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The Brightness of a Black Sun

Jacek Rykała's paintings are brightened by a black sun of melancholy and an existential stance in which, as Agata Bielik Robson writes, "the monotony of existence surrendered entirely to burden and the boredom of identity, gravity, profundity, and memory – all the existential *modi*, which are based on a persistent, conscientious, self-enclosed repetition – are most fully expressed."¹ The metaphor of a black sun, which Gérard de Nerval used in his sonnet "El Desdichado", refers to a paralyzing power of sorrow, fatigue and emptiness born out of a longing for a lost object of desire. Yet melancholy is also, as suggested by Julia Kristeva's book which evokes this metaphor, a distortion of the symbolic relation with the world in which the depressive subject looks for any possible kind of expression for its tormented body. One of the causes of melancholy is nostalgia which initially meant a burning desire to see one's motherland, a persistent longing for one's homeland, something distant in space, absent or bygone. Over time, however, the temporal aspect gained ascendancy over the spatial one, and melancholy started to be perceived, above all, as the guardian of the life of history with which we no longer enjoy a direct bond.

The melancholy that permeates Rykała's painting is occasioned by a disinherited person's longing for what he/she has lost but also by a desire to find for melancholy an adequate form of expression, a form that would enable him/her to get closer to the past and find the future in it. For the present in which we live is always multidimensional and, according to Saint Augustine, means both "the present of things past, the present of things present, and the present of things to come."² Rykała, who undertakes a laborious task to record in his art the traces of the past and the crumbs of what passes, discovers the extraordinariness of banal, seemingly uninteresting places: gardens overgrown with weeds, poor working-class houses, neglected backyards, city alleys, murky gateways and cobblestoned streets. These are enclaves of the past from which life fled a long time ago yet they persistently continue to exist despite the passage of time and oblivion into which they have fallen. The names of the streets which appear in the titles of his paintings ("Piotrowska Street" 1995; Mirecki's Avenue 2 is Dancing" 1980-95; "A Gateway on ZMP Street" 1993; "Legiony Street" 2007; "Targowa Street" 2003) and the names of the districts in Sosnowiec (a series of paintings *The Lights of Środula – Shining and Insinuations of the Sielec District*) indicate their strong rootedness in a particular place yet Rykała universalizes his "little homeland" finding motifs dear to him in nearby Czeladź or Będzin, or more remote Częstochowa and geographically close, yet culturally different, Szopienice. Rykała's painting should not be treated as documentary records of specific places but as an expression of delight over the magic emanating from neglected and sleazy city alleys of Zagłębie. This marvelous beauty is expressed through a luminous brightness that floods these places. But it can also be seen in such seemingly common objects as: shabby benches, fences full of holes, clothes lines with linen getting dry in the wind, rickety gates, beaten pavements, gardens covered in burdock, and cars whose makes take us back to the times of the People's Republic of Poland. It can thus be seen in all those remains of the past which make the places we see for the first time look strangely familiar bringing back childhood memories and stories once heard or read.

The extraordinary, at times even hyperreal, sharpness of seeing; the simultaneous showing of various planes, of things which are near and remote, of things that fall into oblivion or are completely forgotten; the timelessness in which Rykała's landscapes are hinged make us locate them in a magical reality rather than specific, real spaces. Lost in time and to be found everywhere and nowhere, they are both real and fantastic, contemporary and bygone. The categories of time and space become

¹ Bielik-Robson, Agata. *Inna Nowoczesność: Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*. Universitas: Kraków, 2000, p. 63.

² Saint Augustine. *Wyznania*. Translated by Z. Kubiak. Warszawa, 1982, p. 232.

relative because melancholy is not, as it is often argued, a longing for a time lost; it is a longing for a time imagined. In its nature, melancholy is ahistorical since the subject in its possession “desires”, as Svetlana Boym has written, “to abolish history and its metamorphosis into a private or collective mythology, and longs for a return to time and place refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that torments the human condition.”³

Each culture has a profound need to fix physical time by imposing a mythic reality on it, a reality which allows us to see not only the passing and changing of phenomena but also their accumulation. It is a reality that restores the world’s primordial sense by storing what is lasting and permanent. In Rykała’s works time does not flow in a linear manner. It assumes a circular form, and myth and time are not antithetical but complement each other similarly to grand historical narratives relating to the lives of the inhabitants of the ghetto in Sosnowiec-Środula (*“Addressee Unknown” – To the Jews of Środula*, 1998) or micro-histories written in photographs from private collections (*“Lovers from Kaliska Street 1”*, 1997). Unlike the painting, the photograph is always a fragment cut out from a bigger whole. That is why the knowledge it offers is always fragmentary and the essence of the depicted events and people remains inaccessible.⁴ We do not know who the people in the photographs embedded in the paintings are. We know some of them by name which is simultaneously the painting’s title (*“Barbara”* 1994; *“Loniek 1”* 1988; *“Loniek 2”* 1994; *“Hania”* 1993; *“Antonina”* 1991; *“Jasiek”* 1990; *“Gertruda”* 1992; *“Edward”* 1994; *“Karol”* 1988; *“Michał”* 1999). At times we can specify their whereabouts (*Insinuations of the Sielec District – “Janusz”* 1993; *Insinuations of the Sielec District – “Joasia”*, 1992). At other times, they remain completely anonymous (*“Piastunka”* 2001; *“Panienki”* 1995; *“Chłopcy z Będzina”* 1994). But what is at stake here is not tracing individual lives but evoking the past, fixing it, if only for a brief while in which the gaze of the looker rests on the photographs faded by time. The attempt to penetrate the past that we, ourselves, had not experienced, ends in failure. Bound to speculate, we remain outside the bounds of the past. We cannot change the passage of time. That is why, what we commune with when watching photographs is death, the sense of an inability to return to “what-used-to-be”. The photographs have the ability to testify to, rather than depict, authenticity. It is thus not a copy but an emanation of a past reality. It is magic and hallucination but not art, for what testifies is not an object but time. Roland Barthes writes, “What I can see is a recollection, imagination; it is not a recreation but a reality in the past, past and reality at the same time.”⁵

For Rykała, photographs are neither a recollection nor a counter-recollection. They are what sets recollection in motion, what mobilizes collective memory, which, similarly to myth, creates a sense of identity based on an awareness of common past and common rootedness in the past’s realm. It is a sense that is created through participation in collective rituals: the official ones related with rites of passage, and less formal ones that organize the every-day and find their way into photographs-keepsakes from family celebrations, weddings and first communions but also into photographs of collectiveness that testify to one’s belongingness to a community – class, social or professional. The photograph can also be likened, as André Bazin sees it, to a relic: a material, inanimate, captured and preserved trace of the past condition of objects. Embalming time, the photograph-relic transforms the subject into an object of cult, annihilates it but sanctifies it at the same time and transports it into a dimension of reality other than common.

³ Boym, Svetlana. “Nostalgia I postkomunistyczna pamięć.” Translated by L. Stefanowska. In F. Modrzejewski and M. Sznajderman (eds.). *Nostalgia: Eseje o tęsknocie za komunizmem*. Wydawnictwo Czarne: Wołowiec, 2002, pp. 274-275.

⁴ Benjamin, Walter. *Anioł historii: eseje, szkice, fragmenty*. Translated by K. Krzemieniowa, H. Orłowski and J. Sikorski. Wydawnictwo Poznańskie: Poznań, 1996, p. 210.

⁵ Barthes, Roland. *Światło obrazu: Uwagi o fotografii*. Translated by J. Trznadel. Wydawnictwo KR: Warszawa, 1996, p. 139

The backyards painted by Rykała are uninhabited and desolate; no one bustles around there or hangs up the washing. The presence of the inhabitants is only evoked through photographs and petty objects that the artist finds in the demolished houses or objects such as metal hooks, enameled numbers, rust-eaten chains, fittings, and bolts. The crumbs of the departing world inserted into the paintings transform these paintings into reliquaries of the past but the process of sacralization goes the other way round too. Excavated from the darkness of oblivion and rescued from destruction, the scraps of "what-used-to-be" acquire a new dimension. They live their own life, abiding in spite of the destruction of the reality of which they were part. This animistic perception of the world is one of the manifestations of magical thinking. For Rykała, the marvel of the reality is an outcome of a transitory phase, processes of change, liminality and ambiguity. The supernatural atmosphere of his paintings is created without moving away from nature. It is created in the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the marvelous. An element of vagueness, tension expressed in contrasting juxtapositions of light and shade, of what is ephemeral, phenomenal on one hand, and material and firmly steeped in the banality of life on the other, constitutes the essence of this atmosphere. A beam of very bright light brings out from the dark the most significant motifs pointing, in this way, to the artistic and ideological centre of the painting constituted by gateways shining with a brightness, mysterious passages, benches and deserted cars. Illuminative effects taken, as it were, from the paintings of the followers of Caravaggio reflect revelation and delight over the enclaves of the past lost in time, over places which are the traces of the departing world and a materialization of what is passing away. Yet they also direct the gaze of the looker towards the eternal and inscrutable, towards *maxime delectabilis*, the most delightful thing one can think of, towards the light that leads to a metaphysical reality. Melancholy, as Kristeva has written, "belongs to the realm of the heaven. It darkens the darkness into red or sun, which, while being black, is no less sunny than the sources of a dazzling brightness."⁶ Saffron yellow that lights the interiors of Rykała's paintings is an equivalent of gold which in iconic painting symbolized the magnificence of the Heavenly Kingdom, godly energy, the brightness emanating from the martyrs, and the immaterial and the indestructible. The gold is a revelation experienced in the proximity of the metaphysical dimension of reality, but it is also the golden brightness of the icons leading the thoughts to God, a tool of contemplation.

Alejo Carpenter who coined the term *lo real maravilloso* (marvelous reality) claimed that marvel begins to be authentic when it originates in a certain unexpected transformation of reality. The mystery does not descend into the depicted world, but is hidden and pulsates behind it. In order to notice it and see the marvelous dimension of the world, a belief in the existence of this world and a sensibility thanks to which one can look underneath the surface of phenomena and into the depth of time and see that things are not what they seem to be, are needed. One has to experience illumination and see the world anew in the brightness of the light for this world to appear again, if not wonderful, then at least disturbing.

The art of icons establishes different means of expression and a different symbolism for the images of the heavenly and the worldly. Rykała does the same thing separating the disintegrating matter from revelation granted by the insight into the heart of time. In his paintings, light is a testimony to the presence of the sphere of the sacrum in everyday life. It is an irrational element that leads what is extraordinary and marvelous into the banal reality. For what fascinates Rykała is not light or illumination itself but space, in which something is shown and receives openness and clearance. This space is a crevice between what is palpably given and real, and a more or less vague mystery. Martin Heidegger compared clearance (*Lichtung*) to forest clearing flooded with light, a place in which trees get sparser and brightness emerges from the dark. He identified it with a place of the potential where light can be born and illumination can occur. Clearance attracts and dazzles, surprises with its unexpectedness; it surprises by opening something without giving any particular reason. Entering the

⁶ Kristeva, Julia. *Czarne słońce: Depresja i melancholia*. Translated by M. P. Markowski, R. Ryziński. Universitas: Kraków, 2007, p. 153.

clearance of being bathed in light means “immersing” in a new, existential experience. It is only in the clearance that the truth of being reveals itself, the truth thanks to which “the essence of sacredness can be thought. It is only when one begins with the essence of sacredness that one can think the essence of divinity. It is only in the light of the essence of divinity that one can think and express what the word ‘God’ signifies.”⁷ Clearance is a dimension of sacredness but, absorbed in what we see, we close ourselves to the openness of being; we ignore it. Being, this “clearance” that each time shapes the sense of time in which we live, escapes the thought and hides into oblivion making us ask about its own essence again and again.

In his book *Pragnienie Obecności*, Michał Paweł Markowski evokes two mutually complementary models of representation. The first, which is an icon, makes present what it represents. The other, which is an idol, makes present representation itself. An icon is not merely a recollection of what is invisible but a testimony that bears resemblance to the prototype: the Christ, Virgin Mary or the Saints. It thus acquires the feature of sacredness. An ideal witness is a transparent witness, a window-witness who, being invisible in itself, leads towards what is inexpressible, towards god. Rykała’s paintings are precisely such a window, or, in Heidegger’s words, a clearance. Making the past present, they place the traces of what used to be in the “light of being”. They bring nearer what is remote, make visible what is absent and bring the forgotten out of the dark. They make being visible.

In the classic Freudian psychology, melancholy is treated as an un mourned mourning after the loss of an object. It is a condition that gives rise to apathy, fatigue, stasis and boredom. Yet this Freudian melancholy also has a positive aspect since “the work of melancholy” consists in leading the ego to an identification with the lost object so that “the shadow of the object that fell on the ego” becomes an integral part of the psyche. While “the work of mourning” aims at forgetting, “the work of melancholy” offers the most lasting, as it is anchored in the subject’s identity, form of memory. It is about internalizing the lost object and making it an integral part of the identity of the “I”. That is why, though modernity seems bored with the melancholic burden of history, it is the seemingly liberating lightness that proves “unbearable, hard, and difficult in the end. The burden, on the other hand, which seems oppressive, in fact opens up the spaces of lightness; reconciliation with necessity and limitation shades imperceptibly into liberty.”⁸ This is how Rykała’s cityscapes approach oblivion. Although they are patronized by the gloomy Saturn, a god that provokes meditation and gravity, they do not overwhelm with the burden of memory but direct the lookers’ attention towards their throbbing light. For myth and nostalgia which Rykała is evoking, store “something very precious, without which life is difficult; the unchanging, though at times individually lost, values.”⁹ Revealing its power when ultimate answers are needed, melancholy contributes to a regaining of the identity of both those who were dispossessed of their own language, culture, history and those who lost it in their search after novelty. Melancholy is a light without which the present remains incomplete.

⁷ Heidegger, Martin. *Budować, mieszkać, myśleć: Eseje wybrane*. Translated, selected and introduced by K. Michalski. Czytelnik: Warszawa, 1977, p. 101.

⁸ Bielik-Robson, Agata. *Inna Nowoczesność: Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*. Universitas: Kraków, 2000, p. 62.

⁹ Burszta, W. J.. “Nostalgia i mit.” In *Historia: o jeden świat za daleko?* Translated, selected and introduced by E. Domańska. Instytut Historii UAm: Poznań, 1997.