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A Diary or a Suicide?

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A Diary or a Suicide?

Béatrice Didier, renowned scholar of intimate journals, claims that writings like these can be used as a foundation upon which to construct a portrait of the average diarist.¹ She denotes that diarists often have trouble transitioning from childhood to maturity and adulthood, as if thinking that real life is still ahead of them and that they have to prepare before they enter that new chapter. "Life as school" is a preferred topos of that *milieu*. They keep learning things again and again, gear up for the never-ending series of exams that make up the life of every human, are often financially unstable, have trouble deciding on marriage, and lack self-assertiveness.

Some of these characteristics are reflected, surprisingly, in Koniński's religious writings. We recognize that the impossibility of making a choice, or a reluctance towards committing the act itself, appears in his writing, as it does in Amiel's work,² already on the textual level, especially in *Nox atra*. The books also thoroughly explores

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1 B. Didier, *Le journal intime* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976).

2 cf. J. Rousset, *Le lecteur intime. De Balzac au journal*, (Paris: J. Corti, 1968). The book contains, inter alia, an interpretation of repetitions found in Amiel's journal.

the theme of choice as the most important task awaiting the author, as well as the upcoming series of exams we mentioned before.

Those familiar with Koniński's biography may find it difficult to describe the man as immature; however, we cannot simply disregard the fact that he often used to classify himself as such. In the first pages of *Nox atra*, the author poses the problem in a somewhat dramatic way:

Choose! If not for yourself, then for others; if not for Truth that shall set you free, then for ambition that tells you that you finally know what it is you want, that you finally found something to hold onto, something you matured into, that you are no longer just an old manchild playing with ideas as if they are nothing more than soap bubbles. Choose!³

Even the unfinished *Szkic do autobiografii* (*Autobiographical Sketch*) opens with a confession: "I am now approaching fifty, it's time to abandon this eternal «seeker» persona, this endless boyhood; it's time to grow up."⁴ Immaturity is not a foreign concept to Koniński, we might even go so far as to consider him embroiled in his own struggles with immaturity, struggles which he believes to be the source of his disinclination to commit to one of two worldviews clashing within him. In *Nox atra*, he laments:

How to live between the allure of sanctity and the appeal of normalcy – live between two fine temptations and not know which one to choose, and then to pay for that reluctance – with vagueness, an inability to draw joy from both earthly and heavenly delights, and a paralyzing fear that we will be denied salvation, later joined by contempt directed at our own self for succumbing to that fear?⁵

Didier also pondered the role played in the life of the "hesitant" diarist by the process of journaling: maybe writing is in itself a way to entrust problems to paper or a way to thoroughly examine the available solutions and make a decision within the journal, thus making it a witness of the act? She also denotes one other possibility: "We can, without contradiction, claim the opposite: he becomes hesitant due to his journaling habit. The process of writing

3 K.L. Koniński, *Nox atra* (Warszawa: Pax, 1961), 10.

4 K.L. Koniński, *Szkic do autobiografii* (*Autobiographical Sketch*) in: *Kartki z brulionów* (*Notebook Pages*), ed. B. Mamoń, M. Urbanowski (Kraków: Arcana, 2007), 42.

5 K.L. Koniński, *Uwagi 1940-1942* (*Remarks 1940-1942*), ed. B. Mamoń (Poznań: W Drodze, 1987), 83.

promotes ambivalence and ultimately transforms it into a fairly stable and somewhat pleasant state.”⁶ And then she observes: “Ultimately, indecision is a form of internal continuity, of prolonging the writing. It allows the diarist to remain within the prized *status quo*; it also allows the writing to develop and still retain its iterative nature.”⁷ According to Didier, writing about decisions in a diary can protract the state of indecision which, for some reason, can be more appealing to the author than actually making a decision.

The Persistence Trap

Even in the opening pages of *Nox atra*, Koniński places the issue of choice front and center, not only choice as it pertains to ideology, but also the choice between life and death – the question of suicide. We should also notice that the final fragments of *Ex labyrintho* are dedicated to taking one’s own life. In these last pages, Koniński writes that suicide of a Christian abrogates any “reflections on a Christian God”⁸ that person might have entertained, yet he simultaneously ponders the atheist argumentation for suicide that portrays it as a possible “honorable” way to end one’s life. Thus we encounter a heretofore unexplored theme of *Nox atra*. In the opening passages of the book, Koniński recounts a couple of suicide stories: in fragment no. 2, he recalls the stories of a highlander who killed himself for reasons unknown and a housemaid, Agnieszka (whom we know from her appearance in *Remarks*); in fragment no. 4, the author mentions the great “honorable” suicides, including figures from the history of the Roman Empire, Rejtan, and soldiers from the 1939 Defensive War. Fragment no. 5 outlines the story of an outclassed painter from Krakow who ended up killing himself. He also mentions Witkacy. The “darkness” in which the author immerses himself in the opening passages of *Nox atra* is synonymous with the gloom shrouding human consciousness at the end of its rope – the liminal situation wherein one decides whether to ultimately end one’s life or not. The aforementioned suicides were victims of terrible humiliation who suffered in solitude, their pain invisible to those around them. For Koniński, however, compassion towards the suicides does not diminish the profound importance of their final choice, the choice to preserve their dignity. Useless and discarded, they feel that an honorable suicide is the only way out that will give them at least a semblance of being whole in those last moments.

6 B. Didier, *Le Journal intime*, 99.

7 B. Didier, *Le Journal intime*, 100.

8 K.L. Koniński, *Ex labyrintho* (Warszawa: Pax, 1962), 337.

Although *Remarks* pose the question: “Would it not be better to kill oneself rather than live as a disgraced pariah and a shameful beggar?”⁹ only in the opening pages of *Nox atra* is the hellish alternative: commit suicide and thus admit to being an atheist or persevere in humiliation as a follower of Christianity which prohibits suicide, is displayed with such force and portrayed as a demand for the final choice between the “ethics of honor” and the “religion of perseverance.”

Koniński is ambivalent towards the Christian proscription of suicide. He thinks that for a Christian, renunciation of suicide is the only true measure of humility, the virtue held by Christianity in the highest regard. However, he later adds: “If He is only a fiction dreamed up by our hearts, then we cannot relinquish the morality of the proud: let the world purge itself of imperfection, and if I am one of the imperfect ones, so be it, let me perish.”¹⁰ He has to choose between Christianity and Nietzscheanism, between the religion of humility that preaches suffering through indignities and the secular ethics of pride which considers honor to be the ultimate virtue; between the religion of Christ and the Rome of the Stoics. Sometimes, God even arouses Koniński’s wrath as the one who makes it impossible to escape one’s own existence:

A night marked by rebellion against Christianity: you cannot kill yourself, you cannot even consider suicide as an option, you can only desire to persist, to live on – because Christianity approves of perseverance, the idealism and reliability of persistence, while there is no reliability of persistence to be found in the desire to leave this here outpost, on this here Earth, this here vicious swamp.¹¹

Is, however, the choice between Christian humility and Stoic pride the only available choice? Koniński denotes other attitudes towards suicide one can assume.

Humans should not have to stoop down to living “meager lives” (Koniński will employ this Nietzschean phrase multiple times in *Nox atra*, which might indicate the degree to which he internalized this particular value system). The “meager man” becomes worthy of salvation by renouncing one’s own eagerness in a gesture of refusal to protract one’s existence. We should also recognize that not only did his ethical sensibility allow suicide as a way to honorably escape a liminal situation, but that his religious sensibility commanded

⁹ K.L. Koniński, *Uwagi...*, 125.

¹⁰ K.L. Koniński, *Nox atra*, 10.

¹¹ K.L. Koniński, *Uwagi...*, 81.

him, at times, to consider suicide a condition necessary for salvation. The necessity of being utterly honest towards one's life and thus towards the dilemma: either live within the limits established by your ambitions or do not live at all, seems to him not only an ethical but a religious precept. Koniński also ponders the whether Christianity might be construed as a religion that permits suicide. Allowing suicide within Christianity might be possible only as a result of a humanizing modernist reform that would look to a free human conscience as the only place where divine transcendence, absent from the immanence of the world, manifests itself; a reform that would posit obedience to a free conscience instead of obedience to the authority of the Church as an institution dealing in salvation. In such a theology, suicide would be permissible if one's conscience considered it to be the only honorable way to escape the oppression of existence. Koniński dreams of a theology of pride that would replace the theology of humility; dreams of a God who "loves the thunderous flight of giant birds and holds the honorable decision in higher regard than devout tears," the honorable decision a clear reference to suicide.¹² A God who would permit suicide motivated by honor is the same God who – as Koniński is convinced – requires us to live in accordance with our intrinsic truth, which translates into sanctity as the only possible test of faith.

In fragment 45 of *Nox atra*, Koniński recalls Kirillov, a character in Dostoyevsky's *Demons* and writes: "Someone consumed by chronic bouts of panicked fear of death killed himself; he did not end his life because he feared some misfortune befalling him, but only because he wanted to create a piece of God inside himself; ... only because he wanted to give himself and the rest of the world a moment of Divine freedom from Fate and Fear."¹³ Kirillov's situation clearly resembles that of Koniński himself: his conscience allows the existence of God, but his experiences and reason do not give him evidence to support it. Kirillov exposes the implications of the concept of a personal God, the creator of mankind, by planning a philosophical suicide: "If God exists, then everything is His will, and I can do nothing of my own apart from His will. If there's no God, then everything is my will, and I'm bound to express my self-will. ... I want to express my self-will. ... I'm obligated to shoot myself because the greatest degree of self-will is to take my own life."¹⁴ Suicide, according to Kirillov, is an act committed by free men, one that reveals

12 cf. K.L. Koniński, *Nox atra*, 6. The first part of the quote is an obvious reference to a fragment of Book V of Słowacki's *Beniowski* (cf. J. Słowacki, *Poematy. Beniowski (Poems. Beniowski)* in: J. Słowacki, *Dzieła (Works)*, ed. J. Krzyżanowski, J. Pelc (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1952), 3:117).

13 K.L. Koniński, *Nox atra*, 106.

14 F. Dostoyevsky, *Devils* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 692.

no other masters above him, no one who could order him to live against his own will. Although Koniński perfectly understand Kirillov's logic, he attempts to reverse it within the framework of his own theology in a way that would facilitate employing it against the solution it suggested. In place of suicide, he proposes persevering in a liminal situation as an expression of "Divine freedom." He puts the latter idea back in the service of religion, thus making absolute freedom an argument for the possibility of transcending the constraints that biology puts on consciousness, which is an argument supporting the existence of an unconditional world of grace and sanctity:

To be convinced that the God of the saints is nothing more than fiction while living like the saints did, without their particular comfort – and moreover to renounce the comfort of suicide: maybe this terrible absurdity, the absurdity of absolute unselfishness, would be worthy of God, would attest that there is an element of the Divine within the domain of Reality.¹⁵

The Scheherazade Stratagem

As evidenced above, the subject of suicide is one of the first to be raised in *Nox atra*; it also serves as an important pillar of Koniński's theologic constructions. Does that, however, authorize us to treat him any different than we would a certain figure of thought, resembling the one employed by Camus in the opening paragraphs of *The Myth of Sisyphus*? Is the issue of suicide, treated so harshly in the opening passages of the book, simply a rhetoric and compositional device enabling the portrayal of liminal situations as the wellspring of both religious needs and religious thoughts? Can we consider the appearance of that particular subject a symptom of the Self gravitating towards the idea of suicide? Although *Nox atra* was conceived in an autobiographical space, that fact alone is not enough for us to treat the author's every utterance as a confession. Koniński's writings, however, contain other traces indicating how often he contemplated taking his own life.

The fragment entitled *War* opens with what amounts to a written account of a conversation between Koniński and his wife during which they agree to go through with their suicide pact in the event of the situation overwhelming the both of them. Koniński returns to this particular topic a few times in September of 1939.¹⁶ *Remarks* also contain some allusions to suicide and the

¹⁵ K.L. Koniński, *Nox atra*, 106.

¹⁶ cf. K.L. Koniński, *War* in Koniński, *Kartki z brulionów*.

intention of committing the act. Apparently, Koniński thought that the way he was forced to live during the war was unbecoming, humiliating, and decided that carrying on like this would be disgraceful: he suffered from a chronic and untreatable condition which made him unfit for work and left him unable to provide for his family, forcing him to live off the support of those who he himself should have been supporting, according to the cultural role of the man which he deeply internalized. In his own eyes, he was treated quite badly by those closest to him. He considered the fate shared by all Poles during the occupation a succession of humiliations and abasement.¹⁷ Extreme despair, solitude, and humiliation that push the housemaid Agnieszka, the elderly painter, and the unknown highlander to suicide are a clear reflection of the situation Koniński found himself in. Therefore it is hard to doubt that the fierceness with which he described their fates was clearly related to the one particular recourse he pondered. Tellingly, while describing liminal situations that lead to suicide in *Nox atra*, he employed images of rot and decay similar to those which he used to portray his own domestic and familial struggles.

Koniński, however, treated the process of writing *Nox atra* as a sort of preparation for his upcoming test of faith. He was keenly aware which of the two alternatives, persevere or perish, he will end up choosing. He knew that stubbornly holding on to faith and confirming himself in his beliefs is the only way to deliver himself from suicide. The cycle of meditations that makes up *Nox atra* was supposed to – probably by way of self-persuasion – confirm him in his beliefs and thus reinforce his will to persevere. The process of writing, then, seems to be almost “genetically” related to the problem of suicide – as a way of refraining from committing the act. But the relationship between suicide and *Nox atra* might even be more subtle than that. Writing that particular book might have been a way of stalling, postponing his own suicide. Take note that voices urging to make the final decision appear not only in the early parts of the book but are a recurring part of its structure, resembling something of a chorus and rarely taking shapes more discreet than the raw challenge of: “Choose now!”¹⁸ The urging infuses the meditations making up *Nox atra* with a certain rhythm while simultaneously disrupting its continuity. The attention of the Self shifts from illustrating the necessity of choosing towards visualizing the fact the questions about the existence of God remain unanswered and that in the face of this shortage, making informed, responsible decisions is still impossible. The choice between life and death cannot

17 The situation is paraphrased in *Dalsze losy pastora Hubiny (Reverend Hubina's Later Years)*, Koniński's last published novel (cf. K.L. Koniński, *Pisma wybrane (Selected Writings)*, introduction by M. Morstin-Górska (Warszawa: Pax, 1955)).

18 cf. K.L. Koniński, *Nox atra*, 10, 63, 82.

be made when blocked by the question about the existence of God. The call to make the choice is quickly answered with the complaint: "How can that choice be made when the sole criterion is shrouded by impenetrable darkness? Is there a Christian God?"¹⁹

The writing Self also does not want to acknowledge that choosing whether to believe in God also lies within its purview; it demands ultimate certitude. This certitude, unattainable by nature, pushes the issue of suicide to the background. Thus, persisting in the state of uncertainty turns out to be a delaying tactic supposed to prolong the author's life. Repeatedly questioning the existence of God, running through well-trodden theological paths calms the mind soothes despair and postpones the possibility of answering in the negative. Collecting thoughts and putting them on paper becomes a way to stop oneself from taking one's own life. The process transforms the necessity of making the ultimate choice from an existential into a purely existential exercise. Tormented by an overabundance of suffering, the mind is seduced by the logical nature of deliberations that promise to yield truth at their conclusion, it retreats the well-known, safe, even satisfying paths of thought. By adding another reminder (either implicit or explicit) to make the final choice at the end of each nocturnal segment, the writing Self employs the Scheherazade stratagem. The choice, yes, has to be made, but such an important decision can wait until next night... The promise of a final conclusion arrests the author in existence – just like the promise of finishing the story gave Scheherazade another day of life.

Nirvanic Desires

In his book *Żywioł wyzwolony: Studium o poezji Tadeusza Micińskiego* (*The Element Unshackled: A Study on the Poetry of Tadeusz Miciński*), describes the poetics of redundancy of the Young Poland movement by employing the words of Schopenhauer: such poetry lulls our will. Monotony and repetitions obfuscate the meaning of the text, thus it becomes a soothing mantra rather than an appeal meant to arouse our will and emotions: "Words are a cover, they give us a sense of safety, they touch our dormant fears and anxieties, but to pacify instead of stirring them"²⁰ claims Prokop, tracing the origin of that style back to lullabies.

It seems that this particular Young Poland idiosyncrasy might have been employed by the Self writing *Nox atra* in order to suppress unwelcome thoughts and emotions, as the writing process suggests a struggle against all

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 10.

²⁰ J. Prokop, *Żywioł wyzwolony: Studium o poezji Tadeusza Micińskiego* (*The Element Unshackled: A Study on the Poetry of Tadeusz Miciński*) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1960), 160.

elements of the psyche that the Self might want to keep at a distance, protecting consciousness as if it's an ancient keep besieged by a determined enemy. Koniński often admonishes himself:

The religion of angels, the religion of the Heart of Jesus, the religion of great humanist efforts, one which holds all religious and mystic effort in a special and holy place. Hold on to that, my dear thought, my spark of goodwill; persevere in that, do not renounce it, as thanks to that you're alive and above the chaotic anxiety of the mind, above the will's lack of persistence and the heart's fatal weariness.²¹

The long, rhetorical phrases, a hallmark of *Nox atra*, might be indicative of *horror vacui*, fear of the intonational pause that might suddenly give a voice to unwelcome thoughts. They were most likely related to suicidal temptations or eroticism.

In his dreams, Koniński sees himself as a dejected camel, led to the slaughter by the Kalmyk riding him; the man is quite handsome, and dressed in European fashion.²² This particular image is an ideal candidate for "orthodox" Freudian analysis: the camel as a symbol of the *id* worn out by constant sacrifice, abused by the Kalmyk, a man simultaneously "wild" and "European" – a fitting representation of the sadistic *superego*. We might also try to interpret the figure of the camel by analyzing the meaning often attached to its hump – a burden, but one that can be a wellspring of energy: similarly, contemplating perseverance increases the burden, but at the same time rescues Koniński from death by his own hand.

Koniński is familiar with treatises written by mystics and often dream about being carried by God:

God and religion are my own thoughts, my own wants; oh, how I would love to be carried by God instead of bearing his weight on my shoulders! ... Maybe after I pass through this desolate sphere where God weighs heavy on me shall I reach a place where it will be Him who carries me instead.²³

He admits multiple times that it is hard for him to pray, that he considers prayer to be boring and laborious, a task which wears him down, strikes him as futile and absurd.

21 K.L. Koniński, *Uwagi...*, 154. cf. J. Prokop, *Żywioł wyzwolony*, 214.

22 K.L. Koniński, *Uwagi...*, 137.

23 *ibid.*, 134.

The writing Self, by sheer force of will, clings to the belief that prayer might be construed as a sort of exercise whose completion brings us closer to salvation. Such efforts are the direct opposite of the spontaneous, "insubstantial" desire to commit suicide. The Self stubbornly clings to the wearisome life, probably going against the plethora of impulses compelling it to make the final break. It perseveres despite noxious lassitude and internal indifference; it considers God a burden lugged on a journey through the void. In all likelihood, writing *Nox atra* helped Koniński suppress the most animated impulses of his Self – the nirvanic impulse to give up on life, maybe even some erotic urges. By forcing them out of the scope of its attention, the writing Self seems to be condemning itself to torture in the form of clinging to existence and faith only through sheer force of will, hence his recurring lament about the torment of "carrying God." He elaborates upon his experiences using vocabulary indicating tension and distress: "the stubborn will to persevere...," "carrying God," "how tedious it is to «live»," "the Cross is your labor, your final and only labor."²⁴

Rudolf Otto noted that when mystics write about their experiences, they employ the Biblical portrayal of God as immanence. They depict him as "force, life, light, the life-giver, one who graces us with spirit, the water of life, the flame and the fire," truth, knowledge and justice, and finally, holiness itself. All these designations are linked with the renewed, supernatural life as divinity "mediating and giving itself, breaking forth in the living man as his *nova vita*, as the content of his life and being."²⁵

Otto marvels at the dynamic style of Eckhart's writings which, according to the former, reflect the concept of spontaneity of action as opposed to actions governed by free will and reason. He describes Eckhart's thought process as full of vitality and points out the vast knowledge of unconsciousness it contains:

Eckhart has seen that deep below the plane of our conscious spiritual life, occupied in individual, empirical acts of imagination, will and feeling, lies hidden the vast region of our unconscious life and being, into the ultimate depths of which the keenest self-contemplation seeks in vain to penetrate.... Only here at the center springs the power and the unmediated certainty of all ideals, particularly of all religious convictions. Only what has penetrated to this ground of the soul and has here proved itself, becomes truth, unshakable truth for us. Only what comes unconsidered, unmade, unwilling from this ground of the soul, whether as an "image" in

24 cf. *ibid.*, 74, 134, 93, 192.

25 R. Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 148.

the imagination or as a decision in the power of the will, is genuine, is original, is rooted and essential, is true work and life.²⁶

If we compare this concept of deep Self espoused by mystics with Koniński's approach towards irrational forces of the psyche, we will quickly see that for him they are far from operating principles, rather they are something that he has to radically distance himself from. According to Koniński, the spontaneous life of the psyche is a sphere where chaos reigns supreme, and chaos, he says, is synonymous with evil. Koniński associates evil with chaos, and chaos with nature, thus opposing the latter's "peculiar order" with the "Father," whose traces are still present in our world in the form of ethics, religion, and social order, all of them based on the dictate of conscience. He contrasts the chaos of inner psychological life with "vigilance," the nucleus of crystallization of the nature-independent Self: "We need to be eternally vigilant; each gap in the barrier erected by vigilance can be exploited by thievish natural causality, splinters of chaos, the paltriness of nature, flickers of darkness. Vigilance depends wholly on me – this mindfulness – it is me, it is I severing myself from nature."²⁷

Consciousness is supposed to erect a stable edifice of ordered thought and disciplined reactions above a foundation of emotions. Koniński sees the success of such an undertaking as his only chance at salvation:²⁸

Persisting means rising above nature; only that constituent of life that managed uplift itself into the supernatural world using solely its determination has the right to hope to persevere ... whatever belongs to nature's boorish host cannot belong to God and thus is not subject to God's law, which spells: persist; it is, however, subject to the laws of nature, instructing everything within its purview to perish and break apart into constituent elements.²⁹

Koniński also touches upon the traditional theme of Christian asceticism, agreeing that one's ability to abstain from sexual activity is a fine measure of the Self's vigilant resistance against encroaching tendrils of nature. He

²⁶ *ibid.*, 222.

²⁷ K.L. Koniński, *Uwagi...*, 149.

²⁸ cf. T. Żukowski, *Czy śmierć w sercu spełniła swoją robotę (Has Death Discharged Its Duties in the Heart)*, fragment of an unpublished master's thesis prepared under the direction of professor Maria Janion.

²⁹ K.L. Koniński, *Ex labyrintho*, quoted from Koniński, *Pisma wybrane*, 310.

espouses a deep aversion towards psychoanalysis and the concept of the unconscious. Koniński associates the Freudian unconscious with the sphere of chaotic psychological life that he detested³⁰ and considers its exploration, especially plumbing it for meaning, both dangerous and futile.³¹ In contrast to Freud, Koniński did not even consider working with the unconscious mind, did not look to establish dialogue and mediate between to conscious and unconscious spheres of the psyche – the latter a seemingly a prerequisite condition of the mystical experience, of the radical metamorphosis of an entire person, the *nova vita*, as understood by Otto or another of Koniński's beloved writers, William James, the author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Koniński clearly preferred the old-fashioned version of ascetics: he separated himself from the areas of the Self that aroused fear and disgust and tried to build a new human world above them. He also worked out a new, original concept of salvation, one that required inner effort aimed at building an imperishable, immutable, and precious Self – the kind of effort that God would find worthy, the same God who would later express his appreciation of that precious self by bestowing immortality upon it (or at least some parts of it).³² He wrote:

What began as a value should persevere – facilitating that is a sacred obligation towards our conscience which yearns for persistence and desires to imbue things that began their existence as values with it. ... If there is a God, then God delights in perseverance, because He represents the perseverance of value – that is the ultimate meaning of the word “God.”³³

30 cf. e.g. his remarks on *Nights and Days* (K.L. Koniński, *Nights and Days* in Koniński, *Pisma wybrane*, 166)

31 In his review of Zofia Nałkowska's *The Day of His Return*, Koniński criticizes the author for lack of logic and decency, revealing his reluctance to delve into the mysteries of human relationships as unveiled by psychoanalysis, like, for example, the sadomasochistic relationship. His aversion towards the concept of the unconscious is also evidenced by his reaction towards K. Irzykowski's *Pałuba*: “Inner sincerity is necessary and healthy for whomever is *sure of what they want and determined to follow their plans through*. Such people do not fall victim to billowing, *pałuba*-like psychic waves, they look at them with amusement instead of terror: what harm to them is wretched filth, dumb snobbery, trivial vanities, surprising indifferences, inconceivable extremes of imagination and behavior, insane whims, all of them dredged up from the nooks and crannies of the human psyche and treated as if they're more important than the conscious mind – if they are already *walking onwards and outwards towards objective goals?*” (K.L. Koniński, *Katastrofa wierności* (*The Disaster of Fidelity*) in Koniński, *Pisma wybrane*, 141.)

32 cf. T. Żukowski, *Czy śmierć w sercu...*

33 K.L. Koniński, *Uwagi...*, 144.

The Self has to work on itself in order to rise above nature, to become a value and thus enter into the world of values. And allegiance towards other values, that is inner immutability, permanence, becomes the most elementary value, a fundamental value for other values acquired by the Self.

We already mentioned that Koniński considers evil as chaos, including inner chaos or as he sometimes calls it “billowing,” meaning the instability and mutability of the Self. The Self, when fighting for the permanence of values, basically struggles with time inside of itself, its passage perceived as constant, involuntary changes in mood and attitude towards the world. It feels humiliated by this mutability and tries to convince itself as to the permanence of at least some of its values. In practice, it might achieve that particular goal by protecting its contents it deems valuable, by retaining them within itself in spite of a plethora of external impulses prevailing upon it to change.

We should also notice that the concept painting the identity of the Self as inner imperturbability favors iterative writing: by writing, the Self repeats that which it considers its most precious *cogitationes*, particularly these which it wants to retain and identify with them forever. Thus, writing is also a performative act wherein the Self settles in its immutability. Permanence is acquired through repeated recording of what one considers one’s own substantial thought, one whose removal would change our very nature. The writing and the required iterative effort simultaneously removes any thoughts that could threaten the integrity of the Self, meaning its ethically acceptable content.

Accursed Thoughts

Koniński started writing the short story *Na dnie nocy* (*At the Bottom of the Night*) in 1933. The protagonist of that unfinished story is a man who spends one long night contemplating suicide. Fear of death and what comes after robs him of sleep, the man is plagued by insomnia. That dread, hitting him whenever he drifts from wakefulness into sleep, spurs him into extensive deliberations which he calls “the accursed thoughts, the scourge of recent years.”³⁴ A closer look at that particular sentence, as well as the title and the deliberations of the protagonist will reveal the uncanny resemblance between the short story and *Nox atra*, the latter written nearly 10 years later. The similarity between the two, in terms of both being intimate journals, leads us to recognize that Koniński’s first short story preserved for posterity was an account of the bothersome ideas and thoughts already lodged in his mind.

34 cf. K.L. Koniński, “Na dnie nocy” (“At the Bottom of the Night”), ed. B. Mamorń, *Kresy* no. 1 (1999): 235.

The protagonist ponders his lack of courage that prevented him, on that particular day, from committing suicide that he has been planning for a long time. After death, he expects to be condemned to hell, not for the act *per se* but rather for the sin of living below his own expectations. The vision of punishment appears here, actually, in relation to eroticism. He considers redemption unattainable as he cannot himself renounce Eros. God, or the notion of God he harbors, demands sexuality to be sacrificed. It is not enough to simply give up the occasional fling, the logic of the sacrifice is inescapable: "Should I give up this moment, then? In that case, should I just completely resign my sexuality? Including the lie that is marriage?"³⁵

The protagonist claims that carnal bliss excludes the possibility of God, because it that particular moment, life seems absolutely perfect and sufficient and requires no transcendence to be complete and justified; thus, ecstasy implies betrayal, as it closes our mind to the idea of God so thoroughly that it makes him impossible, unnecessary, a disturbance in an otherwise peaceful life. The protagonist, however, cannot shed the lingering doubt that his God does, in fact, exist: "God is not necessary. ... But that's precisely why you are above us, hanging there like a wraith, a nightmare, a vast firmament that threatens to drop right on our heads."³⁶ The following ruminations inform us that in order to commit suicide, the man abandoned his wife and their family home but took their child, as he wanted the boy to die along with him. He went as far as calling their domestic situation "execrable" and obliquely stating that it became a protracted, humiliating, wicked nightmare. The aforementioned shame and wickedness are related to some difficulties plaguing their marital life, but also to the issue of eroticism itself, to the tension resulting from the protagonist's inability to choose between eroticism and God and his awareness of the necessity of making that particular choice. He sees both his own incapability of choosing once and for all and succumbing to erotic desires in spite of being aware of God's condemnation of promiscuity as taints on his life.

Given its resemblance of *Nox atra*, his description of the sleepless night is of particular interest. That night should have borne witness to the protagonist making the ultimate choice between life and death, between the disgrace of returning home and suicide for which the protagonist does not really have the constitution. The situation, however, quickly becomes "irresolvable": the main character realizes that it's impossible to live on like this and simultaneously knows that he cannot take his life, at the very least because of the child he

³⁵ *ibid.*, 236.

³⁶ *ibid.*

brought into the world: "What to do, what to do?! May this night never end, this night of gruesome deliberation."³⁷ Thus, the goal of his desire shifts from making the decision to prolonging the night during which the decision was supposed to be made. In this peculiar state of mind, the protagonist experiences a very vivid wave of erotic memories. The story itself does not stand a chance against the onslaught and suddenly breaks off; however, before the main character completely immerses himself in the intoxicating memory of his first tryst with the woman who later became his wife, he quite lucidly describes what is going to happen next:

He was suddenly beset by a desire to surrender, a craving so powerful and covetous that it made him shudder. He resisted, wanted to believe in the night and in death that had to be decided upon if he was to escape the disgrace and indignity of his life. The fatigue and inertia of his soul, however, knew exactly where to hit him, how to infiltrate the deepest recesses of his will to disarm it and force it to surrender...³⁸

The fragment above clearly reveals that the protagonist is already familiar with the dramatic tension pervading his nights and he knows that the "night of gruesome deliberation" is just another one in a series of similar nights. A more proper name for "the night of making the decision" would be "the night the decision is again deferred."

The deliberations in *Nox atra* are an expression of the author's ambition of attaining holiness, a state of utter devotion to God, validated by his complete renunciation of sexuality and carnal desires. In *Nox atra*, the night also reveals, in all its harshness, the naked truth about the Self: that is, the insincerity of its faith and its unsuccessful enforcement of carnal celibacy. Here the author is also clearly torn. Believing that ascension to holiness is necessary, he is also repulsed by the concept. He perceives it as "terrible," "lethal," "indifferent," "like a skeleton," "empty," "black," it "freezes" life, "exudes iciness," and is "pointless"; it is "like a hot summer day, flies abuzz, the mood broken by the fact that someone close to us is on the verge of leaving this mortal coil" – the words Koniński picks to characterize holiness are clearly associated with death and its domain. Finally, on the same page, he takes to calling it the "damned temptation."³⁹ According to the author, the fact that the saints renounce marriage clearly indicates the evil of the

³⁷ *ibid.*, 238.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ K.L. Koniński, *Nox atra*, 98.

institution: "If all of this is sacrilegious to the holy, how could it be morally right for the rest of us?"⁴⁰

Renouncing sexuality, in both *Na dnie nocy* and *Nox atra* is dictated by divine command and a test of faith following criteria established by nocturnal truths: "There is only one sin, one that is always mortal: turning one's back on God and pursuing that which is not Him."⁴¹ Koniński also writes: "The saints never marry – and if one ever does, he is followed until the end by a pervasive belief that he committed a sin."⁴² We can consider this particular sentence a confession, given that *Wojna* (*War*) contains multiple indications of sexuality being something of a problem in his marriage that often led to cruel clashes.

Friedrich Nietzsche also recognized the existence of a deep relationship between suicidal temptation and the ascetic zeal of early Christians. In his aphorism titled *Christianity and suicide* Nietzsche wrote:

When Christianity came into existence the inclination to suicide was very strong – Christianity turned it into a lever of its power: it allowed only two kinds of suicide, dressed them up with the highest dignity and the highest hopes and forbade all others in a terrible manner. But martyrdom and the ascetic's slow suicide were permitted.⁴³

Alfred Alvarez, the author of *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, also seems to notice a similar relationship between the prevalence of suicidal gestures in ancient Rome and the passion of early Christian martyrs and Saint Augustine's condemnation of attitudes that scorn the fact that "life itself is the gift of God."⁴⁴ Nietzsche, however, through that the Church's denunciation of suicide is a condemnation of a desire that the Church itself deeply instills in its followers by convincing them to completely renounce any notions of

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 96.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 84.

⁴² *ibid.*, 95.

⁴³ F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 123.

⁴⁴ A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002). The author writes that St. Augustine drew up the Christian arguments against suicides because he was disturbed by the epidemic of martyrdom sweeping early Christian societies. Many pagans – as evidenced by primary sources – had no doubts that the Christian eagerness to embrace death (in some recorded cases, Christians even provoked authorities so they take a closer look at their activities) was the result of a deep-seated suicidal streak, similar to the death drive that characterized Roman civilization, where human life was cheap and people lost their lives often at their own request.

worldly ambitions or lust, which in itself might be considered a form of suicide via shunning the maelstrom of life and the forces governing its every aspects (just like Catharist *endura* is commonly considered suicide by refusing food).

The thanatological dimension of the Christian ideal of holiness and carnal purity was also recognized by theologian and psychoanalyst Eugen Drewermann. His analysis of Emile Zola's *The Sinful Priest* indicates that the eponymous priest is portrayed by the author "as a saint, that is, as a dead man." Drewermann claims that after breaking off the illicit affair with the woman he loved, Father Mouret talks about himself in a way that would suggest he desires nothing but to wither away and die: "May nothing ever disturb my immobility! May I remain forever cold and rigid, with a ceaseless smile upon my granite lips, unable to muster the spirit to descend among men! This is my one and only desire!"⁴⁵ Is not the fascination with the "purity" of the life of Simone Weil, who committed a protracted suicide by attempting to live up to her own stringent moral requirements, the strongest in people who clearly hear Christianity's siren song inviting them to commit suicide? Koniński heard that same call himself. He was disgusted with the concessions he was forced to make (marriage) but his dreadful God who demanded sacrifices of him terrified Koniński even more. He was torn between erotic desires, the allure of holiness, and suicidal temptations.

In the short story *Na dnie nocy*, the question of God was directly related to the outlook on eroticism, which simultaneously nearly pushed the protagonist to suicide and yet had the power to dissuade him from committing the final act. In the story, *sexus* leads to anguish and threatens the author's self-worth, but his erotic dreams also bring him comfort and distract him from thoughts of God and death. Insofar as God was only a mask of death drive for the protagonist of *Na dnie nocy*, in *Nox atra*, thinking of God shields the writing Self from suicide, as self-murder seems increasingly desirable due to the Self's pervasive sense of erotic guilt and a consciousness-crushing overabundance of suffering.

Na dnie nocy clearly indicates that problems bothering Koniński were more or less permanent. The protagonist of that short story and the Self whose meditations we witness in *Nox atra* have so much in common that we can easily consider the short story a sort of intimate confession which sought a method of expression different from the "formlessness" typical of intimate journaling. Suspending choice, coming back to recurring trains of thought, and repetition, the latter a distinctive characteristic of Koniński's wartime

45 Quoted from E. Drewermann, *Kler. Psychogram ideału (Clergy: Psychogram of an Ideal)*, tr. R. Stiller, N. Niewiadomski (Gdynia: Uraeus, 2002), 525. Translated into English by this article's translator.

literary output, are here anticipated by the inability to finish the short story, to use compact narratives to portray the existential state of suspending resolution, expressed by reiterating the question of choice and weighing the existential power of a series of alternatives: perseverance versus suicide, faith versus atheism, holiness versus sexuality, “the religion of humility” versus “the ethics of pride,” “orthodoxy” versus “modernism,” “mysticism” or “hard effort,” “God-as-Absolute” or “God-as-Spirit”...

The analyzed short story already outlines a certain existential pattern marked by the inability to finish the writing process and bestow upon thoughts their final shape. Koniński’s conduct in life is anchored in the constant search for the proper attitudes and agonizing over his own incapability of confirming himself in any of his beliefs. All previous critics of Koniński’s work mentioned the peculiar existential state induced in the author by the night and explored that particular subject in-depth, often referring to Karl Jasper’s writings.⁴⁶ Koniński’s nights – as we clearly see now – are also nights of indecision, plagued by the nightmare of being suspended between life and death: “You cannot live and cannot die”⁴⁷ – says the protagonist of *Na dzień nocy*. The theme of indecision present in Koniński’s literary output allows us to acknowledge Didier’s diagnosis and label his writings intimate journals.

Translation: Jan Szelągiewicz

46 cf. e.g. A. Fitas, *Głosz labiryntu. O pismach Karola Ludwika Konińskiego* (*Voice from the Labyrinth: On the Writings of Karol Ludwik Koniński*) (Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 2003), 123-130.

47 K.L. Koniński, *Na dzień nocy*, 238.