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# New Century – ‘New Essays’?

## ‘Phenomenon’ versus the canon

Such properties as non-definability, resistance to normative poetics, and anti-systemic or experimental approaches have long constituted the core of the dictionary of meta-essayistic clichés. Thus, on the one hand, it would be best to discuss a single essay as a unique textual “phenomenon”<sup>1</sup>, i.e. an artistic outcome of the clash of a specific ‘T’ with a specific topic or topics. On the other, though – and this is a cliché of literary historians and editors – it is not possible to avoid any form of organisation and typologisation, and, in fact, the authors of essays themselves have often strived to unify the cultural front by, e.g., publishing texts in a specific periodical or a publishing series, discussing similar themes, or referring to fellow writers.

Such a rather coherent group consisted of authors often defined as the “Stempowski school”, who were associated with the community of the Paris-based *Kultura*. It was mainly them, as Jan Tomkowski argued in the introduction to *Antologia polskiego eseju literackiego*<sup>2</sup> – which covered texts published up to 2000 – who established the traditions of the “Polish school

<sup>1</sup> R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, Kraków 2006, p. 88. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

<sup>2</sup> J. Tomkowski, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Polski esej literacki. Antologia*, ed. J. Tomkowski, Wrocław 2017. The anthologist also indicated the important role of the *Twórczość* periodical, through which many influential essays were released into the Polish circulation. The consolidating function was also fulfilled by the *Podróże* series of the *Zeszyty Literackie* quarterly – vide K. Szalewska, *Pasaż tekstowy. Czytanie miasta jako forma doświadczania przeszłości we współczesnym eseju polskim*, Kraków 2012, p. 19.

of the essay”, which could be summarised in this set of keywords: travel – encounters (with major figures) – library – tradition – art – the Self<sup>3</sup>. The goals of travels were also organised by the anthologist in the form of a list starting with Greece and Italy, then major metropolises (Paris, London, Berlin), next, in short, “other countries” (including Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, Yugoslavia, and the United States), and ending with Russia (which was treated more as the subject of political remarks spun from afar). Thus, framed Polish essay clearly gravitated towards knowledge, cultural aristocracy, and the Mediterranean tradition. It might even seem aesthete-inclined, as it was labelled by the critics of the volume published in the *Biblioteka Narodowa* series. At the same time, they lamented the fact that the perspective pestered the tendencies which had proved influential in recent years<sup>4</sup>. Renata Lis demanded that the editor should give due credit to acclaimed female essayists (e.g. Maria Janion) and she concluded that the very fact of including the 1992 essays by Jolanta Brach-Czaina – which focused on everyday experiences and emphasised femininity – “would have caused the anthology to explode from the inside letting, along the despised other half of human experience, a breath of fresh air into it (...)”<sup>5</sup>.

Though Tomkowski’s classification should be treated as a heuristic tool useful when organising the extremely rich and diverse literary material, it is representative of a certain – essentially conservative – mode of thinking about the Polish essay traditions. Therefore, it is also worth considering more recent Polish essays, i.e. essays of the new millennium, and comparing them to thus specified canon, looking for fresh and often less aesthete-focused or aristocratic tendencies, which must have been germinating much earlier. Yet, they surfaced in the 1990s in the form of the breakthrough *Szczeliny istnienia*<sup>6</sup> [*Cracks of Existence*], which evades all that is pre-cultural. Of course, after the turn of the 21st century, essays which in a creative manner applied the heritage of the knowledge-based “Stempowski school” were still written in Poland; here, one could mention some of the younger writers, e.g. Arkadiusz Pacholski or Dawid Szkoła, or experienced and distinguished authors, e.g. Ryszard Przybylski, Ewa Bieńkowska, or Wojciech Karpiński. However, one would be hard pressed not to notice that the “old school of the essay”<sup>7</sup> – i.e. the model associated

<sup>3</sup> J. Tomkowski, *Wstęp*, pp. XLII–LXXXI. A.S. Kowalczyk (*Esej [entry]*, [in:] *Literatura polska XX wieku. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, eds. A. Hutnikiewicz, A. Lam, Warsaw 2000). The author added thematic areas such as democratic traditions, metaphysical questions, and the Jewish theme.

<sup>4</sup> Those were the conclusions drawn from the discussion titled *Wspólny duży pokój*. *Polski esej literacki* [a debate between A. Frączyk, R. Sendyka, R. Lis, E. Kačka], “Mały Format” 2017, no. 12, <http://malyformat.com/2017/12/wspolny-duzy-pokoj-polski-esej-literacki/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

<sup>5</sup> R. Lis, *Esej i kwanty*, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/7480-esej-i-kwanty.html> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

<sup>6</sup> Vide the survey *Efekt szczeliny*, ed. A. Frączyk, “Mały Format” 04/2018, <http://malyformat.com/2018/04/efekt-szczeliny-ankieta-literacka/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

<sup>7</sup> M. Krakowiak, *Mierzenie się z esejem. Studia nad polskimi badaniami eseju literackiego*, Katowice 2013, pp. 248–257.

with émigré writers, Eastern Borderland nostalgia<sup>8</sup>, and the exclusively aristocratic type of knowledge about culture – is already a historical phenomenon, and the once fruitful convention of travels to the South or essays devoted to art seem to have become petrified or have even been exhausted<sup>9</sup>. In this article, I wish to indicate that the Polish essay of the 21st century annexes new areas and is anything but in a decline, as Małgorzata Krakowiak once suggested<sup>10</sup>; it is simply undergoing modifications, both in terms of its thematic extent and the forms it employs. Those two aspects often prove interrelated: the selection of a non-traditional topic entails a non-canonical cognitive approach or such a worldview which shatters the existing forms of expression, leading to the creation of texts which are distorted in terms of their genres. These are often no longer identified as essays and seemingly remain genologically homeless (that is the case with Andrzej Stasiuk's books, which I have included in this preliminary study for a panorama of non-conservative contemporary essays).

### New topics

It is worth to try and create a working map of new previously unpopular topics, points of interest, and destinations associated with the form of writing discussed in this article, though one should bear in mind that the declared – e.g. in the title – topic of an essay usually constitutes for authors only a starting point, a “springboard”<sup>11</sup> for developing meandering discussions which race towards various other matters and eventually should become an intermediate self-portrait of the essayistic ‘I’. The task of organising more recent literary production which transcends traditional frames is facilitated by series of books<sup>12</sup> announced under a common trademark (the Czarne Publishing House is a leader in this respect).

### Travel “somewhere further, somewhere else”

A clear signal of translocation in reference to the canon is offered by the “Sulina” label, which in an after-the-fact manner summarised a certain travel-writing tendency already visible at the turn of the 21st century. “Sulina”

<sup>8</sup> M. Wyka, *Esej – forma pojemna*, [in:] *Polski esej*, ed. M. Wyka, Kraków 1991, pp. 7-8.

<sup>9</sup> I discussed the fiasco of the “artistic pilgrimage” project, including the topic of mass tourism and the model of the “anti-travel” – which rejects the connoisseur attitude towards the places being visited – in the paper titled *Contemporary Polish Essays: in Search of the Aura of Paintings and Photographs*, [in:] *On-line/Off-line: Between Text and Experience. Writing as a Lifestyle*, eds. P. Gärdenfors, W. Powers, J. Pluciennik, M. Wróblewski, Łódź 2015, pp. 115-131.

<sup>10</sup> M. Krakowiak, *Mierzenie się z esejem*, p. 248. The researcher also indicated two paths, along which the genre might develop: the pernicious path “towards columnisation” and the promising path “towards a meta-literary essay” (ibid., pp. 255-257).

<sup>11</sup> G. Lukács, *O istocie i formie eseju. List do Leo Poppera*, transl. R. Turczyn, [in:] *Pisma krytyczno-teoretyczne Georga Lukácsa. 1908-1932*, selection and introduction by S. Morawski, Warsaw 1994, p. 91. [Georg Lukács, *On the Nature and Form of the Essay*, [in:] idem, *Soul and Form*, trans. A. Bostock, J.T. Sanders, K. Terezakis, introduction J. Butler, New York 2010, pp. 16-34.]

<sup>12</sup> Essays also function in a dispersed state, e.g. in traditional and online periodicals.

is the title of a series of non-fiction books by the Wołowiec-based publishing house, which has operated since 2006, and is intended to present the “unknown faces” of Europe. Apart from some texts which belonged to a different genre, the series included a few collections of essays, e.g. *Gdzieś dalej, gdzie indziej* by Dariusz Czaja (about the lesser known Italian cases), and *Moja Europa* by Yurii Andrukhovych and Andrzej Stasiuk<sup>13</sup>. The series intentionally utilises as its title the name of a Romanian town in the delta of the Danube, i.e. the south-easternmost point of the continent. At that European head, to quote from Stasiuk’s *On the Road to Babadag*: “(...) the continent sinks into the sea, (...) leaves behind people, animals, and plants, (...) shaking off all the noise and histories, nations, tongues, the ancient mess of events and destinies, (...) see it find repose in the eternal twilight of the deep, in the indifferent and monotonous company of fish and seaweed”<sup>14</sup>. The newly defined phenomenon of Europe – the non-obvious historically wronged territories falling into decrepitude, i.e. the “layercake of meat, blood and bones”<sup>15</sup> – has been the point of interest of a large group of authors<sup>16</sup>. In short, one could say that it is no longer Greece or Italy, nor France, the Netherlands or England (i.e. not the South or the West) that will be the desirable destinations, but, rather, the Balkan states, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Russia. It is not a cultural metropolis with its galleries which seem “the Fort Knox of art with marble and canvas instead of gold, where people stop only where they are instructed to stop by the voice in their headphones”<sup>17</sup>, but the abandoned provinces, places where one can observe the lives of simple people and nature, trace the complex pasts of regions (e.g. in small-town museums resembling a cabinet of curiosities), and, often – as Stasiuk did in the quoted book – admire the post-industrial “scrap”<sup>18</sup>.

The release of *Jadąc do Babadag* (*On the Road to Babadag*) was a clear signal of the turning point of the discussed tendency (which might have been caused, to some extent, by the 2005 Nike literature award for the book). The group of collections of essays describing thus perceived “second world” – which is a wording that often functions in place of the so-called “third” world – also includes earlier books, which were not published by the Wołowiec-based publishing house (e.g. *Wilczy notes* by Mariusz Wilk about

<sup>13</sup> D. Czaja, *Gdzieś dalej, gdzie indziej*, Wołowiec 2010; J. Andruchowycz, A. Stasiuk, *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej Środkową*, Wołowiec 2018 (1st edition – 2000).

<sup>14</sup> A. Stasiuk, *Jadąc do Babadag*, Wołowiec 2004, p. 185. [A. Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company 2011]

<sup>15</sup> A. Stasiuk, *Wschód*, Wołowiec 2014, p. 112. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

<sup>16</sup> Essayists are a minority in this group; it mostly consisted of reporters (J. Hugo-Bader, Z. Szczerek, M. Rejmer, M. Książek). It is also worth mentioning the non-essayistic travel pieces on Hungary by K. Varga.

<sup>17</sup> W. Nowicki, *Salki*, Wołowiec 2013, p. 158.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding Stasiuk’s travel-writing project, vide e.g.: D. Zozicka, *Podróże kształcą? Doświadczenie podróży w twórczości Andrzeja Stasiuka*, [in:] *Literackie reprezentacje doświadczenia*, eds. W. Bolecki, E. Nawrocka, Warsaw 2007, pp. 425-437; A. Bagłajewski, *Podróże do Polski Andrzeja Stasiuka*, “Kresy” 2006, issue 3, pp. 57-65; S. Iwasiów, *Postkolonializm wobec podróży. Niektóre przypadki Andrzeja Stasiuka*, “Rocznik Komparatystyczny” 2012, issue 3; M. Nalepa, “Trzeba wciążyć gdzieś jechać, wyruszać, przemierzać...”. *Andrzej Stasiuk i jego niekończąca się opowieść*, “Fraza” 2014, issue 4.

Russia<sup>19</sup> or the first two books by Krzysztof Środa<sup>20</sup>), as well as those published later by Czarne (i.e. further volumes by the same author<sup>21</sup> and books by Andrzej Stasiuk<sup>22</sup>). Yet the geographical reality is not decisive in this case; a similar search for somewhat ominous or strange otherness was visible in Środa's travels to Morocco or Michał Paweł Markowski's travels to South America<sup>23</sup>. Though all the listed authors, unlike Stendhal imitating Barthes, are no longer tracing the phantasm of the "beautiful Italy", they do exactly as the French writer did – they still seek novelty, which constantly proves "somewhere further, somewhere else"<sup>24</sup>.

That new model of essayists/travellers seems both intriguing and ambivalent. Just like the enthusiasts of the South before, namely Jarosław Iwazkiewicz, Zbigniew Herbert, Ewa Bieńkowska, Wojciech Karpiński, they also openly condemn the tourist industry and the schematically moving visitors. That fundamentally intellectually or aristocratically sounding criticism is coupled with their mockery of the obsession with digital photography (the "pstrykactwo"<sup>25</sup> [snapshotting] in Stasiuk's words) or the transformation of the visible world through the "modern cicadas" into a "Facebookable world"<sup>26</sup>. On the one hand, then, the fact of distancing oneself from the mass culture, often associated with the attitude of the model essayist<sup>27</sup>, remains unharmed, but, on the other, fundamental significance is assigned to anti-connoisseuriness understood as a break from the "high" culture. Stasiuk equally mocks trips "to Tunisia, to sit under a palm tree" and pilgrimages "to Paris, to the Louvre"<sup>28</sup>. Markowski presents himself as the one who eavesdrops on the conversations of natives, "photographing some lichens and drying pants instead of castles on hills," i.e. as someone who acts completely differently from the former representatives of the "travel guide generation", and who despises "the spectacular commonness

<sup>19</sup> M. Wilk, *Wilczy notes*, Gdańsk 1999. The author continued the essayistic discussion of Russia, viewed through the prism of its peripheries, in his later books: *Wołoka* (Kraków 2005) and four volumes of *Dziennik północny*, published by the Noir sur Blanc publishing house in 2006-2014 (*Dom nad Oniego; Tropami rena; Lotem gęsi; Dom włóczęgi*).

<sup>20</sup> K. Środa, *Niejasna sytuacja na kontynencie. Prywatny przewodnik po różnych stronach świata*, Izabelin 2003; *Projekt handlu kabardyńskimi końmi*, Izabelin 2006.

<sup>21</sup> K. Środa, *Podróże do Armenii i innych krajów z uwzględnieniem najbardziej interesujących obserwacji przyrodniczych*, Wołowiec 2012; *Las nie uprzedza*, Wołowiec 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Books which I have not listed yet: A. Stasiuk, *Fado*, Wołowiec 2006; *Dojczland*, Wołowiec 2007; *Dziennik pisany później*, Wołowiec 2010; *Grochów*, Wołowiec 2012.

As time went by, both authors started travelling further and further east: Środa visited the Caucasus and Armenia, while Stasiuk travelled all the way to Mongolia and China.

<sup>23</sup> M.P. Markowski, *Dzień na ziemi. Proza podróżna*, Poznań 2014.

<sup>24</sup> R. Barthes, *Nigdy nie udaje się mówić o tym, co się kocha*, transl. M.P. Markowski, [in:] idem., *Lektury*, Warsaw 2001, p. 223.

<sup>25</sup> A. Stasiuk, *Dziennik pisany później*, p. 163.

<sup>26</sup> M.P. Markowski, *Dzień na ziemi*, pp. 192, 311. A slight mockery of the Facebook culture was offered by the title *Książka twarzy* by M. Bieńczyk (Warsaw 2011; awarded the Nike award), where the group of 'acquaintances' includes, e.g., A. Mickiewicz and R. Chandler.

<sup>27</sup> S.R. Sanders, [From The Singular First Person], [in:] *Essayists on the Essay. Montaigne to Our Time*, eds. C.H. Klaus, N. Stuckey-French, Iowa City 2012, p. 125; A.S. Kowalczyk, *Kryzys świadomości europejskiej w eseistyce polskiej lat 1945-1977 (Vincenz – Stempowski – Miłosz)*, Warsaw 1990, pp. 28, 31.

<sup>28</sup> A. Stasiuk, *Osiółkiem*, Wołowiec 2016, p. 79.

flowing lazily through the fingers and which cannot be translated into an accurate turn of phrase"<sup>29</sup>. The point, then, would be to ensure a different kind of connoisseuriness – finding delight in that which is seemingly most banal.

The identity of Polish travellers has also undergone a modification. While Herbert's "barbarian in the garden", despite his sense of inferiority, aspired to become a European or a citizen of the world (after visiting the Lascaux cave, Herbert claimed: "I have never been more cemented in a soothing certainty: I am a citizen of the Earth, heir not only to Greeks and Romans, but to near infinity"<sup>30</sup>), Stasiuk's traveller – when asked about his identity – responds "I'm from nowhere"<sup>31</sup> or provides the name of any of the post-Soviet states. In fact, in his works one will find the largest number of reflections which discussed the non-elevating vision of Polishness as something torn between the East and the West, and stemming not from the traditions of a gentry manor, but from the rural and proletarian cultures.

Therefore, one can note a deep fissure in the travel-essay discourse in recent years. This is why the severe reaction of Marek Zagańczyk, a promoter of the tradition of the *Bildungsreise* to the South, to Stasiuk's travel project was so unsurprising:

Stasiuk's world ends there where mine begins, and it is far from that which I myself chose (...). There is no place in Stasiuk's works for places sculptured with common memory. It lacks that significant for me intertwining of nature and culture. It is a record of decomposition, an image of the world in atrophy. I get lost among the Hungarian, Albanian and Romanian names. No map can help me<sup>32</sup>.

The division line between those models is not necessarily a strictly geographical one. The focus is rather on the diversity of attitudes: in opposition to a search for order, traditions, and self-assurance, there develops a project of conscious immersion in chaos, exposing oneself to a reality which has been ousted, which has not been penetrated or, even, one which cannot be penetrated. Additionally, the travellers of this second circle (Stasiuk, Środa, Markowski) no longer add a cultural taint to their landscapes; they do not describe it as ready-made painters' frames or pretexts for talking about an exalted past. Rather, they collect private archives of amateur photographs, which do not, however, lead to adding structure or meaning to spaces; they do, however, foster the diagnoses of own falling behind the lushness of the world or reflections about the time and nature of memory.

In extreme cases, in those authors' works, the goal in this anti-connoisseur trend appears to be an attempt to transcend "beyond culture", e.g. into the world of nature. What is intriguing in this context is Wojciech Kuczok's essays

<sup>29</sup> M.P. Markowski, *Dzień na ziemi*, pp. 308-309, 311.

<sup>30</sup> Z. Herbert, *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie*, Warsaw 2004, pp. 19-20. [Z. Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, trans. M. March and J. Anders, Manchester 1985.]

<sup>31</sup> A. Stasiuk, *Osiółkiem*, p. 86.

<sup>32</sup> M. Zagańczyk, *Droga do Sieny*, Warsaw 2005, p. 77. Zagańczyk was an editor for the *Podróże* series in the *Zeszyty Literackie* quarterly, and he is also among the essayists who perform "artistic pilgrimages" to Italy.

about the visits of this writer/caver to unexplored caves, to refuges which are not only – as the title of his collection would have one believe – “beyond light”, but also beyond time, beyond modern culture and civilisation, even beyond the panoptical opportunities offered by Google Earth<sup>33</sup>. Other contemporary authors treat the views offered by this software as an inspiring substitute for actual travels into enigmatic regions, where no tourist paths have yet been devised – they look from above, from the perspective of a satellite, onto diffuse multi-colour blobs, engaging their memory or imagination<sup>34</sup>.

Civilisational changes have had, in fact, a major impact on the shape of Polish travel essays and the sense of time and space developed within them. The traditional “leisurely passer-by” (as Jerzy Stempowski described himself), nurturing a special kind of a “rhetoric of walking”, overwriting travel-guide trials of the visited metropolises with his own “text”<sup>35</sup>, has found a rival in the form of a ubiquitous globetrotter, who not only utilises various means of locomotion, but also makes that one of the topics of his essays. Stasiuk and Środa often write about the special atmosphere of travelling by car or plane<sup>36</sup>. Another kind, an original and feminised transformation of the figure of *flâneur*, can be found in the reflections spun while jogging in Japan (Joanna Bator’s *Zen biegania*<sup>37</sup>). This, however, amplifies the immersion in the modern, though exotic, culture, while the two previously mentioned authors, despite moving at an even greater pace, seemingly breaking with the tradition of deliberateness, choose the “madness of kilometres”<sup>38</sup>, the constant movement of planets<sup>39</sup>. Apparently, the outcome is a peculiar looping of the time of travel and the time of memory, which gravitates towards timelessness specific for a philosophical perspective or nature.

### Birds, fish, insects, as well as plants

It is nature, as opposed to objects of culture, that often draws the attention of the above-mentioned travellers. When reporting on his visit to the Paris exhibition titled *Napoleon in Egypt*, Krzysztof Środa passed with silence the displayed graphics as he was looking in them only for illustrations of plants and animals. Eventually, he focused on a stuffed European bee-eater<sup>40</sup>. In his essays, he eagerly describes various animals – similarly, in fact, to Mariusz Wilk, who discussed boreal specimens, and Andrzej Stasiuk, who wrote about stray dogs in the Balkans or about Mongolian herds. Środa mainly focuses on birds, snails, insects, and, most of all, fish, and he clearly

<sup>33</sup> W. Kuczok, *Poza światłem*, Warsaw 2012, p. 124.

<sup>34</sup> Vide e.g.: W. Nowicki, *Salki*, p. 18; K. Środa, *Podróże do Armenii...*, pp. 20, 26; M. Cichy, *Pozwól rzecze płynąć*, Wołowiec 2017, p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> M. de Certeau, *Wynaleźć codzienność. Sztuki działania*, transl. K. Thiel-Jańczuk, Kraków 2008, pp. 99-101.

<sup>36</sup> With his *Szkice piórkiem*, A. Bobkowski could be considered the patron of this essayistic tendency.

<sup>37</sup> J. Bator, *Rekin w parku Yoyogi*, Warsaw 2014, pp. 97-101. The essayistic nature of the collection was discussed by T. Czernska (*Autobiograficzność w eseistyce Joanny Bator: między esejem, felietonem a reportażem*, “Autobiografia” 2018, issue 1, pp. 141-151).

<sup>38</sup> A. Stasiuk, *Grochów*, p. 66.

<sup>39</sup> This is the leitmotif of *Podróże do Armenii...* by K. Środa.

<sup>40</sup> K. Środa, *Podróże do Armenii...*, pp. 75-78.

indicated the reason for that: "(...) for some time now I have been of the opinion that entomology, together with ornithology, are sciences which should be lectured at theological academies and seminaries"<sup>41</sup>.

As for zoological themes, those are mainly raised by "monographic" books, in which animals as the thematic starting point are mentioned already in the titles. Three of those were published in the *Menzaeria* [*Menagerie*] series (Czarne publishing house once again)<sup>42</sup>, two more were published by the same publishing house, but with a label *Poza seria* [*Outside a Series*]<sup>43</sup>. Animals are not treated in them only as literary or cultural motifs<sup>44</sup>, nor do they function exclusively as private symbols<sup>45</sup>, though those two perspectives also prove significant. Then, a kind of a novelty is the introduction of specialist entomological, ornithological, or ichthyological knowledge – though more as a favourably understood dilettantism (e.g. Łubieński as an amateur birdwatcher<sup>46</sup>), and the information gathered from old scientific treatises. That quasi-scientific perspective has even induced Robert Pucek – an essayist whose dream would be for his texts to fill up the "trench separating the world of nature from the world of the broadly understood humanities"<sup>47</sup> – to strongly object to the author of *Piekło owadów* for mistaking a coenagrionidae for a mayfly<sup>48</sup> (which, according to him, was a bigger mistake than "if someone mistook Zbigniew Herbert for George Herbert")<sup>49</sup>. Stanisław Łubieński reproaches writers, painters, and art historians for similar cardinal errors<sup>50</sup>. The essays by the authors associated with the *Menzaeria* series are, in fact, rather surprisingly bound, as Adorno would have liked it, by diverse domains of existence; through their experiments they merge today's culture divided into opposing "departments"<sup>51</sup>. A similar tendency, this time in the context of essays about plants, is visible in *Patyki, badyle* by Urszula Zajązkowska<sup>52</sup>. Even when posing theses of a universalising nature, the professor of botany and a poet, despite her specialist knowledge, does not write about abstract species, but, rather she freely – and from multiple perspectives, almost affectionately – observes the life and movements

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>42</sup> R. Pucek, *Pająki pana Roberta*, Wołowiec 2014; *Sennik ciem i owadów*, Wołowiec 2018; S. Łubieński, *Dwanaście srok za ogon*, Wołowiec 2016.

<sup>43</sup> R. Pucek, *Siedemnaście zwierząt*, Wołowiec 2017; K. Środa, *Srebro ryb*, Wołowiec 2019. These two authors are friends and they often reference one another.

<sup>44</sup> Such an approach to natural objects can be found in, e.g., the meta-literary essays by A. Nawarecki (*Pokrzywa. Eseje*, Chorzów-Sosnowiec 1996; there: *Urtica, Ptaki Hieronima Morsztyna, Mickiewicz i Robaki*).

<sup>45</sup> Such as in the case of an insect in *The Death of the Moth* by V. Woolf, or cats, crayfish, and turtles in *Kinderszenen* by J.M. Rymkiewicz (vide Z. Jazienicki, "Konwulsje, wzdęte brzuchy, rzyganie, futra pokryte żółtą mazią...". Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz wobec nieludzkiego, [in:] *Zazwierzęcenie. O zwierzętach w literaturze i kulturze*, ed. M. Pranke, Toruń 2018, p. 310).

<sup>46</sup> Vide A. Szumiec, *Uwaga! Ptasiarze*, "ArtPapier" 2016, issue 7-8, <http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=299&artykul=5508> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

<sup>47</sup> R. Pucek, *Pająki pana Roberta*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> Z. Herbert, *Martwa natura z wędzidłem*, Warsaw 2003, p. 123.

<sup>49</sup> R. Pucek, *Pająki pana Roberta*, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> S. Łubieński, *Dwanaście srok za ogon*, pp. 28-29, 31.

<sup>51</sup> Th. W. Adorno, *The Essay as Form*, transl. B. Hullet-Kentor, F. Willl, "New German Critique" 1984, no. 30, p. 156.

<sup>52</sup> U. Zajązkowska, *Patyki i badyle*, Warsaw 2019.



of selected plants (often individual specimens), boldly going beyond that which is graspable within the scientific model. She also often writes about the complex relationships which exist between trees and humans.

Independent observations of a specimen in its natural environment have major significance for the shapes of all of the listed books about nature, as those very often trigger musings on philosophical or even metaphysical issues<sup>53</sup>. Therefore, one could conclude that encounters with animals or trees have, in a sense, replaced in those essay collections the traditional encounters with major figures (vide Jan Tomkowski's list). If one compares the texts by Pucek and Bienkowska<sup>54</sup>, one will notice that the study of, e.g., the colour patterns on a moth's wings may lead to drawing theological reflections just as one studies old paintings, though the perspective is considerably shifted in the case of an outsider "animalier".

However, to what extent does this fulfil the willingness to transcend culture (related to the travels discussed above) and, additionally, transcend anthropocentrism, i.e. an attempt to reproduce the animal perspective? In other words, is Jolanta Brach-Czaina's<sup>55</sup> postulate to bridle the "swollen human subject", find "our destroyed stone part", and reconstruct the "disdained animal soul"<sup>56</sup> in order to create "an open subject"<sup>57</sup> being fulfilled? On the one hand, Pucek, Zajączkowska, and Łubieński are somewhat reversing the perspective. In his *début* collection, Pucek used the original creation of "Mr Robert" when writing about himself in the third-person form. Instead of anthropomorphising the insects he observed, he viewed humans with a distant gaze, as if they were the subjects of a nature documentary. Next, Zajączkowska offers a tender and humble insight into the inside world of trees (though cut up into samples). She discusses not only series of details of plant anatomy, but also the modes of functioning of those fully respected organisms in specific conditions, e.g. in the rubble of Warsaw in 1945. Despite her restrained respect in the face of the inaccessibility of the plant world, she conducts visible personifications, e.g. when she writes about their dances or death by fire. Finally, Łubieński wonders what Warsaw looks like from a bird's perspective; he also introduces many onomatopoeias<sup>58</sup>, experimenting with polyphonicity of his text and giving voice to his animal subjects<sup>59</sup>. Yet those are subtle and

<sup>53</sup> Vide K. Czaja, *Przewodnik po zacieraniu granic*, "FA-Art" 2013, issue 1-2, p. 101.

<sup>54</sup> E. Bienkowska, *Co mówią kamienie Wenecji*, Gdańsk 2002.

<sup>55</sup> She apparently signalled for an opening of the canon of the Polish essay.

<sup>56</sup> J. Brach-Czaina, *Błony umysłu*, Warsaw 2003, pp. 119-123. It is also worth mentioning the essay titled *Suka* from *Grochów* by A. Stasiuk, in which the author described the dying of his beloved dog and presented an actually post-humanistic reflection on death.

<sup>57</sup> T. Fazan, *Raczej istniejemy*, "Mały Format" 04/2018, <http://malyformat.com/2018/04/raczej-istniejemy/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

<sup>58</sup> Vide M. Wojtak, *Leksyka imitująca i nazywająca głosy ptaków w polifonicznym tekście*, "Stylistyka" 2017, vol. XXVI, pp. 69-84.

<sup>59</sup> For D. Nowicka (*O literackich lullulach Stanisława Łubieńskiego. Wokół ptasich melancholii*, "Polonistyka. Innowacje" 2017, issue 5), this is proof of a "bird", i.e. post-humanistic as well as eco-critical perspective. A. Jarzyna raised reservations to assigning so much significance to bird onomatopoeias in another text, i.e. *Ornitologia, ornitomancja. Sokołowski i (inne) ptaki Jerzego Ficowskiego*, "Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Historicoliteraria" 2016, vol. XVI, pp. 203-204.

rather marginal attempts. At the centre of the essays, there is the “I” of nature enthusiasts, who are both people of learning and amateur philosophers.

The supposed similarity between those collections and eco-criticism demands additional questions: about the degree of their ideological engagement and about their relationship with the ecological tendency within the alternative culture clearly forming in recent years, which impacts the lifestyles of a considerable group of people as well as their consumer choices<sup>60</sup>. A model essayist should, in fact, be independent in their judgements, and should not repeat the common opinions or assume propaganda slogans<sup>61</sup>. And this is actually the case – neither of the three “animaliers” moves towards that extreme, and those are foreign to Zajączkowska as well. Stanisław Łubiński, despite writing about species on the verge of extinction and the difficult conditions for birds’ existence in concrete cities, retains (as a “cautious optimist”, but also a “toned down pessimist”<sup>62</sup>) a balanced and extreme self-aware and self-critical opinion of a “third way”. Robert Pucek, in turn, boldly presents his original worldview which is not free of idiosyncrasy, yet he presents even his polemics (e.g. anti-Darwinist) within the distancing ironic frame. Krzysztof Środa’s attitude in this context would be most interesting as it also considers violence against animals, interestingly enough associated with own practices: for example, angling (that hobby was the basis for the *Srebro ryb* collection, which included the author’s original photographs of dead catch), eating meat, or collecting insects. Being a philosopher<sup>63</sup>, he does not accept simple solutions; he discusses the theme of death or leaves unsettling images without any commentary, as the recurring in *Las nie uprzedza* image of severed goat heads at a market in Morocco<sup>64</sup>. Those visions are supposed to proximate, through a metaphorical shortcut, the unsettling atmosphere of recent history marked with wars, terrorism, and the so-called migrant crisis.

## The excluded

The above-mentioned topic of extended subjectivity relates, according to Anita Jarzyna, not only to the literary references to the animal world, but also to people’s approach to others, aliens, and refugees<sup>65</sup>. She formulated

<sup>60</sup> Similarly, one could ask about their relationships with the phenomenon of unhurriedness in the *slow life* movement – traditionally viewed as being typical for essays (A.S. Kowalczyk thus wrote about it: “Approach to time applies to the very essence of the essay as a literary genre, and the attitude it establishes” – *Nieśpieszny przechodzień i paradoksy. Rzecz o Jerzym Stempowskim*, Wrocław 1997, p. 225). This mainly applies to M. Cichy’s collections titled *Zawsze jest dzisiaj* (Wołowiec 2014) and *Pozwól rzece płynąć*.

<sup>61</sup> Therefore, one could hardly consider as essays two engaged erudite studies with relaxed associative progressions (written with a columnist inclination), namely M. Sugiera’s *Po rozum do mrówek* as well as *Łączyć i rządzić* (from: *Nieludzie. Donosy ze sztucznych natur*, Kraków 2015).

<sup>62</sup> A. Pekaniec, *Petzacze, lelki, raniuszki i spółka. Notatnik ornitologa*, “Nowa Dekada Literacka” 2017, issue 6, p. 161.

<sup>63</sup> Środa was employed by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences; he wrote his doctoral dissertation on Husserl’s philosophy.

<sup>64</sup> Relating to a film, mentioned in the same collection, from Chechnya of Russian POWs being decapitated.

<sup>65</sup> A. Jarzyna, *Nie-stosow(a)ne analogie. “Lesbos” Renaty Lis jako narracja poszerzająca doświadczenie uchodźcze*, “Polonistyka. Innowacje” 2017, issue 6.

her arguments in relation to, e.g., the essay titled *Ostatnia wieczerza François Mitteranda* by Stanisław Łubieński<sup>66</sup>, which discussed hunting “alien” migrating birds, e.g. in Egypt and Lebanon, thus echoing the already mentioned devices in Środa’s *Las nie uprzęda*<sup>67</sup>. Jarzyna also referred to the final travel-centred part of *Lesbos* by Renata Lis, in which the author wrote about “bird migrants” (flamingos, herons, swallows) that are free, calm, and unaware of borders, and that find safe haven on the Greek island, which also houses refugee camps. To Lis, it appeared to be similar to concentration camps<sup>68</sup>. Therefore, unlike in the realities depicted by Środa and Łubieński, animals in this case do not experience violence but, rather, care. It can be concurred that the story about them is not an attempt at parabolically indicating the dark underbelly of today’s reality, but, rather, at offering a counterbalance in order to emphasise the superiority-driven attitude of Europeans to people who arrive on the continent from the other side of the Mediterranean. Yet, Lis goes even further in her discussions. By specifying her own identity using the “I am a refugee” formula, she demands “unconditional asylum”<sup>69</sup> for both immigrants from Lesbos and lesbians being excluded by the violence-based mechanisms of the mainstream narrative. Since the topic of exclusion can be strongly bound with animals’ topics, which I have already discussed as being typical of new essays, one should ask whether it also became a major component of the most recent products of the genre.

Despite the fact that after the year 2000 many texts were published demanding a revision of the status of women and cultural, ethnic, and sexual minorities, one should note that the rhetoric applied in those usually gravitated towards press and column-related engagement (sometimes also towards sociological specialisation)<sup>70</sup> and not towards the balance and indirect presentations that are specific for the referenced collection by Lis (and common for the genre of the essay). Therefore, it would be difficult to talk about the existence of an entire stream of the essay area devoted to the problem of exclusion; yet, in this group one should highlight two essay collections, which actually prove to be very different.

Renata Lis’ *Lesbos* deserves particular consideration due to, e.g., its mode of depicting lesbian love in a universalising manner, within a broad cultural perspective, which is, however, developed based on the micro stories of specific authors (Jeanette Winterson, Narcyza Źmichowska, Anna Kowalska, and Sofia Parnok). The author avoided outright propaganda; she wrote in an extremely erudite and ironic manner, spinning the networks of

<sup>66</sup> S. Łubieński, *Dwanaście srok za ogon*, pp. 175-192.

<sup>67</sup> Also in *Podróż do Armenii* (s. 93-97), the essayist wrote about a refugee village hidden under a Paris bridge, and compared the refugees to his idol, i.e. the Cynic Diogenes.

<sup>68</sup> R. Lis, *Lesbos*, Warsaw 2017, pp. 156, 163, 164.

<sup>69</sup> A. Jarzyna, *Nie-stosow(a)ne analogie*, p. 42.

<sup>70</sup> Vide e.g.: A. Graff, *Świat bez kobiet* (Warsaw 2001); *Rykoszetem* (Warsaw 2008); *Matka feministka* (Warsaw 2014); S. Chutnik, *Mama ma zawsze rację* (Warsaw 2012); I. Iwasiów, *Blogotony* (Warsaw 2013); O. Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia* (Warsaw 2012); M. Gretkowska, *Silikon* (Warsaw 2000). The differences in terms of the applied rhetoric can be identified in essayistic studies of an academic nature from the *Różowy język* collection by B. Warkocki (Warsaw 2013), as well as from the *Od Źmichowskiej do Mastowskiej. O pisarstwie kobiet w nadwiślańskim kraju* collection by E. Graczyk (Gdańsk 2013). They include autobiographical fragments.

surprising coincidences and subtly expanding a fixed set of leitmotifs and symbols (e.g. a white rose, a fragile cup being a gift for a lover, or an empty box of Huntley & Palmers biscuits, which are manufactured in Reading<sup>71</sup>). The empty biscuit box is – as if echoed by other images of containers – concealing works rejected by the heteronormative majority, including a bottle with a letter inside it or a lead drawer in the “dungeons” of the Vatican protecting Sappho’s manuscripts (allusion to Gide is, of course, not accidental). Lis’ idea – even though she wrote somewhat selectively as she defined, first, the status of her target audience by importantly referring to them as “*droga czytelniczko*”<sup>72</sup> and, second, an encouragement to become a new Sappho<sup>73</sup> – is also a “third way” between two extremes: a closed circle of a sexual minority and the *mainstream* blind to its existence or hastily pigeonholing it. The author does not juxtapose these areas. In following the “post-emancipation” spirit, she tries to write in the “pre-emancipation socio-cultural conditions” – hence, e.g. the distancing spelling of *lesbian* in quotation marks<sup>74</sup> as well as the use of circumlocutions and irony.

Similar balance can be found in the collection titled *Powlekać rosnące* by Joanna Mueller. Here, the author combines that which is corporeal (her own experiences of being pregnant; labour and motherhood described in detail using original linguistic forms, including neologisms) with that which is cultural (she wrote about women engaged in literature, e.g. Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich, Manuela Gretkowska, Anna Nasiłowska, Krystyna Miłobędzka). She constantly fluctuates between autobiographical elements, literary criticism, and poetic fragments marked by her original language poetry<sup>75</sup>. The multi-faceted nature of her collection places it midway between the anti-cultural essays by Brach-Czaina – focused on corporeality – and the emphatically immersed in culture essays by Lis. Interestingly enough, Mueller enters a polemic with *Otwarcie* by Brach-Czaina (where labour is depicted as a uniting experience for women and animals)<sup>76</sup>, opposing the notion of endowing – like an “existential Robin Hood”<sup>77</sup> [*egzystencjalny Janosik* in the original] – the entire human kind with the feminine experience. It is worth adding that Renata Lis, similarly invitingly as Brach-Czaina, stresses that the entire literature needs “lesbian” love, which could introduce a communion of language and desire, subversive for the sterile modern reality<sup>78</sup>, while Mueller seems to intentionally create a non-feminist enclave for that which is feminine and “anachromystic”, while remaining within the genre of the essay, but one which – in an original and subtle manner

<sup>71</sup> It is important inasmuch as it is the city where Oscar Wilde was imprisoned, but also where the biographer of Sappho (best known for disproving the idealised vision of the poet’s life) lived.

<sup>72</sup> Meaning “dear reader”, where the “reader” is used in the feminine variant of the noun, which in English would be obtained only through the ‘dear female reader’ phrasing.

<sup>73</sup> R. Lis, *Lesbos*, p. 112.

<sup>74</sup> R. Lis, *Lesbos – poza polityką tożsamości*, “Mały Format” 11/2018 (accessed: 8.08.2019).

<sup>75</sup> E. Sołtys-Lewandowska, *Powlekać rosnące* Joanny Mueller – *wiwisekcja macierzyństwa*, “Autobiografia” 2018, issue 1, pp. 51-52.

<sup>76</sup> J. Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, Warsaw 2018, 3rd edition, pp. 29-66.

<sup>77</sup> J. Mueller, *Powlekać rosnące (apokryfy prenatalne)*, Wrocław 2013, p. 161.

<sup>78</sup> R. Lis, *Lesbos*, pp. 130-131.

– opposes unconditional universalisation. This is a somewhat subversive gesture as the condition of the susceptibility of the experience of the Self to the typical humanistic generalisation was posed in various concepts of the essay<sup>79</sup>.

## Material culture

To conclude this overview of non-traditional themes, it is worth returning to the issue of evading culture, but not in the form of probing what is animal, plant or corporeal, but, rather, what – according to conservative divisions – would be placed outside the area of 'high culture' (vide the "*biblioteka*" [library] and "*sztuka*" [art] entries in the anthologist's list). The function of that catalyst of essayistic narrative is often not a painting, sculpture or architectural object, but an old photograph which initially serves a special purpose – as is the case in three books by Wojciech Nowicki<sup>80</sup> – or even a pornographic photograph, as in *Tekturowy samolot* by Andrzej Stasiuk<sup>81</sup>. The design of everyday objects, product packaging, and posters may prove a similarly interesting topic, as indicated by Marcin Wicha in his two essay collections (which, surprisingly, are rarely referred to this way)<sup>82</sup>. By starting with, e.g., changes in the appearance of Lego bricks, the author is able to convey historical and sociological reflections (on totalitarianism or modern mass culture) or anthropological reflections<sup>83</sup>. The dusty covers proved more interesting than the contents of the books from his late mother's bookshelf as they not only indicated the changing trends and tastes in terms of visual design, but they also indicated, on the one hand, the private family history and, on the other, the history of communist economy and the mentality of that period.

The outcomes of architectural "botching up", the exuberant construction fantasies<sup>84</sup>, or even rubbish<sup>85</sup> – though painful for the so-called 'good taste' – may prove a related object of interest for essayists.

If, then, the canon of the Polish essay up to the year 2000 – summarised with Tomkowski's keywords – appeared "aesthetist", this short overview of the new tendencies would suggest a major change: an 'untightening of the canon' by accepting 'lower' disdained topics (mainly travels to "worse"

<sup>79</sup> E.g. G.D. Atkins, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth*, Athens-London 2010, p. 61.

<sup>80</sup> W. Nowicki, *Dno oka. Eseje o fotografii* (Wołowiec 2010); *Odbicie* (Wołowiec 2015); *Tuż obok* (Wołowiec 2018). I discussed the specificity of this stream of writing in *Wizualne odskocznie*.

<sup>81</sup> A. Stasiuk, *Fantomy po przystępnej cenie; Ikony Marie*, [in:] idem., *Tekturowy samolot*, Wołowiec 2001.

<sup>82</sup> M. Wicha, *Jak przestałem kochać design*, Kraków 2015; *Rzeczy, których nie wyrzuciłem*, Kraków 2017. This group could also include *Duchologia polska. Rzeczy i ludzie w czasach transformacji* by O. Drenda (Kraków 2016), which, however – apart from the introduction – lacks the personal perspective obligatory for an essay, or *Wyroby. Pomysłowość wokół nas* by the same author (Kraków 2018).

<sup>83</sup> M. Wicha, *Lego Gutenberga*, [in:] idem., *Jak przestałem kochać design*, Kraków 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Vide A. Stasiuk, *Badziew z betonu*, [in:] F. Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą. Reportaże o polskiej przestrzeni*, Wołowiec 2013.

<sup>85</sup> K. Środa, *Nie mogłem zabrać wszystkich*, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/7998-nie-moglem-zabrac-wszystkich.html> (accessed: 8.08.2019). This essay was published in the *Każdemu jego śmietnik. Szkice o śmieciach i śmietniskach* collection (Wołowiec 2019).

geographical regions) and no more reading only books and masterpieces, but also reading the worlds of animals, plants, and regular objects. Several times, the essay has also proven to be a literary tool for reworking existing polarisations (high vs. low, human vs. animal and plant, mainstream vs. minority). However, is it truly necessary to view this tendency as an internal break in the essay? In order to avoid an unnecessary juxtaposition of the 'old' and the 'new' themes, it is worth returning to the source, i.e. Michel de Montaigne, the originator of the genre, who professed the truly Renaissance interest in all topics.

### Montaigne's coat

Interestingly enough, in following the wave of criticism of the anthology of the essay published by Ossolineum, critics attributed the author of *Essays* with several derisive and not entirely justified labels. In her statements in a 2017 debate, Lis labelled the author as a specialist in "volumes and travels", whose natural environment was "an ivory tower"<sup>86</sup>. However, "the inventor of «Self» in literature and a lover of the castle cat", locked in his library – as Montaigne was described in that same year by Marek Bieńczyk (i.e. another essayist and an ardent promoter of the genre; omitted in the anthology) – "does not withdraw (...) from the human community, only places above the fighting aggressive community a reflective community"<sup>87</sup>. Evidence for the French writer's broader interests (beyond the disengaged intellectual ones) can be found in the tables of contents of the three volumes of *Essays*<sup>88</sup>. Indeed, one will find there essays declaratively erudite ("Of Cato the Younger", "A Consideration upon Cicero"), but also those which turn towards commonality ("Of Coaches", "Of Smells", "Of Thumbs") or the curiosities of his time ("Of a Monstrous Child", "Of Cannibals"). It was, among other things, Montaigne's freedom in the selection of the starting topic/pretext, as well as the multiple perspectives combining various domains of existence, that helped him gain the favour of later eulogists of the project of the "ideal essay" (e.g. Walter Pater, Virginia Woolf, György Lukács, Robert Musil, Walter Hilsbecher, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Bense<sup>89</sup>). The commonly referenced elitist nature of the essay – viewed through the prism of the attitude of the author of *Essays* – is not a product of the "springboard" topic, but a positively amateurish manner of developing it and, of course, the artistic style of writing. In this case, the book-based knowledge proves to be an occasional starting point, almost never a target, and, essentially, always one of the filters enabling one to face their "I" with various topics. On a side note, all the authors discussed in the context of the new topics eagerly

<sup>86</sup> R. Lis, *Esej i kwanty*.

<sup>87</sup> M. Bieńczyk, *Więcej czytania, mniej działania, dostoje panie i zacni panowie*, "Książki. Magazyn do Czytania" 2017, issue 2(25), pp. 44, 46. This special "essay about the essay" is a response to the book – excessively pigeonholing, according to Bieńczyk – titled *Montaigne. Un Biographie Politique* by Ph. Desan.

<sup>88</sup> M. de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, transl. D.M. Frame, Stanford 1985.

<sup>89</sup> Vide R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej* (a chapter of "Czysty esej", czyli abstrakcja. O kilku projektach tekstu eseistycznego).

refer to literary texts. Even Andrzej Stasiuk, who seems to possess an anti-book-based knowledge disposition (mocking the cults surrounding Bach or Mann<sup>90</sup>), often appears as a specialised reader who applies the geographical criterion (an enthusiast of, e.g., Cioran, Bodor, Kiš, Bulatović, and Eliade) and who chooses counter-culture (eagerly referring to beatniks). The book-based knowledge displayed by the author, as well as by Stanisław Łubiński, is additionally enriched by his knowledge of popular culture.

In *Książka twarzy* as well as in other books<sup>91</sup>, Bieńczyk, whom I have already mentioned, showed that the modern application of Montaigne's attitude may consist of a lack of division into the so-called high culture and the mass culture<sup>92</sup>. Tennis, football, films, wine – or his fascination with the protagonists of Karl May's books – seem to trigger in his collections extended essayistic discussions just as strongly as, e.g., the fortunes of Polish Romantics do. Despite an extensive array of the topics he discusses – and even considering Bieńczyk's pop cultural erudition – he can hardly be termed a dissenter from the canon. He is an author who consciously applies international essay traditions and avoids devices which would otherwise shift his texts too close to other areas of the humanistic discourse, scientific specialisation, or journalistic interventionality (because even though it is difficult to define what an essay is, it is quite easy to indicate what it is not, as Miłosz wisely argued<sup>93</sup>).

This trans-discipline defence of the shaky balance between the essay and its independence within the limits of its niche – pressed between the fields of solidified discourses – may prove key to rethinking the domain of modern formal mutations of the genre, the authors of which have gone further than Bieńczyk has in terms of 'lowering' the topic. This is because a non-traditional topic or a non-traditional attitude entails non-typical formal solutions, placing a question mark next to a genological classification. As Aldous Huxley argued, the essay, though subjective, cannot simply probe the internal experiences of the Self as this would transform it into personal writing. Moreover, on the one hand, it cannot completely abandon the specifics and life experience in favour of a generalising abstraction, since then it would become philosophy; on the other hand, it cannot become fixated on them, offering an annex to either of the narrow domains of knowledge<sup>94</sup>. Therefore, is it necessary in the 21st century to don the somewhat old-fashioned "Montaigne's coat"<sup>95</sup>, i.e. consciously match the traditions of *Essays*? The liberal framework of the genre specified by the formula presented by Huxley indicates that a negative answer is possible, and that other patterns for the essay are acceptable.

<sup>90</sup> A. Stasiuk, *Dojczland*, pp. 14, 26.

<sup>91</sup> Vide M. Bieńczyk, *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, Warsaw 2015; *Wszystkie kroniki wina*, Warsaw 2018.

<sup>92</sup> K. Rutkowski is another author with such a broad array of interests (vide, e.g. *Paryskie pasaże. Opowieść o tajemnych przejściach*, Gdańsk 1995, where he described, e.g. pinsomania or the history of women's underwear).

<sup>93</sup> Cz. Miłosz, *Ogród nauk*, Lublin 1986, p. 143.

<sup>94</sup> A. Huxley, *Preface*, [in:] idem, *Collected Essays*, New York 1960, pp. 89-90.

<sup>95</sup> E.B. White, [From the foreword to *Essays of E.B. White*], [in:] *Essayists on the Essay*, p. 105.

## New forms

Emphatically, such a possibility was also indicated by Renata Lis. She stressed that it would be possible to write an essay somewhat by accident, even without genological awareness when one has “something important to think over” and the form is sought “empirically” – simply by writing, i.e. struggling with a topic in an open and artistic way<sup>96</sup>. This line of thinking echoes the theses by Brach-Czaina (once Lis’ advisor) expressed in *Konstrukcja filozoficznego eseju*, where she underlined the need for unconventionality and the uniqueness of form reproducing the extra-verbal structure of the internal or external worlds discovered by the “I” within a “risky adventure”<sup>97</sup>. The essayist’s practice fulfils such experimental writing, which remains in line with a kind of a counter-cultural nature of her approach, with dotting on the paradoxical dream of escaping the logosphere. Thus, the author of *Szczeliny istnienia* did actually let ‘fresh air’ into the Polish essay-writing through consolidating not only the significance of new topics, but also a certain anti-traditionalistic yet cognitively functionalised writer’s irreverence (for example, she uses fragments which resemble free verse<sup>98</sup>).

In this light, an unclosed, chaotic, or even rough form of work – one that is far from refinement appreciated by readers – which aspires to be classified as the essay, does not necessarily have to entail an artistic fiasco and a downgrading of the text to being classified as a quasi-essay or “kitsch essay”<sup>99</sup>, since, in some cases, it may be a consciously selected reflection on a lack of order of an experienced reality. According to Andrzej S. Kowalczyk, the essay introduces order, it helps one read even difficult phenomena through the “alphabet of tradition”<sup>100</sup> as well as defend humanistic values<sup>101</sup>, while according to Ewa Bieńkowska it enables one to present one’s own “cultural genealogy”<sup>102</sup>. Thus understood essay should be deep, artistically disciplined, and associated with idealised “Europeanness”, which was noticed and mocked already in 1958 by Ludwik Flaszen when he wrote: “Behind essays (...) Poles hide to convince themselves and the world that they are Europeans”<sup>103</sup>. Yet, one should also consider an alternate possibility: an essay which in a time of crisis indicates the existence of chaos and cognitive aporias, be it related to identity or morality, without attempting to apply any polishing formulas and expanding scepticism (originated by Montaigne). The looped and shattered form of Środa’s *Las nie uprzędza* collection could be considered as an example of the fruit of such an “empirical” search for

<sup>96</sup> A voice in the discussion in *Wspólny duży pokój*.

<sup>97</sup> J. Brach-Czaina, *Konstrukcja filozoficznego eseju*, “Kwartalnik Filozoficzny” 1996, col. 2, pp. 150, 156.

<sup>98</sup> J. Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, pp. 56-57, 69-70.

<sup>99</sup> M. Głowiński, *Esej i kicz*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 1999, issue 51-52, p. 17.

<sup>100</sup> A.S. Kowalczyk, *Esej* [entry], p. 154.

<sup>101</sup> A.S. Kowalczyk, *Kryzys świadomości europejskiej...*, p. 33.

<sup>102</sup> E. Bieńkowska, *Sztuka eseju*, “Znak” 1976, issue 1, p. 104.

<sup>103</sup> L. Flaszen, *Na oleju grzechów naszych. Z notatnika szalonego recenzenta*, [in:] *Kosmopolityzm i sarmatyzm. Antologia powojennego eseju polskiego*, selected and edited by D. Heck, Wrocław-Warsaw-Kraków 2003, p. 174.



the most appropriate form. This is a perspective worth applying to Stasiuk's mantric enumerations and achronological streams of images/recollections, as his amorphous essays – avoiding previous conventions – used to be the object of controversy and disputes, including within a purely genealogical aspect<sup>104</sup>. The conscious choice of a shattered structure complies with the author's thesis when he directly stated with surprise that all the books read, talks conducted, and travels made do not produce any "synthesis" or "wisdom for the future"<sup>105</sup>. A similar inability to add coherence to form is specific for Nowicki's *Salki*, i.e. a collection in which the author unsuccessfully attempts – in a looping or elliptical manner – to discuss post-memory, i.e. the burden of unwanted family recollections about the massacres in Volhynia<sup>106</sup>.

In such collections, photographs can be an element which adds layering of meaning. They were in a particularly interesting way used by Krzysztof Środa in *Niejasna sytuacja na kontynencie*, a book which in many ways resembles the photo-textual essays by W. G. Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn*<sup>107</sup>. Środa declared openly that writing and taking photographs are "two parts of the same project"<sup>108</sup>. Own photographs and reproduced drawings are not mere illustrations, but – as elements similar to metaphors, i.e. extremely accurate though non-discursive "replacements of a phase of discourse"<sup>109</sup> – they appear as indications of inexpressible issues or add new content, sometimes even as counterpoints to words.

The formal innovations combine with the comprehensive thinking about an essayistic book emerging no longer as something developing and evolving through many years, like Montaigne's *Essays* – a *silva rerum* compilation of atomised details (de facto reprinted from periodicals or collective volumes) – but, rather, as a volume designed from the start, often in the form of a collection of shorter thematically diverse texts/chapters, which, however, do not form a monograph of the "essay/study" kind, e.g. one about

<sup>104</sup> Krakowiak (*Mierzenie się z esejem*, pp. 156, 259) basically objected to them being termed "essays", accusing them of being hastened, banal, and excessively subjective. Then, M. Gruszka (*Co dalej z polskim esejem? Przypadek Andrzeja Stasiuka*, [in:] *W szkole polskich eseistów*, ed. M. Krakowiak, Katowice 2007, pp. 143-159) provided indications of the essay character of Stasiuk's earlier collections, though criticising their rough style. Additionally, one should consider the constantly expanding relationship between the author's travel writing and reportage, which is visible, e.g., in the record of dialogues typical for prose writing.

<sup>105</sup> A. Stasiuk, *Fado*, p. 131.

<sup>106</sup> Nowicki also argued against the idyllic vision of the Eastern Borderlands in, e.g., Miłosz' works (*Salki*, p. 148), thus breaking with the Borderland tradition of the "Polish school of the essay".

<sup>107</sup> The discussions of Sebald's photo-textual experiments were gathered in the collection titled *Searching for Sebald. Photography after W.G. Sebald*, ed. L. Patt, Los Angeles 2007.

<sup>108</sup> *Dziwny jest ten świat*. Rozmowa Katarzyny Kazimierowskiej z Krzysztofem Środą, "Tygodnik Powszechny" 2016, issue 34, p. 56. One should also mention the galleries of original photographs in Markowski's *Dzień na ziemi*, D. Pawelec's photographs devoid of any commentary inserted in the middle of Stasiuk's *Dziennik pisany później*, and the sets of photographs added to J. Mueller's collection titled *Powlekać rosnące*. On a side note, in reference to such initiatives, there exists the term "photographic essay", which is supposed to indicate a series of photographs that create a certain "narrative" and trigger reflections in popular science collective works such as *Smart obiekt* or *Hawaikum*, published by the Czarne Publishing House.

<sup>109</sup> K. Dybciak, *Inwazja eseju*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 1977, col. 4, p. 123.

a single artist<sup>110</sup>. Such comprehensive planning is conducive both to bi-medial experiments and to viewing an essay collection as an art book<sup>111</sup> in which either element can add meaning. Such is the case with cutting out the “m” in the title *Rzeczy, których nie wyrzucilem* by Wicha as a symbol of “not fitting within words or life”<sup>112</sup>, or with the application of various fonts for differentiating essay passages from a journal from Łubieński’s ornithologist camp<sup>113</sup>, or with the surprising loop in the table of contents in *Lesbos* by Lis, who (surely in order to amplify the effect) requires her readers to repeatedly study the same texts on the few discussions of lesbian themes in literature<sup>114</sup>.

The application of repetitions and providing additional meanings to graphic elements often entails an introduction of non-essayistic fragments, which further complicate the form. When progressing towards the finale in *Rzeczy, których nie wyrzucilem*, i.e. the pain-filled account of his mother’s death, Wicha abandons all auxiliary topics and uses texts of decreasing lengths. The increase in the amount of editorial light was supposed to, according to his statement, indicate his mother’s subsiding<sup>115</sup>. In the final part of his collection, he applied non-essayistic, torn fragments of a feigned dialogue at a time of agony. A similar strategy was applied by Bieńczyk in *Kontener*, a collection in which he attempted to use culture in order to come to terms with a similar experience of losing his mother, e.g. through recurring chapters with the leitmotifs of mayflies and breath. As part of the difficult work of memory under the patronage of Marcel Proust and Roland Barthes, through a dissonance there suddenly appear completely “non-literary” chapters (like “Obcy”<sup>116</sup>, which constitutes the panic-laden repeating of a piece of information which is also a quote from Albert Camus: “Maman died today”). Such perfected collections could surely be considered as the application of the essay as the “fourth literary kind”<sup>117</sup>; certainly, among readers they are beginning to function as fiction’s competition.

The modern Polish essay – viewed within a broad, inclusive perspective, yet one which remains true to the major concept of the genre – is certainly developing within various paths. Some authors have continued the achievements of the “Stempowski school”, while others, following the model of the genre’s originator, cherish the ability to connect all possible plots<sup>118</sup>. Others

<sup>110</sup> Vide D. Heck, *Esej*, [in:] *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku*, eds. A. Brodzka et al., Wrocław 1992.

<sup>111</sup> Vide, e.g., a collection of mini-essays by J. Dehnel, where each one refers to an old photograph, placed on the opposite page, and in a “stereoscopic” manner connects with the following bi-medial pair (*Fotoplastikon*, Warsaw 2009).

<sup>112</sup> J. Sobolewska, [review of *Rzeczy, których nie wyrzucilem* by M. Wicha], <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/ksiazki/1705530,1,recenzja-ksiazki-marcin-wicha-rzeczy-ktorych-nie-wyrzucilem.read> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

<sup>113</sup> S. Łubieński, *Sosnowka pachnąca żywicą*, [in:] idem., *Dwanaście srok za ogon*. Wołowiec 2016.

<sup>114</sup> H. Teleżyńska, *Szukając Safony*, “Mały Format” 12/2017, <http://malyformat.com/2017/12/szukajac-safony/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

<sup>115</sup> A statement by M. Wicha in an interview by M. Cegielski: <https://xiegnia.pl/wideo/program-tv/xiegnia-odcinek-279-marcin-wicha/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

<sup>116</sup> M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, Warsaw 2018, p. 109.

<sup>117</sup> Vide R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>118</sup> Vide Ph. Lopate, *What Happened to the Personal Essay*, [in:] *Essayists on the Essay*, p. 128.

still explore new thematic areas and experiment with new forms or even provoke through style, descending below the previously acceptable tone. Do these shifts and mutations justify talking about this third circle of “new essays”<sup>119</sup> as emphatically different and dissident forms in relation to the traditions, thus impossible to be framed within the network of the established essay-studies concepts? The above overview triggers one to pose a hypothesis that such variations can also be absorbed by the extremely flexible Montaigne’s convention of the genre if one does not close it prematurely in the name of a narrowly defined canon. One must bear in mind that the essay – as a creation which is anti-systemic in its nature – actually provokes one to engage in never-ending revisions and the creative updating of existing modes of writing. In other words: it demands novelty.

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<sup>119</sup> Thus R. Atwan, a long-term editor for the American series Best American Essays, defined the contemporary for him distorted forms which boldly apply non-essayistic conventions, including poetry or reportage (*Notes Towards the Definition of an Essay*, [in:] *Essayists on the Essay*, p. 200).

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## SUMMARY

This article constitutes an attempt at organising the non-conservative tendencies in Polish essays published in the 21st century, which apply to themes, the lowering of the tone, and forms of writing. One major stream is travel writing, which focuses not on the Mediterranean legacy, but on the 'second world': long-disadvantaged provincial areas. Many essayists abandon the traditional topic of books and works of art, and turn to 'reading' the animal world, the plant world, and the world of ordinary objects. The essay has also become a tool for introducing polarisation between that which is mainstream and that which is marginal and concerns minorities. The fact of choosing a non-traditional topic often entails a non-canonical cognitive attitude, which translates into experiments within the area of the form of expression. The author of this article argues that all those innovations can be accommodated by the flexible convention of the essay as a genre which, in principle, is supposed to constitute an artistic cognitive experiment.

## Keywords

Polish essay in the 21st century, travel essays, essays about animals, Brach-Czaina Jolanta, Stasiuk Andrzej, Środa Krzysztof, Bieńczyk Marek, Nowicki Wojciech, Lis Renata, Wicha Marcin, Pucek Robert, Mueller Joanna, Łubieński Stanisław, Zajączkowska Urszula

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