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The Truth in a Personal Diary

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Truth of the Diary: Representation, Construction, and Writerly Practice

In his *Le journal d'écrivain en France dans la 1ère moitié du XX^e siècle*, Jerzy Lis poses the following thesis: "Who knows if the diary is not one of the most insincere forms of writing, one in which strategies are based on the game with oneself and the readers..."² He adds that he is concerned primarily with diaries of writers, who are renowned for their high linguistic and literary awareness. Today, however, this kind of view on diaries, often presented by disregarding whether it addresses the works of writers, or diaries in general, is very common. They are seen as a variations of autobiographical writing whose dominating features are construction and creation that are contrasted with truth and honesty. It is usually brought down to the following judgment: because diaries, just like all

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2 Lis, J. *Le journal d'écrivain en France dans la 1ère moitié du XX^e siècle*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1996, 40.

other literary texts, are narrational constructs, they do not express anything prior to those constructs and that is why any kind of truth in them is impossible. Diaries and, more broadly, autobiographical writing situate themselves “between the lie and creation.”

I have to admit that I am opposed to this particular take on diaries and this essay will be, in a way, an expression of my opposition. First, however, I would like to take a closer look at the approach I discuss in my work by looking at a very interesting book devoted to the diaries of Zofia Nałkowska. I am thinking about Magdalena Marszałek’s *Życie i papier. Autobiograficzny projekt Zofii Nałkowskiej: Dziennik 1899-1954*.³

In the book, the diary is treated as a literary genre in which the “hybrid combination of fictional and autobiographical narration takes place.”⁴ Its author recalls the modern research of autobiographical writing, which undermined the “axiom of particular referentiality of autobiographical writing.”⁵ As a consequence, the research strategy shifts and the “linguistic problems or the discursive conditioning issues of the construction of the autobiographical subject are brought to the forefront, as well as the textuality of the autobiographical representation.”⁶

In Marszałek’s book that openly refers to constructivism and post-structuralism, two models which are juxtaposed: the model of representation and of construction. She writes:

Approaches to autobiographies that are based not on the models of representation but construction, reveal the performative character of the autobiographical writing: autobiographical narrations are not so much a reflection of “I” and its experience, but an effective instrument of subject creating operations.⁷

As a consequence of this kind of constructivist understanding of autobiographical writing, superior meaning is granted to categories of text and narration, as

3 Another work, based on similar assumptions and also concerned with the diaries of Zofia Nałkowska is the book by Anna Foltyniak entitled *Między „pisać Nałkowską” a Nałkowskiej „czytaniem siebie”. Narracyjna tożsamość podmiotu w „Dziennikach”* (Cracow: Universitas, 2004).

4 Marszałek, M. *Życie i papier. Autobiograficzny projekt Zofii Nałkowskiej: Dziennik 1899-1954*, Krakow: Universitas, 2004, 7.

5 *Ibid.* 14.

6 *Ibid.* 15.

7 *Ibid.*

opposed to categories such as world, reality, person, or identity. That, on the other hand, leads to a gradual disappearance of differences between what is "fictional" and "real," as well as to a removal of the division between the fiction and non-fiction writing; a division that is replaced with a paradigm of pan-fictionality, or pan-textuality. The text, with its "narrational, rhetorical and discursive aspects," is now equipped with, so to speak, the first and last word in the debate over the existence of the world. The textual world precedes the real one and in the more radical concepts, it can even replace it.

Magdalena Marszałek, however, takes a slightly more moderate stand, one in which

the textuality of the autobiographical representation does not overshadow the reality, but makes it more visible, does not negate the connection between the text and the world outside, but rather creates the connection itself. Postmodern sensitivity towards the saturation of a text and the world outside of it makes the inquiring look into the processes of subject and reality construction more astute, which does not mean, however, that it negates their existence that way⁸.

In other words, reality and the subject exist to the extent that they are constructed and because they are constructed. This is why autobiographical writing, including diaries, is regarded by the author as a "strategy of the subject's self-construction," one of the "cultural techniques of producing identity."⁹ A special meaning is ascribed to writing as a phenomenon that possesses the performative strength of transforming "writing about oneself" into a "writing [of] the self."¹⁰

Understanding the performative character of the journal (this category plays an important role in Marszałek's book) is limited to the strategy of the auto-construction of the subject, to the creation of one's own identity. It is connected to the assumption that every subject allows itself to be thought of only inside of the text, or in the relation to it and not outside of it. At the level of the text, "I" and "the world" are contextualized. The issue is that the diary, in my opinion, is not merely a text. It is a kind of writerly practice in which making entries is a kind of action fulfilling multiple functions; an action that, as its integral element, takes part in creating meaning and its functions, and has its physical dimension.

8 *Ibid.* 50.

9 *Ibid.* 59.

10 *Ibid.* 63.

In the literary model of existence, words are treated in separation from the context in which they were used, their life *praxis*. The word of literature leads an autonomous life as a text without a context and a text without materiality. In a literary text, the way in which it comes to life can be (although it does not have to) treated as secondary in respect to the text as a vessel for meaning. In the autobiographical text, and primarily in the diary, this kind of action is impossible.

If the subject of the text is some "I," then the subject of action-writing is an empirically existing person, which is confirmed by the physical trace left by that person in the text, but also in the very material character of the journal. In a slightly controversial manner, we might say that today's truth has been successfully deconstructed using the category of the text, and can come back to us from the side of materiality, or textuality and materiality, mutually combined.

Let us place the material aspect to the side for a moment in order to take a closer look at the diary at work. It has multiple functions: not only the function of constructing an identity (or the function that is mentioned by Marszałek and Foltyniak, as well as most of scholars representing a similar stand), but also a therapeutic, auto-disciplinary, memorizing, bookkeeping, meditative, prayer-related and other functions as well. It also performs a function that could be called professional, for example: a diary as a tool of an intellectual work, as a workshop and a creative laboratory of the writer, etc.¹¹ These functions point, in my opinion, to a person who uses the diary as a tool. And using this tool, just like any other tool, is characterized by a lack of continuity – it can be observed in the lack of textual integrity of a diary that sends us back to the continuity of the life of the person writing the diary.

Let us go back to the level of the text. In personal diaries, every so often, we stumble upon longer or shorter pauses in the diary's continuity. Sometimes, the diarist will inform us about the nature of the break:

When I'm healthy, when I'm immersed in work, chasing the *Anxious*, who have been published in installments in *Gazeta Polska*, for over a month now, when I live my life, liking my apartment, going for long autumn walks in the evenings – I put nothing in here. And this deforming shortcut – like any literary account – makes this diary into a false image of my life: only diseases and erotic failures remain. [...]

11 Concerned with different functions of the diary, I have also written "Dziennik pisarza. Między codzienną praktyką piśmienną a literaturą," in *Pamiętnik Literacki*, vol. 4, 2006.

Empty spaces, long pauses in my here, confessions correspond with periods when I'm not sick, when I don't suffer failures, when there's peace with the rhythm of being.¹²

As opposed to the literary text, the text of a diary is discontinuous in the sense that empty spaces, designated by two dates, refer us to the continuity of a historical time on the one hand, as well as equally historical dimension of the life of a person writing it. The diary, other than literature, is a trace of the temporal being of a person that writes it.

These days, diaries are more and more often treated as literary texts. This new approach is usually applied to the diaries of writers which are, almost without exception, included in the realm of literature and analyzed by scholars using the tools from that very realm. That way, diaries gain importance and lose some of their specific character by becoming texts surrounded by other texts. But are not diaries texts, after all? Of course, they are and the textual or discursive dimension of their existence brings them closer to literary works and makes them prone to be analyzed as peculiar linguistic constructs, narrative structures, types of creative work. It does not change the fact, however, that even at the level of the text itself, diaries should not be identified with literature (except for specific situations, when they are created like a literary text on purpose – for example, the diaries of Gombrowicz). Once we compare intimate diaries with novels in the form of a diary, the difference is clearly visible. At the textual level, there exists a fundamental similarity between them, one based on the rule of linguistic mimesis¹³ but from the formal and constructive point of view there are clear differences visible. The most important of these were named by Michał Głowiński:

if we were to understand an utterance that is organized as a whole according to certain, established in advance, rules as a work of art, then the diary is not one – it is a *form without a form* – while novel is always one, even when its organization is highly loose or chaotic.¹⁴

12 Nałkowska, Z. *Dzienniki*, vol. 4: 1939-1939, part 2: 1935-1939, (entries from 9/12/1938 and 10/23/1938) edited and with commentary by H. Kirchner, Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1988, 334-335, 340.

13 See Głowiński, M. „Mimesis językowa w wypowiedzi literackiej,” in his *Prace wybrane*, edited by R. Nycz, vol. 2: *Narracje literackie i nieliterackie*, Cracow: Universitas, 1997, 5-18.

14 See Głowiński, M. „Powieść a dziennik intymny,” 66, in his *Narracje literackie i nieliterackie*. From that basic difference, Głowiński derives more specific elements: the novel has a “global sense,” “a unified system of meanings” that is absent from a diary, as well as the freedom of expression in diary (“here, the rule is there are no rules”) and their submission to the narrative

Differences between a personal diary and a novel in the form of a diary are even more visible when we take into consideration the functional-pragmatic and material dimension of the diaries and literature. It does not mean, however, that the diaries are completely different from literature. In the ideal sense, we have to assume at the point of exit, hypothetically, their complete dissimilarity from the world of literature, only to later trace the levels of literariness that accumulate in diaries.

Status of the Truth in a Diary: Time, Person, and Materiality

The truth in a diary has a historical, personal, and writerly character. Travestying and slightly broadening the definition of the diary by Philippe Lejeune, one could say that a diary is a series of dated, personal traces.¹⁵ Dated, written, and hence equally textual and material traces refers us back to the external, toward the author, order of historical dates, as well as the empirically existing person that left the trace. One could say that in the diary, history and the person meet in the materiality of the record. It is precisely the material record, with the mark of the human hand and undergoing the temporal process of obsolescence that is the warranty of truth. The truth that we are talking about here is not an oppositional category, not in the relation to a lie or falsity (these can appear in the diary), nor in the relation to creation (that has to appear in the diary). Even if the author of the diary lied and fantasized notoriously, his diary – from that assumed perspective – will be true. It will be so because it will reveal the truth about the lying person, as well as the falsified reality. It is probably obvious by now that this kind of approach is probably closer to the approach of a historian than a literary scholar. Berel Lang grasped that feature very well when he wrote the following:

[the] diary is filled with content that has a status of the absolute truth – not in a sense that the events recounted happened the way they were related, but because the statements of the author undergo a self-verification. Even if one could prove that the author was wrong (or, in an

purposes in the novel. The active role of a diary in the life of the diarist and the lack of such direct reference between the text and the life of the author of the novel is yet another difference. In summary, the description of these three differences, the author of the essay claims that the novel in the form of a diary “fulfills the requirements of a formal mimesis perfectly, since it brings the properties of its blueprint to meet the requirements that are proper to itself as a literary construction” (72).

15 See Lejeune, Ph. „Koronka. Dziennik jako seria datowanych śladów,” translated by M. and P. Rodak, *Pamiętnik Literacki*, vol. 4, 2006, 17-27.

extreme situation – lied), the diary remains, undeniably, the record of his views.¹⁶

In order to take a closer look at the status of the truth in a diary, I would like to make a comparison between a private diary and novel in the form of a diary, while taking into consideration three features: the construction of time, the construction of the writing subject (and of a place occupied by the diary in the life of its author), and the material, physical aspect of the text.

As far as the construction of time is concerned, it seems that in both cases we are dealing with the same series of dated entries. However, in the personal diary we are always dealing with concrete historical data (the day, month, and year) that are from the order of the calendar. In the novel in the form of a diary, on the other hand, we are dealing with dates that are simply markers of passing time, important because of the plot and its development, but not because of any order of time that is external to the novel.¹⁷ That is why one can observe just days, or months, being marked (without a year, as in *Death* by Ignacy Dąbrowski or *Nausea* by Sartre). The novelistic diary creates its own time, which is why it is usually a short period of time, ranging most often between two and a few dozen months. On the other hand, personal diaries, written over the span of decades, oftentimes end with the death of the author. The calendar and the rhythm of everyday life of a diarist decides its shape. That is why one can often observe gaps of few months, or even few years, that are not, with few exceptions (for example, a few months break in *Bez dogmatu* by Sienkiewicz), common for novels in the form of a diary. The personal diary, which can be seen very well in its construction, is guided not by the plot order, or the order of discourse, or more broadly by the order of the text, but by the order of writerly practice, an essence which is grounded in what is historical.

It is a similar case with the personal character of truth in the diary. One could repeat here certain “truism” that Michał Głowiński recalled in one of his texts:

16 Lang, B. *Act and Idea in Nazi Genocide*, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003.

17 Michał Głowiński points to that in the aforementioned *Powieść a dziennik intymny*: “When looked at separately, the novel-diary carries within itself its concept of time; a concept – so to speak – of its construction, as well as of its philosophy. It allows time to break up into particular moments and leads to a novelistic pointillism of sorts, it places a moment what lasts, above continuity” (81-82). Głowiński also points out that time in the diary is connected to the order of events, and the present we observe in it is directed toward the future, while the time of the novel is guided by the order of storytelling in which the present is connected with the vision of the future.

The novel tells a story of fictional events and creates fictional characters and fictionality as a fundamental characteristic of its presented world. Narrational documentary prose talks about authentic events, about times and deeds of people who are not mere creations of literary imagination.¹⁸

This difference between fiction and a document, between the discourse of the novel and entries of the diary can be seen in the way personal diaries and novels in the form of a diary are published. The latter do not need vast footnotes that are necessary in the personal diaries. Footnotes found in diaries, relating to specific people and events, ground its entries in the historical context that was once the context of the diarist's life. In that particular context, the appearance of certain people and events in the diary was sanctioned and understandable by itself through their connection to the author. However, taking the diary out of that context, disconnecting it from writerly practice and replacing the context with the text, results in that very text demanding a secondary contextualization – one that is not connected with life, needs and experiences of the author, but with the reading demands of a contemporary reader. That very reader should remember, however, that the truth of the diary does not exist at the level of the text, but is the truth of the life of the person leaving his or her mark on the practice of keeping a diary; a practice which is comprised of such crucial features as literacy and materiality.

The writing and its materiality is the third marker of truth's status in a personal diary. The materiality of a diary entry is completely different from the materiality of a literary text. The literary text is created, most often, on loose pages (with the exception of copybooks), it is retyped, changed, and edited many times. The literacy of a literary text loses its material identity for the sake of textual identity (which can be observed in the gesture of throwing away different versions after reaching the final one – often retyped on a typewriter, or nowadays on the computer). One could say that literature, as opposed to diaries, is characterized by a formal integrity (a total structure of sense that exists in a manuscript, typescript or print) and personal diaries are characterized by material integrity (a collection of copybooks, calendars that comprise a diary). It is not only integrity, however, but also uniqueness. Every diary, just like every individual, exists in only one copy. A diary is not a book, and it is not a book in form and not only a printed form is the proper form for its existence (as is the case for works of literature). So, if we are dealing with a diary in the form of a book (which is the most common situation), we have to recall crucial changes that accompany its existence. Print, by transforming the practice of a diary into a text of the diary, grants it a features of continuity,

18 Głowiński, M. „Dokument jako powieść,” in his *Narracje literackie i nieliterackie*, 132.

linearity, and cohesion – some of which the diary may be lacking (due to the varying length of pauses in writing a diary, making comments on earlier entries or making a kind of private collection, or an archive where there is room for not only entries, but also different souvenirs, letters, and material components of the everyday, etc.). The unique materiality of a diary allows not only for the verification of the authenticity of the text and helps with establishing its reliability (a historian makes the so called narrative sources undergo such procedures in order to learn if they are true and if they are telling the truth), but also is a necessary correlate of its authenticity in the sense I am trying to propose here.

Three Truths of a Diary: Event, Experience, and Reality

Finally, I can attempt to present the three kinds of truth which we encounter in a personal diary. I would call them: the truth of events (historical truth), the truth of experience (individual or psychological truth), and the truth of reality (metaphysical or transcendental truth). Already, at the beginning, I have to add three reservations.

Firstly, all three kinds of truth are connected to one another and do not appear separately. There is not truth of event without a truth of experience (events always appear within some kind of experience and it is the very act of choosing them and of recording them that is an experience). There is no truth of experience without the truth of events, nor metaphysical truth without other truths. A diary always speaks about certain events (which could be called the external behaviors of the diarist and other people encountered along the way) and certain experiences (which could be called internal behaviors). The very act of writing a diary is simultaneously and perpetually a renewed event, as well as a continuous experience.

Secondly, the truth which I call the truth of experience could be treated as superior to the other two. The diary is, beyond anything else, a record and a trace of experience. The truth of experience is, so to speak, an irreducible ingredient of the diary. The diary can contain the truth of events in small degrees, just like the transcendental truth, but the truth of experience is embedded in the essence of diaristic practice. The gesture of writing in the diary, even if it pertains to objects, phenomena of the most common kind, or simply trivial events, is always a gesture accreted with a concrete experience.¹⁹ At the

19 The category of “experience” that plays such an important role both in the hermeneutical tradition, as well as in the phenomenological tradition, is more and more often called upon today in the context of deliberations about modernity. It is seen as a category allowing a step beyond the limitations of textual and narrative concepts of truth, reality and the identity of

same time it is an action, a practice, that results not only (or sometimes not at all) in a cognition of the reality surrounding the diarist, as well as himself, but also in an influence on oneself and reality. That is why the recording of the experience we are dealing with in a diary also has a performative dimension.²⁰ Experience and action are inseparable within the diaristic practice.

And thirdly, I would like to remind readers that a diary understood as agreed upon here is not only a text, nor a kind of text, discourse, or narration. It is a writerly practice that is based on operating the word through its recording, which finds its textual and material dimension. That is why the three aforementioned kinds of truth find their own reflection in a writerly-material side of the journal (truth has its material trace here). But they also have their own, again transpiring in different ways, pragmatic dimension (truth of something, or about something is here, although not in an urgent way, a truth for something). About the pragmatic, functional so to speak, dimension of the truth that is connected with the activity of writing a diary itself, we have already provided clarification. Here, I would like to highlight the meaning of its material dimension. The truth about the diary, regardless of its kind, is a truth about the "documentary trace" that Paul Ricoeur distinguishes from the "traces in the brain and emotional traces"²¹ and which I could additionally distinguish from a textual or narrational trace. A textual trace is similar to an emotional trace and different from the documentary one, in that it exists as an ideal being, potential and individual, and becomes concrete in the form of a manuscript, typescript or a printed book, arriving at its material shape and reaching its reader. A documentary trace, on the other hand, is always

an individual that are reduced to the form of linguistic constructs. See the collection of essays *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie*, edited by R. Nycz, A. Zajdler-Janiszewska, Cracow: Universitas, 2006. In one of the texts from the collection – *Doświadczenie – ponownie rzeczywistoista kwestia humanistyki* – Dorota Wolska brings our attention to the fact that the notions of "truth" and "reality," "seem to be coming back into favor, after a time in exile, among other things in the context of deliberations about 'experience.'" (48) I would also like to observe these categories in this text: truth and reality are present in the diary as correlates of experience.

- 20 Similar to "experience," "action" and its performative character becomes more and more important in today's humanities, allowing us to speak of a "performative turn." Ewa Domańska writes that "the 'Performative turn' is a sign that postmodern currents (constructivism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, textualism, and narrativism) are exploited and do not belong to modernity any longer, but to the history of humanism.... By focusing attention on the question of performativity, it allows us to go back to discussions about practice and action (and reality in general), that pushed the approaches connected to postmodernism into the background, focusing on the analysis and interpretation of the text (and the world seen as text)." ("Zwrot performatywny we współczesnej humanistyce," *Teksty Drugie*, vol. 5, 2007, 53-56.

21 *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Seuil, 2000.

material in its very nature. The materiality is its primary feature. In other words, a personal diary that moves from the form of its original manuscript to a printed book form becomes a textual trace of certain documentary trace (itself becoming a different documentary trace).²² It allows for the perception of difference not only between printed and non-printed versions of diaries, but also between the place in which they are being stored and their points of contact. In the case of the first, it is a library; in the case of the second – it is an archive: private, family, or public.²³

The first kind of truth recorded in a diary is the truth of events that could otherwise be called historical truth. Many of the sentences in the diary have the character of an account that could undergo verification. A diary record differs from a literary text in that it is strongly anchored in the context of its becoming, the most important markers of which are the empirically existing subject (along with its limitations, physicality, psyche, needs, etc.), as well as the world surrounding it as a space of its existence and action, and the space of existence and actions of other people. The fact that the diary entry is always of the moment and individual in its character and that there is always an element of creation and construction, a particular kind of reflexivity, in which the reality and a person appear through the diary but are also co-created by it (in that the diary influences their shape and identity), does not change the fact that it is or can be a testimony of what has happened. The meaning and functions of the truth of a witness rise in importance in extreme situations when the diary testimony is created with full awareness of the weight of the described issues, the necessity of passing on the knowledge to the next generation and its possible function of proof in the future (even today, diaries are often used as evidence in court cases).

22 Today, documentary traces and, in general, relations between what is documentary and what is textual, play a much larger role in both printed editions of diaries, as well as in memoirs and autobiographies. Among the latter, the best example would be *W ogrodzie pamięci* by Joanna Olczak-Ronikier, where copies of different kinds of documentary traces (documents, letters, and photographs) are as important as the text itself. As far as the diaries go, documented traces can be found most often in those written by non-writers (two examples: Curt Cobain's diary that was accompanied with reprints of almost all of the manuscript pages; the edition of the so-called *DMary of Reguły Diary* with copies of many pages of the original diary, photographs and documents). I believe that the following rule operates in this case: being a writer, and in particular an outstanding one, and a creator of meaningful literary texts, allows for the personal diary to be seen as, primarily, a text of literature.

23 Paul Ricoeur writes that "The archive appears as a physical place that protects traces that we have thoroughly distinguished from the traces in our brain, as well as from emotional traces – it protects documentary traces" (*La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*).

It is clearly visible in war diaries (quite often they almost turn into a case of a chronicle), especially written by Jewish authors. Victor Klemperer asks in his diary: "Who will bear witness to all of this?" and he answers: "I shall bear witness to the very end."²⁴ Similarly, other Jewish diarists, like Chaim Kaplan, do the same: "Even during the most dangerous days of war and occupation, when the enemy's planes showered us with bombs, I did not stop writing my Diary. I felt some internal need to immortalize those events on paper."²⁵ Jacek Leociak, when commenting this diaristic attitude, points our attention to the fact that the willingness to record and save the the truth is one of the strongest motivations here. Hence, "the notion of testimony, understood here in both legal and moral categories, becomes the key notion."²⁶

For a diary understood as a testimony, a carrier of certain historical truth, or rather having a historical dimension, the category of an account and of the "archived memory" proposed by Paul Ricoeur is important:

As far as I am concerned, I intend to honor the event by treating it as a real reference of the testimony seen as the most important category of the archived memory.[...] The event in its most primal sense is that what is being witnessed by someone.²⁷

According to Ricoeur, testimony sends us back to a documentary trace, the trace sends us back to the event, as well as to the archive as a place of store-keeping of the traces of events. We could say in this way that a diarist is creating for his or her own purposes – or not only his or her own – a kind of private archive (while, as often is the case, the diary belongs to a much larger archive, where next to the autobiographical notes one can find documents, photographs, all kinds of objects and souvenirs). The diarist collects in his archive and adds to himself events just like objects. At the same time, this very archive is an object, a collection of different material objects that are vessels for texts (letters, postcards, press releases, tickets, bills, labels, etc.) or not (photographs, small objects, pieces of clothing, etc.).

24 Klemperer, J. *I Shall Bear Witness: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1933-41*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998.

25 Kaplan, Ch.A. *Księga życia* (fragmenty dziennika) [*The Book of Life*, fragments of the diary], from, „Biuletyn ŻIH,” vol. 45-46, 1963, 207; after: J. Leociak *Tekst wobec Zagłady. (O relacjach warszawskiego getta)*, Wrocław: Leopoldinum, 1997, 101.

26 Leociak, J. *Tekst wobec zagłady*, 108.

27 Ricoeur, P., *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*.

The second kind of diary truth is a truth of experience that could also be called psychological truth. In the diary, that which is personal and within the sphere of physical, emotional and intellectual experiences that leave behind their trace comes to the surface. The person is present next to all of it in the diary through what is written down, as well as through what is not. Pauses between dates, empty spaces, silence, they all reveal the personal character of a diary and refer to a person that is as much on the outside (as the one writing a diary) as on the inside (as that which leaves behind a material and textual trace).²⁸

Just like the truth of events sends us to history, the truth of experience sends us to the person writing, recording, and creating his or her diary. That is why it is necessary to introduce – following a formulation by Małgorzata Czermińska – “a category of the author understood as a person exterior to the text,” with which the theory of literature and humanities in general need to “confront anew.”²⁹ The author of *Trójkąt autobiograficzny* calls our attention to the “intensity” and “severeness” of the experience, especially one that is an experience of a borderline situation that leads to a “creation of the text as a trace of experience.” Czermińska ascribes a special role to autobiographical and documentary texts, including diary entries.³⁰

In her polemic with Paul de Man, through referring to the concept of nar-rational identity and its creative transformation at the same time, Małgorzata Czermińska formulates her own stand in which the trace left by the person in the autobiographical or a documentary text “is not merely a relic, remnant after the absent, but [...] constitutes a new quality.” She summarizes:

28 Diarists themselves sometimes use the metaphor of trace in the auto-thematic entries in their diaries: “The diary of mine is like footsteps on a sandy shore. The well trained eye of the local will read from it who passed, will guess his height and age. For others, it will be a meaningless trace of footsteps of a passerby... If the passerby himself came back to this very place after a long time, he might not recognize his own footsteps: winds will erase them, sand will cover them, water will flood them and for a second time the traveler will meander on his old path, lost, on his way into the wide world.” (Żeromski, *S. Dzienniki*, vol. 1, entry from 4/10/1885, edited by J. Kądziała, Wrocław–Warszawa: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2006, 137–138.

29 Czermińska, M. „Autor – Podmiot – Osoba. Fikcjonalność i niefikcjonalność,” in a collection: *Polonistyka w przebudowie. Literaturoznawstwo – wiedza o języku – wiedza o kulturze – edukacja. Zjazd Polonistów, Kraków, 22-25 września 2004*, vol. 1, edited by M. Czermińska, S. Gajda, K. Kłosiński, A. Legeżyńska, A.Z. Makowiecki, R. Nycz, Cracow: Universitas, 2005, 212. Further on, Czermińska observes that “after the anti-psychological approach, initiated by the formalists and phenomenologists and later on culminating in the concept of the ‘death of the author’ formulated within French post-structuralism, we have entered a phase of being interested in the author again; interested in him as a person existing on the outside of the work.”

30 *Ibid.* 213.

Instead of talking about *distortion* we should talk about *transformation*. Instead of lamenting over the loss, one should take a closer look at that which one has gained instead. [...] I would rather say that language *transforms* a person into a trace, than to say that it distorts him or her, because it not only transforms, in order to preserve, hence saves from passing, but also extracts it from silence.³¹

In her conclusion, the author proposes a concept of a “dispersed description,” which seems to be a very interesting, new take on the relationship between a person and a text:³²

If we were to use an analogy with the notions proposed by Geertz, I would rather create, for the purposes of debate over trace, a metaphor of a description that is not condensed, but rather *dispersed*. The traces of the person in the text are the phenomena from different levels – convictions that are expressed directly, or only suggested, but also meaningful silence, the choice of the subject, a way of shaping literary material or stylistic predilections. These dispersed traces are like a code, and the key to this code is embedded in the writer’s identity, as well as his existence when taken along with a social and historical context. Hence, the reader/researcher has access to only part of that key and in a varying degree, depending on the writer.³³

The third kind of diary truth is the truth of reality, or the truth which we could call a metaphysical or transcendental. In this case, the one writing a diary reaches a discovery, an experience, an expression in the recording of such truths which transcend his accidental features. They are concerned with the human condition, the nature of reality, the presence or absence of God, or supernatural powers. The truth of reality recorded in a diary can be of a religious dimension, but does not have to be. The way in which it is expressed, I believe, can take one of three forms: epiphany, when the truth reveals itself before the diarist in a sudden and singular manner, and the diary, by its nature, is attuned to such sudden occurrences if it is allowed to record them. It can be taken up in the form of a reflection, when a diary becomes a site for the accumulation

31 *Ibid.* 219–220.

32 Before her, another interesting concept was proposed by Ryszard Nycz in “Osoba w nowoczesnej literaturze: ślady obecności,” in his *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości. Poetyka epifanii w nowoczesnej literaturze polskiej*, Cracow: Universitas, 2001, 50–87. And if I read the difference between the two correctly, Nycz’s proposal places the stress on text, while Czermińska’s work rests on the person.

33 Czermińska, M. “Autor – Podmiot – Osoba...” 221.

of thoughts on the nature of man and the world, and finally in the form of a desire that is embedded in a diary; a desire that is directed at what is real and the motivation reaches reality. Of course, all three kinds of appearing and recording of the truth of reality can be present in the same diary. There can likewise be diaries without any of these features.

As examples of diaries in which we are dealing with common entries of an epiphanic character, we could name those of Józef Czapski, Anna Kamińska, or *Journal Written at Night* by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński. The best example of a diary in which the truth is a constant challenge for reflection that happens in the “order of time” is *Kłopot z istnieniem* by Henryk Elzenberg. The best representative of the third kind of record of the diaristic truth of reality, a reality that becomes the horizon of experience toward which it is directed, would be the *Diary* of Witold Gombrowicz.³⁴

Lastly, I would like to take a closer look at the final example as – it seems to me – the least obvious from all of the above. Gombrowicz, whose work, including the *Diary*, is most often analyzed with the categories of “game,” “mask,” or “inter-human church,” does not suggest a person who would be interested in truth in its metaphysical, or even transcendental, dimension.³⁵ And yet, it is the word “reality” that is one of the most important (if not the most important) words in the vocabulary of Gombrowicz and his *Diary*.³⁶ Each of the three volumes, already at the very beginning, brings entries in which “reality” or that which is “real” functions as a hero:

If only one could hear a real voice in this kingdom of passing fiction! No – you hear either the echoes of fifteen years ago, or the rehearsed songs.
[about the emigre press]

34 I point to Gombrowicz's *Diary*, treating it as an example of a literary diary that possesses features of a personal one, making it something more than another literary work of the author.

35 Michał Paweł Markowski seems to be the only one who proposed a thorough existential and at the same time ontological and communicative reading of Gombrowicz in his book *Czarny nurt. Gombrowicz, świat, literatura* (Cracow: WL, 2004). His approach is close to mine in its assumptions, that is in seeing “Gombrowicz, who does not play literature, does not fiddle around with it, but petrified stares into worn out lining of the world and restlessly tries to come up with something, aware of failure that marks every text and all understanding of the Reality.” (13) However, I do not share Markowski's interpretation, in which the reality of Gombrowicz, in its deepest layers, turns out to be an “existential abyss,” an “ontological catastrophe” and a communicative “pulp of dark murmur,” against which writing becomes an “intensive growing of horror, celebration of nonsense that describes both life and work.” (17, 36, 20, 19).

36 During the reading of *Szkice piórkiem* by Bobkowski, Gombrowicz calls the diaries a “broth made of the taste of reality;” Gombrowicz, *W. Diary*, vol. 2, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989, 80.

[...]

This singing would be magnificent if the singers were not terrified of it and if one did not sense the tremor in their voices, which arouses pity ... In the immense silence, our unconfessed, mute and gagged reality takes shape.³⁷

Indeed I believe that the chief goal of Polish postwar existence is getting at reality.³⁸

And if you have in mind even more profound moral considerations, then I will say to you, quite frankly, that in maintaining silence about these things I would be completely distorting what had come to exist between us – and this kind of sin, committed by a writer whose maxim is optimal proximity to reality, would be unforgivable.³⁹

What is this reality that he so often mentions in his *Diary*? There is no simple answer to that question. One can only say that for Gombrowicz reality has a personal character, an individual, every day, biographical and spiritual reality, while, at the same time, it lends all of those categories different, more than individual, uncommon, historical and transcendental characters. The truth of reality is the result of twofold movement: on the one hand “striving for dehumanization,” a willingness of man to get out of himself in order to recognize the conditions and foundations of existence, and simultaneously “a striving to humanize,” a “sudden retraction into plain humanity and human mediocrity,” marked with the presence of the “common man, the way we have him in our everyday experience and everyday feeling: the man from the cafe, from the street, given to us concretely.” If this condition will not be met, metaphysics detaches from physics and what is human detaches from singular, concrete man: “reality falls apart like a house of cards and threatens drowning in the verbalism of non-reality.”⁴⁰

Gombrowicz aims to formulate the truth of such reality that would be every day, down to earth and penetrating human life in its most common symptoms and at the same time transcendental and speaking about the

37 Gombrowicz, *W. Diary*, vol. 1, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989, 3-4.

38 Gombrowicz, *W. Diary*, vol. 2, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989, 9.

39 Gombrowicz, *W. Diary*, vol. 3, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989, 5.

40 W. Gombrowicz *Dziennik 1961-1969*, Cracow: WL, 2004, 232.

human condition and his place in the surrounding universe. Only once in his *Diary* does he call this truth by name:

For reality is that which offers resistance; namely, that which hurts. And a real man is one who is in pain.

No matter what we are told, there exists, in the entire expanse of the Universe, throughout the whole space of Being, one and only one awful, impossible, unacceptable element, one and only one thing that is truly and absolutely against us and absolutely devastating: pain. It is on pain and on nothing else that the entire dynamic of existence depends. Remove pain and the world becomes a matter of complete indifference...⁴¹

Translation: Jan Pytalski

⁴¹ W. Gombrowicz, *Diary*, vol. 3, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989, 184.