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RAFAŁ WOJACZEK'S "SICKNESS UNTO NON-EXISTENCE"¹

The paper focuses upon the philosophical message rendered by Rafał Wojaczek's poetry. The author regards the issue of non-existence as the central theme of Wojaczek's creative output, and analyses it in the context of existentialist philosophy, referring to Martin Heidegger's concepts in particular. The following four aspects of the leading idea of non-existence are identified and discussed in the article: non-existence understood as death which not only constitutes everyone's destiny but also validates individual life; non-existence as nothingness which is disclosed in anxiety, with the retreat of being in its entirety; non-existence as a blurred personal identity; and, finally, non-existence as a condition of creativity. The unique form and style of this poetry are considered to play an essential role in conveying the metaphysical content.

Keywords: Rafał Wojaczek, existentialism, existence, non-existence, death, anxiety

It is tempting to analyse Rafał Wojaczek's poetry referring to the terms coined by the father of existentialist philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard, in his book *The Sickness Unto Death*. However, in the case of the Polish "cursed poet", the essential message conveyed by his creative output differs from that of the Danish philosopher. In Wojaczek's poetry, the leading point is not despair understood as most grievous illness, but rather his versatile and uniquely "morbid" consciousness of philosophically understood non-existence, approached initially from the position of intuition of individual death. Accordingly, in this poetry individual existence with all its disturbances is perceived as sickness leading to death, the Heideggerian *Sein zum Tode*.

The motif of death is present in most of Wojaczek's poems. It can even be said that this poetry is permeated with an obsession with death. Thoughts of death evoke existential anxiety, but at the same time death justifies the corporeal existence and imposes meaning upon it:

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My body
Is death which you fear
And which you desire
My body
Because only death is able to
Validate your life².
My Body (Wojaczek 1999: 14–15)

Since his suicide at the age of 26 in 1971, Rafał Wojaczek's creativity, intertwined with his tragic life, has become a source of critical analyses and interpretations, but also numerous myths presenting its author as a cursed poet: an alcoholic, erotomaniac, psychotic and decadent, whose poems express a nihilistic outlook and shock the reader with profanities and obscenities. The tragic death of the philosophising poet was viewed as an obvious defeat of his search for the ultimate meaning of existence from the perspective of non-existence, in accordance with the famous passage from of Albert Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*: "Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer" (1955: 4). Wojaczek seems to have uttered a bitterly negative answer to the thus understood principal question of philosophy, both through his biography and poetic projects. The actual death of the poet has been sensationally associated with the "morbid" trait of his artistic creations.

Yet, the phenomenon of Wojaczek's popularity is more than just a question of mass culture legend. To do justice to this poetry one should focus on the amazing philosophical content rendered in an equally amazing poetic style. Two factors seem to determine the significance of Wojaczek's place on the map of Polish post-war poetry: the deep and authentically outlived existential message; and the original poetic form organically correlated therewith, a unique style of artistic expression which many a time involves the breaking of linguistic rules. But as Martin Heidegger puts it in *Letter on "Humanism"*, it is exactly the poet and thinker, and not the traditional philosopher, who can transgress the fossilised language schemes and rationalistic categories imposed upon reality by Western philosophy, and thus is able to express the truth of being more adequately than a traditional metaphysician: "In this regard 'subject' and 'object' are inappropriate terms of metaphysics, which very early on in the form of Occidental 'logic' and 'grammar' seized control of the interpretation of language. We today can only begin to descry what is concealed in that occurrence. The liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework is reserved for thought and poetic creation" (Heidegger 2000: 83).

Maybe that was why Wojaczek abandoned his initial plan to study philosophy and dedicated his life (and death) to poetry. At the same time, from the position of a Heideggerian poet, he approached the fundamental questions of existential philosophy: the problems of existence, non-being, and anxiety³.

² All translations unless otherwise marked are given by the author of the present paper.

³ Yet, the philosophical traits of Wojaczek's poetry are not frequently exposed by the critics. Among those discussing this aspect of his poetry are J. Błoński (2001); S. Barańczak (1971), who discusses the problems of the

The existential "sickness" consisting in feelings of emptiness and anxiety, but also a specific morbid fascination with absence and privation, can primarily be related to the multifarious category of non-existence. In Wojaczek's poetry, the notion of non-existence may be interpreted in at least four different aspects:

- 1) non-existence understood as death which each individual existence aims at; consistently, both Wojaczek's biography and poetry are deliberately marked by death stigmata. Any attempts at concealing this ultimate end will make for an inauthentic, and, consistently, also valueless existence;
- 2) non-existence understood as Heideggerian nothingness – manifesting itself in the experience of existential anxiety. The question remains whether Wojaczek's border intuition of nothingness leads to the disclosure of its opposite, being as such, or remains forever an unsatisfied "hunger", to quote the poet's repeatedly used term;
- 3) non-existence as a questionable personal identity, a shattered sense of one's separate existence; alongside the experienced retreated being in its totality, the subject – a concrete empirical "I" – and its identity become blurred;
- 4) non-existence understood as a necessary condition of all genuine creativity. The artistic act consists in the creator's summoning into existence something that was formerly non-existent. In this context, it is worthwhile to refer to Władysław Stróżewski's definition of the essence of creative activity as "leading to the creation of something new, i.e. something different from the so far existing things, or something that has not existed before" (Stróżewski 1977: 13).

What is more, for Wojaczek this is only in poetry, through artistically purified experience of anxiety, that a shadow of hope for the paradoxical "annihilating" of non-existence emerges.

NON-EXISTENCE AS DEATH

Stefania Cisek, Wojaczek's friend from the early years of his youth, pertinently summed up the constant motif of the death stigma in his life and poetry in the following words: "Death lived within him throughout most of his life" (Bereś 2008: 111). In his poems, death assumes different roles, forms and disguises. The awareness of the ultimate end is, however, always present, pervading every moment of life, and finding its most persuasive expression in poetry:

Each dawn is mortal says the brain
In the dialect of poets so that I grasp it can.
Rhymes at the Preharvest (Wojaczek 1976: 193)

Death dominates the individual life, but at the same time it fulfils a universal metaphysical role, becomes a "shepherd of being", endowing the world with significance from the perspective of personal loss:

metaphysics of hunger, anxiety and loneliness in this poetry; M. Fostowicz (1991), who focuses on Wojaczek's philosophy of tragedy, influenced by F. Dostoyevsky and F. Nietzsche; R. Cudak (2016) – who analyses the question whether Wojaczek was metaphysical.

Where the male of my left hand plays with the sky
There a herd of milk stars, and my death feeds them.
The Unholy Ballad (Wojacek 1976: 127)

Death determines and precedes each existence as its ultimate destination; a hand holding a grain becomes “a grave of the fruit” [*Catalogue*] (Wojacek 1976: 118). Life is perceived as revolting against itself, as a slow yet not fully realised process of dying. Still, the dream of remaining in the background of “one infinity” is inherent to it:

This process, this is life driven by a will
Opposed to it, because it finds death
Inside. This friction, benevolent resistance
Aimed toward staying in the background

Of one infinity.

[...]

This process is the dying not yet traversed
By anyone on the road; through which a reverse
Remembrance of the dead does not shine. This movement is dying not experienced yet
By anyone on the way not passed
By backward memory of the dead person’s life.
This Process (*Poetry...* 2006).

As life is just a veil of death, so also physical existence, in the face of its elusiveness, turns out to be one of death’s masks. As such, death becomes metaphysically substantialised:

The real mastership of death, which invents
The ever different forms of its existence [...]
The Mimicry (Wojacek 1976: 165)

Wojacek masterfully describes the diversified forms of death’s “existence”. Tymoteusz Karpowicz notes that the poet focuses on the descriptions of the meanest types of death: the “death of the pissed”, death without dignity (1976: 11). Provocatively, this seems to be but a game, aspiring perversely at finding another, more sublime and even theological dimension of death. In the poem *Introduction to the Science of Colours, or the Artist Painting at Night*, death plays a role of a divine tool correcting and validating the artist’s/human’s endeavours; completing the life-long imperfect acts:

The death’s margin, necessary for
God to make corrections, to smooth the style.
(Wojacek 1976: 125).

In Wojacek’s poetry, each creative act, each deep experience is death-oriented. Permeating corporeality, death also stigmatises the act of love, and it enables the lovers to mutually experience a premonition of each other’s death: “Let’s make love, may you dream my death ever anew” [*Let’s Make Love*] (Wojacek 1976: 184).

Wojaczek writes about growing up, maturing to death. This involves the acceptance of the unavoidable, the heroic consciousness of the ultimate destiny:

We allow [death] to
drink equally from our mug, not caring about the costs.
The Song of Heroes VII (Wojaczek 1976: 69).

The authentic existence implies a courageous living with the awareness of death, without making excuses, without denying the finitude of existence and escaping from the tragic wisdom to the shallow distractions of life. It involves a constant confrontation with one's own death, as hiding the truth is fruitless:

And when I cheated for the purposes necessary
for life, alongside the deception, death's account grew.
There Was a Necessity (Wojaczek 1976: 89)

In the case of Wojaczek's philosophising thought, the Heideggerian authentic existence is brought up to the absurd: the consciousness of death becomes death obsession, leading outside the stanzas to the actual suicide of the poet. "I am so egocentric," he wrote in a juvenile letter to his friend, "that I can imagine death only as committed by my own hand" (Bereś 2008: 111). In the poem *I Walk and Ask*, the awareness of the inevitability of death imposes the imperative of searching for it:

I walk and I ask: where is my gallows?
In whose garden, in which forest does it grow?
(Wojaczek 1976: 78)

For the poet, the act of fulfilled death also implies an escape from *la condition humaine*, the painful burden of existence with its fears and ennui. As Tomasz Kunz remarks, Wojaczek "subordinates himself to annihilation, seeing in it a liberation from the source of his sufferings – anxiety and boredom" (2016: 83).

NON-EXISTENCE AS NOTHINGNESS

For the author of *The Season*, the essential existential experience is fear. Fear replaces Cartesian thinking in proving the individual existence: "(...) tell me that you fear, I will believe you exist" (*You Must Always Fear the Rose*). Fear is an integral part of life:

But fear like pain
can no longer not be
there is no us without it and it
does not scare without us.
A Ballad on Fear (Wojaczek 1976: 197).

Wojaczek's *fear* has a universal dimension, and it is closer to the existentialist notion of *anxiety*: the Heideggerian *Angst*, the feeling referring to no object, i.e. nothing. Anxiety

discloses the presence of nothingness in our being. As the German philosopher says, in a situation of anxiety we feel that beings slip away as a whole.

Nothingness cannot be an object proper of any experience, for it is precisely the lack of any object. For the existentially minded philosopher, the so understood “disclosure” of nothingness in anxiety, and of “nihilitating nothing” constitutes probably the most important metaphysical experience. In fact, in anxiety we encounter nothingness simultaneously with being in its entirety. In *What Is Metaphysics*, Heidegger writes: “Nihilation is not some fortuitous incident. Rather, as the repelling gesture toward the retreating whole of beings, it discloses these beings in their full but heretofore concealed strangeness as what is radically other – with respect to the nothing” (2013: 6). For most of the time, nothingness and correspondingly also the essence of being as opposite to it remain concealed. It is only in the experience of “nihilitating nothing” that Dasein is brought before being as such (Heidegger 2013: 6), defining the meaning of Dasein.

The essential question concerning Wojaczek’s ideas under consideration with respect to the “sickness unto non-existence” and the metaphysical disclosure of nothingness (with the retreat of being in its entirety in anxiety) would be whether such experience of anxiety also possesses a Heideggerian nihilating character, i.e. whether the metaphysical truth of so-far concealed being is disclosed to the poet therewith.

The author of *Other Fairytale* seems to follow the route delineated by the German existentialist, when he writes:

Who of holy harmony will dream
Death invent he must and entrust in him.
Vademecum (Poetry... 2006)

Wojaczek knows that in order to achieve a higher level of metaphysical experience, with its positive disclosure of essential meaning, it is necessary to reveal (in repulsion) the nihilating horizon of being. This condition seems to be met by Wojaczek in excess. But is being itself as opposite to nothingness revealed to the poet? Does the Heideggerian *ek-sistence* understood as “standing out into the truth of being” (2000: 249) become accessible to him in the light of the ultimate philosophical message of this poetry?

For Heidegger, being reveals itself in clearing; for Wojaczek, the glimpses of “light that controls the dark” emerge out of death, to use the words of Tymoteusz Karpowicz (1976: 20).

But the light so quiet as silent is the voice
That each of us still hear, summoning him.
The Little Light (Wojaczek 1976: 138)

Through the frightening and repulsive existential and poetically rendered dimensions, a “hunger” for their opposite manifests itself: a longing for being, the sublime, the sacred. In Wojaczek’s revolting poetry, the glimpses of faith and acceptance shine – like for Camus’s *l’homme révolté*, who although he says *no*, but also, from the very beginning of his rebellion, says *yes* – because his *no* is spoken in the name of positive values (Camus 1954).

Yet, in Wojaczek’s poetry, uncertainty always intrudes (“Dawn still does not know maybe it dusk is”) (*Polonia Restituta*). It seems that besides the vague glimpses of a positive

metaphysical attitude, there still remains a dominating nihilistic feeling, a lack of faith in the essential, sacred meaning of being. In the poem *Letter from Cell II* he writes: "Even if we repeat it before the sleep for long/Your name is the path which leads nowhere" (1976: 111), and in *The Unholy Ballad* we read: "Where my right foot stops the movement of planets/ There is no God only infinite sadness" (1976: 127).

It is as if the retreat of the entirety of being is not followed by a truly metaphysical experience of the essence of being "as radically other with respect to the nothing" (to refer to Heidegger again).

NON-EXISTENCE AS A QUESTIONABLE PERSONAL IDENTITY

Along with the retreat of being in its entirety in the face of one's own death and metaphysically understood nothingness, the individual existence also becomes questionable – death will simply write about us: "Nobody" (Wojaczek 1976: 166). A sense of identity is shattered; one's personality is split:

Who is that who writes my poems
With my pen
And takes my wife in my bed?
Who is that who has just left?

(Wojaczek 1976: 223)

The author repeatedly refers to himself in the third person, usually unfavourably (e.g. as "motherfucker", "drunkard", "parasite" in the poem *Forgive the Infantry*). In his last volume, *The Unfinished Crusade*, the lyrical subject becomes a woman, which gives an other-sex outlook on the world [*A Very Feminine Question*] (1976: 215).

The subject is impersonal, experienced as if from outside, which in the language layer is manifested in non-grammatical syntactical simplifications, e.g. the pronoun "I" governing the third person. Jan Błoński pertinently explains this mechanism: "The syntax falls apart, because the integrating sense of personality falls apart" (Błoński 2001: 88).

[...] I is
but there is no me
[...] There is not to sleep
Not to breathe
Not to live.
Season (Wojaczek 1976: 93).

In the face of imminent non-existence which questions the very sense of existence, the individual subject can be identified with anyone else, as well as with nobody.

NON-EXISTENCE AND POETIC CREATIVITY

As Stanisław Barańczak concludes, for Wojacek “creativity becomes a cure for the ‘sickness unto death’ [...] – creativity which does not summon death, but rather aims at its ‘killing’, ‘annihilating’” (2001: 98). It is only poetry which contains the frail insight into ultimate revelation:

[...] light so feeble as fragile sometimes is
A poem – the one that immortal will be.
Little Light (Wojacek 1976: 138).

Poetic creativity, the laborious enchanting of the existential message in invented powerful words, possesses a cognitive value; a poetic wording allows one to grasp the intimations of source truth:

[...] the words
Even though on which I choke
I urgently need to rhyme
As a carpenter who when he wishes to see
In the window frame must the sky fit.
Three Religious Poems (Wojacek 1976: 67–68).

Remaining in the element of being (or non-being?), writing exerts the Heideggerian “wholesome pressure toward deliberate linguistic formulation” (2000: 241). In the case of Wojacek’s poetry, it resides in the originally precise and unique style, shockingly expressive and, at the same time, perfectly matched with the conveyed content, showing attention to the melodic line, the usage of innovatory metaphors, the unusual combination of words.

Melody, rhythm, metre – the masters of Polish poetry provided the patterns for Wojacek’s poetic workshop. He referred to his fascination with the language of Kochanowski and Sęp-Sarzyński. The malicious critics argued that the choice of these masters was due to the fact that he abandoned Polish philology after his first year of studies.

The strong means of expression preferred by Wojacek grow directly from his powerful existential visions. The style seems to grow organically from the poet’s experience. “For him, each poem was a living organism, with veins and a bloodstream” – Jerzy Kronhold claims (Bereś 2008: 169). Hence the drastic vocabulary, images, and the presence of physiological, organicist motifs.

There is the truth with us: you know, what you give it
poem fed with desperate blood
from a cordial wound.
Testimony (Wojacek 1976: 149).

Wojaczek's poetic works are an example of integral creativity, in which the distinction between life and poetry is blurring, and the creative process, like life itself, is intertwined with death:

Death
(Why to begin a poem with such a word
Is it not better to hang
Immediately).
The Beginning of a Poem (Wojaczek 1976: 191).

The poet relies on contrasts: life-death, white-black, beauty-ugliness, and brilliant paradoxes, like in the poem *Dead Season* ("Yes, I arrived here not in time/who lives/dies hurriedly") (1976: 94).

Referring to Roman Ingarden (1960) it can be concluded that the deepest stratum of this poetry is rendered by the artistic values present in other strata of Wojaczek's poems, which allow the properly qualified recipient, in their aesthetic experience, to reveal the metaphysical qualities – the "qualities" of non-existence understood as the paradoxical horizon of being. As a metaphysical poet *par excellence*, Wojaczek in a unique way touches the differentiated dimensions of non-existence premonition and experience: personal non-existence, i.e. death; nothingness understood as the retreat of *being* in its entirety, while both categories reveal themselves in fear/anxiety; and the loss of one's individual identity in the face of imminent death and nothingness. Finally, poetry itself becomes a domain of artistically transformed confrontation with non-existence, leading to at least fragmentary and symbolic insight into the ultimate nature of being⁴.

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⁴ The paper is a modified version of an article entitled *Twórca wobec nieistnienia: Rafał Wojaczek*, published in Polish in the collection of post-conference materials (Krzysztof Maćkowiak and Cezary Piątkowski (ed.). 2009. *Język i styl twórcy w kręgu badań współczesnej humanistyki*, Zielona Góra: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego).

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RAFAŁA WOJACZKA „CHOROBA NA NIEISTNIENIE”

Artykuł poddaje analizie filozoficzne przesłanie poezji Rafała Wojaczka. Za centralny temat twórczości Wojaczka autorka uznaje problem nieistnienia, interpretując go w kontekście filozofii egzystencjalnej, w szczególności w odniesieniu do myśli Martina Heideggera. Interpretacji zostają poddane cztery aspekty Wojackowej koncepcji nieistnienia: nieistnienie rozumiane jako śmierć, która nie tylko stanowi przeznaczenie każdego człowieka, ale również nadaje wartość indywidualnemu życiu; nieistnienie jako nicłość ujawniająca się w trwodze, wraz z wycofywaniem się Bycia w jego całości; nieistnienie jako rozmywająca się tożsamość osobowa; oraz nieistnienie jako dialektyczny warunek wszelkiej twórczości. Unikatowa forma i styl tej poezji zostają uznane za odgrywające istotną rolę w przekazie treści metafizycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: Rafał Wojaczek, egzystencjalizm, istnienie, nieistnienie, śmierć, trwoga