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How to Speak about Dying

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To My Father

1. Preliminary settlements

My task, at least seemingly, is a simple one: to show how people speak about death of one of their parents and what effect it has on their own identity. In my analysis I include auto/biographical accounts – non-fiction – although I am aware of the fact that their authors' literary skills influence the way they render their experiences. I do not intend to multiply texts for interpretation – I rather aim at distinguishing primary features of narratives about dying and indicating fundamental differences between them.¹

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¹ I unevenly and selectively use a few texts: M. Dąbrowska, *Dzienniki*, selection, introduction and footnotes T. Drewnowski, vol. 2: 1926-1935. Warsaw 1999 (later referred to as MD, page number); Z. Nałkowska, *Dzienniki*, ed., introduction and commentary H. Kirchner, vol. 5: 1939-1944, Warsaw 1996 (later referred to as ZN, page number); T. Różewicz, *Matka odchodzi*, Wrocław 1999 (later referred to as TR, page number); NK - Miller, "My Father's Penis," [in:] ead. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and other Autobiographical Acts*, New York, London 1991 (later referred to as NKM, page number); Ph. Roth, *Patrimony. A True Story*, New York 1991, I refer to the 1996 edition (later referred to as PhR, page number).

Fritz Schütze, the founding father of the concept of biographical research as it is understood today, identifies four structural processes of the life course revealed using narrative interviews.² Firstly, there are “institutional patterns” which refer to execution of duties stemming from specific age norms, levels of education, etc. Secondly, we speak about “biographical action schemes,” i.e. intentional, deliberate behaviour chosen by the subject of a biography and compliant with his/her goals. Thirdly, we should notice “trajectories” – compact sequences of events determined by external factors independent of an individual’s will. They can be compared to a calamity which unexpectedly falls on a person, destroying his/her world order and causing bankruptcy of “a certain concept of oneself.”³ Finally, experienced and initiated events often lead to a transformation, i.e. forming new elements of the identity which may mean an attempt to escape from a trajectory and enter a new action structure.

Speaking of narratives about traumatic experiences linked with dying (death) of a close person, I will rarely refer to “institutional patterns” and “action schemes” characteristic to narrators’ biographies. If these patterns and schemes emerge in the accounts (and they will), they will only serve as background or areas of negative references which will help the narrator realize his/her inability (difficulty) to accept and fulfil his/her professional, social and public functions. I will concentrate on what, according to Schütze’s typology, is called a trajectory which, in accordance with the adopted settlements, is a phenomenon of disorderly social processes and processes of suffering.⁴ Although researchers stipulate that the meaning of a trajectory covers a broader area than death as it concerns various kinds of disintegration, loss of support in life, a term that is most commonly referred to is a trajectory of dying. A trauma related with the vision of one’s own death or death of a relative, despair which accompanies this situation, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness – all this creates a border situation. On the one hand, it seems unbearable, on the other hand, it is remarkably mobilizing. It evokes diverse efforts that are preventive and organizing (the sphere of biography or

2 I learn and report Fritz Schütze’s concept and its bonds with pioneering works by W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki and other similar interpretations, eg. R. Cavan’s studies on the suicide process mainly after: M. Prawda, *Biograficzne odtwarzanie rzeczywistości (O koncepcji badań biograficznych Fritza Schütze)*, „Studia Socjologiczne” 1989 no 4 (115); G. Riemann, F. Schütze, „Trajektoria” jako podstawowa koncepcja teoretyczna w analizach cierpienia i bezładnych procesów społecznych, transl. Z. Bokszański, A. Piotrowski, „Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 1992 no 2, r. XXXVI; M. Melchior, *Zagłada i tożsamość. Polscy Żydzi ocaleni, na aryjskich papierach.* Analiza doświadczenia biograficznego, Warsaw 2004.

3 See M. Prawda, *Biograficzne odtwarzanie rzeczywistości...*, 87.

4 G. Riemann, F. Schütze, „Trajektoria” jako podstawowa koncepcja..., 92.

creative output), most often ineffectively and fallibly, painfully clashing with the phenomenon that is stronger than our will, knowledge and desires but sustainably linked with the history of dying.

Dealing with death trajectories, we will treat them as “strictly biographical” phenomena, as defined by Riemann and Schütze,⁵ but also the strictly narrative ones. Their narrative character is based on the fact that storytelling unveils the disorderly trajectory and endless suffering but it is also revealed in different life threatening situations in which various crisis strategies apply: one of them is speaking – about misery, past, future, similar stories with happy or unhappy endings, miraculous recoveries and unexpected deaths, about God, family or newly built interpersonal relationships. Storytelling makes it possible not only to reach all expressible elements of a traumatic situation but also to have some of them emerge at all. Of course, fear or suffering are not conceived within or owing to storytelling but it is the narrative structure that arranges the traumatic experience in a sequence of events, turning it into a biographical experience.

There is only one more matter to explain. A methodology of biographical research applied in the modern sociological studies was intended to provide methods of analyzing an individual’s existential experience which sociologists were hitherto unable to describe. Whereas, literature has always tackled issues which sociology could not take care of: human suffering, fear, and pain. We can, thus, make assumptions about the reasons why narratology is interesting to sociology. But the other way around? Why is Znaniecki, Strauss⁶ or Schütze’s research attractive to a literary theoretician? Let us say the following: it is because it reminds us that text, also literary, is a recording of a human experience. A very complicated recording in which we should recognize the voice of both a suffering person and a writing artist, that is why it may (or may not) seem less credible but it is still indispensable to identify our attitude towards basic existential phenomena: birth, life, love, and death. And at least a few times in a life time, we are tempted, often due to one’s own experience of someone else’s dying, to read a literary text this way: as a weeping text.

2. Heralds of misery, the initial stadium

For years, symptoms of Anna Nalkowska’s illness had been gently increasing. From time to time, the mother of Zofia suffered from the exhausting and

5 *Ibid.*, 93.

6 I mainly refer here to the book by A. Strauss and B. Glaser *Anguish: The Case Study of a Dying Trajectory*, Mill Valley 1970, as well as the earlier Strauss’ work *Minors and Masks: The Search for Identity*, Mill Valley 1969.

dangerous arrhythmia and she often behaved like a large child, being sulky and fussy, demanding from her daughters constant interest, attention, conversation, and care. Nałkowska's *Journals* from the 1930s, but mainly from the pre-war period, are filled with problems caused by the mother: her senile incapacity to understand the others' need for intimacy, her peculiar egoism and mood changes. The writer did not cope with this situation well: Zofia was between the devil and the deep blue sea. She loved her mother and was ready to pander to her whims but she could not give up having a young man in the house. Bogusław Kuczyński was a demanding and sombre lover, sensitive about himself, a high-principled and tough man.

Sharing life between the need for intimacy and taking care of the mother required from Zofia dexterity and patience, the more so because Anna Nałkowska was becoming even more childish and less aware of her state. If she did not receive what she wanted, she was fussy and disapproving, benignly complaining about her fate of an unloved and rejected parent. When she felt better, she gave her love and care to the daughters, expressed her worry about their health, she heroically summoned up her and her weaknesses being treated with negligence. In Nałkowska's *Journals*, particularly vividly in the war-time volume, the appearances of harmony in the family are in an unceasing interplay with endless misery the heroines are exposed to from far and near. Bogusław Kuczyński is already gone; the Nałkowski family home became a home of women. All three of them (Anna, Zofia and her sister Hanna) are getting sick, weakened, mentally burned-out; human and war misfortune stricken. And all of them try to conceal this state from each other and the world, and make yet another attempt to get out of the miserable situation.

In January 1942, the mother's condition rapidly deteriorates. For the first time, Dr. Teuchmann openly informs Zofia that her mother is debilitated, requires constant care and her illness may cause a catastrophe any moment. He advises Zofia to locate the elderly lady in an institution because her caprices and repetitive attacks prevent her daughters from having a normal work and life: "Obtaining one day for her is a waste of one week for each of you" (ZM, 345).

Even though Nałkowska does not take the doctor's advice, it does not mean that she fails to accept his diagnosis that justifies it. She explicitly feels the approaching end. Nałkowska's perception of the world characteristic to her philosophy obtains here a special dimension. This time, the spectre of a catastrophe, often accompanying the writer, is real and completely inevitable. And as always before, it is balanced with her talent to think about the causes of a disaster and her ability to face the world. The entire internal work serves as a tool for trying, partially experiencing, testing the dark future on herself. What happens when the mother is gone? What will the world be like without the one who loved and

was loved? What comes to an end together with the mother's death? What happens with the consciousness of the abandoned child?

Nałkowska knows that her mother slowly goes away and that every single day spent with her might be the last one. She makes effort to be patiently understanding towards the ill person, tries to fulfil her needs, which becomes difficult in the context of another war-time winter, when the temperature is 20 degrees below zero for several weeks and it is impossible to keep the home warm. However, what is important is the feeling of the coming end, irreversible loss, which the author tries to push away or at least make it less evident by means of taking care of the mother, being with her and indulging her caprices. At the same time, she strives for maintaining some margin of the reality which could be identified as her own: readings, philosophical reflection, notes, rare conversations with friends: "Sullenly and despite everything, I insist on keeping my identity – through diving into the world that is read (alas, how rarely written!), the world of someone else's thought which confirms that I'm right, through the conversation with people who might be indifferent but who embody the identity which persists despite everything" (ZN, 357). The way Nałkowska struggles with her mother's illness resembles the way she fights her own old age, the spectre of her own disability, the horror of the war. She does not escape from the evil; she faces it – mentally and intellectually. She verifies whether her perception of the world altered under the influence of new experiences, how it changed and if this transformation threatens the feeling of solidarity with herself: "I do not sleep at night, lacing all this terrible fate of mine and others with my flow of consciousness – all this 'depth of perdition.' I do not take any sleeping pills. I appreciate the possibility to think even the worst thoughts, to think undisturbed in the silence of the sleeping house" (ZN, 359), Nałkowska writes on the 29th of March, 1942, in the days of her mother's illness, distressed with tragic news "from the town."

What is very characteristic, but in some sense also untypical about Nałkowska's struggles with her mother's dying is that she experiences it as something taking place between her and the world – in solitude, without significant participation of other people. Hanna's presence is hardly marked in the space of the cramped flat on Madalińskiego. The relationship with the sister – always difficult – gets more complicated due to the feeling of guilt: Zofia keeps in secret the information about her bother-in-law Maksymilian Bick's suicide. She knows that once this fact is disclosed, the situation will become even more dramatic. Zofia isolates Hanna from the troubles triggered by their mother's condition and tries to inspire her sister to go back to sculpting. She encourages her to visit the atelier. And she has an overwhelming feeling of walking on thin ice, drifting on an ice floe. Nevertheless, her lonely handling death is eventually explained by Nałkowska's view on the family she calls "the

place of condensed suffering” (ZN, 369). The family cannot protect you from the evil which painfully strikes the family showing its demonic power.

The sickness of Maria Dąbrowska's mother comes unexpectedly: on the 10th of November, 1927, the writer receives a letter from her sister Jadwiga about the alarming health condition of their mother. She can't decide whether she should go directly to Białystok or attend her brother's wedding in Tyczno near Rzeszów. As the mother's state temporarily improves, she goes to the wedding, then to Białystok. The mother has her ups and downs. There is no unequivocal medical diagnosis. The suspicion of typhoid is ruled out but “the illness is strange” (MD, 81). It brings debilitation, a dramatic aversion to eat and fever. The crisis comes at the turn of November and December: “There is no fever. The doctor says that we are past the worst and we are starting a recovery. It will be very tough but not hopeless. He orders eating grapes and oranges. I buy it all. The Soviet caviare I got for Mum from Mrs Sempolowska. I go to Warsaw in the evening to earn something, gain some money, solve Jadzia's problems and organize brining Mum to us for convalescence” (MD, 81).

Dąbrowska's account presents an average image of a sickness which does not take place in the void but overlaps with other life troubles related with the dramatic need of money which requires various activities, exclusive products. They latter often play the role of magical objects: grapes and oranges in the middle of winter, caviar. They put in a better mood not so much the ill person as the whole family. This account also shows the tension which accompanies sickness: the unstable rhythm of relapses and remissions, hopes – dashing and tirelessly retrieved from the stream of current matters. Dąbrowska experiences her mother's illness surrounded by the family, supported by Jadwiga's uninterrupted presence, composure, and class.

The illness of Herman Roth, the writer Philip Roth's father is slightly similar, almost typical. The word ‘typical,’ of course, sounds inadequate as the sickness is always an astonishing, unwanted and appalling tragedy for one's relatives. Nonetheless, in comparison to other accounts, we can distinguish elements that are recurrent and common to various stories of a disease. During his annual winter visit in Florida, the 86-year-old Herman Roth suffers from a slight paralysis of one side of his face. Despite his age, he is generally a healthy, strong and lively man; he stays in West Palm Beach with his friend Lillian Beloff he fell in love with one year after his wife's death. A preliminary diagnosis sounds comforting: the paralysis is probably caused by the virus infection. It is so called Bell's palsy. It usually retreats automatically. Sometimes it does not, however, and one has to get used to difficulties with speaking, swallowing, or eating in general. One also has to accept the looks: distorted face, asymmetrical and grotesque, and to saliva uncontrollably dripping of the lips.

After the unfortunate trip to Florida, Herman Roth is scheduled to the tomography of the head and that is when the correct diagnosis is formulated: brain tumor. His son, who came from Connecticut, is waiting for the diagnosis in the hotel in which he usually stays during his visits in New York. He finds out the truth from a large envelope with a radiologist's description. Philip Roth precisely reports on the circumstances of getting acquainted with the fate's verdict on his father. He recalls the hotel name, the appearance of the envelope – are these details meaningful to the story of a disease? What do they add to our knowledge about the dying trajectory? Let us put those questions aside for now but we need to point out that the meticulousness is purposeful and linked with the principle of 'telling everything.'

On receiving the message, Philip Roth is alone. His friend, wife-to-be, Claire Bloom went to visit her daughter in London. The writer makes a two-fold assessment of this situation: he realizes that it would be easier for him to fight depression and incapability of taking up any job if Claire was there with him. On the other hand, loneliness allows him to completely submit to the sorrow: "When I felt like crying, I cried," he writes (PhR, 16). Philip Roth repeatedly returns to the X-ray pictures he has been given. As he states, what is most terrifying is not the fact of dealing with tangible evidence of the father's illness but having a picture of his body uncovered in the act of being ill. It is not seeing the sick brain but seeing his father's brain – the presumed source of his character, temper, authority, strength, fascinating liveliness, power not overshadowed even by the talent and fame of his son. Looking at those pictures, he saw everything and nothing. He came into contact with a mystery which got exposed but not solved.

The absence of his friend does not mean, however, that Philip is forced to handle the situation by himself. He keeps in touch with the more or less close family, reaches for both specialist and less official medical advice. He talks on the phone with his friend Joanna, a Polish emigrant who grants him absolution from his professional indisposition, being lost and a very non-American feeling of helplessness and despair. You do not have to work all the time, you do not have to stay in good shape, you do not even have to comprehend what happened, he hears in the phone receiver.

There is one thing left to do: inform the father about the diagnosis and the choice of a treatment method. As the tumor is probably not malignant, doctors suggest an operation. One, maybe two, because the tumor is dispersed among vessels and will be difficult to remove.

The disease has its stigmata – it marks not only people but also the subjective world with the signs of the irreversible. They are gently introduced in his narrative only by Philip Roth: on his way to talk to his father, he incomprehensibly, remarkably and inexplicably drives off the highway and arrives at

the cemetery where his mother's ashes are. He went there only twice after her death: this mistake, hence, could have a symbolic meaning. But what meaning? Can he count on his late mother's support? Can he count on sensing her presence? Roth writes about something else: a fundamental meaning of the visit at the cemetery is connected not with sensing the presence of the dead but with the conviction that they finally left.

3. Disease exacerbation, crisis; the stadium of agony

Entering the next stage of an illness is usually related with a specific date. In Anna Nałkowska's case, it happened on the 22nd of April, 1942. Under this date, Zofia wrote: "Last Sunday – the day filled with terror which I experience as if it was the most ordinary everyday. I was torn between the mother, Hania and four doctors and I wasn't even surprised any more. The second attack was the beginning of my mother's death. She was sitting at the table on the armchair with her head thrown back, like the grandma when she was dying, pulseless hands covered with cold sweat people call 'deadly'" (ZN, 368). The author has no doubt that the disease will strike the final blow, and that her mother is close to death. And that – in the third year of the war – death is an overwhelming experience one should actually get used to and accept its offer to solve ultimate matters, its promise to bring solace. For people in the ghetto, but not only, dying in one's own bed, surrounded by the beloved family could appear as luck, luxury, destiny's gift. Nonetheless, Nałkowska heroically fights to save her mother and postpone the moment of the calamity: she strengthens her with injections of salt, *cortina*, strychnine and camphor, with drips of glucose, colon cleansing, vein injections, cupping. "Perhaps we can pull her to the shore yet one more time," Nałkowska deludes herself on her name-day, on the 15th of May, 1942 (ZN, 375).

Unfortunately, the condition of Anna Nałkowska in fact does not improve. The patient opposes to further treatment which is a torture to her. She wants to die and she wants to live. She is consumed by fever and debilitation. Medics are torn between different diagnoses because there are hardly any symptoms. The most likely cause of the condition is myocardial degeneration. "But it's not only that," Zofia adds in her journal on the 18th of May (ZN, 378). She knows that, just like everyone around, this illness is mortal, and has only one end which must happen. After a short period of improvement, comes pneumonia. Anna Nałkowska dies on the 6th; she suffers before death, having breathing difficulties.

Suffering of the mortally ill is also tormenting to their relatives. Not only Nałkowska, but also Różewicz touches upon this topic. His mother, taken from the hospital in the last phase of cancer, dies at home. Her misery makes

Tadeusz reflect upon the saint body which is elevated though pain. Only, this elevation is bitter, empty. Mother suffers like Christ but her suffering is meaningless. Either for her or the world. "Today, she only ate two spoonfuls of broth. Her skull is covered with yellow-blueish, almost transparent skin. She is afraid of being taken to the toilet. She is so feeble that she is unable to lift herself on her elbows. We put a suitcase at the foot of the bed so that she could lean on it" (TR, 104). Everything seems elusive in view of such suffering: European culture, religious beliefs, art, people. Because people, also the loving ones, turn out to be too weak to be able to accompany dying in its whole physiological sublimity and horror. Różewicz's thought escapes in various directions. He dreams of going away, he tends to be bitter about his inability to work. He wishes to take a vacation, some rest. Despite the presence of his brother, then the arrival of his father's and others, he feels lonely in his awaiting the mother's death; death which is expected to bring everyone liberation from suffering.

The progress of Herman Roth's illness was foreseen by the doctors with precision. The patient was forewarned that in case of his negative response to the idea of an operation, he will shortly experience new ailments, e.g. difficulties with speaking and swallowing. In the period of intensifying symptoms of the father's disease (Herman Roth did not subject himself to the operation), Philip's health condition deteriorated. His heart problems increased which resulted in a bypass surgery. Deterioration of health of people who take care of a sick person is not a rarity. Nałkowska experiences dangerous blood pressure fluctuation and she feels life-threatened herself; Różewicz goes through a heavy mental crisis. But the process of recovery is as rapid as falling sick: Nałkowska almost immediately returns to her everyday activities, similarly to Różewicz. Roth's operation is successful and followed by instant convalescence. Philip Roth implored the fate to let his father live until he is strong enough to handle his death and the funeral.

The father's agony had place in the hospital. According to the earlier expressed will of the patient, any respirators or drips were not supposed to be used in case of his problems with breathing or eating. Philip Roth complied with his father's request, thus he did what is very hard to do: he let his father die.

4. Tormented body

Descriptions of disease and pain reveal crucial discrepancies resulting from different levels of civilization, life standards, or even organizational systems of medical services. They exert substantial influence over the ritual of dying and the narrative about death. Differences linked with distinct cultural conditions are equally interesting. Their measure could be specific

attitudes towards the body – the body of a sick person, subject to disintegration, pain, indisposition, the fallible body incapable of keeping itself clean or maintaining hygienic regimes, the body uncovered and exposed to the public view. The Polish texts analyzed here are characterized by a more enigmatic approach towards the body. Różewicz writes about the tormented, asexual, transparent, often repulsive and ugly body. The body in Nałkowska's writings is, after all, neat and beautiful, dignified by concern and suffering: "Her face – skinny and dark – became so beautiful that it's striking to everyone" (ZN, 378). "She is lying in half-sleep – pretty, good, unfortunate, she resists food and medications – but eventually agrees to everything, trusting and thankful for everything" (ibid.).

Narratives in English present the body of a dying person as a problematic body. It will cause troubles, both physical and mental. It will be an issue, a topic to think through, a starting point for re-vindication and memories. When Roth's father stains the whole floor with his excrements and the son, tiding it, gets dirty with feces, then cleans everything and throws a whole bag of dirty clothes to the car in order to take it to the laundry, he will feel that everything he does is natural, in place. "It was exactly Patrimony. Not because cleaning symbolized something else, but precisely because it was nothing else than the experienced reality. It was my Patrimony: not money, not tefillin, not a cup for shaving, but shit" (PhR, 176).

While bathing his father, Roth will take a thorough glimpse at his penis. He will notice with certain astonishment that, among all his organs, this one looks young. He will think of pleasures it was a source of. Pleasures divided between the two of them – the father and the mother. Nothing else comes to Philip's mind. He waits for some conclusions and a thought strikes him – that he should remember this moment in order to save the father's image from spiritualization, etherealness, incorporeality. In the bathing scene a concept of a future book – an account of the father's dying – is born. He cannot forget about anything, he has to speak about everything without hiding any drastic elements which are shocking not only to the Polish reader but also to others, since English-speaking scholars – encouraged by the ethical turn in literary criticism – wondered whether Roth did not infringe his character's right to intimacy.⁷ This breach of the taboo is a function of demythologizing death as a religious event, its measure being retreat from metaphysics. Death belongs to the family, generational bonds, heritage, intimate memory. Anti-metaphysics of Różewicz is of a completely different kind: for Roth, the source of power and the conviction of a special type of immortality guaranteed by

7 P.J. Eakin, "The Unseemly Profession," [in:] *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, ed. by J. Adamson, R. Freedman, D. Parker, Cambridge 1988, 176 and next.

the generational continuum is physicality. Różewicz does not find support or consolation either in the body or the soul.

Nancy K. Miller who nurses her father, has another kind of experiences. When she was a child, a girl, he fascinated her with his strength, masculinity, his influence on her mother and the rest of the family. Sunday mornings, which he used to spend in his carelessly buttoned striped pyjamas, evoked in her unclear interpretations of the mystery of sexes. She trembled at the thought of the father's power symbolized by a vague notion of the phallus and hid her erotic and writer's experiences from him. Observing his body changed by an illness, his intimate organs, she could not find anything mysterious. It was prosaic. "My father does not have a phallus," she concluded (NKM, 145). This meant he was neither a king nor a sovereign. He is, or rather he was an owner of an ordinary human capability of procreation and erotic pleasures. Nancy Miller became an advocate of – not always honored – rights of this feeble body. By claiming her father's right to natural death, she found herself in the phallic position. She represented a ritualistic privilege to decide about life and death. Not coincidentally, the closing words of her essay are spoken by a nurse who, uncertain she understood well the author's request to switch off her father's life-maintaining apparatus, asks: "Do you want me to kill you father?" (NKM, 147).

In the case of Philip Roth and Nancy Miller, the reported experienced of the father's death means partial interpretation of Freud and Lacan's psychoanalysis. Recalling a primal horde where the sons eliminate their father and sovereign by force, the author of the novel *Patrimony* identifies with another type of being a son which does not permit a strike but means tender and voluntary acceptance of the father's domination. Following Paul J. Eakin, it is not a coincidence that a thought to "tell everything" is conceived in the contact of the narrator with the naked body of his father, because this thought is directly dependent on the phallic power and authority he represents. Its emergence is triggered by the phallus.⁸ The relation between the father and the son is not equivalent to the conflict based on violence; it is rather composed of respect and awe experienced by the narrator also after the father's death as he is convinced that not everything has been taken care of according to the will of the deceased. The father figure appearing in a dream turns into a phantasm of the symbolic Father equipped with unchallengeable arguments received without event slight distance or reservation.

Nancy K. Miller invokes her own experience in order to reject an unclear but dominant notion of the phallus linked with psychoanalysis. It is not the phallus that rules the world but death: the right to pronounce it and execute

8 *Ibid.*, 178.

it. Here, the phantasm of the father's strength is deprived of its sexual-authoritarian equivalent. What is left is a trace of one's own fear of the father and the memory about him. It is not friendly respect experienced by Roth. It is rather the residuum of anxiety forcing her to admit that if it was not for her father's death, she would not have considered to publicly analyze her intimate approach to him and his body.

The above presented ritual of the transformation from a man to an old man and from a girl to a phallic goddess is a symbolic interpretation of the process which invariably accompanies the dying of the parents: the exchange of the habitually played roles. Nalkowska nurses her mother as if she was a child. She makes sure her mother is clean, warm, eats diversified food. She washes, combs and dresses her. She cuddles her, calms her down and quietly sings until she falls asleep. What is even more touching than those everyday activities performed with tenderness and delicacy is the author's unchangeable conviction that hereby, the love of her life is passing away, that in her adult life there is no one else upon whom she could bestow comparable affection, and that this love sequence shall not be continued.

This also concerns Rózewicz. He performs all the hygienic activities: he washes his mother, feeds her with crumbs of food like a little bird or an infant, he changes her sheets and brings her bed pan. After the funeral, under the date of the 19th of July, 1957, he writes, "I gave my love to the soil. My good suffering baby – my soul" (TR, 106).

In Philip Roth's account, this role exchange is noticed by the sick father himself who, talking on the phone with his friend, says, "Philip is like a mother to me" (PhR, 181).

What is this exchange of roles? What does it mean to take the role of a mother of one's own mother or father? Is this what the ritual of maturation, initiation into adulthood look like? Is it about experiencing the death of one's own parent, finding for oneself a new place in the sequence of existential actions, in the chain of family interconnections?

5. Mourning

Even though the authors of all the examined narratives define their attitudes towards *sacrum* as non-worshipping, they practice completely distinct forms of mourning. In Roth's book, helping someone die is truly the last service that could be given to a person in agony. As both Herman Roth and his family are (to some extent, of course) prepared for death, the funeral itself rather serves fulfilling a certain tradition. Philip Roth agrees to introduce ritualistic elements to the funeral, although he perfectly knows that burying the father in the shroud does not comply with their rejection of religion.

Nevertheless, it seems a better solution than a burial of the father wearing a suit worn by Herman Roth, an employee of a large insurance company, in his office on a daily basis. Only lack of courage restrained the writer from notifying the employees of the funeral house, "Bury him naked." We do not know whether anybody cried over the coffin, whether Kaddish was said and what the mourners did after returning from the cemetery. The story ends together with the moment of death. And it resumes again in the narrative on the subject, covering entire areas of the family story or even American history. Herman Roth's death confirms his son's sense of identity and perception of himself as an American Jew who overcame various obstacles and achieved success. Paradoxically, it also rebuilt his bond with the father blurred in the course of life: the bond between the world famous writer and the modest, ill-educated clerk. The disease enabled them to return to the ties of the body, biological ties and unveiled them as it unveiled the father's brain and his penis. For, what does it mean to be a father and to be a son? It means to literally come from this particular body, to be flesh and bone. This is why everything is important: saliva, sweat, excrement. And everything needs to be described and told. And this is why one needs to summon up an 'unseemly' book written nearly in parallel with the process of dying. And one needs to negotiate with one's own conscience the right to violate someone else's intimacy.

A few days after the funeral and the mourning mass, Różewicz noted in his journal, "Mum, my love, you are with me. I will talk to you, I will work thinking of you" (TR, 107). The process of mourning started with the mass and the note in fact has never finished. The mother's suffering in the last days of her life has been included in the theology of humanity practiced by the poet, in Różewicz's religion without God, in the saint secular history which had its executioners and martyrs. The poet's mother still passes away bringing a wound of orphanage that was insufficiently cried over. If this permanent despair does not sound more clearly in Różewicz's story, in his work, it is because it's completely deprived of pathos and the conviction that literature can fill the void left by the absentee. Andrzej Skrendo shows that the volume *Matka odchodzi* consists of not only statements formulated in the course of dying and after the mother's death but also poems written before the poet's personal tragedy. Those poems, situated in another, elegiac context, are read like post-mortem pieces. Skrendo's conclusion is the following, "In his volume *Matka odchodzi* Różewicz does not ask about the truth of life but about the truth and untruth of poetry. In view of poems surrounding *Ściana*, this piece not only stops being an erotic work and can be read as a poem about the mother, but even reveals as a poem about her dying! Does it sound reckless? I do not think so. If we agree that there aren't any non-relational features, it will become obvious that

texts take their sense from the context.”⁹ Literature, therefore, is not a simple gesture to bring back someone’s presence, but it is a very disputable, ethically ambiguous and always engaged in literary contexts and aesthetic measures, attempt to fill the void with the writer’s work.

After her mother passes away, Nałkowska leads a double life: between home and cemetery. “Hours in the cemetery, the sun, silence. I talk with her quietly, I kiss the sandstone embracing the grave with its edge. It’s warm. Inside this frame, dark violet, frisé petunias are growing, every time I bring the same ones and plant them in free slots without a flowerpot. Pink hydrangea is still blooming. A woman who watches the grave remembers my mother, though the latter couldn’t go there for a long time. She says that there are no such loving daughters now, that she knows everything that is happening and she saw my sister when she came alone and cried very much” (ZN, 390). Nałkowska gets more comfortable in the cemetery, comes back anxious about the grave, about the deceased. Writing about love to the one who “is underground” (ZN, 386), once again she takes the role of the mother of her mother, the role of Demeter who misses Persephone and comes to the gates of Hades to be closer to the beloved one.

In this period, the writer comes closer not only to the gates of Hades but also to folk culture. She longingly listens to fascinating stories told by the cemetery woman – stories about love stronger than death. She does not define her attitude towards these signs of folk miraculousness, but absorbs and introduces them to her own narrative. She is then closer to the other world; no matter if it is the world of the dead, the world of ballads, miracles, or strangeness.

When we take a closer glance at dying trajectories depicted in the comparable accounts, we will observe a certain regularity: the trajectory of suffering subjected to the highly artistic and literarily perfect narrative manipulation – despite all doubts – still seems less disorderly, though always equally helpless towards the ultimate. Perhaps this is the therapeutic function of literature.

Translation: Marta Skotnicka

9 A. Skrendo, *Cień matki. Zapis dekonstrukcji*, [in:] „Matka odchodzi” Tadeusza Różewicza, ed. I. Iwaszów and J. Madejski, Uniwersytet Szczeciński, *Rozprawy i Studia T. (CDXCVI)* 422, Szczecin 2002, 37.