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# Essay as a Hydrofoil Boat: Reflections on Reading Jan Tomkowski's Anthology of Polish Literary Essay<sup>1</sup>

One feature of the Polish essay is its special – even ostentatious – personal character: I am this and that and I do not care much about the rest; this is precisely what I need to fight for under the literary sun<sup>2</sup>.

(...) as it is the aesthetics that is the mother of ethics rather than the other way round. If you were of a different opinion, please recall the circumstances in which you fall in love<sup>3</sup>.

## Piloting the quasi-genre

The lightness of thought is not (always) being lightsome. The essay is not as light as a poem and not as heavy-going as a philosophical discourse. In one word: a hydrofoil boat. It does not glide and it does not roll away. I did

<sup>1</sup> *Polski esej literacki. Antologia*, introduction and edition by J. Tomkowski, 1st edition, BN I 329, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 2017. Hereinafter referred to as PELA, together with the page number.

<sup>2</sup> J. Błoński, *Król esej?*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" 2000, 3 December, p. 12. Błoński's column appeared in his section titled *Mieszaniny*. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

<sup>3</sup> J. Brodzki, *An Immodest Proposal*, [in:] *In Praise of Boredom*, transl. A. Kołyszko, M. Kłobukowski, selection and edition by S. Barańczak, Kraków 1996, p. 189.

not invent this all by myself; I am making a reference to Joseph Brodsky, an expert essayist, who was looking for something between the pace of a car and a plane (so he was looking for a hydrofoil boat, so to speak).

Michał Głowiński, who in a conversation with Piotr Szewc calls the essay a 'liberal genre', refers to the essay as truant in a river-interview with Grzegorz Krzywiec.

The essay is rococo: light, sophisticated, elegant. The essay is not rococo: not easy to read, intellectually unfrivolous, erudite. It reconciles subtlety and gravitation.

### A fragment from *Portret Kanta* by Bolesław Miciński

Perhaps the most interesting meta-reflection on the essay as a form in Polish essay writing is a fragment from *Portret Kanta* (*A Portrait of Kant*) by Bolesław Miciński, titled *Od autora* (*From the Author*): just like Walter Hilsbecher in *Essay über den Essay* or Italo Calvino in *American Lectures* (especially in his unforgettable *Lightness*), the Polish essayist, who died prematurely, names the properties of the writing which he refers to as essayistic. I will quote here the first paragraph – the most general and quasi-definitional one, so to speak:

The artistic assumptions of this draft are included in the title: *Portret Kanta* (*A Portrait of Kant*). The portrait, hence the assumptions are of pictorial nature, while the life of Kant was proverbially colourless and monotonous, which caused considerable difficulty as it was necessary, *ex definitione*, to avoid all kinds of extra-pictorial elements, such as psychological analysis, text interpretation or historical commentary. **One ambition of this draft was the transposition of notions to images.** This is why the essay is preceded by an extensive introduction on painting. The pictorial assumptions determined not only the form but also the volume of the draft which had to be concise out of necessity, like the painting to be seen with one glance. This caused the lingering recurrence of several *leitmotifs*. The aim of these reprises was to shorten the whole in the memory of the reader: keeping in the current consciousness the motifs which fade during the perusal. This is why the ending includes the sentence which is to be found in the introduction. The perseverance of topics (window, castle ruins, green curtain) was also aimed at highlighting the tragic monotony of the life of the Kaliningrad thinker. The same pictorial ambitions made him use the play of light and shade almost in excess. But how (...) to depict the disappearance of the sense of reality, which tormented the philosopher in a different way? This is precisely why the trees behind the window are compared to patches of paint on a still wet watercolour and Kant in the lime alley is similar to 'flat', two-dimensional Egyptian drawings.

(PELA, 403-404, emphasis added by BM)

The essay is an attempt, always brave if not risky, at style; at finding an adequate equivalent of the topic or rather a constant search for it (openness of the form harmonises here with the uniqueness, specificity and peculiarity of the designate). The essay on Kant is a greater challenge than that on Aristotle. It is, generally speaking, a challenge.

In this sense: many texts collected on 1000 pages of the anthology are merely drafts rather than essays. Often interesting drafts, on different subjects, drafts intersecting with the poetics of the reportage or column (as in the case of Wisława Szymborska, who was an outstanding poetess, columnist, reviewer and epistolographer, but she was not an essayist). But they are not outstanding essays. Even when Jan Tomkowski chooses well-known essayists, those who are considered essayists, he selects not necessarily the most outstanding achievement of the given essayist. Also, there was no place for some authors at all.

The essay is not every text which does not fit in to other genres. Its mastery goes against the poetics of *silva rerum*; sometimes while reading the anthology one may have the impression that it is precisely this principle that Tomkowski adopted in his selection of texts. His nonchalance may be compared to putting a tailcoat on a naked body (without references).

(The essay does not stem from excluding other genres, other possibilities, but, in a sense, going beyond them. The essay is, so to speak, not possible to be pastiched. It is impossible to write an essay in the way in which Bolesław Miciński, Józef Czapski or Maria Janion did. It is possible, only worse and this will not be an essay after all).

Some references, however, (but this is another problem – one of publishing the essay in this series) take away the flavour of understatements; they relieve the readers in their search, whereas the acerbic references (compulsory in the edition of *Biblioteka Narodowa*) do not take this away. Does the essay, with its lack of humbleness regarding genre divisions, its separateness and personality, fit in such an understanding of edition at all? Does the essay not burst this intention of the master edition? There is no model for the essay or model for essay edition. Too many explanations, assistance, turning allusions into obviousness, conscientiousness going against the lining of essayistic language, which is usually noble (velvety or silky), but which everyone should recognise individually rather than follow the opinion of the expert (particularly that the references of the expert 'objectify' in a subjective way<sup>4</sup>).

The thing with the essay, so to speak, is like with Greek. Either you have mastered this alphabet, language, at least passively (read, interpret it),

<sup>4</sup> A good example is the lack of references to the dedication to the essay *Siena* by Zbigniew Herbert (from the volume titled *A Barbarian in the Garden*), which says: 'To Konstanty Jeleński – an Alexandrian'. This is a dedication of an essayist to an essayist. It could not be explained, for instance, that Jeleński was born in Alexandria (he was born in Warsaw and died in Paris). The dedication is a metaphor, referring to the Alexandrian origin of the essay: the essay is not from Athens or Rome or Jerusalem: the essay is from Alexandria. In addition, Herbert notes, using a code, his attention to Constantine Cavafy, who was close to him and who was an Alexandrian (both in terms of his place of birth and him being an outstanding essayist).

or you are a barbarian, which used to be excellently thematised in Polish essay writing, to recall, for instance, *A Barbarian in the Garden* by Zbigniew Herbert (also as a kind of dialogue with Cavafy).

Therefore, the essay assumes a certain required level of literary culture on the part the recipient, and this cannot be replaced with anything else. In order to write a good essay (there are no other), it is necessary to be an intelligent and well-read person; and to read the message that it is an essay – likewise<sup>5</sup>.

There are contradictions in defining the essay in juggling associations on the part of the most outstanding essayists. For instance, Jan Kott wrote that:

I will write after Gertrude Stein: “an essay is an essay is an essay. It is not an essay to write of an essay but to write an essay!”<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, in his conversation with Włodzimirz Bolecki, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński says that:

What does the essay mean? It is a genre which is extremely exciting and demanding. **A true essay does not only border upon a literary work, it simply is one.** It is not only a demonstration of knowledge or intelligence of the essayist. **It has to have a special construction.** There were not too many essay masters in Poland, Jerzy Stempowski, Ludwik Fryde or Bolesław Miciński, for instance. They always had more to say in their essays than it was imposed by the subject<sup>7</sup>.

The tautological (resulting from the paraphrase of Stein) and simultaneously rebellious definition – in accordance with the leftist temperament of Kott – and the aesthetic definition (it is about ‘special construction’) as well as the ethical one by Herling-Grudziński (it is about ‘true’ essays in the alleged opposition to ‘untrue’ essays – or what I am referring to as drafts here) all have a certain feature in common. In the blessed helplessness of defining, outstanding essayists themselves resort to metaphors and to examples.

<sup>5</sup> There appear to be no errors in the anthology; reading carefully, I found only one mistake: on page 815 in the essay by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński titled *Siedem śmierci Maksyma Gorkiego* (*Seven Deaths of Maxim Gorky*) (1963) there is a mistake in the date in the following sentence: “It is about the anonymous «Letter of an Old Bolshevik», written directly after the trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev in August 1956 (so several months after Gorky’s death) and smuggled from Russia to London”. The year should obviously be 1936, not 1956. Maxim Gorky, or Alexei Peshkov, lived in 1868-1936. There is also some shift in the references to *Kilka szczegółów* (*Several Details*) by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz: the explanation of the word “*tub*” (bark of a tree, usually of a lime – a word qualified as obsolete) appears on page 995, whereas the word itself appears six pages earlier, on page 989 in the sentence “A cart made of wood splint is turning from the market into Żydowska Street (...)”. It is worth adding that the word “*tubianka*” (wood splint basket) – still in common use today – is derived from the word “*tub*”.

<sup>6</sup> J. Kott, *Pisanie eseju*, [in:] *Lustro*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 104-105. As cited in: Małgorzata Krakowiak, *Mierzenie się z esejem. Studia nad polskimi badaniami eseju literackiego*, Katowice 2012, p. 188.

<sup>7</sup> G. Herling-Grudziński, W. Bolecki, *Rozmowy w Dragoniei*, Warszawa 1997, p. 306. As cited in: M. Krakowiak, *op. cit.*, p. 189, emphasis mine – KKK.

What is interesting and unique, and what was highlighted by Małgorzata Krakowiak in her pioneer work on the literary essay, is the fact that the essay escapes typologies (such as: lyric – narrative – drama, or: prose – poetry). Its matter is as real as it is imaginary, but it does not create fictional worlds (perhaps except for probabilistic purposes). The essay is situated on the antipodes of literary fiction and at the same time it draws a lot of inspiration from it: literary characters can be protagonists of essays – as in *Lalka i perła* (*The Doll and the Pearl*) by Olga Tokarczuk, the author of an excellent volume of essays and drafts titled *Moment niedźwiedzia* (*The Moment of the Bear*); literary phrases (e.g. winged words) can be considered in the essay; a place created in literature can be an inspiration for the essayist – as was the case with Stanisław Barańczak and his *Macondo*. And, indeed, the essay gets closer to other arts: there is, for instance, essay-writing revolving around *ekphrasis* in painting or sculpture (Czapski, Herbert, Herling-Grudziński, Pollakówna).

### The lack (and excess) will turn back against it

In the anthology, there are no eminent Polish female essayists, such as Maria Janion, Barbara Skarga, Joanna Pollakówna, Jolanta Brach-Czaina, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, or Renata Lis, and the very closing of the choice of Polish essay-writing between Cyprian Norwid – who was, indeed, very well selected as the first Polish essayist, the author of masterpiece *Białe kwiaty* (*White Flowers*) and *Czarne kwiaty* (*Black Flowers*)<sup>8</sup> – and Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz seems to be androcentric (but also here there are some spectacular deficiencies, such as the lack of Stanisław Lem, Jan Gondowicz, Piotr Sommer or Marek Bieńczyk). The essay, a rebellious form, was in favour of auto-emancipatory authoresses. The lack of representativeness can be also seen in omitting the whole thematic areas of Polish essay-writing: dissident essay (Adam Michnik, Jakub Karpiński), historical essay (Jacek Bocheński, Jerzy Jedlicki, Jan Tomasz Gross), essay on art (Joanna Pollakówna, Ewa Kuryluk, Mieczysław Porębski, Maria Poprzęcka), theological essay (Jerzy Nowosielski, Ludwik Wiśniewski), anthropological essay (e.g. Tadeusz Sławek, Zbigniew Mikołajko, Dariusz Czaja), or interpretational essay (due to hermeneutics, this one particularly frequently shifts from literary studies towards literature). And so on. As expressed in the introduction, I do not agree with the author of the anthology that it is the easiest thing to confront lists of persons, lists of Polish essayists. The list of essay writers is a list of attendance. Checking it (and possibly adding those who are absent – not by their own fault) belongs to the duties of those who discuss the endeavours of the anthologist.

The literariness of the essay (there are two further clarifications of the essay in the title of the anthology: ‘Polish’ and ‘literary’) is never measured

<sup>8</sup> A dissenting opinion should nonetheless be mentioned. In his essay titled *Wiosenne chrzenie. Witkacy w Tatrach* (from the volume: *Paradoks o autorze*, Hałart, Kraków 2011, p. 183, ref. 20), Jan Gondowicz writes that *Tatry w śniegu* (*The Tatra Mountains in Snow*) by Stanisław Witkiewicz (senior) ‘is the first Polish essay (1886)’. This essay can be found in *Pisma tatrzańskie*, (vol. 1, Kraków 1963).

by its topic (the same way that the level of the water is not measured, for instance, in amperes). The measure of essay literariness includes these features which I mentioned at the beginning of the draft – this special balance between the poetic density and intellectual gravity; the constant formal aporias, from which the essayist, like the fencer, comes away unscathed due to stylistic mastery.

Hence it seems to be a dubious practice to include fragments of larger works, their chapters, rather than the essay as a form which is originally cut by the author. This happened with, for instance, *Myśli o dawnej Polsce* (*Thoughts about the Old Poland*) by Paweł Jasienica, where the length of the fragment confined to the portrait of Queen Jadwiga of Poland from 1949, together with the excellent commentary, would be enough. However, a fragment is not an essay. This is brilliantly discussed by Walter Hilsbecher in his *Essay über den Essay* (*An Essay on the Essay*); the author sees in the fragment and in the aphorism some kind of competition for the essay (the classic text by Hilsbecher appears in the references to the edition of *Polski esej literacki*). If Jasienica did not cut this fragment as an essay, did not give it the (subjective, surely, and signed by him) form of the essay, this should not be done by Tomkowski, who is aware, I suppose, of the differences between draft, aphorism, fragment, and the essay. The title – outstanding, sometimes irritating, intellectually sublime – is one of the essential features of the essay, the domain of this author, and it cannot be *Thoughts about the Old Poland* (*fragment*), unless that was the author's will (which it was not). The situation is similar with *Koniec świata szwoleżerów* (*The End of the World of Chevaux-légers*) by Marian Brandys, whereas the stylistically excellent *Puszkina z Petersburga* (*Pushkin of Petersburg*) by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz holds up as a whole, having been made a whole by the author himself.

As is well-known (Tomkowski mentions this in the introduction), the essay has entered into relations with many several other literary genres; there is the phenomenon of essayisation of the novel or, more broadly speaking, prose (also historiosophic); there are reportages with elements of the essay. Essayisation is a phenomenon derivative of essay expansion, its exclusive allure (not to say attractiveness, as this would border on an oxymoron). The anthology of the literary essay is by no means an anthology of essayistic fragments or the intertwining of such fragments with essays *tout court*.

### Concept?

It is impossible for someone who discusses this anthology of essays not to raise the question about how the author of the introduction, who also made the selection of the texts, understands the genre. The anthology, let me remind – bouquet from Greek – refers to the most beautiful flowers, specimens of its species. Is it a complete bouquet, is it enough to read this anthology (being a student of Polish philology, for instance) to have some idea about Polish literary essay?

The introduction is a lecture of an expert or, at least, his alibi. This is why it is worth reading 110 pages and consider if the proposed concept is coherent, convincing, how this anthology relates to the wealth of the Polish essay and whether it really is a model choice. Pointing to numerous deficiencies in the choice of names raises doubt. They represent a gap in the intersubjective canon of Polish literary essay.

And how about the very understanding of 'essay' and 'literary essay'? Is there any difference between them? The terms 'philosophical essay' or 'travel essay' do not eliminate the preliminary assumption about their literariness (this anthology is made up of such travel or philosophical essays, portraits of persons and places, works or cultural threads). Literariness is a constructive feature of the essay, which makes an essay an essay.

In this sense, it is sometimes worth accepting auto-diagnostic arguments of authors whose texts were included in the anthology, not only as a manifestation of the topic of modesty. And consequently, in the biography preceding the draft (not: essay) by Ludwik Bohdan Grzeniewski, titled *Archipelag gaf* (*Archipelago of Gaffes*) (version from 1981), there is a sentence: "Even though the writer himself did not like the word «essay» and was consistent in not using it (he preferred the unspecified and less obliging term «draft»), it is precisely the essay writing that comprises the most valuable text written by him" (p. 863). On the contrary: we do not have to. Perhaps I am inclined to agree with the presumption that Grzeniewski is accurate in qualifying the genre of his texts as 'less obliging' and more undefined. At least the draft quoted in the anthology is precisely a draft, an argument spun around anecdotes, a slick story based on these anecdotes; it does not have the intellectual rank of the essay, it makes no claim to finesse.

### For soft landing with grace (of the hydrofoil boat)

English, the *lingua franca* of today's world, is not my language. With less advanced knowledge, it both simplifies and confuses the language, and definitely does not stroke the palate; with more proficient knowledge (Shakespeare and the rest), when I read it out loud, it irritates the vocal cords earlier stroked by the smoothness of Russian, its pleophony mighty as the Volga river, and the light champagne bubblyness of French.

Of course, excellent essays are written in English: Woolf, Yeats, Auden, to name the greatest. Natural language, home language has always fostered writing essays, as is the case with writing poetry. It is difficult to write essays in a foreign language which was merely learnt.

The essay as a genre-no-genre<sup>9</sup>, difficult to capture, is not and will never be the *lingua franca* of literature. It is a dissident (otherwise the dissident essay is a distinctive sign of Central and Eastern Europe as well as Russia, it notes the history of this strange part of the world): it is this amorphous phenomenon which goes beyond normative poetics. The essay is, perhaps, a poem in prose.

<sup>9</sup> The spelling with dashes is, of course, intentional.

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## SUMMARY

The paper is a multifaceted and contextual attempt at discussing the anthology of Polish literary essay in the version proposed by Jan Tomkowski in the edition of Biblioteka Narodowa (Series I, no. 329). It is also an essay on this essay anthology.

## Keywords

Polish literary essay, anthology, genre, quasi-genre, master edition



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