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The Literary “No” to Politically Tabooed Topics during the Polish People’s Republic. The Case of Tadeusz Konwicki’s Prose Writing**

The Literary “No” to Politically Tabooed Topics during the Polish People’s Republic. The Case of Tadeusz Konwicki’s Prose Writing. Using the example of characteristic works by Tadeusz Konwicki, one of the main post-war Polish writers, the article discusses literary ways of taking up topics functioning in the Polish People’s Republic as political taboos. War and post-war relations with the Soviet Union, the fate of Polish inhabitants of the eastern borderlands, the motif of the Home Army struggle against the Soviet army altogether constituted a proscribed area of interest. The analysis shows how the literary resistance against silencing, expressed through allusions, understatement, the poetics of traumatic realism and the grotesque — makes the writer an agent of collective memory.

Keywords: Tadeusz Konwicki, political taboo, silence, resistance, agent of memory

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This is in my nature that at the time when I was publishing underground and was, as if, on the side of the opposition, I felt responsible for the People's Republic. And, after 1989 up until today, I have still felt responsible.

T. Konwicki¹

Let us begin with the basic facts — Tadeusz Konwicki, an eminent film director, prose- and screenplay writer, deceased in 2015, was a protagonist of practically all of his works. He was witness to several state systems and throughout his life he was trying to tell his own story as representative of the whole group of people whose fate he shared. In the Polish People's Republic, however, this particular fate was interdicted by censorship for several reasons. Narrating this fate required dealing with truths which were politically inconvenient for the authorities. They were inconvenient not only when articulated, but also when they functioned as unspoken. The articulated ones would reveal that Poland's war losses in the east were perpetrated not only by Nazi Germany but also by the Soviet Union. The unspoken ones silently disclosed the fragility of legitimizing grounds of socialist authorities in post-WW2 Poland, which owed its rule to the alien empire and had to return the favor by nurturing the alliance based on lies and concealment.

We need to stress that Tadeusz Konwicki was not against the socialist system. At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s he was one of the writers and publicists accepting socialist realism in Polish literature. In 1953 he was formally admitted to the Polish United Worker's Party. Since the 1960s he started, however, to part ways with communist rule. Konwicki signed many protest letters of humanitarian appeal. In 1963 he published *Sennik współczesny* (*A Dreambook for Our Time*)², one of the most seminal works of Polish postwar literature, narrating the experience of the generation coming of age at the Polish eastern borderlands during the war and trying to find a place for themselves in post-war times. The year 1971 brought about another work on the lot of the generation entering maturity right after the war: *Nic albo nic* (*Nothing or Nothing*).

The writer was expelled from the party for taking part in issuing a letter to the authorities in protest at the relegation of philosopher Leszek Kołakowski from the party. After 1976 he published in émigré publishing houses based in London and in

¹ K. Bielas, J. Szczerba, *Pamiętam, że było gorąco. Rozmowy z Tadeuszem Konwickim*, Kraków 2001, p. 238.

² T. Konwicki, *A Dreambook for Our Time*, trans. D. Welsh, introduction by L. Kołakowski, London 1976. Hereinafter the English title used in the text.

Polish samizdat houses (so-called "alternative-circulation publishing")³, and back again in official state publishers⁴.

Taking into account those Konwicki's novels which are the most characteristic for the problem I intend to focus on in this article⁵, that is, the presentation of ways of transgressing the borders of politically tabooed topics in Polish post-war prose, it would be reasonable to analyze *A Dreambook for Our Time* and *Nothing or Nothing* first, and, further, *Kompleks polski* (*The Polish Complex*)⁶ (1977) and *Mała apokalipsa* (*A Minor Apocalypse*) (1979)⁷. The two former works, published in the so-called alternative circulation (samizdat), did not have to acquiesce to limitations imposed by communist censorship. Using poetics of the grotesque, they presented a critical picture of reality and, as a result, were inscribing themselves into counter-discourse targeting the dominant official narrative about historical and contemporary Polish-Russian/Soviet relations and the Polish reality of the 1970s. The first two works located the plot in the Poland of the 1960s, but the mental plot in the time of the Nazi German-Soviet occupation of the Wilno region, which was then within the boundary of the Polish Republic. Tackling this particular set of topics, the author had to reckon with the demands of censorship. He emphasized the importance of mental action which comprised fragmentary memories, feverish ravings, nightmares occurring to the characters. The use of the grammatical present tense in *A Dreambook for Our Time* for delivering scenes from the protagonist's life happening in the past and the past tense for the plot taking place in the present served to highlight the importance of that layer of the plot. It was noticed by Jan Walc in his discussion of Konwicki's novel from 1975⁸, although he did not arrive at more far-reaching conclusions in this respect

³ Konwicki's works published outside of the reach of censorship: *Kompleks polski*, NOWA 1977 — published as the third issue of *Zapis*; *Mała apokalipsa*, NOWA 1979 — came out as the tenth issue of *Zapis*, *Wschody i zachody księżycy*, Krag (alternative circulation) 1982, *Rzeka podziemna*, Krag (alternative circulation) 1984, the next edition as *Rzeka podziemna, podziemne ptaki*, London 1985.

⁴ Between 1976 and 1989 several books were published officially: *Nowy Świat i okolice*, Warszawa 1986; *Bohiń*, Warszawa 1987.

⁵ Konwicki was recognized as a notable writer and filmmaker. In this paper I discuss only a selection of his works. Konwicki's full bibliography can be found in *Słownik współczesnych pisarzy i badaczy literatury*, ed. J. Czachowska et al., vol. 4, Warszawa 1996, pp. 219–225. Moreover, a list of his most popular works can be found online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tadeusz_Konwicki (access: 09.07.2015).

⁶ T. Konwicki, *The Polish Complex*, trans. R. Lourie, The Dalkey Archive Press 1998 (first published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc, 1982). Hereinafter the English title used in the text. I will not discuss this novel here, because I have already written about it in other articles: "Polskie opowieści w dyskurs postkolonialny ujęte", [in:] *(Nie)obecność. Pominięcia i przemilczenia w narracjach XX wieku*, ed. H. Gosk, B. Karwowska, Warszawa 2008, pp. 75–89 [published in English as: "Counter-discourse and the postcolonial perspective: The Polish Complex by Tadeusz Konwicki", trans. D. Kołodziejczyk, *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, issue 2, Routledge 2012, pp. 200–209].

⁷ All quotes taken from: T. Konwicki, *Sennik współczesny*, Warszawa 1973; *Nic albo nic*, Warszawa 1971; *Mała apokalipsa*, *Zapis*, April 1979 (no. 10). Further quotes from this edition are annotated in the text, abbreviated as SW, NN, MA and page number. Emphases added are mine.

⁸ J. Walc, "Nieepickie powieści Tadeusza Konwickiego", *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1975, no. 1.

which would account for such an organization of the plot time. Such conclusions would have to spell out what the novel implied: that the difficult past of Konwicki's characters, connected with a determined space (Poland's eastern territories taken over after WW2 by the USSR) and experience (the fight against two enemies for retaining the territories within the bounds of the Polish state) requires full articulation and working through, while, in the meantime, it leads a life that is wrongly present, latent, and officially suppressed. This happens so because political circumstances are the reason why not only is there no place for this past in history books which contain a version convenient for those who wield power, but also its meaning was changed so that the heroism of people taking part in the guerilla war with the occupying forces got to be represented as irrational recklessness, and loyalty to the cause for which many sacrificed their lives was defined as treason and hostile action.

Konwicki's resistance against tabooing those crucial areas of the past or their instrumentalization in interpretations acceptable for the authorities was rooted in a conviction that such appropriation of the past will cause unrecoverable damage in the process of identity formation of the Poles who, under the circumstances of limited sovereignty, could neither go through the social therapy to heal war trauma, nor did they have a chance to negotiate the internal consensus on how to tell their history⁹. As Robert Traba writes, "the state historical politics was to a large extent reduced in the Polish People's Republic to the 'national' monopolization of memory. In the ideological dimension it meant the cult of 'the People's Republic victory' and of martyrdom whose perpetrators were solely the Nazi occupiers, without any trace of Soviet crimes and repressions"¹⁰. Subsequently, the traumatic events from the past became persistently present and, as trauma research proves, neither belonging to the past fully, nor to the present time¹¹.

Tadeusz Konwicki treats his writing as a kind of "warning and admonition combined, and a multi-tiered polemic — psychological, artistic, moral, patriotic, oppositional and historiosophic", as he himself said in *Pół wieku czyśćca* (*Half a Century of Purgatory*)¹². He expresses his literary "no" to the politically tabooed topics under communist rule through the poetics of traumatic realism¹³, the main feature

⁹ This aspect of collective memory was comprehensively discussed by Robert Traba. See R. Traba, "Procesy zbiorowego pamiętania i zapomniania. Trzy przypadki i ich konsekwencje dla pamięci zbiorowej", [in:] *Pamięć i afekty*, ed. Z. Budrewicz, R. Nycz, R. Syndyka, Warszawa 2015, p. 382.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See K. Bojarska, *Wydarzenia po Wydarzeniu. Białoszewski, Richter, Spiegelman*, Warszawa 2012. The author grounds her analysis in Freud's, Lacan's, Laplanche's, Carruth's and Felman's theories of trauma.

¹² S. Nowicki (Stanisław Beres's pseudonym), *Pół wieku czyśćca. Rozmowy z T. Konwickim*, Przedświt, (n.p.) 1986, p. 143. Further quotes from this edition are annotated in the text, abbreviated as PWC and page number. Emphases added are mine.

¹³ According to K. Bojarska, traumatic realism is a poetics characterized by a sublimated formal aspect of the work, the effect of defamiliarization, distance, reader's inability to easily identify with the mental setup of the narrator or implied author, discontinuity, citations, the semiotics of gestures taken

of which is a fragmentary, repeating plot, the construction of a traumatic protagonist and a specific formation of the text's time-space.

1. The traumatic protagonist in the novel of traumatic realism

Traumatic realism is founded on the poetics of contact with a reality made up from a different dimension of experience. In Konwicki's writing this "different dimension" emerges as a result of his suffering from a specific double blockage effectively hindering working through the traumatic experience. First, it was a dramatically difficult experience if we take into account the plain reality of WW2 in the Polish eastern borderlands. Second, the memory of that time was officially proscribed and sentenced to silence. The writer described his experience of the Home Army guerilla fighting the Nazis and Soviets in the eastern borderlands in the following way:

It was ridiculous, inapt, pathetic. We took such a beating for this microscopic and rickety prancing as if we lost at least a great war. But, because it was the case of the Russian repressions, we, as we always do — turned a minor pop into an impressive thunder. [...] We were thrashed so badly, at least as if it was the Hiroshima bomb attack. That is why everything is so badly bruised and that is why I don't want to write about it, nor to speak about it. What am I supposed to write? That it was great? That it was victorious?¹⁴

The lack of social therapy of the war trauma (in the diverse forms it was experienced) has imprinted itself on society up to the present day¹⁵. In Konwicki's writing, this lack is signaled through the construction of the protagonist who has intermittent problems with consciousness and memory, rambling feverishly about unnamed complications of fate, tormented by nightmares and a sense of guilt linked to a conviction about acts of treason committed in the past, errors and wrong life choices. In *Nothing or Nothing* the protagonist asks in a bout of fever: "How did it all happen? Why do I fear tomorrow? Why am I dying and cannot die? Why don't I understand anything and die of fear at this non-understanding?" (NN, 152).

The reader does not get to know the details of the detrimental situation which has led the protagonist to the state he is in. He is already traumatized and has obvious difficulties with articulating and naming the traumatic events he experienced. The unnamed recurs intermittently in fragments of scenes, images of persons reminding the protagonist of people he met in the past, agonizing dreams which create fragmentary images of the past times and spaces. In brief, the unnamed lies at the base

out of the structure of social practice, a rejection of the reflecting (mirroring) effect of realism for technological transformations of reality and their inclusion into art. See: K. Bojarska, op. cit., p. 201, fn. 1.

¹⁴ S. Nowicki, op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁵ One of the most typical examples of how the lack of working through trauma worked is the fact of the appropriation, under communism (and, partly, afterwards) of the memory of the war only in the national dimension, as a martyrdom of the Polish nation exclusively.

of the novelistic plot. The reader digs out the subtext to the surface supplementing the missing bits him/herself. This is how it works in *A Dreambook...* and in *Nothing or Nothing*. We can assume that the post-war normal reality of the People's Republic which surrounds Paweł from *A Dreambook...* and Darek from *Nothing or Nothing* is an apparent normalcy, covering up what has been repressed, left in ruin and loss which, left without a symbolic processing, seep into the dark regions of the unconscious and from there determine the tone and form of the specific post-war peace of mind¹⁶.

In *A Dreambook...* one of the characters, an ex-guerilla fighter, sums up the situation in Poland at the beginning of the 1960s, almost two decades after the end of the war: "It started as if at a ball. But the fun went sour. People are vexed and irritated, everybody aches somewhere" (SW, 39).

Nothing or Nothing develops a metaphoric account of the state of affairs signaled in the novel's title. It communicates the lack of alternative in the post-war existence of Poles, the choice without a real choice — between the "no" of the past that has been annihilated and the "no" of the present weighed down under the burden of concealments and falsifications. The protagonist says:

I know what everyone knows. We are mired in some kind of a jelly. In a strange substance — a bit stinky, but not stinky enough to poison us; not dense enough to throttle us, not black enough to seem to be the death. Not seeing one another, we are slowly drowning convinced that it is only us alone who are reaching the bottom. (NN, 236)

The last sentence of the cited fragment implies that society is turning into a shapeless pulp, devoid of the forces of social cohesion and lacking the sense of community sharing experience of the past and present. The writer faces a difficult task — he is to narrate something which cannot be overtly mentioned, and which, even in propitious circumstances, would be hardly possible to account for due to the emotional charge, ambiguity, sense of harm, betrayal, and failure. Konwicki decides to operate through understatements, signals, allusions, and a feverish and oneiric aura which, as in an unconscious state, warrants enunciations of the lowered assertion.

Sometimes the enunciations uttered by Konwicki's characters feature self-reflexive signals of the literary "no" to the official interdiction and bans. In *Nothing or Nothing* the leading character says:

I have always wanted to create the world in my own way. **When it turned out to be impossible**, I started to create it in my imagination [...] I am lying down and construct an imaginary, complex life, a bit unusual, but also quite probable, **full of jealously hidden meanings, which nobody will be able to decode without my help**. (NN, 198)

The writer develops in the two novels a certain variety of traumatic realism when he tries to narrate the events from the war which determined the fate of the whole generational setup of Poles born in the 1920s in the eastern borderlands,

¹⁶ See K. Bojarska, op. cit., p. 26.

brought up in patriotic spirit and ready to give up their lives for the motherland in case of war, as they were taught by the 19th-century Romantic writers who, in the time of the partitions, constructed a national narrative with a mission to help survive the failed and humiliated compatriots and sustain their sense of national identity. As already mentioned, these young people fought in the mid-1940s a guerilla war with two enemy forces — Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union — and, after the war, had to find their footing in a reality determined by one of the enemies when Poland became a satellite state in the Soviet bloc. The problem of the (non-)present past was equally, if not altogether more important, than the excruciating present (which he speaks about in *The Polish Complex and A Minor Apocalypse*).

Konwicki tackled this problem in a range of his works, in which the past and its borderland space was returning either as a childhood memory (*Dziura w niebie* [*A Hole in the Sky*]) and in one's youth (*Kronika wypadków miłosnych* [*A Chronicle of Amorous Accidents*]), or as a bearer of unspoken trauma, that is, in recurring, fragmentary, fantasmatic and spectral modes (*Nothing or Nothing, A Chronicle of Amorous Accidents*). Perfectly aware of censorship limitations regarding Polish-Russian relations, and, simultaneously, of colossal losses caused by belying this problem of unworked through past, he wrote "as if a play with the first act lost", forced to bypass in silence the right actors of the drama. This is what he called his creative work in a conversation with Stanisław Bereś, recalling that almost all of his novels "start with slamming on the door, somebody comes in, somebody runs away, somebody wakes up in an unknown situation" (PWC, 125), but the author declines from explaining the circumstances with any direct reference.

Konwicki was fully aware of the traumatic character of the situation in which the past experiences required working through, although he never uses the word "trauma". However, in *Pół wieku czyśćca* (*Half a Century of Purgatory*) we read: "This is like watching the **same occurrence all over again**. I can see the desire to reach the bottom in it. It is rooted in hope that, in the course of time, in the process of the right chemical processes, one will manage to **recover its essence**" (PWC, 129).

It is worth mentioning Konwicki's first work which, however, was not published right after it was written in the 1940s, but as late as 1957, when the topic of the Home Army guerillas fighting in the borderlands against the Soviets could no longer serve the authorities as a tool to destroy people linked to this organization which the communist regime saw to be the armed branch of the government-in-exile in London. This is *Rojsty*, the only work by Konwicki in which the characters experience the reality of war directly, rather than remembering it or dreaming about it in nightmares. I wrote about *Rojsty* in detail in another analysis¹⁷, and here I will only quote the author's comment on his work from 1984, published in the samizdat/alternative circulation in *Half a Century of Purgatory* in 1986:

¹⁷ H. Gosk, "Zaczynając od Rojstów i Władzy. Tadeusza Konwickiego spotkania z imperium", [in:] *Kompleks Konwicki*, ed. A. Fiut et al., Kraków 2010.

I never regretted my guerilla travaux. *Rojsty* was a reflex of pacifism after the lost war [...] My rebellion was quite natural. But, because we are living under Soviet occupation and we are subjugated, everything becomes ambiguous as a result [...] To make the thing more natural and fitting our mentality, we need to falsify it. Writing the truth has all of a sudden become as if untrue. (PWC, 26–27)

The two last sentences of the quoted fragment require an explanation, because through the content understood only by the local audience, they imply that Konwicki was also aware of the less obvious aspects of a pathology resulting from political dependence from the USSR. One of such indefinite aspects of that situation of dependence was the formation of the unofficial counter-discourse directed against the official version of the war events. The counter-discourse interpreted these events in its own way, idealizing the Polish armed struggle and erasing everything that would reveal any controversy within it, not to mention its occasional absurdity. The counter-discursive heroization and idealization distorted the image of the past, harming it as much as the official tabooing and censorship interdictions on those fragments of past which were inconvenient for the regime. A non-heroic picture of actions of the young boys from the Wilno Home Army unit depicted by *Rojsty* did not fit the interpretive framework of the counter-discourse in need of heroic narratives, and, narrated in accordance with the official discourse it would falsify the author's intentions.

The author's words resonate with irony aimed at expectations of the Polish collective subject looking for an antidote to the propaganda lies fed to the society by the authorities in the glazing of the heroic-martyrdom pathos (also untrue) of a story about the difficult war past. It is worth noticing that such expectations became a staple element of the Polish collective mentality.

Some aspects of the poetics of traumatic realism (the nuanced structure of the works, the effect of defamiliarization, distance, impossibility to unproblematically identify with the protagonist-narrator's psychological setup) occurring in *A Dreambook...* and *Nothing or Nothing* can be considered a way to introduce something like a synecdoche of the context for the novels. The context communicates not so much and not only the social and political environment for the plot, but, more importantly, how the author filters and senses them. Bojarska writes about traumatic realism as poetics of artists who experienced the change in historical reality¹⁸. The categories of change and lack are constitutive for Konwicki's novels analyzed here which I propose to see as the bearers of trauma and, simultaneously, attempts to work through it. The recurring motifs of the Wilno area, the guerilla fighters making difficult life choices, yet unable to resolve the tragic dilemma of loyalty/treason, are nothing less than the repetition of traumatic events. As such, this poetics not only deepens the sense of discontinuity, rupture, gap between the past and the present, but also attempts to link and bind the past and the present by articulating their traumatizing relationship and, through it, opposing the political ban on speaking.

¹⁸ See K. Bojarska, op. cit., p. 231.

According to one of the key theoreticians of traumatic realism, Michael Rothberg, texts created within this poetics have a documentary character. Although they give witness to reality through incoherent narration, they do not give up a certain form of reference¹⁹. This task is not easy, especially if the witness is to be given to something which has been annihilated by the official discourse.

2. Event, spaces, people who (officially) never existed

Apart from the fight against two enemies, of which one became after the war the guarantor of the new border of the Polish People's Republic and its sovereign authority, another tabooed topic was the pre-war eastern borderlands that became the USSR after the war. Subsequently, Poles were resettled. If the borderlands were mentioned at all, it was only in a general way and without any political context and discussion of the war fate of the inhabitants, oppressed by the Soviet rule after September 17, 1939.

In Konwicki's writing, his home Wilno valley lived its own life as an arch-pattern of a poor, but also in a way Edenic space of freedom, good mores, harmony and stability of world laws. It would return in consecutive works more often than the Home Army guerilla experience. In *A Dreambook*... the borderland motif is linked to the loss of elderly siblings, the Korsaks who, after resettling to post-war Poland, admit: "This authority is good for us, too. Where will we end up in our old age, we have left our old place behind once already" (SW, 112).

The reader does not get to know where their place is and why the Korsaks left it behind. In the novel, its borderland name appears — Ejszyszki — and it functions as a synecdoche of a better world. Malwina Korsak tells about Ejszyszki to the protagonist-narrator:

It will be some seventeen years when we were, mister, put into cargo carriages and brought to this Poland. [...] So we did come, and we found this valley, exactly the same as ours of Ejszyszki. For which we thank God. But such rich soil, just like butter, with such scent, light, is nowhere to be found. Because at our place, there in the east, the forests are different, fields flatter, rivers calm. [...] One can live anywhere, but dying must be only on one's own soil. (SW, 196)

It is worth paying attention to the anonymity of the agents of resettlement and the lack of any context of that event. The unnamed "them" "put us into cargo carriages and brought to this Poland" for unknown reasons. Ms Korsak does not posit herself as an agent of the events making up her life. The reader either knows the circumstances of resettlement from the east and the minute signal will be sufficient for her/him, or s/he does not, and in that case the story, which is structured as a pal-

¹⁹ See M. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism. The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Minneapolis 2000, pp. 100–101.

impsest revealing some other story resurfacing from under the main text, will not yield all the possible senses of the message.

In *Nothing or Nothing* the same process of post-war resettlement of the Polish population from the eastern borderlands is narrated even more sparingly. The protagonist meets an elderly man going to the seaside by bus to his “in-laws”, to live with them his last days. The old man says: “This is how it was. I always thought I’d be buried were I was born. And we did have beautiful cemeteries. On sandy hills, high up, amongst birch trees. Here, mister, there are not such birches. I felt from the beginning you’re close to me” (NN, 232).

No place name where the old man was born is mentioned. But the conversation concerns Wilno and its cemetery spread over the hills, the Rossa. The reader may know it or not, but, if he knows the same people as the old man, he must have seen their ID locating their birth place in a truly Orwellian phrase: “Born in the USSR”.

The Wilno valley, Konwicki’s birthplace, returns in his writing as a space of permanently solid features and immutable topography. It is also a universal space, Polish in its essence²⁰, marked with graves of those who perished fighting for the Polish cause, landscaped with village huts in orchards and churches on hills, crisscrossed with rivers at the bottom of which one can still find medals of past uprising fighters. This space which does not exist in reality any more, will be seen by the protagonist of *A Dreambook*... at the Soła river in south-east Poland (of the new borders), this space is missed by the Korsak siblings, and such a valley provided the space for the plot of the early novels, like *A Hole in the Sky* (1959), and late, like *Bohin’* (1987).

Such specifically constructed space was accompanied by the equally non-neutral semantically construction of time, in which the officially absent past cast a somber shadow over the unacceptable present and foreclosed any future. For this reason the plot of many of Konwicki’s novels takes place just before the end of the world which is to happen due to a cataclysm, for example, a comet hitting the Earth. The characters in *A Dreambook*... repeat: “this is a strange year; they are saying, it’s the last”. In *A Dreambook*, *Nothing or Nothing*, *The Polish Complex*, and *A Minor Apocalypse* even seasons of the year get mixed up and they occur simultaneously. In a conversation with Stanisław Bereś the author commented on this literary device for expressing a protest against reality: “It is also a political protest of the citizen of this state against what happened [...] Everything is without importance, falsified, destroyed — the rivers, forests, the weather, calendar, human dignity. [...] And, after all, my generation also had its own ‘real’ time” (PWC, 105).

²⁰ Jan Walc observed it in the work mentioned above: *Nieepickie powieści T. Konwickiego*.

3. The articulated

After 1976 Konwicki decided to speak openly. As mentioned, he published some of his works in publishing houses functioning outside of the bound of censorship. He will comment on that decision and on his novels published in the alternative-circulation journal *Zapis* in the following way: "I broke a certain taboo and said, maybe for the first time in this country, about the existence of Russia and that we are enslaved. I announced both those things at the risk of my life. Nothing bad happened to me, but such a possibility was quite viable" (PWC, 165).

A Minor Apocalypse published at that time represents, in poetics of the grotesque, the "utterly transparent slavery" (MA, 8)²¹ of Polish society. It is worth mentioning the self-critical aspect of that work, also in the sense of how the author distances himself from the previously applied means of opposing the silence imposed by political taboos. This seems to be the author's way of sharing the same intuition with Maurice Blanchot, who says that "to be silent means to keep on speaking"²². Interdiction on speaking in Konwicki's narrative is understood as an imperative to speak with all the consequences, including the results of long-term enslavement.

The protagonist-narrator of *A Minor Apocalypse*, a writer who shares a lot of the author's worldviews — says in the first person plural, as if placing himself in the circle of disavowed artists:

[...] we became Sovietized to such a degree that the cult of the illicit erupted here; an ambiguous desire for a lick of the forbidden, a pitiful delight in political pornography dressed in the lingerie of allusion [...] that aberration, the scheming contest of self-justification for all the sins of collaboration [...]. (MA, 18)

Understatements and allusions, used by Konwicki himself before, in *A Minor Apocalypse* get criticized not only as insufficient, but most of all because they are recognized as a licensed protest, a concession on the part of the regime. A philosopher-Marxist, lending his services to the party, comments on allusions in the following way:

Allusions [...] play a vital role. Not calling a thing by its name reveals what it is; allusions have a suggestive power, they reach into the listener's subconscious. Therefore, an undisclosed truth becomes a public truth. The tension caused by the hunger for truth, or, rather, I would say, by people's complex about truth — those dangerous threatening tensions are artificially eliminated by a skillfully employed allusion. [...] After a certain amount of time, people will prefer an allusion to the truth itself. (MA, 35)

This demagogic interpretation reveals the pathology of the political system, forcing people to be trapped in the absurd and get used to it, or, even find some posi-

²¹ Page numbers relate to the English translation, or to the Polish original, if not locatable in the translation.

²² M. Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. A. Snock, Lincoln, Nebraska and London 1986, p. 11.

tive aspects of this predicament. Postcolonial critics define the process signaled in *A Minor Apocalypse* as self-colonization²³. Konwicki adds to this concept his observation that self-colonization/Sovietization occurs invisibly, thus difficult to stop, if the mentality of Poles does not change:

Our contemporary poverty is **transparent as glass and as invisible as the air**. Our poverty is kilometer-long lines, the constant elbowing, spiteful officials, trains late without reason [...], lying newspapers [...], the compulsion to belong to the Party [...], a state store where you can buy anything for dollars, the monotony of living without any hope whatsoever [...]. Our poverty is the grace of the totalitarian state by whose grace we live. (MA, 43)

And, further: "So now the regime had its own art. The regime is self-sufficient. It creates reality and mirrors it in art" (MA, 56).

In *A Minor Apocalypse* the absurd and nonsense reign free. The protagonist-narrator, who, in the capital city, is to commit an act of self-immolation that will shake the conscience of Sovietized compatriots, is invigilated by the militia, checked for his ID, trailed, interrogated by the security services. During the interrogation his tormentor says: **"We have given the oppressor the slip. We've outwitted him. We are free because we have imposed our own slavery"** (MA 118).

Konwicki was convinced that the situation of Poland at the end of the 1970s required a vocal expression of what the authorities banned, of the mechanisms of politically constructed silence, and of the social consequences of such a blocking of the truth. In works published after 1976 he pointed out the agents of silencing, or addressed them directly, making a censor the protagonist-recipient of his works (e.g., in *Nowy Świat i okolice* [*Nowy Świat and around*]). It seems that he himself was more than just a border character in the space negotiated or forcefully shared with other agents of silencing, who persist in controlling words and subjects, and agents of memory who equally unrelentingly pursue to reveal what is hidden.

According to Jay M. Winter, border characters are "writers, comedians, actors who live in a special space reserved for risky words, likely to offend and provoke by speaking about things that are known, but which are not mentioned publicly"²⁴. The writer who breaks the silence around subjects tabooed by the authorities does so not to offend or provoke, but to expose what has been hidden. He belongs, then, to the agents of memory.

Translated by Dorota Kołodziejczyk

²³ See A. Kiossev, *The Self-Colonizing Metaphor*, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html> (access: 11.07.2016).

²⁴ J. M. Winter, "O milczeniu", trans. LIDEX, [in:] (*Kon*)*teksty pamięci*, ed. K. Kończal, Warszawa 2014, p. 415.