

Małgorzata Gajak-Toczek*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9774-887X>

Different faces of old age as perceived by the students of Polish studies

The autumn of life is a topic which has become the focus of many areas of science, because it is difficult to strictly assign the problems of being old to one specific science that studies them. Though there have been attempts at approaching old age in reference to entire populations in terms of unifying trends, it is chiefly a person's individual experience that determines these trends (in that respect, scientists have identified personal stories of individuals, their attitudes towards the present time, and the strategies of evaluating the past), and to a lesser extent the product of a specific community or culture.¹

Old age has been discussed differently throughout the ages. Some perceived it as a time of painful physical changes, social exclusion and severe loneliness. Others saw in it an opportunity to fulfil plans, and associated it with life's peace.² Even today, being a phenomenon difficult to grasp, old age is evaluated in various ways. The proposed definitions depend on the methodological assumptions applicable for a specific area of research. The notion has different specific definitions in sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. It is approached differently by medicine and by gerontology. Despite these differences, it is possible to identify some common elements. Virtually all sciences agree on both the uncertainty regarding the reasons

* Ph.D., professor, University of Lodz, Faculty of Philology, Institute of Polish Philology and Speech-Language Pathology, Department of Contemporary Polish Language, ul. Pomorska 171/173, 90-236 Łódź, malgorzata.gajak@uni.lodz.pl

1 J.-P. Bois, *Historia starości. Od Montaigne'a do pierwszych emerytur*, trans. K. Marczevska, vol. 2, Wydawnictwo "Marabut", Warsaw 1996, p. 313. [Unless indicated otherwise, English versions of quotations were translated from Polish]

2 Vide M. Gajak-Toczek, B. Gala-Milczarek, "Człowiek stary w mediach – stereotyp a obraz postulowany", in: *(Nowe) media. Implikacje kulturowe, językowe i edukacyjne*, M. Karwatowska, B. Jarosz (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2015, pp. 51–61.

for human ageing,³ and the conviction that it is related to a series of unfavourable biological changes.⁴

Old age as an existential phenomenon has been inscribed in the language of literature and literary studies. The conspiracy of silence in any public discussions, which was discussed in the 1970s by Simone de Beauvoir in her famous work *The Coming of Age*,⁵ has now been broken. Among the many recent Polish academic publications regarding the most recent works, the most noteworthy include Cezary Rosiński's *Ocalić starość. Literackie obrazy starości w literaturze polskiej* and Agnieszka Czyżak's *Na starość. Szkice o literaturze przełomu tysiącleci*.⁶ One should also refer to the collective works: *Egzystencjalne doświadczenie starości w literaturze*, *Życie w starości*, *Dojrzewanie do pełni życia: starość w literaturze polskiej i obcej*, and the selection of material from the *Starość*⁷ [Old Age] conference of the academic staff and students of the University of Silesia.

While the discourse on old age should also be used at school, education has not yet properly approached the problem, as indicated by various studies, e.g. Izabela Kochan, Beata Zięba-Kołodziej, Ludwika Wojciechowska, and Helena Ochonczenko.⁸ The aim of this article is to present one possible variant for the training

3 The Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine negates the assumption that ageing is a natural and inevitable process; cf. B. R. Barber, *Skonsumowani. Jak rynek psuje dzieci, infantyлізуje dorosłych i polityka obywateli*, trans. H. Jankowska, Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Literackie Muza, Warsaw 2008, p. 28.

4 Any attempt at defining the ageing of the human body leads to the creation of new theories. Those are classified into biological theories, which are related to recognising the pathogenesis of the process, and psychological theories, which focus on the analysis of social and mental old age.

5 Cf. S. de Beauvoir, *Starość*, trans. Z. Styszyńska, Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, Warsaw 2011; the work consists two parts: the first one entitled *Old Age Seen from Without*, discusses the anthropological history of old age; the second part (*The Being-in-the-world*) offers readers an opportunity to view old age from the perspective of a person experiencing the condition.

6 C. Rosiński, *Ocalić starość. Literackie obrazy starości w polskiej literaturze najnowszej*, Wydawnictwo E-naukowiec, Lublin 2015; A. Czyżak, *Na starość. Szkice o literaturze przełomu tysiącleci*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań 2011.

7 *Egzystencjalne doświadczenie starości w literaturze*, A. Gleń, I. Jokiel, M. Szladowski (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, Opole 2008; *Życie w starości*, B. Bugajska (ed.), Przedsiębiorstwo Produkcyjno-Handlowe Zapol, Dmochowski, Sobczyk, Szczecin 2007; *Dojrzewanie do pełni życia. Starość w literaturze polskiej i obcej*, S. Kruk, E. Flis-Czerniak (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2006; *Starość. Wybór materiałów z VII konferencji Pracowników i Studentów Instytutu Nauk o Literaturze Polskiej UŚ*, A. Nawarecki, A. Dziadek (eds.), Górnośląska Macierz Kultury, Katowice 1995.

8 Cf. I. Kochan, "Obraz starości w percepcji uczniów liceów ogólnokształcących kreowany przez treści programowe nauczania języka polskiego", *Studia z Teorii Wychowania* 2015, vol. VI, issue 1 (10), pp. 135-159 (the article included an account of the researcher's own stud-

of Polish studies students, i.e. future teachers, to create fulfilling education “for” and “towards” old age. Many factors indicate the importance of engaging in such activities and should be highlighted to the students of Polish studies, i.e. future teachers. First of all, one should realise that centuries-old modes of talking about the evening of life do not carry their former strength. The stereotype of the Old Philosopher is commonly juxtaposed with a clown, a madman, and a person who is not needed by anyone, and who cannot lead or teach. The twilight of existence is no longer synonymous with wisdom; it is rather perceived as the epitome of weakness. The modern world has rejected the former post-figurative cultural model defined by Margaret Mead, based on the transmission of knowledge from parents to children. A new pre-figurative model defined by Mead utilises entirely different premises: not so long ago a member of an older generation could have stated emphatically: “listen, I was young once, too, but you have never been old.”⁹ Today, though, young adults realise that their formative period is fundamentally different from that of the generation of their grandparents. Therefore, when designing activities, one should consider the misalignment of the world of students in their everyday cognition and the world of their predecessors (which also applies to those who display considerable skill in emphasising with the experiences of the Other).

The demographic ageing of modern populations constitutes a major challenge for the near future and another important argument in favour of implementing the notion of education “for” and “towards” old age.¹⁰ The European Commission reported that forecasts show that by 2060 the number Europeans aged over 65

ies conducted within a research project under the same name); B. Zięba – Kołodziej, “Starość – refleksjei oczekiwania ludzi młodych”, in: *Pedagogikaspołeczna wobec problemów współczesnej młodzieży. Polska pedagogika społeczna na początku XXI wieku*, B. Chrostowska, E. Kantowicz, C. Kurkowski (eds.), Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne “Akapit”, Toruń 2010, pp. 65–66; L. Wojciechowska, “Człowiek stary w percepcji młodzieży”, in: *Z zagadnień psychologii rozwoju człowieka*, E. Rydz, D. Musiał (eds.), vol. 1, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II, Lublin 2007, pp. 178–180; H. Ochonczenko, “Starość w opinii młodzieży szkół średnich” in: *Zdrowie człowieka i jego edukacja gerontologiczna*, M. Kuchcińska (ed.), Wydawnictwo Akademii Bydgoskiej im. Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz 2004, pp. 125–133.

- 9 Cf. M. Mead, *Kultura i tożsamość. Studium dystansu międzypokoleniowego*, trans. J. Hołówka, 2nd edition, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2000, pp. 23–24. The researcher also identified the model of a co-figurative culture where parents and children learn from their peers.
- 10 Vide *Edukacja do i w starości. Wybrane konteksty, problemy, uwarunkowania*, M. Kuchcińska (ed.), Wydawnictwo Kujawsko-Pomorskiej Szkoły Wyższej, Bydgoszcz 2008; A. Leszczyńska-Rejchert, *Człowiek starszy i jego wspomaganie – w stronę pedagogiki starości*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego, Olsztyn 2005; *Starzenie się a satysfakcja z życia*, S. Steuden, M. Marczuk (eds.), Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 2006; Z. Szarota, *Gerontologia społeczna i oświatowa. Zarys problematyki*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pedagogicznej, Kraków 2004.

will double. The number of the oldest inhabitants of the continent, over 80 years of age, will also increase (currently 23 million compared to 62 million by 2060).¹¹ The growth of the population of senior citizens encouraged Bohdan Dziemidok to expand the periodisation of human existence by Vern Bullough, Bonnie Bullough and Kathy M. Munro which concluded with the wooden age (70–80 years)¹² to include one more period: the sand age (80–90 years). Allow me to add that the name raises a common association when referring to seniors, i.e. “do piachu” [to be buried].¹³

When establishing a discourse with university students (and, in the future, with high schoolers) regarding old age, it is necessary to also remember that even though civilised societies have developed a system of childcare, supplemented by grandmothers, aunts and uncles, there is no complete model that prepares people for taking care of their ancestors. Young people are also not prepared for extended care of their parents.¹⁴

The matters outlined above prove that it is worth engaging in activities to help young adults understand the problems of old age, which are experienced by people in their final period of life, and realise that these problems will apply to them in the future. The objective to develop conditions for a dignified conclusion of human existence, so that the final years are not merely filled with pain and social inclusion, but also include satisfaction in one's long life, is a challenge which every new generation faces. Surely people's empathy and sympathy for old-timers will help them to silence their depressing thoughts about their various ailments and at times a humiliating sense of being a burden, and instead allow them to serenely and hopefully cross the shadow line.

The sheer extent of the topic was the reason I decided to limit the examples used for this article to texts which included the modes of thinking about old age specific for the turn of the 21st century: *Baśń zimowa. Esej o starości* by Ryszard Przybylski, „*Trakt starego człowieka*”. *Próby polityki starości* by Tadeusz Sławek, and *Lala* by

11 Cf. M. Bojanowski, “Stary Kontynent starych ludzi”, *Gazeta Wyborcza* 2011, issue 257, as cited in: B. Dziemidok, “Aksjologiczne aspekty starości: czy starość może być piękna, dobra i szczęśliwa?”, in: *Starość darem, zadaniem i wyzwaniem. Wybór materiałów konferencyjnych*, A.A. Zych, Wydawnictwo „Progres”, Sosnowiec–Dąbrowa Górnicza 2014, p. 257.

12 Earlier periods of life identified by the researchers include: the bronze age: 20–30 years, the golden age 30–40 years; the silver age 40–50 years; the iron age 50–60 years; the tin age 60–70 years. The theory was discussed in J. Rembowski, *Psychologiczne problemy starzenia się człowieka*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw–Poznań 1984, p. 10.

13 B. Dziemidok, “Aksjologiczne aspekty starości: ...”, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

14 Cf. M. Szpakowska, *Chcieć i mieć. Samowiedza obyczajowa w Polsce czasu przemian*, Wydawnictwo W.A.B, Warsaw 2003, pp. 242–243.

Jacek Dehnel¹⁵. They offer, on the one hand, autobiographic and biographic observations, formulated at the end of one's journey, on the meaning of existence, framed in the form of an essay or novel, and, on the other, they open areas of inter-generational dialogue. They enable people to talk about important problems of contemporary times using contemporary language; they also complement classes with the latest literature (which is still omitted from school set book lists).

The attributes of the autumn of life: suffering (evaluated in various ways), sadness (which can be overcome), and ugliness (re-evaluated, and, actually, aestheticised) enable one to define various areas of study, e.g.: existence towards death, the sense of alienation, the subsidence of body, the annulling of old age or the gift that it brings. I shall use the final three categories as the axis of my article.

These initial assumptions enable one to introduce into the discourse with students of Polish studies the category of existential experience¹⁶, broadly explicated in literary and anthropological studies, which, as posited by Barbara Skarga and Ryszard Nycz, I view through the lens of a testimony (a work of literature in this case) marked by the individualism of a creator, i.e. having the trademarks of uniqueness

15 R. Przybylski, *Baśń zimowa. Esej o starości*, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warszawa 1998, hereinafter abbreviated to (BZ); T. Stawek, "'Trakt starego człowieka'. Próba polityki starości", in: *Egzystencjalne doświadczenie starości w literaturze*, A. Gleń, I. Jokiel, M. Szladowski (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, Opole 2008, pp. 15–31; J. Dehnel, *Lala*, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., Warsaw 2006; hereinafter abbreviated to (L). I also discussed in-class attempts at taming the topic of old age in: "(Nie)trudne rozmowy o starości ze studentami polonistyki", in: *Edukacja polonistyczna jako wyzwanie. Powszechność i elitarność polonistyki*, vol. 1, Ewa Jaskółtowa, Danuta Krzyżyk, Bernardetta Niesporek-Szmburska, Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, Katowice 2016, pp. 195–211. XYZ, "Edukacja ku starości w kręgu kinematografii polskiej (na wybranych przykładach)", in: *Edukacja polonistyczna. Metamorfozy kontekstów i metod*, M. Karwatowska, L. Tymiak (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2017, pp. 283–298.

16 Recently, four volumes of articles devoted to the category of experience have been published; the first one: *Literackie reprezentacje doświadczenia*, W. Bolecki, E. Nawrocka (eds.), Fundacja "Centrum Międzynarodowych Badań Polonistycznych", Instytut Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Wydawnictwo, Warsaw 2007; the second one: *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie*, R. Nycz, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska (eds.), Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, Krakow 2006; the third one, *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie. Dyscypliny, paradygmaty, dyskursy*, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, R. Nycz (eds.), Wydawnictwo Szkoły Wyższej Psychologii Społecznej "Academica", Warsaw 2008; and the fourth one: *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie. Analizy kulturoznawcze*, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, R. Nycz, B. Giza (eds.), Wydawnictwo Szkoły Wyższej Psychologii Społecznej "Academica", Warsaw 2008. Thus, the thematic formula of those studies fits the contemporary studies of literary theoreticians; vide also: *Doświadczenie lektury. Między krytyką literacką a dydaktyką literatury*, K. Biedrzycki, A. Janus-Sitarz (eds.), Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, Krakow 2012.

and singularity.¹⁷ Thus located, these activities enable one to comment not only on a work being analysed, but also on the intricacies of human existence, i.e. that which the Karga called the “existential relationship between man and the world.”¹⁸

Empathetic reading seems the right response to the challenge of the available reality: it offers an opportunity to prepare future teachers to educate “for” and “towards” old age, it creates an opportunity for avoiding an artificial distance, and, at the same time, thanks to reflective anthropology, it reveals new perspectives of study, i.e. the limited nature of old age and its transgressiveness. Thus, it authorises one to depart from the traditional model of academic codification.

Experience is viewed as a notion which is more existential than theoretical, close to the common perception, related to that which is referred to as life’s wisdom. However, it does not constitute, as indicated by Martin Jay,¹⁹ knowledge itself, but it rather includes references to a new experience. It entails the development of human identity. The fact of being experienced does not mean that one knows something forever and becomes inflexible. On the contrary, they become more open to new experiences and stop being dogmatic (experiencing, cognition, human development in time). The concept of experience as an application, i.e. a gradual recognising of oneself in the face of that which is alien, has an ethical dimension. It enables one to combine its two kinds as defined by Wilhelm Dilthey: *Erlebnis* and *Fr Erfahrung*. The former in its core has the word “life” (*Leben*) and it connotes a personal type of experience; it is related to that which is individual, emphasising the original unity which precedes any objectivisation. The latter indicates a relationship with a journey (core: *Fahrt*) and is associated with external experiences and cognitive judgements regarding them, and thus it denotes the process of learning, accumulating various situations into the *I* story (a kind of wisdom specific for old age, as it comes by the end of existence), referring to that which is collective, public, and connected with cultural archetypes.²⁰

Zofia Budrewicz indicated just how important it is in teaching to base the act of reading on the category of experience as she saw in it an opportunity

rozwijania i odwoływania się do nabytych doświadczeń wyobrażonych, by “działały” w nowych sytuacjach i/lub ponawianych nowych lekturowych doświadcze-

17 Cf. B. Skarga, *Kwintet metafizyczny*, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, Kraków 2005, p. 120; R. Nycz, “O nowoczesności jako doświadczeniu. Uwagi na wstępie”, in: *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie*, p. 13.

18 Ibid., p. 15.

19 Cf. M. *Pieśni doświadczenia. Nowoczesne amerykańskie i europejskie wariacje na uniwersalny temat*, trans. Agnieszka Rejniak-Majewska, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, Kraków 2008.

20 Cf. M. Jay, “Dilthey i odtwórcze przeżywanie dawnego *Erlebnis*”, in: *Pieśni doświadczenia. Nowoczesne amerykańskie...*, pp. 321–337.

niach zmysłowo-mentalnych i wpływały modyfikująco na tożsamość podmiotu doświadczającego.²¹

[to develop and refer to acquired imagined experiences so that they could “operate” in new situations and/or renewed new reading-based sensory and mental experiences, and modify the identity of the experiencing individual]

Thus, shaped imagined experience or the experience of the imagination leads to combining the influence of empirical knowledge with a reading, enabling a personal response to a text’s personal nature. A young person should learn that the pace of civilisational change does not lower the importance of experience in the cognition of the world or self-cognition.

The project presented in the article originated from a methodology built on the selected aspects of the ethical breakthrough discussed in the works by Zofia Budrewicz, Anna Janus-Sitarz, Krystyna Koziółek, Elżbieta Mikoś, Barbara Myrdzik, and Anna Włodarczyk. It leads to the application of the category of the Other in the discourse of education, broadly explicated in literary studies. The attempts at emphatic reading proposed by the authors should be undertaken on a regular basis as the reading-based reconstruction of the experiences of the creator, related to their experiences of old age, constituting a special space for musing on one’s own existence, while the created empathy bears self-reflection, so important in the process of shaping the personalities of young people. In organising encounters with literary images of old age, one should notice the operative utility of the figure of subjective sensory and mental experience with the opportunities of recipients/ students/ pupils having an insight into them. The personalistic model of perception focused on extracting in a school analysis the aesthetic and impressive functions, i.e. focused on the recipient, does not remain in conflict with the artistry of a text, nor does it reject the interpretative tools of the philological method.²²

Waning of humans

Baśń zimowa by Przybylski is, as Anna Legeżyńska suggested, one of the “most personal”²³ accounts of experiencing the autumn of life, recorded by a ninety-year-old man conscious of his defeat in the struggle against Nature and Destiny. It gave young adults an opportunity for extensive consideration on the passage of life and

21 Z. Budrewicz, “Odbiorca szkolnej lektury jako podmiot doświadczający”, in: *Doświadczenie lektury...*, p. 64 [Unless indicated otherwise, English versions were translated from Polish].

22 Por. E. Mikoś, *Lekcje empatii. Czytanie poezji dwudziestowiecznej w liceum. Literatura – psychologia – dydaktyka*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, Krakow 2009.

23 A. Legeżyńska, “Baśń z okrutnym zakończeniem”, *Polonistyka* 1998, issue 10, pp. 691–693.

it created a chance to commune with an old age which is unrealised, foolish, which carries ridiculed suffering, one to which “nie można powtarzać Heideggerowskich mądrości, że ‘jest bytem-ku-śmierci’” [a person cannot repeat Heideggerian learned remarks that ‘it is a being-towards-death’], but rather: “‘Jeszcze nie teraz’. Byle zdanie to nie było konwencjonalnym pocieszeniem” [‘Not just yet’ As long as the sentence is no mere conventional consolation.] (BZ, pp. 132–133) The identification of new instances of the everyday experiences of a senior during classes was accompanied by the chorus-like phrases, incessantly repeated “triumfalny krzyk ciała: ‘Ze mnie się poczyłeś i wraz ze mną się skończysz’” [triumphant scream of the body: ‘You were conceived from me and you will end with me’] and the undying song of matter “‘Jam ciebie zrodziła i ja cię unicestwię’” [‘I bore you and I will annihilate you’] (BZ, p. 14).

Unhurriedly, with prudence and consideration, students read the suggestive records of the changes introduced in a senior’s world, framed through the lens of an adventure, i.e. something in which one participates with engagement yet involuntarily. Among the factors which determined the processes of the protagonist’s social inclusion, which sentenced him to the “żałosne tułactwo umysłu między znużeniem i aktywnością” [pathetic wanderings of the mind between weariness and activeness] (BZ, p. 2), students listed, e.g.: the loss of physical strength, dotage, decrease in mental prowess (deteriorating eyesight, loss of hearing, and the lack of interest in reality). The dramatic nature of the account from the stay in “death row”, as Przybylski referred to his humble abode, was easier to highlight through the analysis of the subtitles: *W grobie mieszkania* [In the tomb of my flat], *Wielkie znużenie* [The grand weariness], *Zimne delirium* [Cold delirium], *Spadanie w nicość* [Falling into nothingness], *Sens życia i absurd istnienia* [The meaning of life and the absurdity of existence] and *Koniec świata* [The end of the world]. The imagination of future teachers was fueled by the expressive, sharp descriptions of the man’s many visits to the hospital²⁴, which included lying in bed in the corridor, made necessary due to the insufficiency of rooms, “wśród licznych staruszek, niemych papierowych istot z otwartymi oczyma, pustymi jak wszechświat, i w końcu wśród starców, którzy nie panują już nad własnym organizmem, upokorzeni nieskrywanym obrzydzeniem i powstrzymywaną wściekłością personelu, skądinąd wspaniałego” [among numerous gaffers, mute paper-thin beings with opened eyes empty like the universe, and, finally, among old timers who could not control their own bodies, and who were humiliated by the explicit disgust and restrained fury of the personnel, who were excellent nonetheless.] (BZ, pp. 12–13)

²⁴ Old age was discussed similarly by: K. Brandys, *Przygody Robinsona*, Wydawnictwo „Iskry”, Warsaw 1999; J. Bocheński, *Stan po zapadzi*, Niezależna Oficyna Wydawnicza, Warsaw 1987.

During a discussion, the surprising words of the author received a commentary:

O takiej fazie dolegliwości wieku podeszłego mogę więc powiedzieć tylko to, co Platon orzekł o swoim Absolutie. „A więc nie będzie o nim ani imienia, ani opisu, ani wiedzy, ani postrzegania, ani mniemania”. [...] O tej fazie starości należy milczeć. Jak w Oświećmiiu. (BZ, p. 13)²⁵

[Therefore, all I can say about that phase of the ailments of old age is what Plato once said about his Absolute. “So, it won’t have either a name, or a description, or knowledge, or perception, or belief.” [...] One should remain quiet about this phase of old age. As in Auschwitz]

The students, in following the essayist, interpreted the struggles with the end of his existence as one of the most personal experiences of a human being, and impossible to co-experience or even to express in words, though it applies to everyone. Contemporary language has lost its power of naming. The *homo sapiens* summarise the end of existence with powerless silence.

Additionally, much attention was assigned to the notions related to the corporeality of humans in old age,²⁶ which is often glossed over, being *the* cultural taboo of the 21st century. Young people spoke openly about the situation of a senior who, once crossing the “shadow line”, will be deprived of the ability to love by the numbing of senses: it will deprive them of the good which presents the beauty of the world, the joy of existence, and, sometimes, even its meaning. Robbed of the madness of the senses, the spontaneity of experiencing, the thoughtless experiencing of beauty, cast between uncertainty and despair, an old person is tormented by the thought that, as the author of *Baśń zimowa* put it, “między nim a Erosem rozwarła się przepaść. Nie wie, jak ma nadal żyć. Wie tylko na pewno, że ‘nie dokochał świata’” [A chasm opened between him and Eros. He does not know how to live on. What he only knows for sure is that ‘he did not love the world as much as he wanted to.’] (BZ, pp. 68–69)

25 That is not an uncommon comparison; vide H. Klimko-Dobrzaniecki, *Dom Róży*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2006; Z. Rudzka, *Ślicznotka doktora Josefa*, Jacek Santorski & Co Agencja Wydawnicza: Wydawnictwo Inanna, Warsaw 2006.

26 One could use as context for that the poems on aging by Czesław Miłosz; I discussed those issues in my papers: Vide M. Gajak-Toczek, “‘Wiersze ostatnie’ Czesława Miłosza liryczną pieśnią o ludzkich sposobach doświadczenia świata”, *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia ad Didacticam Litterarum Polonarum et Linguae Polonae Pertinentia IV* 2013, vol. 140, pp. 224–245; idem., “A Few Reflections on Life-passing on the Basis of Works by Tadeusz Różewicz and Czesław Miłosz”, *Man and the Word* 2013, vol. 15, issue 2, pp. 76–82; also available at: <http://www.cceol.com/aspx/issuedetails.aspx?issueid=441b032e-7c72-454d-ad90-bcd4caef84ce&articleId=01dc7981-ffb0-4752-bd3c-c8f9e6b848a5>.

The central notions within the discussions also included questions about the possibility/impossibility of a re-definition by a protagonist of their own identity in the face of the downgrading of their former *I*. The autumn of life entails not only, as stressed by Leszek Szabała, a fear of “bezdziejstwo”²⁷ [inhistoriness], i.e. idleness, a special case of being “thrown out to the trash”, but also the necessity to experience suffering with which one cannot easily cope, something which was already stressed by Epicurus in antiquity, as he argued that great pleasure comes from a break in pain. The juxtaposition of the well-known saying that sickness elevates a person with the dramatic assertion by fr. Józef Tischner, while he was battling laryngeal cancer, that “apparently it does not elevate one”,²⁸ opens an area for considering the core of human existence, for considering the potential forms of being around those whose days are marked by the trauma of painful experiences. I am not delving into more detail on this issue as it would require a more extensive discussion.

Students’ attempts at discussing the collection of essays as a personal guide-book on old age are justified by the literary scholar’s attempt at offering a unifying juxtaposition of his own vision with the experiences of other thinkers and artists: Socrates, Kant, Michelangelo, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, and Tadeusz Różewicz. The selection of these figures reveals the intentions of the creator who decides to write down the modes of coping with old age.

Future professional teachers framed the history of the process and the death of Socrates (similarly to, e.g.: Leszek Kołakowski, Czesław Miłosz, and Zbigniew Herbert) as a brave act of self-annihilation being the crowning event of the “koszmarnych stron doli człowieczej z okrutną zapłatą za cielesne zaistnienie” [ghastly pages of the human fate with the cruel payment for corporeal existence] (BZ, p. 9). They considered voluntary death as an escape from the disability of old age. The course participants placed Kant’s story on the other extreme; before he passed, he was deprived of everything for which he had served. The triumph of Nature over Mind meant dotage, mental decrepitude, the fading of once ingenious mind, and the loss of the “adamicznej zdolności nazywania” [Adam’s ability to name] (BZ, p. 10) and the wait for the future (the experience of the “niepomiernej nudy zmęczenia” [endless boredom of tiredness]; BZ, p. 65).

27 H. Szabała, “Etiuda o starości”, [in:] *Wobec świata wartości. Księga pamiątkowa w 45-lecie pracy Profesora Bohdana Dziemidoka*, H. Szabała, W. Pepliński (eds.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, Gdańsk 2001, p. 238.

28 I referred to, e.g. fr. J. Tischner’s statements, cf. W. Bonowicz, “Czy cierpienie uszlachetnia?”, *Tygodnik Powszechny* 2014, issue 37, www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/cierpienie-zawsze-niszczy-24077 [accessed on: 8.09.2014] and his study: *Myślenie według wartości*, 2nd edition, Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, Krakow 2011; vide also: T. Ponikło, *Józef Tischner, Myślenie według miłości. Ostatnie słowa*, Wydawnictwo WAM, Krakow 2013.

The recording of the voice of the “starego, schorowanego i zmęczonego ciała” [old, sick and tired body] of Michelangelo enabled the students to create views of the continuing fear which accompanies the march towards one’s end, the replacement of former joys with the feeling of torment caused by the realisation of the coming of death. The reference to the assertion by Jan Białostocki²⁹ on Plato’s flame of love (*fiammad’amor*) which was the patron of Michelangelo’s achievements offered credit to the interpretation of the master’s achievements in the category of rising, including above the failing abilities of the body.

The monologues of the Eliot protagonist on the “nieodpoznaniu świata” [unrecognition of the world] (BZ, p. 58), the cunning cruelty of fate and the lack of understanding of the meaning of one’s own existence, once again taught young people that even the happiest, richest and healthy old age is, basically, mere enduring. In his soliloquies, Eliot’s protagonist spoke on “co historia wyprawia z człowiekiem i co człowiek wyprawia z samym sobą [...] bez ideologicznych bredni” [the things that history does with man and what man does to himself [...] without ideological nonsense.] (BZ, p. 59) However, immersion “w szaleństwie wybytych obłądu” [in madness devoid of insanity], enclosed in a foolish catalogue of useless memories, did not offer any consolation. Similar conclusions were offered by the students when reading Iwaszkiewicz’s fragments on old age. Przybylski referred to the poet’s strive for retaining his existential harmony as “priceless idiocy” arguing that the fact of achieving the *serenitas* recommended by Seneca was a mere “foray”, the futility of which can be postponed at any moment by harsh reality. Różewicz also perceived old age as the waiting for leaving one’s existence. The author of *The Red Glove* viewed it, similarly to Przybylski, as the process of re-evaluating all values, a world devoid of Transcendence or any metaphysical hopes for eternity. The run towards the cemetery, the gates of which open to the land of the great NOTHING, was not captured in the vision of a contact with the Absolute.

The answer to whether in the available reality there is a place for seniors who experience a somewhat “unreal” “existence without existence”, which does not want to/cannot say anything anymore, constituted the result of deciphering the metaphors: “owoc jarzębiny, który dotrwał do zimy, tylko po to, by rozdziobały go gile” [the fruit of the rowan tree which lasted until winter only to be devoured by bullfinches] (BZ, p. 44), “zamrożona kapusta na polu. Żałosne ostatnie astry” [frozen cabbage in the field. Pathetic last asters] (BZ, p. 52), “Zamrożona wołowina. Stos pokruszonych obrazów” [Frozen beef. Piles of broken paintings] (BZ, p. 70), and “Paskalowski myślący badly” [Pascal’s thinking weed.] (BZ, p. 95). The course participants stressed that when the mind becomes defeated in its fight against the end of existence, people no longer try to reflect on who/what a person becomes.

²⁹ Cf. J. Białostocki, *Płec śmierci*, trans. J. Białostocka, 2nd edition, Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2007, p. 40.

That is because old age deprives a person of everything that built their previous *I* one thing at a time: the potential of thinking, expressing own needs, self-determination, and the awareness of participation in the existence of others and of a community. In Przybylski's essay they did not find any recipe for the autumn of one's life, they did not extract from it any advice or guidelines for continued existence. They considered old age, the Grand Plunderer (Cezary Rosiński), as the final victor. The juxtaposition of the attitude of the author with the suggestions of Anna Czabanowska-Wróbel and Helena Zaworska³⁰ on the existence of yet another path for an Old Person, apart from doubt, i.e. the wisdom of senior works, which in late style often enabled them to masterfully depict the depth of thought built on many years of experience,³¹ spurred discourse on the possibility/impossibility of becoming victorious over the life's autumn's characteristic breakdown through the act of artistic creation.

NOTHINGing of reality

Sławek utilised a language subject to the rigour of scientific discourse in "*Trakt starego człowieka*". *Próba polityki starości*, an analysis of the title poem by Wystan Hugh Auden, *Podróż zimowa* by Franz Peter Schubert and Johann Ludwig Wilhelm Müller, the journals of Sándor Márai, the poems by Paul Celan, and most of all the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, to create a bridge for the search for universal categories, and a special kind of existential code capable of expressing old age. By following an Old Person on their journey devoid of any spatial or temporal bearing ("wołanie tego, co nie-ludzkie" [calling for that which is in-human]; T. p. 23), the future teachers were able to realise that the autumn of life not only suspends any previous rules, but it also lifts a person's responsibility for others. The interpretation of the analogy between old age and music triggered the register of many aspects of old age, e.g.: involuntariness, unexpectedness, and the ability to take patronage over events freed of the rule of people (the suspension of will "od wcześniejszych powinności" [from previous obligations]).

By focusing the discussion around the philosopher's words: "Stary człowiek odstaje, nie pasuje, i tym samym staje się dla nas wołaniem tego, co nie-ludzkie" [An old person stands out, does not fit, and thus becomes for us the calling for that which is in-human] (T, p. 20) enabled the verbalisation of the realistic truth on the inevitable processes of ageing, and it constitutes a starting point for making

³⁰ A. Czabanowska-Wróbel, "Winterreise", *Teksty Drugie* 1998, issue 5 [53], p. 155; H. Zaworska, "Pieśń myślącego badyla", *Gazeta Wyborcza* 1998, issue 74, pp. 24–25.

³¹ Cf. T. Wójcik, *Późna twórczości wielkich poetów. Dramat formy*, Elipsa. Dom Wydawniczy i Handlowy. Włodzimierz Ulicki, Warsaw 2005; M. Wallis, *Późna twórczość wielkich artystów*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 1975.

attempts at extracting the figure of the Wise Man from the philosophical treatise. Preoccupied with “spojrzeniem w NIC” [peering into NOTHING] (T, p. 20), Sławek’s persona, the “special state”, presented, thanks to the acuteness of the view, the spiritual dimension of the world, apart from documenting the biological dimension of personal enduring, subjected to the laws of passing. It thus created the reality of things and major matters, which are always important, extracted from that which is superficial, shallow, and doomed for the modernising shallows of perceptions, “zmieniających wszystko co-było na-to-co-jest i to-co niecierpliwie-wyczekiwane” [changing everything that-was into-that-which-is and that-which is impatient-awaited] (T, p. 18). Therefore, through a magical act of creation, Sławek absorbed the human existence of the world (“specyficzne konstytuowanie się egzystencji na drogach życia” [the special establishing of existence in the paths of life], T, p. 23), presenting the perspectives of life in line with the rule expressed by Paul and Jacqueline Chaurchard: “to, co zostało urzeczywistnione, przedstawia większą wartość aktualną niż to, co jest jedynie w stanie możliwości” [that which has been realised presents higher current value than that which only exists as a possibility].³²

At the end of life, the students saw, following Sławek, a synthesis of earlier experiences of a human being, intuitive knowledge, sometimes irrational, enabling one to make categorical statements. The identification by Sławek of the exclusive nature of the wisdom of old age constituted a major learning conclusion: the ability to use that gift is conditional on the possession of the proper collection of experiences, accumulated from the earliest years, which provide the ability to balance logical and pragmatic premises in the decisions made.

The gift of old age

Jacek Dehnel argued in *Lala*³³ that in order to experience joy in old age, an old person must be treated subjectively. That is determined by many factors: their health, standard of living, and their relations with family, friends and their close environment. The classically-focussed author suggested that old age also entails the creation of a summary: the question about the goal of the efforts made becomes increasingly fundamental at the end of one’s existence. The story of the title character, i.e. the ninety-year-old Helena Bieniecka, enabled the young people to track not only the history of Polish landed gentry (i.e. of: manors, property, the rise

32 P. and J. Chaurchard, *Starzec się we dwoje*, trans. B. Durbajło, Instytut Wydawniczy „PAX”, Warsaw 1977, pp. 26–27.

33 Interpretation was aided by, e.g. the texts: H. Ratuszny, “Opowieść w kolorze sepii”, *Twórczość* 2007, issue 1, pp. 110–112, and D. Nowacki, “‘Lala’, Jacek Dehnel, WAB Warszawa”, *Gazeta Wyborcza* dated 23 October 2006, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75517,3699387,lala-dehnel-jacek.html?disableRedirects=true>, [accessed on: 1.09.2017].

and fall of fortunes, foreign trips, international relations, family heirlooms, aristocratic claims, eccentric aunts, mésalliances, and oddball or gambler uncles) but, and possibly most of all, encouraged them to notice the experiences of a woman with an exceptionally strong personality, whose mind and body were subject to the unrelenting laws of passing. In class, students read fragments of the book which depicted the continuously increasing senile decrepitude of the old lady: her mental infantilisation, and the inability to coherently talk about the past due to loss of memory. Lala “wrapped in old age” confused events slowly moving into the shadows. Her grandson picked up her story thus trying to repay his debt of gratitude for her love, respect, care for his development, the introduction to culture and the world of not merely artistic values (the very young narrator lived in a highly spiritual culture: during his childhood he listened attentively to her spinning the stories from the Greek mythology, in his early school years he discussed Gustav Flaubert and Stendhal, and he listened exclusively to classical music³⁴).

Despite the fact that Lala’s old age is not mature (students considered, e.g. the major events of the Grand History of the 20th century which were omitted by the author), it did mark the limits of the maturity of the narrator who had to face that which is hardest: her death. When conversing with the students I emphasised those fragments in which Jacek (more often the diminutive Jacuś) talked about the difficulty of taking care of his increasingly sick grandma without any embarrassment. In their reflections, the future Polish philologists emphasised the narrative technique in the story: Dehnel broke the cultural taboo by presenting the power and the decay of old age when the protagonist was not able to control either her physiology or memory. Among all the quotes depicting the physical downfall of the woman it is worth mentioning the young man’s emotional words:

zaczęła przypominać rozregulowany mechanizm: umysł, hydraulika, zegar biologiczny... Przeraziła mnie ciągła ekspozycja fizjologii, puszczenie wszystkich barier wstydu; patrzyłem na nią i zdawało mi się (jakie to banalne), że jest dzieckiem; przypomnianie: zrób siusiu, włóż pampersa, no widzisz, a nie mówiłem, nie, nie rusz tego, daj, ja posprzątam...(L, p. 377).

[she started resembling a mechanism going haywire: her mind, the hydraulics, her biological clock... I was terrified by the constant exposure of physiology, the letting go of all barriers of embarrassment; I looked at her and I thought I saw (how banal) a child; the constant reminding: take a pee pee, put on a diaper, see I told you so, no don’t touch that, I’ll clean that up...]

³⁴ The issue probably worth discussing in more detail with students would be the old age of Jacek himself, who by spending time with his grandma never had any true contact with his peers.

The message from the Gdańsk writer to his readers is framed in the quote:

Chyba każdy z nas potrzebuje kogoś takiego – mistrza życia. Kogoś, kto wie, jak należy postępować wobec bliźnich, czym się kierować, jakie wybory podjąć, kto może świecić przykładem, a nie tylko zakurzonym dyrdymałem z ksiąg rozkazów i nakazów.³⁵

[I think we all need someone like that – a champion of life. Someone who knows how to behave towards others, what to follow, what choices to make, who can be an example and not only a dusty hokum from books of dos and don'ts]

This message becomes particularly meaningful in the age of the fall of all authority figures. The story of Lala offers an opportunity to discuss one's own identity, to root one's own *I* in the past, to frame symbolic meanings, and to include that which is past into the available present. Today's existence in this discourse achieved a metaphysical, sacral dimension. Dehnel's vision of old age was interpreted by young people as the gift of wisdom, the mind's cheerfulness, an ability to see everything that determines the core of humanity and leads to the identification of the important things among those unimportant ones. By coming into contact with a world which the students could not have otherwise experienced directly, they achieved an area for overcoming the barrier between literature and life, lifting the assumption that the world depicted in books is mere fiction. Those experiences resulted in the students' search for answers to the question about their own old age (am I going to be like that? Are all people doomed with physical downfall, the breakdown of corporeality, and the loss of control over bodily reactions?) They also reflected on the possible forms of behaviour in situations when they themselves had to take care of seniors (What should I do to help others? How can I decrease the discomfort they experience?)

Faces of old age

The interpretation of the latest literary texts enabled the course participants to consider old age: its pros and cons expressed in individual depictions, thus shaped by the process of the bodily dwindling and the related somatic humiliation, and by cultural archetypes: the pessimistic apology for the process of transitioning into the shadow line, its depreciation, inability to talk about the final stages (the silent realisation of human degradation), or the monument model which elevates the period. The prospective teachers came across works which presented truth strengthened by the experience of the long existence in the world, which authorises, or

³⁵ "Wychowała mnie Szeherazada", An interview with Jacek Dehnel by Katarzyna Janowska, *Polityka* 2007, issue 4, p. 58.

predisposes even, one to make considerations which exceed the individual dimension of experiences, considerations in which an author and their biography guarantee delving into a message which is important, which rises above the average, and which applies to experiencing a being and its understanding. The closeness of the end changes the creative perspectives of a speaking persona, and it forces people to drop their masks, veils, and illusions.

The encounter with literary images served a cognitive function: it revealed the depth and diversity of the experiences of human old age indirectly, it created an area for a generalisation of personal observations, and it helped find a language in which one can encapsulate experiences. It enabled the naming of the elusive path of an old person which runs through everything which is defined, and the framing of it within a set of applicable rules. Future Polish philologists saw in old people the guardians of memory, connections between “former and more recent years”, a repository of experiences – life’s route markers and “hostages sheltering us safely from the incoming spectre of inevitable death,”³⁶ enabling people to use life to the fullest, as per Heidegger’s “always-not-just-yet” perspective. The reflections on diverse student reactions to regular, basically, human processes of “dwindling”, were accompanied by reactions: from terror, disbelief, and distaste, through compassion and pity, to attempts at understanding and viewing the final period of human life through the prism of common sense.

The act of reading constitutes a bridge for rationalising the conviction that an attempt at finding a cure for the experiences of old age is a toilsome, difficult, painful, and (extremely) necessary task. Despite the distance separating the experiences, coming into contact with these books was even more effective due to the fact that they often violated social conventions. One could apply to them the reflections on the output of Old Poets by Joanna Hobot: just like their texts of old age, texts by Przybylski, Sławek and Dehnel featured “the highly appreciated by young people boldness, the lack of consideration for the tastes of readers, and the excessive freedom of the authors who entered roles which they chose to the surprise of readers.”³⁷

In the case of the author of *Baśń zimowa...*, it was the role of a chronicler recording various modes of coping with the end of one’s existence (including his own) and a painful record of the fall of man. During the autumn of life, the Sławek tried to see the positive elements which he associated with the search for a space for self-fulfilment of an old person. Finally, Dehnel, who initially recorded his grandma’s

36 K. Wieczorek, “Dobry Filozof – to Stary Filozof, czyli o sztuce *savoir-viellir*”, in: *Starość raz jeszcze... (szkice)*, J. Olejniczak, S. Zając (eds.), Agencja Artystyczna PARA, Katowice 2007, p. 31.

37 J. Hobot, “Poetyckie zapisy doświadczenia starości wobec wyzwań świata ponowoczesnego i polonistycznej edukacji”, in: *Edukacja polonistyczna wobec trudnej współczesności*, A. Janus-Sitarz (ed.), Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, Krakow 2010, p. 134.

story and then continued with his own, appeared to come to terms with the necessity to pass and achieve a cheerful old age.

The fact of framing class activities in a way to expand the experience space of students is aligned with the perception of the role of a student as a researcher and a reader of literature, as defined by Edward Balcerzan, and introduced into school teaching practices by Bożena Chrzęstowska. Thus, organised analytical and interpretative processes impacts readers, and can shape their current and future experiences. Psychologists and educators have long been familiar with the fact that people are strongly influenced either by that with which they identify or that which outrages them. The former is associated with the satisfaction in recognition, while the latter with the encounter with otherness, as suggested by Martin Jay.³⁸ The striving to combine seemingly divergent vectors should constitute a guideline for the activities of future Polish philologists during difficult classroom discussions on old age, which constitute an attempt at, even if fragmented, becoming accustomed to the disorganised collection of incoherent experiences of the world of old people. It is important for it to be accompanied by the realisation that one cannot write a generalised story of old age; it is not possible to create any models of it. All that can be done is to observe individual records and recognise in them some universal elements. Sensitivity to seniors is an important quality of a civilisation which will develop only if it can respect the sense and wisdom of old people.

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³⁸ Cf. M. Jay, *Pieśni doświadczenia. Nowoczesne amerykańskie...*

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Małgorzata Gajak-Toczek

Różne oblicza starości w refleksji studentów polonistyki

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu *Różne oblicza starości w refleksji studentów polonistyki* jest przedstawienie sposobu postrzegania starości przez przyszłych nauczycieli. Materiał egzemplifikacyjny stanowią trzy teksty: *Baśń zimowa. Esej o starości* Ryszarda Przybylskiego, „*Trakt starego człowieka*”. *Próba polityki starości* Tadeusza Sławka oraz *Lala* Jacka Dehnela. Hermeneutyczne czytanie pozwoliło na stworzenie kilku obrazów jesieni życia: bolesnej, naznaczonej cierpieniem próby przezwyciężenia i cierpienia w akcie twórczym; starości jako możliwości pogłębionego spojrzenia na duchowy wymiar ludzkiej egzystencji oraz starości pogodzonej z prawami przemijania zanurzonej w akcie memoracji danych wydarzeń.

Słowa kluczowe: starość, edukacja ku starości, filozofia starości, literatura współczesna

Different faces of old age as perceived by the students of Polish studies

Summary

The aim of the article *Different faces of old age as perceived by the students of Polish studies* is to present how old teachers perceive old age. The exemplification material consists of three texts: *Winter tale. An essay on the old age* of Ryszard Przybylski, "The Old Man's Route". *An attempt at old age politics* by Tadeusz Sławek and *Lala* Jacek Dehnel. Hermeneutical reading allowed for the creation of several images of autumn of life: a painful, marked by suffering attempts to overcome and suffering in a creative act; old age as a possibility of a deeper look at the spiritual dimension of human existence and old age reconciled with the laws of transiting the events immersed in the act of memorization.

Keywords: senility, education of the aging, philosophy of aging, contemporary literature

Małgorzata Gajak-Toczek, Ph.D. hab., assistant professor at the Department of Language Teaching and Polish Literature, University of Lodz; she is interested in modern literature, its relations with other arts and the application of methodological assumptions in primary and middle school education. She studies the school forms and methods of teaching literature and culture in primary and middle schools. Her academic interests centre around the traditions of Polish language and literature education in the second half of the 19th century, and the course book as an education tool (selection of set books, modes of organising them, mechanisms of creating texts in set books in the anthologies for primary and middle schools). She also studies: modern culture in Polish language and literature education, and the presence of writers in past and modern humanistic education. She is the author of the monograph: *Franciszek Próchnicki, dydaktyk – edytor – badacz literatury*, Łódź 2010; *Tadeusz Czapczyński (1884–1958). Pedagog – literaturoznawca – literat*, Łódź 2017.