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# **“Elimination of the Advantage”: Empathy and the Work of Mourning in Marek Bieńczyk's “Tworki”.**

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### “Elimination of the Advantage”:<sup>1</sup> Empathy and the Work of Mourning in Marek Bieńczyk’s *Tworki*

Marek Bieńczyk’s latest novel, unlike the earlier *Terminal* and the essayistic *Melancholia*, enjoys a moderate but, more importantly, favorable interest of critics.<sup>2</sup> The charges that he has written a “doctoral book” waged against his debut novel *Terminal* (after all, Bieńczyk works at the Institute of Literary Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences), seem to have provoked the author to accompany *Tworki* with unnecessary and essentially conservative commentary on the occasion of interviews.<sup>3</sup> The novel, even if it makes for a “resistant” reading, can be considered a successful attempt to find a new language for speaking about the Holocaust.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the essay comes from the conversation with Marek Bieńczyk conducted on the occasion of his receiving the “Passport” award from *Polityka*. See: “Słowo w akcji. Rozmowa z Markiem Bieńczykiem, literackim laureatem Paszportu *Polityki*,” *Polityka*, 2000 no. 5, 51.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to the following reviews: M. Zaleski, “Praca żałoby,” *Gazeta wyborcza*, 1999 no. 108, 3; K. Szczuka, “Miłość w czasach Zagłady,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1999, no. 27, 14; K. Nadana, “U Pana Boga za piecem,” *Res Publica Nowa*, 1999, no. 7–8, 103. The favorable responses of the critics are not, however, reflected in the interest of the general readership, for until now, a year since the publication of *Tworki*, less than a thousand copies were sold. In “Proza życia,” a type of report from the sales of the work of young Polish authors, Maja Wolny expresses a hope that this situation will change for *Tworki* because Bieńczyk was awarded the “Passport” award by *Polityka* (see: Maja Wolny, “Proza życia,” *Polityka*, 2000 no. 7, 57). In comparison, Olga Tokarczuk’s *Praviek i inne czasy* was published in 40 000 copies, and Manuela Gretkowska’s *Namiętnik* in 13,000 copies.

<sup>3</sup> See: “Imię Soni,” *Rzeczypospolita*, 1999 no. 159, D3.

Bieńczyk has undertaken a very ambitious and difficult task of writing – half a century after the end of the war – a book about the Holocaust of the Jews, a book which would speak not only to those who remember that period but also to young people who have access only to the documentary and literary representations of those times. *Tworci* represents the trauma of the Holocaust not in events but in language. It is a novel about the “elimination of the advantage” the living have over the dead,<sup>4</sup> an attempt to understand the people of the times and the choices they made and, in effect, also an attempt to recover faith in the cognitive power of literature, in its significance. Finally, the novel performs the author’s own work of mourning, an attempt to overcome fear and trauma.

Bieńczyk performs these tasks on two levels: on the level of language and, additionally, on the level of composition (here the use of the myth of Arcadia is particularly worth noting).

### In the beginning there was writing<sup>5</sup>

The roots of *Tworci* are tangled, reaching many places at once and connecting loosely related experiences, because the novel grows out of childhood trauma, teenage fears, and the feeling of being – as Bieńczyk puts it – “an accidental debtor” of the letter of a young woman saying good bye to her family before dying.

Bieńczyk, born eleven years after the war, confesses in a conversation with Maja Wolny that he belongs to the generation who dreamed about the Germans:

The walls of my building had been punctured by shells, kids continued to play war, war was the subject endlessly discussed at school, often in television, sometime at home. When I first went to Germany, as a 13-year-old...I was unable to swallow anything.<sup>6</sup>

The films he has seen about the Nazi, the books he has read, and his own unpleasant experiences caused the future author of *Terminal* to be haunted by, as yet unrealized, fear.

The fear intensified later with the accidental discovery of an authentic letter written by a woman who was hiding during the war in the *Tworci* psychiatric hospital. She was one of the Jewish women whose work in the hospital gave them a chance to survive the

<sup>4</sup> See: “Słowo...,” 51.

<sup>5</sup> M. Bieńczyk, *Tworci*, Warsaw, 1999, 7. English edition: M. Bieńczyk, *Tworci*, trans. Benjamin Paloff, Northwestern University Press, 2008. Subsequent references in the text are to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> „Słowo w...,” 50. In the conversation with Wojciech Chmielewski (“Imię Soni”), Bieńczyk adds: “When after a month we left for Zebrzydowice, I literally devoured food... The funny thing is that when as a 19-year-old I went to Germany again, hitchhiking, the first German words I heard – I was sleeping in a ditch, and was woken up by a plainclothes policeman with a gun in his hand – were “Hände hoch.”

war; many of them did, she did not.<sup>7</sup> One cannot, however, speak of misfortune, because Sonia consciously chooses to die, or rather consents to her fate.

The letter the novel begins with ("Yes, in the beginning there was writing, not very pretty, tall, tightly squeezed letters denying each other space and denying sails to the sentences") made Bieńczyk a willing "debtor" – though I think the word "hostage" would be more appropriate – of its sender. He was forced to write an answer which, for the lack of reliable information, had to be a fabrication. Writing *Tworki*, Bieńczyk performs a forgotten homework without which, as it turns out, one cannot say anything certain about oneself or the world in which one happens to live.

The language of the novel-answer differs substantially from the language usually used to speak about the Holocaust, the language which registers, catalogues events, violence, long agonies and quick deaths... The author of *Tworki* disagrees with what Grynberg says about "the novel of the Holocaust" in his essay "Szkoła opowiadania":

economy and modesty of means seems a must to me in the literature of the Holocaust... the situations and events I choose speak for themselves, in their own language; without the rhetoric which is absent from real life and true literature.<sup>8</sup>

This is not the language of Bieńczyk's generation, raised to a large extent in a textual world.<sup>9</sup> What is more, Bieńczyk has another end in mind: his task is not to describe the Holocaust, to save the Jewish nation from being forgotten, but to search for another human being, to understand him or her, to join him/her in suffering, to feel what Jurek must have felt reading Sonia's farewell. Bieńczyk seems to believe in the individual dimension of loss. After all we do not lose a whole nation, but specific people who are dear to us. It is their passing that moves us, inspires sadness or fear.

To understand one has to find a platform for an encounter. Bieńczyk believes that only language can be that platform, that an encounter with the Other is possible only in language. In order for the encounter to take place a confrontation of the idiolects is necessary. The language of the novel's protagonists (as Katarzyna Nadana points out, "the pre-war, Warsaw style" is imitated by the author with true "virtuosity"<sup>10</sup>) is confronted with the language of the author (never the author's own, for it consists of cultural quotations) on almost every page of the novel, thus the multiplicity of pseudo-poetic rhymes, puns, parodies, ellipses, and anacoluthons. In one of the interviews Bieńczyk mentions that when preparing for writing the novel he hardly used the

<sup>7</sup> See: K. Szczuka, "Miłość...", 14. "It is worth mentioning that much, including the name and the kindness of the director, as well as Sonia's story, belongs to the authentic war history of the hospital in *Tworki*, where many Jews were lucky to survive, also among the patients (many, but not all)."

<sup>8</sup> Quoted after „Imię...”

<sup>9</sup> See: *ibid.*: „My experience is different: not only the historical experience of a person born after the war, but also the literary experience of one who was educated and learned to write...in the textual world.”

<sup>10</sup> K. Nadana, „U Pana Boga...,” 104. <http://rcin.org.pl>

archive and the old press but spent much time “listening intently to old songs, and films – to the Polish of the time.”<sup>11</sup>

“Listening intently” is an interesting way to put it, especially when juxtaposed with another comment made by Bieńczyk:

I give those dead people this experience, this language, just as they give me theirs. I want to meet them not in the realm of concrete facts, which I know little about, but in something which is more alive, more physical to the writer, in language, with which I consume them as they consume me with theirs.<sup>12</sup>

What the author of *Tworci* proposes here is knowledge through empathy, where understanding depends on identifying with another person, on “consuming” that person, on perceiving the world with his or her eyes. Importantly, such empathizing always entails taking on the language and style of the person we are trying to understand, which makes it empathy through language, a textual empathy.

The shortest definition of empathy offered by Józef Rembowski in a work devoted to the subject says it is “a process of feeling, perceiving, and understanding the psychic state of another person.”<sup>13</sup> In further qualifications borrowed from other researchers on the topic, Rembowski points out that empathy resembles “psychological cannibalism,” because for a moment it includes the other person in one’s own “I” (E., 35); “empathy is based on the ability to put oneself in the position of another person” (E., 44) and requires that the person wanting to empathize “accept the point of view of other people” and “accept their social role” (E., 57). It is also important that empathy, “trying to feel the pain” of another person (E., 66), puts in motion the linguistic condition, for the one who empathizes has to express his impressions in the language of the one whom he is trying to understand (E., 67-8).<sup>14</sup>

Bieńczyk works with the tradition of treating language as the platform for the encounter with the Other. Such critical stance was creatively explored in the 1960s and 1970s by some of the French literary critics within thematic criticism. They tried to reach the hidden meanings of the work by adopting the point of view of its maker. The task of the critic was to “allow” the Other into oneself, to make space in oneself for the Other’s word, a process that was to allow the discovery of the essence of the work.<sup>15</sup> Bieńczyk appears

<sup>11</sup> “Słowo...,” 50-51.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>13</sup> J. Rembowski, *Empatia*, Warsaw, 1989, 89. Subsequent references in the text preceded by E are to this edition.

<sup>14</sup> The very word “empathy” is not much more than a hundred years old (its creator in German in 1885 was Th. Lipps; the German *etymfiblung* was translated into English in 1912), which does not mean that the concept was not known earlier. It appeared in the history of culture under the name of “compassion,” “shared pain,” “resonance,” “adherence” (J. Rembowski, *Empatia*, 33).

<sup>15</sup> See: M. Głowiński, T. Kostkiewiczowa, A. Okopień-Sławińska, J. Stawiński, *Słownik terminów literackich*, Wrocław, 1998, 577-8.

here once again as a student of Poulet, Richard, and Starobinski (after all he frequently used their findings in his work on *Czarny człowiek*), only he combines thematic criticism with his own conviction that the world is a collection of texts and therefore the Other can be reached only through the word.

Much earlier, the critics of *Młoda Polska* have addressed literary works in a similar manner. In his book devoted to expression and empathy in the literary criticism of *Młoda Polska*, Michał Głowiński shows that this group of critics, especially Brzozowski, used the category of empathy in their consideration of the literary work.<sup>16</sup> This meant "adopting to a greater or lesser extent the style characteristic [for the work/writer – M.L.]," and "more or less suspending all distance" toward them,<sup>17</sup> and thus largely paralleled what Bieńczyk does in his last novel.

As it turns out, Bieńczyk consciously brings the language of the pre-war and war-time schoolboys into the language of his narrator because only in this way can he come closer to, feel, and know the thoughts and feelings of his characters. This process of empathizing begins with Sonia's letter or, more specifically, with its expressive style. Exclamation marks say much more than all (equally brief and emphatic) sentences of the farewell letter:

which is why I think I can ride along those exclamation points, as though on rails, along narrow paths, by a magical line, into those neighborhoods; that through a gymnastic effort I can take them right up to Sonia's square room... slip over onto that side there, near the tick-tocking ticks of Sonia's watch. (5)

Exclamation marks, poetic emphasis, exaltation, the protagonists' taste for humorous song, war-time jokes, rhyme and rhythm are absorbed by the narrator, so that the language of *Tworci* begins to resemble – as Kazimiera Szczuka puts it – "a Holocaust sing-song."<sup>18</sup> This "sing-song," half playful, half serious (after all a sing-song is an incomplete utterance, open to the accident of the "other's word," as well as open to the unofficial language) eliminates the type of advantage the living have over the dead.<sup>19</sup> This is because by letting the languages of the dead enter our own, we bring the lost ones back to life in their word, and at the same time, we renounce the knowledge unavailable to them which we acquired after their death.

Erasing the distance is one of the conditions of empathic knowledge. The first contacts have been made, the "mixer" is over, time to explore.

<sup>16</sup> See: M. Głowiński, *Ekspresja i empatia. Studia o młodopolskiej krytyce literackiej*, Cracow, 1997, 76-9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>18</sup> K. Szczuka, „Miłość w...,” 14.

<sup>19</sup> See: Bieńczyk's comment in the conversation with Maja Wolny: „empathy in Canetti is very physical, deeply felt, with all the senses, with the whole body; there is also in Canetti an almost obsessive feeling of debt toward the dead. . . . Canetti makes it one of his writerly tasks to eliminate the advantage the dead have over the living” (“Słowo...,” 51)

## The work of mourning

Marek Bieńczyk's latest novel seems different from *Terminal* because it concerns not so much melancholia as mourning or, more specifically, the work of mourning. For if melancholia and mourning grow out of the same experience of loss, only the later overcomes trauma. "The melancholic," writes Zeidler-Janiszewska, "cannot move beyond re-living the experience of loss; his complaints...become accusations...The time of mourning, on the other hand, is the time of intense work leading to the reintegration of the 'I' of the mourner and a reconciliation with the changing shape of the world."<sup>20</sup> "[A]fter the work of mourning is completed, Freud argues, the 'I' becomes free again and unfettered."<sup>21</sup>

Sonia's death is such loss, first for Jurek, then for the narrator. Bieńczyk, by feeling compassion for his protagonists, by empathizing with them, also in a sense becomes a "mourner." As Jurek, he did not lose the entire Jewish nation, but this one specific girl, to whom he has been tied through the letter and through his fear. It seems that Bieńczyk, together with his protagonists, holds a mass for Sonia, participates together with Jurek in a "funeral procession" and then reintegrates his "I" of the mourner, discovers that the Holocaust of the Jews cannot be voiced other than through the attempt to reach the motivation behind individual choice of the individual who said "yes" to death.

Sonia is a mystery Jurek listens to intently as a doctor listens to the sick patient. Bieńczyk uses a common motif of the literature of the Shoah, namely the uncovering of one's hiding place and giving oneself over to the Gestapo. It seems to me, however, that in Sonia's case one cannot speak of exceeding "the critical mass" or about a dramatic reaction to the final defeat of the Warsaw ghetto uprising – after all Sonia's decision is made already six months after its fall. The girl takes with her to her grave the mystery of her death, the reasons for her choice. She leaves Tworki, despite the fact that she loves and is loved, she may feel safe in the hospital, she is not in any danger, the director of the hospital – the Good German Honette (there are many characters like this one in literature) could protect her in case of an emergency. So why does she leave? There is no simple answer to this question, perhaps her death is a "homework" one needs to complete.

Jurek, who "read out the sentences yet again, stared into them as though into a mirror, repeated them like aphorisms, last words...understood that now he will always have to turn these sentences over in his dreams like a millstone, to chew them like an acrid vitamin, like his own tears upon waking" (146). Further on it turns out that this is a task not only for Jurek; the narrator says that "that piece of paper is the best thing that's been done for us, that's been thought about our life here and the road laid out before us" (146). Because Sonia's letter may give meaning and weight to our lives, so that we are able to feel again a "tingling in our hands and a tickle in our throats" (146). The death of Olek's lover returns to our lives their tragic dimension; it is a bitter *memento*. Each of

<sup>20</sup> A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, *Między melancholią a żałobą*, Warsaw, 1996, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 7.

us, Bieńczyk seems to be saying, should have one's own Sonia to whom one could write till the end of one's life, as he has been writing all his life "to Berdichev" (163) in order to realize whom we have lost in that war.

By coming to terms with the loss, the mourner performs the work of mourning, makes his or her "I" ready for new experiences, opens to the world.<sup>22</sup> Bieńczyk performs the work of mourning and discovers that "there is no literature without the Other and without the desire, the longing for the impossible presence"; according to him, true literature "opens itself to the Other, to his presence."<sup>23</sup>

How are we to understand Sonia's decision? We could, in line with the narrator's suggestion, see in it a recognition of one's own fate. By choosing suffering, by freely turning herself over to the Gestapo, Sonia is a victim who knows her fate, who pursues step by step her own destiny: "Strange how things work out! Seems like it's the way it had to be!" (146). She discovers that she can make her "I" free in one way only, by choosing the way of suffering which was meant for her. Her fate is the exile from Paradise, a voluntary departure from Arcadia and her lover.

It seems that Sonia's choice may be considered also from the perspective of the Romantic notion of the Sublime. As Magdalena Popiel observes, "For the Romantics the greatest attraction of the Sublime was that it *revealed the human sense of freedom*. Especially when juxtaposed with tragic fate, the piece of mind resulting from the absolute moral agency acquired the value of sublimity"<sup>24</sup> (emphasis M.L.). Deciding to turn herself over to the Gestapo, Sonia reaches the sublime moment of her existence. From this perspective, death in the epiphanic flash of recognition appears to be not so much a loss of life as the recovery of the sublime freedom.

### "Clean glades and crystal water" (16)

Speaking of the empathic reading of Bieńczyk's novel, one needs to comment on the place where the meeting with the Other takes place. That place is the hospital for the mentally ill<sup>25</sup> which, however, as a place where love is born and where there is time for strolls and poetry, strangely resembles Arcadia, or perhaps its Biblical equivalent, Paradise.

Tworki is today one of the largest mental hospitals in Poland, as well as one of the oldest, established at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Historic red brick buildings and the beautifully kept park over the river Utrata are preserved in their original shape.

In conversation with Maja Wolny, Bieńczyk confesses that it took him a long time to "tame" Tworki, by wandering in the park, sitting on the benches, by "listening intently"

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<sup>22</sup> Unlike the mourner, the melancholic does not fully understand whom he has lost, because he contemplates not the subject of loss but loss itself.

<sup>23</sup> See: „Imię...”

<sup>24</sup> M. Popiel, *Oblicza wzniosłości. Estetyka powieści młodopolskiej*, Cracow, 1999, 40.

<sup>25</sup> One should point out the significance of the metaphor of the hospital for the lunatics—after all it is a world upside down, and also a refuge for Anti-Plato and his poetry.

into the spirit of the place.<sup>26</sup> We can find traces of those meanderings on the pages of the novel:

this place is strangely warm, a safe center like a valley among mountains (9)

...

Even here, not so far from the hospital walls, it's not bad, a meadow quiet as though after a flood, a little bridge as unyielding as faith and green as hope, and a little river running under it, not too big, transparent, with little fish as signs of God's love, but made smaller by whatever its name, Utata – "Loss" – subtracted from its lovely sum. (16-7)

Except for the name of the river, which constitutes a form of a warning or quotation marks, nothing disrupts the idyllic pastoral image. When this world is invaded by blackmailers from Warsaw, who demand ransom from Marcel Brohowicz in return for peace, the protagonist is justifiably surprised and taken aback:

They knocked right on Paradise's door. That's the first thing that's popped into my head, that thought. That time doesn't flow here and that nothing can happen. That we're sitting here behind the oak of good and evil snug as bugs in a rug. (95)

But soon the situation goes back to normal (even if the stability is only illusory) and it is time for an outing, a holiday of song, dance, poetry, and an allegorical procession:

Coming ever closer, they are at their great apogee. The first one on the right, Love, waves her free hand in the measure of some melody...Next to her strides Serenity, distinguished by his great height and boot size... That hand under his elbow belongs to Hope. (102)

From the first pages of *Tworki* the reader receives signals that the hospital is more than simply a realistic location. The image of the hospital reality overlaps with the icon of the pastoral idyll; the passages quoted above inspire such an Arcadian reading.

The hospital in Tworki, similarly to Arcadia (originally a rocky and infertile region in Greece, that only with time became a secular Paradise, a garden of lush vegetation) is isolated from the rest of the world.<sup>27</sup> The place is doubly separated: first by the fence in the park, which prevents the patients from running away, and second by the river Utrata which flows by the park.

As Jadwiga Sokołowska points out, Arcadia cannot exist without its antithesis, the city.<sup>28</sup> Tworki also has their counterpart: the dangerous, occupied, informer-filled Warsaw. Even if the hospital remains under German jurisdiction, there are no roundups here, no armed underground, no forced labor, no prisons. Here, even if supplies are scarce, life pulsates with the pre-war idyllic rhythm. Only the local train which connects Tworki to Warsaw as with a umbilical cord is a reminder of danger; Love often arrives by it (Jurek, Olek, Anna), but sometimes also Death (the blackmailers).

<sup>26</sup> See: „Słowo...”, 51.

<sup>27</sup> See: D. Śnieżko, *Mit wieku złotego w literaturze polskiego renesansu*, Warsaw, 1996, 127.

<sup>28</sup> J. Sokołowska, *Dwie nieskończoności. Szkice o literaturze barokowej Europy*, Warsaw, 1978, 49.

As Dariusz Śnieżko observes, "Apart from an attractive environment... Arcadia possesses also a peculiar atmosphere of *otium*, where poetic competition and unrequited love become serious concerns."<sup>29</sup> In Bieńczyk's novel, which turns out to be also a "love story," the pastoral idyll takes place in "the garden of Eros" whose arrows wounded – though not particularly accurately – Jurek, Sonia, Olek, and Janka. The love exploits of the two couples take up quite a lot of space; there is even a betrayal – Jurek betrays Janka with Danka, there are crude rhymes, parodies of Mickiewicz's 13 syllable meter, much "poetry-making."

Despite such extraordinary surroundings and the propitious climate of happiness, the fate of the characters who come to Arcadia to rest does not radically change – as is the case in Theocritus:<sup>30</sup> from among the three hiding Jews only Janka will survive (perhaps because she is not as mysterious as Sonia, but rather plain); destiny will catch up with Sonia, Olek, and Marcel's wife, Anna. Apparently in Arcadia love and death have always been intricately connected. Although the elegiac tone had been recognizable in the literary representations of the Arcadian myth already in Theocritus' *Idylls* and Virgil's *Eclogues*, only the Renaissance, and even more the Baroque imagination pronounced this "melancholy" note really clearly. The conviction that death comes also for the heroes of the idyll found representation in 17<sup>th</sup> century painting. Two artists – Giovanni Francesco Guercino and Nicolas Poussin – separated by a quarter of a century, paint two paintings of death in the Arcadia. The first is titled *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1621-1623), which can be translated as "I am even in Arcadia"; in the context of the shepherds who find a skull on a wall with the title utterance underneath there is no doubt that the painting is a reference to death which extends its power also to the idyllic space.

It seems that Bieńczyk, by mobilizing the myth of Arcadia, attempts to create a literary equivalent to the world of emotions of his novel's protagonists. This procedure is similar to having an ear for the language of the characters, because the aim is the same: to understand what Jurek and Sonia felt in that situation, what they thought about falling asleep, waking up, working, and making love. The discovery that Tworki are a description of another "exile from Paradise" in which death swings on the garden swing, back and forth (and sleeps in a watch – a significant prop in Arcadia which apparently knows no time), allows the reader interested in empathetic, emotional reading to perform his own work of mourning. Only by trying to empathize with those people, to understand what they felt walking in the hospital park at a time when the Ghetto uprising was expiring in Warsaw, can we say something important also about ourselves. Bieńczyk makes us aware that, similarly to himself, we are all marked by loss. To understand oneself, one has to know what one has lost and later perform the individual work of mourning. That is possible only when we speak about specific people and not about general phenomena. Thus the author of

<sup>29</sup> D. Śnieżko, *Mit wieku...*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> J. Sokołowska, *Dwie nieskończoności...*, 37.

*Tworki* is saying “Sonia” instead of “the Holocaust”; “Marcel” and “Anna” instead of “the Shoah” and “the hecatomb.”

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At the *Polityka* “Passport” award ceremony, Bieńczyk said that word “makes up for the loss.”<sup>31</sup> He may have had his latest novel in mind. *Tworki* undertakes the task of recovering the Other in literature. Toward this end Bieńczyk employs “the Holocaust sing-song,” a controversial form especially for those who believe that speaking humorously about the Holocaust is inappropriate. The author of *Melancholia* believes otherwise, and although he appreciates the books by the author of *Kaddish* and by Hanna Krall for their precision, he believes that to say something important and moving about the Holocaust in the contemporary “textual” world it is not enough to describe the lives of those people, but one has to reach for their language. For it is in language, Bieńczyk believes, that one can find the truth, language is the vehicle by which we travel into the past.<sup>32</sup>

This is not easily accessible language; one needs some time and effort to reach it. A good way to do it is, according to the author, through empathy. It is empathy that can give us direct contact with the Other. And in *Tworki* empathy is based on listening to language which conceals true emotions under the layer of school-boy humor; this is a specific type of “identification” with the lost person which leads to the “elimination of advantage” the living have over the dead.

It seems that the proposition of empathetic reading is inscribed into the novel. Bieńczyk wants a reader who will follow his characters, who will try to empathize with their lives and their decisions:

And so I come as called, I receive the transmission, on so many pages I sign for this unwelcome, unaddressed gift and call on you, because perhaps one of you will come, one of you will arrive permanently at my bench, yes, I’m calling you, all of you, come...by whatever train you can... and read, please read...and sign for receipt...sign again, confirm it, certify it, check off that you’ve received it, throw in your own post-postscript. (171)

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<sup>31</sup> See: „Słowo...,” 50.

<sup>32</sup> In her conversation with Bieńczyk, Maja Wolny quotes from his afterword to the Polish edition of Elias Canetti’s *The Conscience of Words* (Cracow 1999). Bieńczyk refers to Canetti’s concept of “absorbing people into oneself in order to understand them anew again.” It seems that the author of *Tworki* borrows from Canetti the thesis about the “elimination of advantage” of the living over the dead. Writing about the Austrian’s essays that they are focused on “the physical detail Canetti seems to unearth in order to make it belong to his own physicality” (326), Bieńczyk discovers his own creative method. He then adds: “On many pages of this volume sentences flash about the experience of touch and closeness...the physicality of this experience is crucial to me: an encounter, a meeting of two bodies, their identification with each other; closeness which comes from contact...No abstract value, no beautifully posited memory of others.” (330). One can hardly resist the feeling that Canetti’s words are a point of departure for Bieńczyk’s own thoughts about loss and the work of mourning, in *Tworki* necessarily based on language (after all we live in a textual world, says Bieńczyk).

The request for a postscript is an encouragement for the work of mourning, for empathy toward the Other, for the recognition of one's own loss.

Marek Bieńczyk's *Tworki* is a novel which allows us to believe again in the significance of literature because the capacity for compassion, the capacity to "listen intently" to another can be used in prose to recognize one's own trauma, one's own loss. For Bieńczyk writing, long believed to be therapeutic, and for the receiver reading, may turn out to be (and here is more good news) medicine for the "illness of mourning." In order for that to happen, Bieńczyk suggests, one has to first become "ill" with mourning, that is, realize that each of us has in one way or another lost the Other. We should all live through that, give in to the "illness," in order to let go of the useful language of statistics, the practical language of psychoanalysis, and to eliminate the advantage, to recover the original language of the Other, to understand him, and to recover.

*Translation: Krystyna Mazur*