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**OBSERVATION AND DURATION; LYRICISM IN
POEMS BY REV. JANUSZ STANISŁAW PASIERB**

A breakthrough in thinking about a literary work happened during the period of Romanticism. It was then that a creative process started to be treated as an expression “of man’s reaction to the inner reality of one’s own personality and to the truth about the world surrounding man”.¹ This turn in thinking about literature was connected not only with the loosening of generic categorization (division into lyric, epic and dramatic), but also with the focus on the individual reactions of people to surrounding reality and their internal lives. Thus, in the centre of this kind of thinking we have a person—an acting subject. This kind of thinking became an important part of literary heritage and has become so permanent in thinking about literature (particularly about poetry) that today the category of a speaking subject appears almost in any discourse on literary texts. Poetry is a specific place for the presence of a subject. This argument is supported, for instance, by a dictionary definition of lyric poetry which states that it is one of the fundamental literary genres:

including texts, the thematic domain of which are mostly internal experiences, emotions and convictions of an *individual* (emphasis—K.B.) conveyed through a monologic utterance with a strong *subjective* (emphasis—K.B.) focus, subordinated to an expressive function) At the centre of a lyric text we usually have a lyric ‘I’ (lyric subject), whose

¹ Czesław Zgorzelski, *Zarysy i szkice literackie*, Warszawa 1988, 8.

emotions or thoughts organize the whole text; the situation of a lyric 'I' is in such a text the main determinant of the composition.²

The centre of the lyric text, and therefore the medium of lyricism is a speaking subject. It is his/her observations and experiences which are offered to a reader. The focus on individual experiences is a very important caesura in thinking about the descriptiveness and referentiality of literary texts.

Literary studies also focus on the creative self-awareness of an author. Disregarding theoretical debates, I would like to quote Ostap Ortwin, who stresses the distancing of an author embarking on creative activities from her experiences, the result of which is an individualized text with an objective expression.³ Ortwin commented on it in the following way:

A long lyric poem (poemat), a result of the most intimate and radically subjective confession, is the product of a transitory, elusive and passing moment. At the same time however, as a work of art, it achieves full meaning and aesthetic value only when it can, through artistic means, soar above the pettiness of a given moment and over the changeable, perishable nature of individual existence, when out of common and accidental elements, often of an individual character, it creates an eternal, human theme, and in the eternal material of language it externalizes it, pinpoints once and for ever and makes universal, thus turning it into something tangible and understandable for all.⁴

² Janusz Sławiński, *Liryka*, an entry in Michał Głowiński, Teresa Kostkiewiczowa, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, Janusz Sławiński, *Słownik terminów literackich*, ed. by Janusz Sławiński, Wrocław 2008, 278–280.

³ I have in mind, among others, the following essays and sketches: T.S. Eliot "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in: *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Waking Lion Press, 2011, 30–39. Stefania Skwarczyńska, vol. II: *Od przełomu antypozytywistycznego do roku 1945*, p. II: *Od fenomenologii do egzystencjalizmu. Estetyzm i New Criticism*, Kraków 1981, 397–408, and Ostap Ortwin, *O liryce i wartościach lirycznych*, in Idem, *Żywe fikcje. Studia o prozie, poezji i krytyce*, ed. by Jadwiga Czachorowska, foreward Michał Głowiński, Warszawa 1970, 105–116.

⁴ Ostap Ortwin, *O liryce i wartościach lirycznych*, op. cit., 105.

It is worth focusing in this quotation on a passage from small observations to internalized and objectivised experience transformed into a text. This is a very clear problem in the poetry of Rev. Janusz Stanisław Pasierb. His poems are very often about one observed moment, which is then referred to a more general situation, transcending what was noticed. This clue by Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska is useful here: "Interpretative activities should therefore be directed at pinpointing the specific nature of the lyric 'I' [...]. Its presence in turn [...] is imprinted in the space beginning from the deepest senses to the first and external spheres of affecting a reader [...]"⁵

The poetry of Rev. Pasierb, from the first reading, turns out to be strongly marked with the subjectivity of the author. It is worthwhile to note that all volumes of his poetry share the same type of warm, friendly attitude to man and culture—even in the case of poems about suffering and loneliness. Experiences of the perception of reality are transformed by Pasierb into poetic language, solidifying individual emotions and transferring easily to deeper reflections, transcending the makeshift nature of notes. We could use a poem entitled "Staruszka w muzeum" ("An elderly woman in a museum") from the volume *Zdejmowanie pieczęci (Removing a Seal)*,

staruszka w galerii
tuż przed zamknięciem
siwa umęczona
rencistka pewnie
a nie milionerka

jak Sokrates w więzieniu
grający na lirze
wzruszająca

⁵ Bernadetta Kuczera-Chachulska, *Kategoria liryczności a problemy wartościowania*, in *Wartość i sens. Aksjologiczne aspekty teorii interpretacji*, ed. by Andrzeja Tyszczyk, Edward Fiała, Ryszarda Zajączkowski, Lublin 2003, 142.

może teraz dopiero
znalazła czas
gdy czasu już nie ma

a na pewno trzeba
przed długą podróżą
sprawdzić jak wygląda
Jezus Matka Boska
aniołowie niebo⁶

The poem is apparently only a short account of a situation observed. The time and place is given: an art gallery, just before it is closed. There are no more details. The dry account, however, is limited only to the first stanza. The lyric 'I' is watching an elderly woman. We see her through his eyes—she is grey haired and tired. The lyric 'I' does not know her, but supposes that she must be a pensioner. The lyric 'I' also expresses something else apart from lack of certainty—he signals that he wants to be aloof from this situation. Disambiguation: “not a millionaire” shows humour devoid of derision. A talent for observation turns out to be important. Wojciech Kudyba characterized the efforts which the lyric 'I' takes while observing other people and the culture of breaking away from reportage.⁷ He stressed the “immediacy of observations and attentiveness towards facts”,⁸ and argued that what matters is that the observation “should not be a goal, but a means, and should be used to reveal the hidden aspects of events described”.⁹ A speaking subject remains an active interpreter of reality who does not stop at coverage. In this stanza the distance

⁶ Janusz St. Pasierb, *Zdejmowanie pieczęci*, Pelplin 2006, 29. “An elderly woman in a gallery just/before closing/grey tired/a pensioner surely/not a millionaire/as Socrates playing the lyre/moving/maybe she has found time only now when/there is no time/and surely one has to/before a long journey/check how they look:/Jesus Mother of God/angels heaven.”

⁷ Wojciech Kudyba, *Rana, która przyzywa Boga. O twórczości poetyckiej Janusza St. Pasierba*, Lublin 2006, 25–30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

to an elderly woman is seen not only in the ending of the poem but also in a kind of warm irony (so different than, for example, the irony of Wisława Szymborska!).

The third stanza deals with reflections on time. The situation of the woman is 'summarized' through an attractive paradox: "she has found time only now/when there is no time". Problems of time and transience become a thematic axis of this poem. The woman is characterized by the activities she performs and the time which she still has to perform them. Ability is limited by the lack of ability which is to appear quite soon.

The last part of the poem stresses an extended outlook of the whole situation. The woman is "before a long journey". The nature of this journey is explained in the verses which follow: "One has to check how they look: Jesus Mother of God/angels heaven". So, the ultimate problems are rendered in a humorous way, but the 'case' of the elderly woman is treated very seriously. Within this seemingly light form there is some space for eternity. This situation is made possible by an extension of a range of vision, which brings duration to this snapshot scene. The absolute perspective offers depths to the observed event, and not only allows for petrification of the reality submerged in time, but also makes the picture itself very vivid. A touch of metaphysics enlivens this scene.

The example of this poem confirms an argument about the extension of a perspective of an ordinary observer—a trip of an elderly woman to a museum has been raised to a level of a search for truth, of learning about the unknown. The warm irony of the lyric 'I' is hard to miss. It shows his lively interest in human matters. The protagonist is treated seriously all the time, although a slightly naive type of thinking is ascribed to her in the area of the transience of time. The lyric 'I' keeps the distance but also remains close to his protagonist. An ordinary situation is deepened by a perspective of imminent eternity. It should be noted that this is not a dramatic monologue. The lyric 'I' is only an observer. At times he is surprised, at times he is puzzled or wonders, but he always interprets the situation with benevolent interest in

people and their problems. What is important is that the whole picture is enriched by a sacral perspective.

A very different way of relating everyday experiences is shown in the poem entitled 'prywatnie' ('privately') from the volume *Czarna skrzynka* (*Black Box*)

nie ma się gdzie schować
po otrzymaniu takiej wiadomości
w naszych mieszkaniach nie ma prywatnych kaplic
można tylko na chwilę zamknąć się w łazience
usiąść na brzegu wanny i powtarzać
Jezusie Nazareński Jezusie
to przecież nie może być prawda.¹⁰

This poem shows human loneliness in the face of inauspicious news. We can clearly see how the poet bows to man. A very intimate and tragic moment of loneliness of an individual is described. The sharp sense of an observer allowed the poet to select a tiny scene and to interpret it in an unusual context. As Wojciech Kudyba noticed: "Pasierb on many occasions in his poems signalled that he is content with everyday logic and that he is fascinated by situations when some type of 'higher reality' is revealed—when our earlier experiences are transcended."¹¹ If the lyric 'I' did not move beyond the observed picture, the poem would merely be a dry, generic scene. Thanks to metaphysical surplus the poem acquires a deeper dimension. Pasierb is interested in man and trusts in God at the same time. Tadeusz Linker wrote that Pasierb "tried to show man wholly devoted, at times unwittingly, to God and Love, subjected to suffering and death."¹² And so it happens in this poem. The phrase directed to God:

¹⁰ Janusz St. Pasierb, *Czarna skrzynka*, Pelplin 2006, 21. "There is no place to hide after receiving/such news in our/flats there are no private chapels one can only/ lock oneself in a bathroom sit on an edge of a bath tub and/repeat O sweet Jesus O Jesus it cannot be true."

¹¹ Wojciech Kudyba, *Rana która przyzywa Boga...*, op. cit., 170.

¹²

"O sweet Jesus, O Jesus" is, as if, written above the protagonist and placed in his lips. It is no longer important if the protagonist 'really' wanted to utter these words. Pasierb showed in this poem, at the same time equable and full of stress, man's need to call on God in times of crisis. This poem is a record of human experience at the border of lyricism and religious thinking.

The role of a poet is clearly marked in Pasierb's poetry, and auto-thematic poems can be found in each of his volumes. A poet is someone who records experiences and answers the call of reality. This is, for example, visible in "wiersz afrykański" ("an african poem")

afrykański wiersz o lwie i gazeli
powiada że oboje
muszą umieć biegać
żeby przeżyć
i że właściwie każdy
musi co rana
zaczynać swój bieg
tak dziś wygląda świat

ale poeta w tej sytuacji powinien
od czasu do czasu wołać
zatrzymaj się bez względu na to
czy uciekasz czy ścigasz
bo nigdzie
ani przez chwilę
nie będzie ciebie
naprawdę.¹³

The final part of the poem is particularly interesting.

¹³ Janusz St. Pasierb, *Puste łąki*, Pelplin 2001, 36. "an african poem about a lion and a gazelle/tells that both/must be able to run/to survive and/that almost everyone/must every morning start one's run/that is how the world/looks today//but a poet in such a situation/should from time to time/shout 'stop' no/matter if you are running away/ or chasing because nowhere even/for a while you will be/for real."

Apart from stressing the role of a poet, who has been ascribed the function of someone who gives an impulse to reflection and stops the flow of everyday time, we can clearly see an interest in man's condition. The poem stresses the transition from animal culture—based on instincts—to reflexive culture. A poet, as a representative of the latter, takes on the role of a guide in everyday life, which is now lived at high speed. The final lines point to a tragic aspect of everyday life—we have no chance for real life if we do not stop. A poet is someone who, thanks to the stopping of flickering reality, gives a chance for survival.

The examples analysed here show that Rev. Janusz Stanisław Pasierb's poetry is the poetry of human experience. The meeting with this poetry is like meeting with the other. The poet shown in these poems is not an ordinary person—he is a messenger directed towards the world and people, but chosen by God. The task of a poet is to note human experience. The tensions are created around the opposition experienced versus recorded. And as the role of the poet is noting down reality, observation becomes the basic tool to achieve it.

In the “Obrót rzeczy” (“The Turn of Things”) Pasierb writes:

Various activities devour a lot of my time, and this has a negative effect on writing poetry; fortunately this means a big gain for literature. Poetry is an internal barometer of man, his dispersion or concentration. Germans have a good word for this: *Dichtung*, which means densification. Poetry is densification of content. Gun powder when sprinkled burns slowly, hissing; when it is locked in a pistol it explodes. It is the same with poetry. When a poet is not capable of concentration his poetry is superficial.¹⁴

This fragment shows Pasierb's concern with accumulating the content in minimalistic poetic forms. Pasierb stressed the need to struggle with words during writing poetry — words first had to be

¹⁴ Janusz St.Pasierb, *Obrót rzeczy*, Pelplin 2002, 10.

tamed, so that they could live in the vernacular, and then one had to be alert, so that one would verify truth in everyday life.

In the conversation with Zbigniew Herbert which was included in the volume *Zgubiona drachma (A Lost Drachma)*, Pasierb, having listened to Herbert's story about the authentic and deep faith of his grandmother, stated:

I envy you this equipment for life. But regardless of our point of departure, we all need personal experience. Even faith, and maybe faith in particular, is challenged all the time by the law of the crisis.¹⁵

Experience verifies faith and life. When we put together observations which have been so far scattered, we could say that the role of a poet is to accumulate experienced reality through poetic words. The law of crisis, of which Pasierb wrote, applies to almost all the protagonists of his poems. The poem "privately" showed that man is given the chance to experience God, but he does not always use this chance—in difficult situations calling God's help happens inadvertently. And such is the case with Pasierb's poetry. God takes the central place, but reveals Himself through human experience, which in turn is not always fully understood by these poems' protagonists. Everyday reality touches Mystery, which a poet can decipher.

I used the formula "observation and duration" in the title of this paper. Putting these two words together is not accidental. The poet, with the diligence and care of a reporter, notes what is available to the senses, but as he realized the entanglement of human experience in time and space, he adds some surplus to his poetry—he detaches experience from the horizontally oriented world and immerses it in transcendental reality. It could be said that this poetry is about salvation, but through noting experiences available directly, without

¹⁵ Janusz Stanisław Pasierb, *Dramat, który nadaje nam godność. Rozmowa ze Zbigniewem Herbertem*, in Idem, *Zgubiona drachma. Dialogi z pisarzami*, foreword Stefan Frankiewicz, Warszawa 2006, 54.

theological speculations. This is supported, for example, by Pasierb's statement from "The Turn of Things":

I think that Christian poetry should draw conclusions from the fact of the Incarnation. After all, God became a man, and the Word became flesh. Poetry, remaining faithful to God, must be, as God is, in love with the created world, visible, tactile, and particularly in man, who is a union of body and soul.¹⁶

Theological themes cannot be restricted only to lists of motives and references to the Bible. The poetry of Pasierb perceives concrete things and the body as metaphysical signals visible and available to man. Rev. Jan Sochoń, while characterizing Pasierb's poetry, pointed many times at the close grasp of everyday reality present in it, and at the unusual sensuality of descriptions.¹⁷ As he stressed: "Man does not exist here, on earth, in some spiritual space isolated from matter, but is submerged in earthly elements: of body, space and time."¹⁸

Duration in this poetry is duration close to man—his joys and sorrows. The poet stops the time of human actions and opens it to transcendence. Time has a stop, when God's element enters.

At the beginning I quoted the fragment from Czesław Zgorzelski's sketch in which the nature of creativity (mostly in the area of poetry) was characterized. Zgorzelski treated a creative act as a reaction to reality, seen by a concrete and acting subject. Reading Rev. Pasierb's poetry, thanks to the fact of the subject closely observing the world and people, allows us to notice a transition, typical of lyric poetry, from detailed observation to objectivised experience. Observation and duration are the pillars of lyricism, and Pasierb's poems show how eternal perspective strengthens the value of individual experience.

¹⁶ Janusz St. Pasierb, *Obrót rzeczy*, op. cit., 11

¹⁷ Ks. Jan Sochoń, *Geografia zbawienia*, in *Ksiądz Janusz St. Pasierb – kapłan, poeta, człowiek nauki. Materiały z sesji w pierwszą rocznicę śmierci (Pelplin – Wyższe Seminarium Duchowne, 15 grudnia 1994 rok)*, Pelplin 1995, 18–23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.