty time*: “Nie żyje ten kto ogląda obrazy. I ten który je ze smakiem. I pijany. I ten który leci. I ten który śpi. I ten który spółkuje. Żyje tylko ten, który się boi, który ucieka, który czeka” (“The one who watches paintings is not alive. Neither the one who delights in food. Nor the drunk. Nor the one who flies. Nor the one who sleeps. Nor the one who has an intercourse. Only he is alive who is afraid, who escapes, who waits” – *Złowiony*). On the other hand, he proves that the emptiness has the feature of getting instantaneously filled with past, but “past is nothing.”

As is suggested by the subject of *Złowiony*, the real stopping may only come in the word, so the poet must be the only priest of the ritual of regaining the lost presence and the poem the only way to get back to the source. But even in this very poem the success of the ritual is questioned and in the broader perspective, the whole of Różewicz’s output can be viewed as a consistent polemic with the myths of source and presence.

The problem of trace

The trace is one of the negative categories in the poetry of Różewicz researched by scholars in an attempt to expand on Ryszard Nycz’s diagnosis from his now famous text *Tadeusza Różewicza „tajemnica okaleczonej poezji”* (*Mystery of Tadeusz Różewicz’s “mutilated poetry”*).¹⁹ Nycz persuades us that lack is related to trauma in several ways. It is a reflective category, yet under some circumstances it can become revealing. Lack should be understood in this way, when Nycz is speaking about negative epiphanies in Różewicz’s poetry (“bringing us the feeling of ontological uncertainty, epistemological doubt and semantic ambivalence”²⁰). It is a feature of lack and trace that, even if only through negation, they assume the existence of the positive or even bring it back to life (in its potential). They are the

¹⁹ R. Nycz, *Tadeusza Różewicza „tajemnica okaleczonej poezji”*, [in:] idem, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*, Kraków 2001, p. 186–207.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 201.

essence of ontological dependence. A present trace of the absence seems to be the ideal of in-between with the potential of turning into either presence or absence. Despite the fact that Nycz suggests interpreting Różewicz's traces in their full, double-sided potential, yet the inconclusiveness the scholar points to favours the perspective that the author of *szara strefa* rather embraces the postmodern negative epiphanies.

What we are dealing with in the late poetry of Różewicz is traces covered up, traces of leaving and the "lack of traces." In all cases the semiotic function (the trace always refers to something else than itself, always hides something) is either suspended or questioned. It is quite possible that we should understand the trace here, according to the suggestions of contemporary philosophy; in the words of Barbara Skarga; "[...] as stripped of any similarity, analogousness and symbolic functions."²¹ As such it would be a non-eschatological sign of a pure call to nothing. In earlier times the trace referred us to the space of the invisible, it performed the function of a bridge between physics and metaphysics, in the postauratic it just signifies the decline of everything. Yet, it can be understood in a variety of ways; in Benjamin's writings, for that matter, it is a sign that keeps the memory of the whole and opens the doors to its allegorical reconstruction.

Różewicz's philosophy of sign is, in my opinion, situated at the crossroads of two "ideologies": the positive (reconstructive) and the negative (empty, not referring to anything outside of its own space) and is devised as suspended in the ontological and epistemological indefiniteness. The "traces of traces" at this stage of his writing lead us in at least two directions: towards the myth of ontological whole and divine presence on the one hand and (closely connected with the former) the primal unity of word and thing on the other.

Traces of lost God

In *bez*, the poem that opens the *Płaskorzeźba* volume, we read about "największe wydarzenie / w życiu człowieka" ("the greatest events / in man's life"²²) that is "narodziny i śmierć / Boga" ("the birth and death / of God"). Here the trace suggests a double, fundamental absence. It itself being the signifier of lack, it is additionally negated: "bez znaku bez śladu / bez słowa [...] opuściłeś mnie bez szumu / skrzydeł bez błyskawic / jak polna myszka / jak woda co wsiąka w piach" ("without a sign without a trace / without a word [...]. You left me without a rush / of wings without lightnings / like a field-mouse / like water drained into sand"). The negated trace, a trace that existed only in the forlorn potential, cannot become a trail; it doesn't call us and thus one of the two relations it could entail is not activated at all. Although its basic timeframe sends us to the past (traces are leftovers of what used to be), it is also connected with the future: it calls us to follow (as in following the traces of footprints). The poem above, which excludes the latter possibility represents the melancholic condition of a trace: its only reference

²¹ B. Skarga, *Znak i obecność*, Warszawa 2002, p. 101.

²² T. Różewicz, *Selected Poems*, trans. A. Czerniawski, Kraków 1997, s. 253.

being that to the past. The negation makes it even more absent: the past that cannot be activated through the trace becomes illegible, it will stay inactivated and unreconstructed. Next to the (absent) trace of the leaving God actualised in the “non-signs” of presence accompanying the emergent absence, we can also see the lack that is spoken of in terms of absence, but which actualises itself in the very act of speaking: “nie zauważyłem twojej ucieczki / twojej nieobecności / w moim życiu” (“I missed Your flight / Your absence / in my life”). This type of speaking about God is close to being apophatic.²³ Różewicz’s *via negativa* does not consist in expressing the inability to see through the mystery of God, but rather, as was rightly pointed out by Dariusz Szczukowski, the inability to express the desertion of man by God.²⁴ Or, to put it in other words still, the negative way is no longer leading to a positive representation; negativity itself became part of the positive, it is its philosophical development.

As says Georges Poulet, the God negated in apophasis resembles a dead God, but is not tantamount to a dead God. This is the God of melancholics: neither dead, nor alive, positive in its negativity; the God of those who face the insoluble mystery of his existence and his indeterminacy.²⁵ The melancholy of negative theology is also the consciousness of one’s own indeterminacy, consciousness of the desperate efforts in eternal non-cognizance as the only way towards the inaccessible truth. As to this life in the condition of indeterminacy, “życie bez boga jest możliwe / życie bez boga jest niemożliwe” (“life without god is possible / life without god is impossible”). Yet, the indeterminacy is not “common” negativity, rather it is a chance for the subject, who – as Poulet says – in face of the withdrawal of the most supreme object of thought asks the question about its own existence. Thus, the negative, non-existent traces are signs of the demise, ruins of God who left, and of humanity without metaphysical foundations, yet on the other hand they trigger the work of allegory, which may not lead to the reconstruction of the lost values, but will at least in a sense make it more probable.

Is this question: “who am I?” the only referent of Różewicz’s trace? Even if it is so, we cannot state that this is a call to nowhere and therefore that the philosophy of trace can be fully inscribed in the postmodern philosophy of difference. It is true that the consciousness of the trace-like nature of existence relegates the presence, identity and identicalness to some indefinite past, but this very relegation, the procrastination, contains meaning. The question “who am I?”, reflection upon self, is meaningful only in procrastination because it is procrastination. All the poems of Różewicz referring to the notion of trace are written from an indefinite, distant perspective in which the Event present only in the traces of (non-)

²³ Różewicz’s affinity to negative theology has already been described in several works; see for example: W. Gutowski, *Aluzje i symbolika religijna w poezji Tadeusza Różewicza*, [in:] idem, *Wśród szczytów transcendencji. Szkice o sacrum chrześcijańskim w literaturze polskiej XX wieku*, Toruń 1994; J. Łukasiewicz, *Zwiastowanie poezji*, “Odra” 1997, 5, s. 52–56; D. Szczukowski, *Literatura a religia*, [in:] idem, *Tadeusz Różewicz wobec niewyrażalnego*, Kraków 2008, s. 196–203 – the last of these works being the most detailed account.

²⁴ D. Szczukowski, *Tadeusz Różewicz wobec...*, op.cit., s. 188.

²⁵ G. Poulet, *Myśl nieokreślona*, Warszawa 2004, s. 37, translation mine.

presence forces the subject to confront this ontological incongruence and his own condition of “being procrastinated”. The path, being also the path of negative ontology and theology, the path that is “pusta ciemna wyziębiona” (“barren dark / no longer warm”²⁶ – “Einst hab ich die Muse gefragt”, P) leads to a home where there are no “Ojca / ani braci ani chleba” (“Father / brothers or bread”) and concludes in retreat, leaving the traces “in front of oneself” (“zostawiłem przed sobą ślady stóp / i odszedłem w krainę bez światła” – “I left before me marks of my steps / and withdrew into a landscape / with no light”). The withdrawing subject no longer full of divine perfection but rather full of negativity (“widzę człowieka stworzonego / na obraz i podobieństwo boga / który odszedł” – “I see a man created / in the image and likeness of a god / who’s gone”²⁷ – *Obraz* in *Opowiadanie traumatyczne. Duszyczka*) confronted with the emptiness of traces leading to nowhere is a subject without the answer; as would Poulet say, he is the question itself: *quaestio mihi factus sum*. The poem that starts with a quote from Hölderlin: “Once I asked the muse / and she replied: / In the end you’ll find it”²⁸ speaks about the impossible end and the impossible answer.

We can also observe forms of impossible answers in Różewicz’s apophatic gestures of refusal such as the finger to the lips that is a constantly returning motif in his late works and yet another sign of unfathomableness. Despite the explicitly stated authorial suggestion that it is a sign of closing, it is, at the same time, a sign of opening, opening of the mysterious sphere of silence. This gesture can also be understood in the context of apophatic theology. Two poems from the *Wyjście* volume: *Palec na ustach* and *Nauka chodzenia* prove its double value. The first, more obvious interpretation is the negative one:

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| usta prawdy są zamknięte palec na wargach mówi nam że przyszedł czas na milczenie nikt nie odpowie na pytanie co to jest prawda ten co wiedział ten co był prawdą odszedł | the mouth of truth is closed a finger to the lips tells us that time has come for silence no one will answer the question about what truth is the one who knew the one who was truth is gone ²⁹ |
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The other possibility can be found in the poem on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer is “the one who knew” (Lacan). This must be why Różewicz treats him as a master (“w ostatnich dwóch latach biorę lekcje / u pastora Dietricha Bonhoffera”

²⁶ T. Różewicz, *Forms in Relief and other Works*, trans. R. Sokoloski, New York–Ottawa–Toronto 1994, s. 133.

²⁷ Idem, *They Came...*, op. cit., s. 208.

²⁸ F. Hölderlin, *Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin*, trans. M. Chernoff, p. Hoover, Richmond 2008.

²⁹ T. Różewicz, *New Poems*, op. cit., p. 143.

– “for the last two years I have taken classes / from pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer”). In *Nauka chodzenia* the German anti-fascist pastor imitates “God’s departure”, yet his leaving is nothing but positive, he follows “in his footsteps”, follows God (“wstał i odszedł // szedł za Chrystusem / naśladował Chrystusa” – “he got up and left // he followed Christ / followed in his footsteps”). As can be seen Różewicz is not far from this Christological orthodox understanding of “following.” It is not without meaning that Bonhoeffer was a proponent of “non-religious Christianity” and at the same time a greatly involved anti-fascist (he participated in the anti-Hitler plot), so his “orthodoxy” must be taken in a very broad, certainly non-dogmatic perspective. But it is this very characteristic that makes him a “master”, that pushes the subject of *Nauka chodzenia* to ask him questions without answers. Instead of an answer he will see the finger to the lips (“a może Bóg przestraszył się / i opuścił Ziemię?” – “maybe God got scared / and left the Earth?”). Following “instead” of giving an answer seems to not only be the development of a Christian formula, it is an answer *per se*: a courageous follower legitimises the courage of the followed one. So, if God left the Earth for reasons other than getting scared, the departure opens for teleological interpretation and the apophatic gesture is no longer solely a gesture of denial, it becomes a gesture of a call at the same time.

If it weren’t for the apophatic element that at the same time sends us in the opposite direction, we could risk the conclusion that the lyrical subject enters the road to (allegorical) reconstruction. Yet, the gestures of opening merely balance the more common and stronger signs of closing with the result that the latter may be eventually perceived as non-final. This is a good enough ground for Różewicz the allegorist to continue searching and not give up in his attempts to understand. The mystery of a lack of metaphysical equipping of human beings can perhaps be explained with the pure traces of human presence. This is what the subject is looking for:

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| <p>i tak wędrując po matce ziemi po pięknej błękitnej planecie nad którą unosi się czerwony Mars i Saturn w tysiącu pierścieni doszedłem do Gór Olbrzymich na uliczce prowadzącej do Muzeum Sportu i Turystyki trafiłem na ślad</p> <p>ślad jej stopy ślad uśmiechu ślad ręki (<i>Gawęda o spóźnionej miłości</i> (fragmenty), zfr)</p> | <p>and so wandering around mother earth the beautiful blue planet over whom hovers the red Mars and Saturn in his thousand rings I came to the Giant Mountains at the street leading to the Sports and Tourism Museum in Karpacz I found a trace of Wanda</p> <p>her footprint her smile print her handprint (<i>The tale about late love fragments in Recycling</i>³⁰)</p> |
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The words “her handprint” are followed by a real hand print: a copy of the dedication by Wanda Rutkiewicz. Różewicz seems to be asking: Is this print, this trace of a human’s mystery clearer, more adequate than the divine trace? And he

³⁰ Idem, *Recycling*, trans. B. Plebanek, T. Howard, Todmorden 2001.

answers, in accordance with Levinas's conclusions³¹, that surely we cannot speak of adequacy. It is true that in the scene of conversation with Rutkiewicz the poet puts into her mouth an explanation of the mystery (probably of life as a need to reach beyond yourself, as the voluntary approaching of death), these may be the alpinist's own words: "potrzebne jest mi poczucie / zagrożenia i to takiego, / którym mogę sterować" ("I need a sense of / danger and one / that I can steer") as well as these:

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| <p>czasem myślę, że wspinam się dlatego, żeby przekonać się, jaka droga jest mi nasza szara codzienność. Wracając poznaję, jak smakuje kubek gorącej herbaty, po dniach pragnienia, sen po wielu nieprzespanych nocach, spotkanie z przyjaciółmi po długiej samotności cisza... (<i>Gawęda o spóźnionej miłości</i>)</p> | <p>sometimes I think that I climb in order to learn how dear is to me our grey everyday reality. When I come back I recognise the taste of tea from a cup after days of thirst, a good nights' sleep after sleepless nights, a meeting with friends after long solitude silence... (<i>The Tale About Late Love</i>)</p> |
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These, however, are only 'realistic non-correspondences'. The subject of the poem knows that an attempt at understanding only makes more distant.

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| <p>przez mgnienie oka zdawało mi się że zrozumiałem upływanie czasu i życia że poznałem drogę do wnętrza matki ziemi do śmierci matki matek rodzaju ludzkiego. (<i>Gawęda o spóźnionej miłości</i>)</p> | <p>in the blinking of an eye I thought that I understood the passing of time and of life that I learned the way to the inside of mother earth to death the mother of mothers of human species. (<i>The Tale About Late Love</i>)</p> |
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What Rutkiewicz would like to experience is "life without delay", pure presence, defeating the derivativeness and inadequacy of a trace, the winning power of existence. Różewicz does not decide whether this experience is possible (that is, who is right: Heidegger or Derrida); he only points out that the understanding of this presence is not given to him (and to us), and every attempt distances us from it even more. That is probably the most proper understanding of the finger to the lips of the heroine in this poem.

The condition of a human being according to Różewicz is an ideal (melancholic) suspension between the necessity of rejecting divinity and inability to free oneself completely from the language in which this rejection could be expressed (which would be the only realisation of a total rejection); the suspension is also between a trace as a sign of departure and a gesture of calling; between the need to experience and understand presence and the impossibility of achieving any kind of certainty. The melancholic loss seems to paradoxically serve as a chance

³¹ E. Levinas, *The Trace of the Other*, trans. A. Lingis, [in:] *Deconstruction in Context*, red. M.C. Taylor, Chicago 1986, p. 345–359.

to continue presence and identity: attachment to loss (and the language of loss) is the last bastion of presence, which may exist only in this negative gesture.

“I know I will die complete.” The ontology of an impossible poem

One of the key topics in Różewicz’s oeuvre is a search for the validation of a poet’s existence in “a worthless time.” Several poems speak about this necessary / impossible process of “producing” poetry at a time and place that in their nature negate the very possibility of its existence. This, among others, is the source of the trauma-related lexicon of Różewicz. Words can be justified if and only if they are related to the space of trauma, if they testify to the traumatic. *Znieruchomiały obraz świata* (“The standstill picture of the world”) can be only represented by “poezja / jak otwarta rana / ostatnie krwi płynienie” (“poetry / like an open wound / the last gushing of blood” – “Liryki lozańskie” in *Twarz trzecia*).

The poem from the *Plaskorzeźba* volume entitled *Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland* devoted to the memory of Paul Celan and referring to his *Todtnauberg*, which is an account of the poet’s unfortunate meeting with Martin Heidegger, starts with this quote from Hölderlin: “who wants poets at all in lean years.”³² The first event to be related here is the well-known Hölderlin’s picture of gods who are leaving:

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| bogowie opuścili świat pozostawili na nim poetów ale źródło wypiło usta odjęło nam mowę podróżujemy i mieszkamy w drodze to tu to tam | the gods have left the earth they let poets remain but the well spring drank our mouths took our speech we travel and live going here there ³³ |
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In Hölderlin’s “Bread and Wine” the poets remind people of gods and prepare them for their return: the world that had lost the metaphysical validation can, even must regain it. However, according to Michel Foucault, Hölderlin is aware that this regaining is solely a function of language. After the gods have left “language could only depend on its own power to keep death at a distance.”³⁴ Różewicz draws similarly disillusioning conclusions from this motif. In his poem poets are only nomads, they don’t have a mission to fulfil any longer, they follow the footprints of an absent God and, just like him, they leave.

Celan’s poem tells the story of a specific non-meeting: a non-occurrence of a meeting in which the poet (the wandering Jew – Celan) did not get a word from the philosopher, in which the latter was supposed to explain his active role in the

³² F. Hölderlin, *Bread and Wine*, [in:] idem, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, New York 2002.

³³ T. Różewicz, *Forms in Relief...*, p. 151.

³⁴ M. Foucault, *Language to infinity*, [in:] idem, *Language, Counter-memory, Practice*, Cornell 1977, p. 53–67 (p. 59).

“worthless time” (or perhaps even excuse himself³⁵). *Todtnauberg* conveys the atmosphere of awaiting for sense that is not going to be revealed and even more than that: it cannot be revealed. The poem is, as Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, tired (of waiting), disappointed; it is a disappointment poem. Różewicz allegedly changes the story of undermined sense into the story of hidden sense: “jakie pytanie / poeta zadał filozofowi / jaki kamień filozoficzny / leży przy drodze / do leśnej chaty” (“what question / did the poet ask the philosopher / what philosopher’s / stone / lay by the path / to the forest hut”). So it seems he upholds the mystery transgressed by Celan in his text. However, it is not the mystery of the unspoken word that is of utmost significance here, but rather the role of the poet after the “lean years”, the worthless time. The philosopher was unable or unwilling to communicate with the unnamed within himself, the poet in Różewicz’s poem did just that. The effect of this self-encounter is truth that does not lead to consolation. It is most probable that Celan himself was a “beneficiary” of this truth, ending his life in the waters of Seine. You can find this suggestion in the coda of Różewicz’s poem:

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| <p>W czasie który nastął po czasie marnym po odejściu bogów odchodzą poeci Wiem że umrę cały i stąd płynie ta słaba pociecha która daje siłę trwania poza poezją. (<i>Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland</i>)</p> | <p>In the time that has come after the worthless time after the gods had left the poets are leaving I know I will die complete and this is the source of the weak consolation that gives strength to exist outside of poetry. (<i>Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland</i>)</p> |
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It is interesting that Celan, of whom Hans Georg Gadamer spoke that you could not possibly interpret him without reference to the experience of the divine³⁶ did not find the power to “exist outside of poetry.” Różewicz in turn found this power although it would be difficult to find a stable foundation of the divine in his poetry. And he found it in the concept of final loss, complete death (including the memory of generations to come, because “I know I will die complete” is the reversal of the Horatian idea). Melancholy – a state of special sensitivity to passing away, of waiting for your own death prefigured in the deaths encountered along the way – becomes the space of a heroic meeting in Różewicz’s later poetry. It is the meeting with his own anxiety and suffering but also with the emptiness of language. As Foucault says, speaking as a way of escaping death lost sense some time ago already. The subject of Różewicz’s later poems doesn’t speak “against death”, but directs his speech towards this original (and final) absence.³⁷

³⁵ This, very plausible, interpretation was suggested by p. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, trans. A. Tarnowski, Stanford 1999, p. 38.

³⁶ H-G. Gadamer, *Under the Shadow of Nihilism*, trans. L. Schmidt, M. Reuss, [in:] D. Misgeld, G. Nicholson, *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, New York 1992, p. 111–124.

³⁷ M. Foucault, *The Father’s „No”*, [in:] idem, *Language...*, op. cit., p. 68–86 (p. 86).

Kulturkritik by Różewicz

In an interview with Jean Baudrillard Catherine Francblin asks the philosopher whether his apocalyptic worldview does not reflect a hidden yearning for the original state. Baudrillard answers:

I'm not willing to move back to a real object. This would only nurture a right-wing nostalgia. I know such an object does not exist, just the same as truth. Therefore I keep and protect a desire for it within an absolute look, a godly proposition compared to which all objects emerge in their triviality.³⁸

Today this kind of nostalgia for a “real”, non-simulacral object should be, according to Baudrillard, an intellectual strategy to help one make proper use of nothingness and emptiness. The author sees our times as a phase of empty rituals, of celebration of transparency and self-invalidation. Yet, as he speaks of the “prostitution of reality”, its self-deletion and “extermination of reality by means of its copy” the French sociologist and philosopher takes the position of someone with the memory, perhaps knowledge of the state before the anaesthetic fall, of the object in its pre-ironic version. However, as is explained in the interview, it's not that he has a real memory, he just protects the desire for an absolute point of reference. This desire is strongly linked with the need to revive the illusion, with the ability to “manage” non-presence, not with empty mutually reflecting screens, but with cultivating the mystery as a principle of presentation.

Such an “impossible” project of culture indifferent and undifferentiated, yet at the same time demanding the memory of the times “before the fall” is inscribed in the creative work of Tadeusz Różewicz. With each new volume he is closer to Baudrillard's notion of spectacle of banality and nothingness while at the same time he criticises this state with more and more vigour and fierceness. A couple of years ago you could perhaps find elements of consolation in the form of Różewicz's poetry in accordance with Lyotard's description of modernist form: “because of its recognizable consistency, [it] continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.”³⁹ But today you cannot, in my opinion, speak of any formal strategy of compensation in Różewicz's work. The dominating formal solution in his last poetry volume *Kup kota w worku (work in progress)* is not the modernist collage – recognisable as a genre and therefore consoling – but rather an intentionally “shapeless” logorrhea; next to which can be found pastiches and parodies of genres, styles of speech and specific texts.

If we read *Kup kota...* (only) from the perspective of Różewicz's former works we are bound to conclude that he realised yet another one of his creative plans: that he started with openly criticising culture and now he concludes with the same, but no critical comments are needed anymore, because culture is accused

³⁸ J. Baudrillard, C. Francblin, *Kommedia dell'arte. Wywiad przeprowadzony przez Catherine Francblin*, [in:] idem, *Spisek sztuki. Iluzje i deziluzje estetyczne z dodatkiem wywiadów i „Spisku sztuki”*, Warszawa 2006, p. 129, translation mine.

³⁹ J-F. Lyotard, *Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism*, [in:] idem, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester 1984, p.71–82 (p. 81).

by its own tool: language that got out of its control. And it is true that Różewicz's project is critical to the core. The author was always striking at the most sensitive places of the cultural body and he was unrelenting while doing so. The narrator of *Kup kota...* is aware of the fact that modern culture is able to assimilate anything, including any critical statements against itself and any form of "sabotage", yet he feels obliged to speak / criticise. This, perhaps is the mission of the poet in the lean, unpoetical times: to speak against and despite the situation of culture abolishing itself.

In this last volume of Różewicz the critical project is carried out as a "frontal assault": it is directed not only against the so-called high culture, but it also strikes at the sphere of public life, including the level of Polish political debates – often-times vulgar and simplistic. The problem, in accordance with Baudrillard's line of reasoning, is not solely aesthetic, it is predominantly anthropological. Theatricalisation of our life, narcissism and consumptionism as mindsets, fictionalisation and carnivalisation of life are but a few symptoms spoken of by contemporary sociologists and cultural theorists (Giddens, Bauman or Baudrillard himself).

The parody of pop culture, pop politics, pop religion is dangerously situated near its object. It seems, however, to be the very plan of Różewicz's total critique to go to the lengths of self-exclusion (questioning his own originality, opposing the "right" attitude).⁴⁰ Experimenting with your own and others' languages (Rorty) turns out to be very risky here, almost self-destructive. Perhaps signalling the impossibility of surpassing the logorrhoea of pop culture signifies its omnipotence, is the fulfilment of the apocalypse of language? On the other hand the volume includes some "distanced" authorial comments and at least one poem that belongs to an altogether different poetics. The poem's title is, significantly, *Credo* and we are mainly interested in its third part: "poszukiwacze złota piękna i prawdy" ("diggers of gold beauty and truth") where we can find Różewicz's "desire of the absolute": "zaczynam od początku / zaczynam jeszcze raz / zaczynam od końca" ("I start from the beginning / I start again / I start from the end"). The repetition has very little to do with Baudrillard's formula of exorcising the world in the leftover ritual, it is rather a link to Tadeusz Różewicz's former tradition of disputing with himself in the face of (the loss of) religion (and the religion of loss). In this poem we find all signs characteristic of such discussions: the choice between truth and beauty, the necessity of speaking against the impossibility of speaking, the escape of god and the toil of following the nonexistent and just apparent traces of his presence.

Certainly, Różewicz is not afraid of nonexistence. We could say he accepts Baudrillard's challenge to control nonexistence by symbolic means, returns to the illusion, but not the disenchanting illusion of pop culture hyperreality. The latter only appears in his poems as a set of ideally transparent screens that do not interpret reality, they are the disenchanting reality. It's not there, of course, that he digs for "beauty and truth." He searches for values in that, which is negated, in

⁴⁰ I tried to recount the risk involved in such an attitude as well as the negative sides of *Kup kota...*, against what seemed to be unreserved praise from critics (especially Piotr Śliwiński) in my review in "Opcje" 2008, 3, 2008, p. 95–96.

the lack: “gramatyka poezji / to gramatyka milczenia i braku” (“the grammar of poetry / is the grammar of silence and lack” – *Credo*). Still, he does not turn from a melancholic into a proponent of the work of mourning; he does not expect to receive back that which is missing, he only “protects the desire.”

