A Few Reflections on Life-passing on the Basis of Works by Tadeusz Różewicz and Czesław Milosz

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Summary

People nowadays avoid speaking about senility – a very difficult period of our lives - that is referred to as “the third age”, “the autumn of your life”, “declining years” or “a ripe old age”. As senility is both a unique and collective paradigm, it is worth undertaking this subject with secondary school students during Polish lessons. Works of Old Poets Tadeusz Różewicz and Czesław Miłosz attempt to show cultural mechanisms of ostracising old age, shaping experiencing, proposed and opposed interpretations of the cultural models of aging. In our analyses we should remember that texts created in dramatic and extreme situation like walking along the path of one’s own life in the “wisp of shadow” become something more than literature – they make the canvas of private, unique emotions confirmed by the biographies of the writers.

Keywords: senility, the deterioration of body, illnesses, alienation, otherness, the Old Woman archetype.

the world would be bad without old people (Różewicz, 2006b, 224)

Senility¹ – the taboo of contemporary culture – is

¹ The escalating interest in senile theme at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries is on the one hand the effect of demographical processes (getting old of European population) and on the other hand cultural changes (dominating myth of eternal youth). In the humanities at the turn of the centuries the wide context of senile issues open the theories of subject and remembrance which is confirmed by numerous publications, e.g.: Hobot-Marcinek, 2012; Ślósarska, 2009; Egzystencjalne doświadczenia ... (Existential Experience ...), 2008; Zawistowska-Toczek, 2008; Życie w starości (Life in Senility), 2007; Pomoc ... (Help ...), 2007; a theme excluded from social life, met with silence, left behind the curtain of presence. It is diversely defined: Georg Lichtenberg calls it “a disease” (Lichtenberg, 2005), Ryszard Przybylski “winter fable” (Przybylski, 1998), and Sándor Márai “an adventure” (Márai, 2004). In the every day language we often use euphemisms: “the autumn of your life”, “declining years” or “a ripe old age”, “Methuselah age” in

Santrauka

Šiuolaikiniai žmonės vengia kalbėti apie senatvę – nelengvą gyvenimo tarpsnį, vadinamą „trečiuoju amžiumi“, „gyvenimo rudeniu“, „gyvenimo saulėlydžiu“. Senatvės kaip unikalių kolektyvinės patirties temą pravartu nagrinėti su vidurinių mokinių biografijos. Tadeuszo Różewicziaus ir Czeslawo Miłoszo senatvinė kūryba atskleidžia kultūrinius

Esminiai žodžiai: senatvė, nykstantis kūnas, liga, susvetimėjimas, kitybė, senolės archetipas.
order to mitigate the painful truth about our own passing existence from our awareness. Nevertheless, as things are happening irreversibly “on the way” to old age which is “the patron of our path” (Sławek, 2008, 16), it is worth undertaking this subject with secondary school students during Polish lessons. Therefore, the subject of the article is explored in the works of Old Poets: Tadeusz Różewicz and Czesław Miłosz attempt to show cultural mechanisms of ostracising the old age, shaping its experiencing and the interpretations proposed and fought against by the cultural models of aging. It is supposed that the clasp, the most proper key-word enabling overcoming the epistemological rupture between the subject (old man) and the object (old age) and facilitating the discourse is the experience which – according to Ryszard Nycz – is characterised by “chronic ambiguity” (Nycz, 2006, 56). Martin Jay, looking for his meta-narration monograph that fully describes the idea of experience, displays its European and America approaches, simultaneously emphasizing its polisemous meaning. The philosopher, after Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Buber and Walter Benjamin, gives special meaning to two different types of experience: Erlebnis and Erhafrung. The former, including the word life (Leben), evokes elementary unit, something which is inexpressible and “more direct, pre-reflective and personal” (Jay, 2008, 28), the latter includes the word journey (Fahrt), associated with the process of learning and joining separate moments into narrative unity. The notion has a progressive nature, emphasizes the movement which is durable but not always smooth displaying the role of memory in creating its meaning as “accumulated experience may become a kind of wisdom which arrives after dusk” (Jay, 2008, 28). The path leading towards old age is not a solely individual experience; it marks the fate of every human being. It is both a unique and collective paradigm.

In the analysis it is extremely important that the discourse about: „the old age stayed in the centre and the elaborate stylistics and methodological modes did not cover or contaminate it” (Szladowski, 2008, 8). It is also worth remembering that texts created in dramatic and extreme situation like walking along the path of your own life in the “wisp of shadow” become something more than literature – they make the canvas of private, unique emotions confirmed by the biographies of the writers. In order to avoid simplifications – as for difficulties in drawing a border between text “I” and author “I” it is worth seeing the conception of sylleptical model of subject, according to which – as Ryszard Nycz states – “sylleptical ‘I’ should be understood […] in two different ways concurrently: as real and imaginary. As empirical and textual, as authentic and fictional” (Nycz, 1994, 22).

Old age – calling for what is non-human

Senility of Tadeusz Różewicz can be perceived as a rich record of reflections of a person who is approaching the end of their existence. The poet who – as he said himself – spent 83 years in a “condemned cell sentenced to life” (Różewicz, 2004, 69) painfully experiencing the deterioration of his own body. In his poem 21 March 2001 (Różewicz, 2002, 62) he fearfully enumerates the illnesses he suffered. He went through cataract, gout, pain of indolent and purulent legs, blood circulation disorder. The author, although seemingly chaotically and coincidentally, creates the record of his grapple against the world, illnesses, fears of coming suffering. Attempting to constantly observe his body, he looks at himself as from the outside, realizing that his space shrinks to his flat, room and finally his bed. The figure of alienation, otherness which we can read in the poem is extremely emphatic. The stranger who appeared is incompatible with his former, “tame” identity, wrinkles and flabby muscles hinder the process of auto-identification, as the author is “90 years old / 9 years old / 900 years old or is 80 years old / 8 years old or / 800 years old” (Różewicz, 2002, 40). The epistemology of somatic processes in the aging organism leads to faltering and denying of his own status. Being himself becomes being someone else, someone irrecongnizable. Physical metamorphosis and aesthetic decline become repulsive. Therefore we can conclude that senile decomposition of the world is a significant experi-


3 Thanks to archetypal figure of Old Poet the creators under cover of conventions and playing with traditional symbols attempt to express the experience of existence coming to the end. They favour the concept of A. Skrendo who treats senility as text: “I assume that so called ‘old works’ are not a simple evidence of experiencing senility, but is a certain construction created for certain purposes. With the help of this construction we try to combine the works of different writers who seem to be different and distant” (Skrendo, 1999, 203).

4 Cz. Miłosz wrote: “Certainly all the biographies are false, not excluding mine which a leader could assume from this ABC alphabet. False because different chapters are joint according to certain assumption. However it should be joined differently and no one knows how. […] Biographies are like shells and you cannot get to know much about a mollusc which lived there. […] The worthiness of a biography bases on the fact that they represent the epoch in which certain person lived” (Miłosz, 2001, 70).
ene – it can be perceived as “insult” of nature, being its “freak of nature”, denial of reason and order. An old man as “dissimilar to anything” is manifesting the strength of disorder, chaotic energy of unknown and suspicious origin, under which the order of reality can collapse” (Sławek, 2008, 18).

The author of Exit, whose poem becomes a hospital record, inscribes his individual observations into horizons of culture universum. The author’s point of view is similar to Martin Jay’s notion, who claims that all the experience, including the experience of old age “presents a crossroads of public language and private subjectivity, of utterable common phrases and difficult to express individuality of the inside” (Jay, 2008, 20). In his poetic considerations, which through their repetition show the image of a human being dependable on fate, wasting his strengths on overcoming weaknesses, there appears the reflection upon the living through the period of life autumn. The existence of a human being is terminated on the border of the presence and the past (no future), it is filled with many activities directed at timing one’s own fears of incoming end. Różewicz’s character – lonely, alienated, defenceless – attempts to unite with all this which can bring him physical suffering. His reality is overwhelmed by “Lack, Poverty, Care, Blame” (Różewicz, 2002, 7), which become the part of the existence of homo sapiens and create a fine tissue of “grey zone”, being – according to Joanna Hobot-Marcinek – “the sign of repudiation, semilegality, illegality, disability and unwillingness to accept reality which becomes monochromatic with time” (Hobot-Marcinek, 2012, 85). Standing at the final point of one’s existence an old man knows that everything “changes into strange soup / -the soup of death not life” (Różewicz, 2002, 16), where he – deprived of the help of others – plunges himself. Poet emeritus sees what was earlier invisible, uncovers what was hidden under the surface of accessible reality. His path – according to Tadeusz Sławek – is not “simple ‘not yet’ which describes many apparent activities and not equally simple ‘not now’ which blocks the perspective of death” (Sławek, 2008, 27). The old Master is aware that the remaining path – unmarkable and not existing on any map – is extremely short. Running as if against itself “to the cemetery/the grave” (Różewicz, 1996, 86) every day becomes closer to the end. Ryszard Przybylski states:

“The running towards the cemetery gate becomes faster and faster. Therefore death was deprived of dignity. The solemnity connected with the slow and ritual stroll dies out. Human's entering the grave should be solemn. […] Today a man runs to his grave panting postponed by his own idiotic rush, which prevents people from understanding the necessity of submerging some individual forms (Przybylski, 1998, 118).

Senility – contrary to youth – reverses the world to every human being, forcing everyone to see earthly matters from a different angle. It is possible to understand – according to Silesian researcher – “not in the form of ‘lack’ as a lack of something I was deprived of, but as a form of absence of something which is the purpose I crave for. Not what I was deprived of but what I was promised. Senility is the absence and lack in the sense of a promise” (Sławek, 2008, 23).

Różewicz, recording the rhythm of his own existence or we should say even more aptly: the rhythm of his own departure/dying treats the third period of his life as “existential risk” (Eliade, 1992, 129), the feeling of being lost in chaos, swirling decomposition. He emphasizes, however, that people always desire the longest duration in the presence, even if it is formidable. In The Second Poet’s Secret we read: “it’s time to die / but I don’t feel like / there is still another Leśmian’s poem / and Nowosielski’s painting / another sip of red wine / another encounter with Hamlet / I met him sixty years ago / He hasn’t changed / but I” (Różewicz, 2002, 41).

Poet emeritus struggles with the notion of unimaginability of death as no known word is able to describe its substance, define its nature. Covered in fathomless secret, it is still inscribed in the existence of every human being, who does not want it but is forced to come through the gate leading towards death:

*The gate of death*

*the secret of its construction based on the fact that it does not exist but it is still wide open for everyone it is so narrow that a person squeezes through it with sweating forehead in bloody toil shrieking and screaming of fear for years (Różewicz, 2006a, 384)*

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5 The researcher explaining the meaning of colour writes: “the name of the colour also symbolizes not only poverty, suffering, mediocrity, humiliation, senility, silver hair, evil, mourning, boredom, sadness, monotony but also resurrection, abjuration, penance, asceticism, relativity, mistiness and the combination of contrast (white and black)” (Hobot-Marcinek, 2012, 85).

An old man, even if he is cheerful and creative “is already dead. He lives under the ground and feeds himself with soil” (Przybylski, 1998, 125–126). We should agree with Marian Stala who says that Różewicz “was and still remains a poet who speaks to those who are not afraid to face chaos, decomposition and death” (Stala, 1997, 44–45).

It is not at all strange that Różewicz’s subject inscribes the personal experience of “third period” (Erlebnis) in the widely understood cultural paradigm (Erhaftung). The poet’s idiosyncrasy is born from historical experience. The representative of the generation „with a broken back” who does not need to be “blindfolded” (Różewicz, 2002, 27), protesting against common examples of popular culture, brings out the atrocities of the II World War. The character of the poem recyling, does not accept many trends of reality and cannot find himself in the world of surrounding signs. The trendy behavior of contemporary women compares to the suffering and humiliation of prisoners: “[…] she gets man’s shirt / torn underwear / old worn out trousers / and a jumper of a Russian soldier / she has a star on a white canvas / no – Jewish women have red triangle / rags over their heads / I have an impression/that I am on a fancy-dress party / the orchestra is playing…” (Różewicz, 2006 b, 40–41). It can be inferred that the author sees the inhuman changes in the young generation that is laughing jeeringly at the sight of the old man7, as – according to P. Czapliński and P. Śliwiński – “greed of power over nature, sloppiness showing quasi-divine competences, frightful indifference towards unique, individual pain” hidden in “indolatry of statistics and pragmatism” (Czapliński, Śliwiński, 2000, 338).

The adventure of life – the adventure of aging-dying – the adventure of existence

Czesław Miłosz in his senility sees the old age as the phase of intensified auto-reflection on the I, trying to regain identity. In the poem Late maturity he writes: “Not soon, in my late eighties the door opens in me and I went into the clarity of the morning. / I felt my previous lives together with their pain departing from me one by one / like the ships” (Miłosz, 2011, 1218). The limitations of the ill body, “all the parameters of the deep senility” (Miłosz, 2011, 1245) cause the loss the sharpness of silhouette of the outer world, which becomes less important for the I as main reference10. The Old Master reveals: “my dear eyes, you are not well. / I receive a blurred picture from you, / And dimmed colour” (Miłosz, 2011, 1150)11; however – contrary to common stereotypes – he emphasizes that “they are still insatiable” (Miłosz, 2011, 1150). The organism of an old man with all its faults is the only material proof of human changes. The poet, however, does not concentrate on them. Although, the time passes he still wants to be the participant of “life festivities”, use fully what it gives. The philosophy of the world, participating in its every dimension is, firstly, a sensual delight of seeing and, secondly, intellectual experience of the world, the essence of our presence and predicted absence. Czesław Miłosz combines his despair caused by the approaching end of his earthly journey with the admiration of the beauty of female bodies, favouring his certainty of duration – according to Anna Pilch – “Beyond and outside the aging body everlasting eroticism” (Pilch, 2010, 233)12. Joanna Hobot-Marcinek sees the “experiencing love, sexual and creative activities” in the perspective of the archetype of Old Woman who embodies the Dionyso life savouring. The researcher states that “The Old Woman with flabby breast and infertile womb, in conflict with society, desires to be attractive, full of vivid sexual desires, intoxicated with wine, standing on the border of two worlds, afraid of senility and death, but contradicting them with her vitality and zest for life – is the character who intrigues Old Masters […]” (Hobot-Marcinek, 2012, 16)13. Revealing in the essence of existence of the “grey zone” enables Miłosz to violate the existing rules, going beyond the borders outlined by the

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7 T. Różewicz writes: “’Grandson’ passe by / on a mountains bike Yelling / Out of the way old ass / I was stunned / and then I cursed the shithead” (Różewicz, 2002, 95).
9 It is worth remembering that in early works the Nobel prize winner negated the participation of bodily experience as a source of higher knowledge. In the poem Oskarżyciel (Accuser) he writes: “you hated your body, admit it, / You were in love with it. It did not fulfill the expectations […] / You were a passer-by, who uses hands, legs and eyes” (Miłosz, 2011, 671).
10 A. Leżeżyńska emphasises that “ironic disposition” towards senility brings closer Cz. Miłosz to T. Różewicz (Leżeżyńska, 2000, 14).
11 Degrating body is described in: Dalsze okolice (Further neighbourhood), Miłosz, 2011, 999–1001; Degradacja (Degradation), Miłosz, 2011, 1244.
12 See also: Cybulska, 2007, 236.
13 As the researche says – drunk old woman – graus oinophoros – is metanarration expressed indestructibility of life and graus methyse – old Sylenie withstood death with her laughter.
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...the limitations of human condition... uncovering the curtains of the hereafter, overcoming cultural taboo, touching the “lining of the world”, uncovering the curtains of the hereafter, overcoming the limitations of human condition. The poet combines the Methuselah age with drawing the attention from outer reality to himself, concentrating the I on the I, he tries to... make a virtue of necessity” (Legeżyńska, 2000, 14), realizing that [...] not everyone can experience real senility” (Miłosz, 2011, 1213). Therefore, it appears that there is a significant opportunity of auto-correction of identity which has a consolatory character. As a person scarred of the gloomy past, who went through numerous unsuccessful attempts, He craves for peace in his old age, tries to see all the old matters from a certain distance, seeing now all the threads invisible in the past. Experiencing the rules of soulless History, destroying not only individuals but also all the civilizations, the Old Poet states: “My beliefs, ideas, views left me, / Opinions certainties rules and habits. I woke naked on the verge of civilization, / which seemed comical and inconceivable” (Miłosz, 2011, 1213).

Old age enables homo sapiens to feel the secret of the world, entering the other space, being with unbelievable arche, enabling to catch the ejdós of the matters. In the Radiated lightness the Nobelist notes: “Once I imagined that when we are old we consider the things which are eternal, beyond the existence, but now I can see its difference, that all my attention is directed at something elusive. [...] Elusive and eternal are perhaps the two pages of the same piece of paper” (Miłosz, 2011, 999).

In his last volumes Miłosz perceives a man as a aporetic, carnal-spiritual creature; both elements constitute his nature:

I sit in a cafe and watch passing by men and women. They could be the creatures of immaterial bodies who do not surrender to passing time, diseases and death. However, the infinite wealth, complexity of earthly matters come from the contradiction contained in them. The mind would not be attractive but for all these things anchored in the matter: slaughterhouses, hospitals, cemeteries, porn films. And the other way round, physiological needs would oppress us by their dullness if it was not for the mind. (Miłosz, 2011b, 18)

In Miłosz’s poetry the biological changes in the human organism are not significant for the notion of humanity. His poetry reveals the image of the individual who builds his identity on ceaseless rivalry between the somatic experience of one’s own spir-...
stable motives and typical emotions or likings” (Chrząstowska, 2011, 57). They teach to forgive imperfection, value human relationships, walk peacefully along the path of existence. The artists strongly emphasize the unity with the presence felt by those who belong to the “grey zone”. The zone deprives the old dramatic situations of their dimension, reduces the rebellion against nature. The masters of “the defeated despair” attempt to worship the existence in its every millimeter which escapes the power of death.

This world is worth being talked about during the Polish lessons. Spirituality of Old Masters, warm feelings for those who passed away, gratefulness of the individual existence can be measured by the ability to respect the Different, respecting his right to a worthy life.

The poets of difficult, wise affirmation cause that even the unbearable sights of pain, evil, death do not hide the value called DURATION. Their works present the realization of the thought formed by Tadeusz Sławek who says that the most significant fact about old age is that senility “against the neighboring death – is […] the praise of life, life ’stopped’ despite its entropic tendencies. Life goes by, leaks; senility – is the rebellion against nature. The masters of “the de feuilled despair” attempt to worship the existence in its imperfection, value human relationships, walk peacefully along the path of existence. The artists strongly emphasize the unity with the presence felt by those who belong to the “grey zone”. The zone deprives the old dramatic situations of their dimension, reduces the rebellion against nature. The masters of “the defeated despair” attempt to worship the existence in its every millimeter which escapes the power of death.

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