

Teksty Drugie 2013, 1, s. 167-173
Special Issue – English Edition



The Bareness of a Clergyman: Priestly Poetry as a Minority Discourse?

Wojciech Kudyba

Przeł. Jan Pytalski

Wojciech KUDYBA

The Bareness of a Clergyman: Priestly Poetry as a Minority Discourse?

Are models of reading, or even certain types of reader's sensibility common to contemporary currents of literary studies, useful for research on texts which remain in graspable relation to religion? Today's works devoted to the question of *sacrum* in literature have always progressed due to research tools developed by following methodological currents. Semiotics, thematic critiques, and hermeneutics gradually opened new and interesting areas of reflection over sacral elements present in different layers of literary work.¹ However, is research that draws on the *instrumentarium* of post-colonial criticism and is inspired by sensitivity towards all "otherness" – characteristic of gender studies, for instance – able to bring equally significant and convincing cognitive results with religious literary works? Without giving a definite or final answer to the question, I would like to present one example of reading of a religious text that employs such postmodern sensitivity toward various "minority discourses." The subject of my study is a poem by father Janusz Stanisław Pasierb which is entitled "Écorché." I believe that certain layers of meaning of this poem can be revealed with the use of notions taken from the interpretative currents mentioned above. The categories and notions I have in mind in particular are: "otherness," "alienness," and "oppression." I also believe that certain models that encourage heavy usage of biblical and theological references in reading, especially in the analysis of religious works, disables conducive interpretations and

¹ An encompassing overview of older methods of research on the sacred (*sacrum*) in literature can be found in the article by S. Sawicki "Sacrum in Literature" in *Sacrum in Literature*, 13-26, J. Gotfryd, M. Jasińska-Wojtkowska, S. Sawicki, eds., Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 1983. <http://rcin.org.pl>

Texts and the Body

leads to misunderstandings. However, let us start with a calm and, to the extent possible, bias-free first reading of the poem in question:

See my beauty
how banal are your ordinary skins
smooth wrinkled fat or chapped
see how naked muscles play
red with violet's blues
how tendons shine with blessed candle's yellow

this is bareness

with bony chaff sand or ash
one can cut and fester for examination's sake
play strings of pain
no reflex will be hidden from you
indignity of spasms pathetic shudder
it is all for you

fleeting resemblance to normal men
will bring you courage in time of hesitation

In the very center of this mysterious poem, there lies the image of a man who is uncovered in a very specific way – the image of someone given away to the gaze of others, opened completely to others. The French term, *écorché* (peeled of skin, hurt, irritated, scratched), is used in the history of art to describe a model that is skinless, and hence, reveals its musculature. As can be found in an art dictionary, *écorché* was a kind of artistic exercise, the results of which were used for painting or sculpture modeling.² The presence of expert terminology and references to various works of art suggests that the poem was by a man who was, first and foremost, an art historian employing a form of ekphrasis that refers to a particular work of art and becomes the verbal equivalent of painted or sculptural achievement. It therefore might be tempting to seek intertextual connections between Pasierb's text and paintings such as Mathias Grünewald's *Crucifixion* from the altar in Isenheim, or various iconographic representations of Saint Bartholomew.³ But the poem itself, devoid of any clear signs of relating to existing works of art, likewise encourages a degree of restraint. The structure of its statement also suggests caution. Description remains the crucial element of ekphrasis, while Pasierb's poem is a lyrical monologue. In the very center of his work, there is a lyrical "I." It is this lyrical "I" that grasps one's attention and, due to its emotions or "through" them in a certain way, one observes other elements of the world created by the poem. The lyrical "I's" specific existential status determines the shape and emotional temperature of the statement. Let us remember:

² See Kornell, M. "Écorché" in *The Dictionary of Art*, Turner, J. ed. Grove, New York: 1996. 706.

³ Ewa Sykula writes more comprehensively about painterly contexts employed by the poet in *Passion According to Pasierb*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2005, 106-7.

the protagonist of the poem is somebody open, marked by a wound, which reveals him or herself to others. The poem is a lyrical monologue spoken from “inside the wound.”

How should one interpret this key metaphor in the poem under discussion? What constitutes this terrifying *écorché*, experienced by the person speaking in the poem? We do not know and we will never know what caused the wounds. The text never explains. Lyrical monologue points rather to the effects of wounding and reveals the social dimensions of the wound. It turns out that the painful tear is taking place not only inside of the consciousness of the lyrical “I,” but also, or maybe even primarily, within the bounds of its relations with others. The protagonist is marked with the wound. His first discovery is a discovery of otherness that separates the wounded body from common and banal skins that bear no signs of having been cut. Through the wound it recognizes not only its existential separateness among people – the simple fact of not belonging to a community – but also realizes the hardships of being with others. The wound completely changes the dynamics of interpersonal relations and makes them much more problematic. It transforms its bearer into somebody from the outside, somebody “completely different.” What is more, it is because of the wound that others are able to come “from the outside” and become foreign. The tear seems to make easy identification impossible. It divides the world between “me” and “them,” setting boundaries between a person and a community.

Being wounded becomes a symbol of a certain mode of existence that is against society. It does not end the interpersonal relations of the protagonist, but changes their character by adding a dramatic dimension. The wounded hero discovers his or her own otherness, distance and alienation those surrounding, at the same time becoming aware of the fact that the tear gives him away to an unfavorable world. It might seem that the discovery of one’s “otherness” would lead to retreating, escaping from hostile reality. However, things are different in the world created by the poet. The poem attempts to convince us that the wound is not an attempt to search for a hiding place, but to the contrary: it is an inevitable revelation. The fact that the wound is directed to “aliens” is at its very core. *Écorché* seems to be a metaphor for being-against-others. It is otherness sentenced to endure their gaze and touch – and that is why the lyrical subject’s statement is so ambivalent. Apostrophes directed to the community could be read as attempts to establish contact, as a form of invitation to the meeting. “See” – this and similar calls sound like direct encouragement for establishing a relation. In a later part of the poem there is a mention of touch, which allows us to assume that the hero encourages closeness – invites us to an honest and meaningful meeting. However, the entire monologue is underwritten by irony, the bitter realization that a true meeting with “others” is impossible.

The same kind of irony can be discovered in a passage describing bareness. The exclamation, “this is bareness,” means that the person speaking rejects everything that in a natural way fends off the world, defends us against “others.” In one of the lines we read “it is all for you.” The hero of the poem consciously decides on the most drastic existential form of giving himself/herself away. The fact that we are dealing with a complete, radical and to some degree drastic revealing is confirmed by the specific character of bareness that we encounter in the poem. It is not about the vulgar nakedness of human flesh, but

about something much more. It is about revealing something that is buried much deeper – it is about peeling away everything that is superficial and exposing one's interior. As a deeply moving and naturalistic portrait of a skinned body, which brings the contest between *Apollo and Marsyas* to Herbert's mind, it reveals the dramatic dimension of our being against others. The entire poem seems to be saturated by a bitter realization that even a radical opening to others does not necessarily lead to a similar opening on their part or ultimately end with dialogue.

The author of the poem reminds us that, firstly, a harmed and wounded human being directs his or her entire self outward trying to get attention, and that worries force interaction and encourage meeting. But what kind of meeting is at stake here? Personalists and philosophers of dialogue talk about the meeting as mutual sharing and openness. The phenomenon of bareness, a peculiar existential giving away of oneself to others is interpreted by those thinkers as a readiness for a special kind interpersonal exchange.

In his poem entitled "Robe," Pasierb wrote that bareness is a kind of "mating robe." It is a sign of openness towards another person, of having trust in those we love. It is hard to state, however, that the interpersonal space sketched in "Écorché" is one dedicated to love. We learn about it by observing, among other things, the motif of touch. Let us recall that Lévinas, when analyzing the mutual discovery of oneself in the Other, and vice versa, precisely during a meeting, and describing the experience of affirmation of closeness – referred to the previously mentioned sense of touch. He wrote about the act of a caress. In Pasierb's poem, touch has very little to do with affirmation. It seems as if it were, similar to the gaze, a tool of pain. According to philosophers remaining within the circle of Pasierb's interest, during an actual meeting our fellow man's gaze confirms, hidden from the world, our personal value and enables "the absorption of shame through love."⁴ The gaze of the Other, on the contrary, objectifies and deprives one of value and increases the sensation of shame and humiliation. The Other – foreign or alien – looks at us as if he was looking at an object and as if he were touching an object. This is the kind of awareness that lies hidden behind bitter words of the lyrical subject whose body is open "for examination's sake." The Other makes the protagonist experience shame and pain more pronounced than ever before. Maybe the poem's hero wants to protect his or her personal value, but likewise experiences being "given away" and realizes the "indignity" and "pathetic" character of his or her openness, feeling humiliated and helpless. From that suggestion, it is only a short step to the analysis on interpersonal relations performed by Jean-Paul Sartre. Similarly to their appearance in the works of the author of *L'être et le néant*, the poem in question takes fellow humans as a kind of embodiment of hell. They respond to our openness with the gaze that abuses and interferes with our internal integrity, takes away sense of our dignity, endangers intimacy

⁴ This term comes from a work, well known to Pasierb, by K. Wojtyła entitled *Love and Responsibility*, Cracow: 1962. 163. See also the analysis of the phenomenon of love and shame in works familiar to the poet, such as: Sawicki, F. *Philosophy of Love*, Poznań: Naczelny Instytut Akcji Katolickiej, 1934 or *Phenomenology of Shyness*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Wrocławskiej Księgarni Archidiecezjalnej, 1986., Sheler, M. *The Nature of Sympathy*, translated by Peter Heath, New York: Archon Books, 1970. and Tischner, J. *The Philosophy of Drama: Introduction*, Cracow: Żnak, 1998. 72-3.

and individuality, and sentences the hero to an unending suffering.⁵ Otherness that could be an invitation to a dialogue and personal meeting becomes a source of oppression in the world created by our poet.

The poem by the poet-priest could be read as a particular, poetic tale of violence. All of the representations of community projected by the lyrical "I" have an oppressive character. One could have the impression that the community, to which the person speaking in the text directs his or her words, is ignorant of the ways of communicating with the world, other than domination and cruelty. The norm established for the relations with the hero does not involve mercy or sympathy, but rather harshness symbolized by sand, ash, and bony chaff. If members of this anonymous community address the protagonist, they do so solely to inflict pain – to cut and fester, and "play strings of pain." The text itself allows us to recreate some of the mechanisms of social oppression. The "other" is stigmatized and humiliated first, and then is labeled as "alien," "abnormal," to be finally excluded from the community of men. The entire poem is saturated with a terrible irony against the world in which community works according to similar rules.

But exactly what kind of oppression is the poem speaking about? The strongly pronounced motif of bareness places the poem in line with a text by Ryszard Krynicki, entitled "Naked, I Woke Up Waiting in Line for Bread." The bareness and helplessness of the hero of this new wave poem seems to be a metaphor of oppression that had its source in the totalitarian regime of its time. At the very least, Krynicki's text allows itself to be placed in some social context. It is different with Pasierb. His message becomes generalized and separated from political circumstances. It is hard to ignore the interpretative track left by the author himself. In one of his essays, he performed an explication of his poem. He proposed an interpretation, one of many possible and not necessarily the best. It is nevertheless worthwhile to recall:

We, people of the Church, do not hide and we are visible to everyone who wants to see us. We are exposed to the gaze of the public. Jesus Christ dies naked, exposed to the gaping crowd. We cannot hide, everyone can see our agony, indignity of spasms, pathetic shudder. We are exposed, we repeat ritualized gestures that offend us and give us away to shameless glares, mockery and cruelty. The righteous in their thinking are with us when convenient, but in reality we are alone, accompanied only by him.⁶

Fragments of "Écorché" have been equipped in the above quoted essay with context that allows us to read the poem in its entirety as a work about "otherness" of people of faith and oppression that they undergo. Pasierb seems to suggest that faith does not grant peace or a feeling of safety. What is more, it does not grant a sense of community. It is solitude. Faith is the constant risk of humiliation, derision and cruelty, and the Church – seen from

⁵ In particular, we are interested in the analysis of the phenomenon of the "gaze" as discussed in the already mentioned *L'être et le néant* (Paris, 1979, 309-16) Sartre's concept is discussed in great detail by Kamptis, P. in the book *Sartre und die Frage nach dem Anderen. Eine Sociolontologische Untersuchung*, Wien-München: Oldenbourg, 1975. 96-155.

⁶ Pasierb, J.S. *Skrzyżowanie dróg* (*The Crossing*) Pelplin: Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, 1994. 75.

a similar perspective – does not provide any safe haven. Believers have nowhere to go in order to hide from violence, and the poet's essay tries to convince us of religion's heroism. It sketches a particular theology of faith, where the idea of mimicking Christ in his bareness and helplessness against the crowd becomes central to the whole undertaking. The extension of this line of thinking can be found in Pasierb's comments about the "otherness" of priests. In an essay entitled *Ksiądz istota nieznaną* ("The Priest: The Unknown Being") we read: "If anti-clericalism is understood not as resisting the clergy, but as hatred directed at priests, it is just another face of racism. It is a price that people who wear soutane pay for their otherness."⁷ Is the poem in question therefore a work about the otherness of "people in soutanes" – laughed at, exposed to humiliation and helplessly facing anti-clerical oppression? Although contexts hinted at by the author are important, it seems that the possible meanings of the poem are far broader. I would like to observe in Pasierb's poem a universal model of the "circumstance of oppression," which remains generalized and far from any concreteness. The text provokes many questions that cannot be fully answered. One of them, however, is particularly urgent and concerned with the peculiar dependence between the subject of the poem and the oppressive community that he or she addresses. How then ought we to read "Écorché"? Is it a response to actual and real oppression? Or perhaps the oppressive community is merely a projection in the poem? Maybe it is the protagonist, tormented by the feeling of otherness, alienation and guilt, who projects the oppressive community that turns against him or her? As is the case with many poems, "Écorché" likewise hovers like a fog that obscures straightforward interpretation.

That is why the already existing interpretations of the poem are even more surprising. In her book entitled *Poeta czasu otwartego. O wierszach ks. Janusza Stanisława Pasierba (A Poet of Open Time: On the Poems of Father Janusz Stanisław Pasierb)* Aleksandra Pethe focuses her attention on the speaking subject of the poem. She states her thesis, claiming that the "subject speaking in the poem is an anti-type of the mythological Marsyas"⁸ only to later search for proofs showing that the lyrical hero of the poem is none other than Jesus Christ. In various different parts of the poem, the author of the essay observes references to the Bible. She interprets the words "see my beauty" as an allusion to the Book of Lamentations, where one can read: "Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow" (Lam 1:12). According to Pethe, the motifs of chaff and sand are biblical symbols of passing, cleansing and death. She sees the passage about "playing strings of pain" as a reference to words of Thomas from the Gospel of John: "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and put my finger into the place from the nails, and put my hands into his side, there is no way I will believe." (John 20:24). The line "this is bareness" is considered by the scholar "to have the status of an interpretative key,"⁹ since it is a paraphrase of Pilate's "Behold the Man," hence pointing directly to Jesus Christ as the

⁷ Pasierb, J.S. *Światło i sól (Light and Salt)*, Paris: Éditions du Dialogue, 1983. 275.

⁸ Pethe, A. *Poeta czasu otwartego. O wierszach ks. Janusza Stanisława Pasierba (Poet of the Open Time – On the Poems of Father Janusz Stanisław Pasierb)*, Katowice: Biblioteka Śląska, 2000. 190.

⁹ Ibid. 191.

protagonist of the poem. In the end, Pasierb's poem in Pethe's interpretation becomes a well-known "poetic formula of the lonesome Christ ECCE HOMO¹⁰" – a manifestation of Jesus' experience in a "state of agony."¹¹

In her comprehensive analysis of "Écorché," Ewa Sykuła distances herself from some of Pethe's statements.¹² She underlines the fact that it is difficult to anchor Pasierb's text in the context of the Marsyas myth, since "there is no interpretative suggestion in the poem that would point in that direction."¹³ Sykuła finds Pethe's observations concerning chaff, sand, and ash to be excessive. What is truly valuable about Sykuła's work is the broad background of her interpretation. She meticulously reconstructs contexts from history of art, compares the poem with other statements of the author and impresses readers with her erudition. Similarly to Pethe, she believes that "it is important to reconstruct the lyrical subject first, because that is where the interpretative key seems to be located."¹⁴ In a similar fashion, she refers to the Bible in order to justify a tormented Jesus Christ as the protagonist. In the end, Pasierb's poem in Sykuła's interpretation becomes an "accusation of art, and what logically follows, of all culture of careless and inadequate approaches to Christ, especially during his torment and death."¹⁵

Both of the aforementioned readings of Pasierb's poem seem misguided to me. I believe that the message of the poem remains much more general – far more than any of the two scholars would like to admit. The search for the answer to the question of who is the real hero of the poem must lead to misunderstandings, since the poem is constructed in a way that allows for the situation of being skinned to become a metaphor for the existential situation of anyone. Both scholars proposed a similar model of reading "Écorché." Against the intentions of the author himself (who never published this poem in his volume of *Religious Poems*), as well as against the text itself (which lacks any clear, sacral character) they have approached Pasierb's work as a religious text. This conviction, however, made them engulf the poem in biblical contexts, and it ultimately misguided by them. Does every encouragement to look at "naked muscles" have to be seen as an allusion to the Book of Isaiah, and every mention of "playing strings of pain" imply a reminiscence of the meeting between the unfaithful Thomas and Christ? Does the line "this is bareness" sound in a way that excludes any speaker other than Jesus Christ? It seems as if both scholars operated by using a set "preconceptions," that replaced a thorough reading of the poem itself. Instead of interpretation, we have been presented with a peculiar over-interpretation of Pasierb's text.

Translation: Jan Pytalski

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. 192.

¹² See Sykuła, E. *Pasja według Pasierba (Passion According to Pasierb)*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2004. 103-128.

¹³ Ibid. 105.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. 120.