

WOJCIECH KUDYBA

**PASIERB—AN ESSAYIST. THE ASSESSMENT
OF RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES.**

Although books of essays by Janusz St. Pasierb were quite popular¹ and although they were an important part of his *oeuvre*, they have not been analysed yet in a separate text. Six monographs about Pasierb's works have been written so far, yet they are almost exclusively concerned with his poetry. It was not critics or reviewers who have created such an asymmetrical situation. Almost all Pasierb's books of essays have been noticed and appreciated. *Czas otwarty* (*Open Time*) had nine reviews; *Gałęzie i liście* (*Branches and Leaves*) had seven reviews, *Pionowy wymiar kultury* (*Vertical Dimension of Culture*) had six while *Miasto na górze* (*A Town on a Mountain*) had three. It was only his last volumes which had less intensive reception.² Some hope to re-stir interest in Pasierb's essays has been revived lately by a book by Aleksandra Pethe: *Ars, fides et ratio. Esej teologiczny?*

¹ Janusz Stanisław Pasierb wrote 8 books of essays:

1. *Czas otwarty*, Pallotinum, Poznań 1972,
2. *Miasto na górze*, Znak, Kraków 1973
3. *Światło i sól*, Éditions du dialogue, Paris 1982,
4. *Pionowy wymiar kultury*, Znak, Kraków 1983, .
5. *Gałęzie i liście*, Pallotinum, Poznań
6. *Skrzyżowanie dróg*, Pallotinum, Poznań 1989,
7. *Obrót rzeczy*, Pallotinum, Poznań 1993,
8. *Katedra symbol Europy*, Bernardinum, 2003

² Three volumes have had four reviews altogether. Cf., W. Kudyba, *Skrzyżowanie dróg*, „Via Consecrata” 2001, no. 11, 2. W. Oszejca, *Falowanie rzeczywistości*, „Więź” 1994, no. 6, 190-192. W. Kudyba, *Zapomniany symbol Europy*, „Gość Niedzielny” 2003, no. 30, 35, J. Sochoń, *Obrazy życia*, „Nowe Książki” 1994, no. 8, .4-5.

(*Tischter-Pasierb-Szymik*) (*Ars, fides et ratio. A Theological Essay? (Tischner-Pasierb-Szymik)*).³ Aleksandra Pethe earlier wrote a text about his poetry.⁴ It could have been expected, therefore, that she would devote, in a wider context, more attention to Pasierb.

It was not to be. Pethe was right to summarize the state of Polish research on the essay as a literary genre. It seems that she should not have bothered with dictionary definitions. It should be stressed, however, that she summarized the ideas on the form of the essay presented in the works of such researchers as, among others, Wojciech Głowala, Tadeusz Bujnowski, Marta Wyka, Roma Sendyka, Małgorzata Krakowiak, Dorota Heck, Andrzej Zawadzki, Jan Błoński and Paweł Markowski. It is a pity that she did not attempt to use a diachronic approach, which would have allowed her to trace not only a simple ‘accumulation of reflection’, but also fundamental changes in the ways of thinking and writing about the essay. If only she had discussed the text by Krzysztof Dybciak “Inwazja eseju” (“An Invasion of the Essay”) (*Pamiętnik Literacki* 1977, no. 4), it might have become apparent that already in the 1970s the structuralist paradigm of the understanding of the essay had been challenged. Its relational aspects were raised, which anticipated the later arguments of Michał Paweł Markowski. But Pethe did not use these texts. While undertaking meta-theological decisions she attempted to find a ‘joint space’ of varied theories and use them to formulate a type of ‘extract’ of generic features of the essay.

The second part of the book changes the focus from the general to the very detailed. Pethe opened this part with a reminder about the history of the Polish religious essay and about the research on it, and she tried to explain to what extent categories from literary studies could be useful in the description of theological discourse—particularly when it takes the form of the essay. Three final chapters are devoted, one each, to the essays of three authors listed in the title

³ A. Pethe, *Ars, fides et ratio. Esej teologiczny? (Tischner-Pasierb-Szymik)*, Siedlce 2012.

⁴ A. Pethe, *Poeta czasu otwartego*, Katowice 2000.

of Pethe's book. They include biographical and bibliographical data of these three writers, and reveal some of the features of these essays and selected problems they deal with. In the chapter devoted to the essays of Rev. Janusz Stanisław Pasierb we learn about the strong presence of the narrator's 'I' and the proclaimed openness of these texts. Pethe also followed the meta-theological statements of Pasierb and showed meta-literary and meta-linguistic reflections in them (which were concerned, among others, with the problems of the form and words). Pethe tried to argue, with convictions deeply rooted in elaborations, convictions that essays of Pasierb were concerned mostly with art and culture—not with theology. The ending is a recapitulation of the researcher's findings.

How can these findings be characterized? They do not cause satisfaction. At the beginning, it should be stated that this book creates numerous barriers making the identification of the raised problems and evaluation of the means to solve them difficult. At times it is the editorial and linguistic layer that creates an obstacle. Mistakes in the headers of some chapters, and punctuation errors could be blamed on the proof reader. Maybe a proof reader may also be blamed for syntactic errors. It also happens, however, that stylistic problems get connected in this book with terminological problems. On page 99 Pethe writes approvingly about the Church as an "ideological institution". Does she really understand the term "ideology" in the proper way? The correct understanding of it (see, for example, the definition in *Encyklopedia Katolicka KUL (KUL's Catholic Encyclopaedia)* and knowledge about recent history makes such a claim impossible. The Catholic Church as an institution turned away from ideology at least since the end of the Papal State in 1870 (and even if it had been the case of the so called 'ideological theology', then the border of Vaticanum II is clear). Even more confusion is raised by the title of one of the sub-chapters, "Esej teologiczny i literackie kryteria opisu zjawiska" ("The Theological Essay and Literary Criteria of Description of This Phenomenon"). In the Polish language we have the structures: "kryteria oceny" ("criteria of assessment") and "kategorie opisu" ("categories of description"). The phrase coined by Pethe, "kryteria

opisu” (“criteria of description”) is a contamination, a linguistic error which has serious logical consequences. What is, then, the meaning of the phrase “literackie kryteria opisu zjawiska” (“literary criteria of description of this phenomenon”)? The text leaves no doubt that we are concerned here with structural properties of the essay (see remarks on pages 97-98). This title is, therefore, misleading. Its second part should read as follows: “literaturoznawcze kategorie opisu zjawiska” (“categories of description of this phenomenon from the perspective of literary studies”).

Pethe is not always careful about the logic and linguistic precision of her arguments. Individual parts of the dissertation are called “konteksty” (“contexts”). Is it correct? According to the internet dictionary of the Polish language, the lexeme “context” means “a part of an aural utterance or a written statement necessary for the adequate understanding of a word or a phrase; the surroundings of an utterance or a statement.” The state of contemporary theology described in the second chapter certainly can create an important background to understanding some of the problems connected with the theological essay. A survey of features of post-modern culture could be of some use as well. But the research on the poetics of the essay certainly does not provide such a background. It belongs instead to a field of reflection on the research tools—they are important to the author, but not to writers themselves and not to their texts. I also do not understand at all why and how analytical chapters—dealing with the essays of Tischner, Pasierb and Szymik—could be contexts. Are they also a background to some unknown text/statement? I would like to believe in it, but I am afraid this goes against the rules of logic and norms of the Polish language. The lexeme “kontekst” (“context”) was made in this book a synonym of the word “rozdział” (“chapter”).

While we are dealing with the structure of this book, I would like to ask for a braver selection and bolder ordering of the discourse. The question is: should not chapter III be located among explanations concerning the methodological background of the book (at the beginning)? I am also not quite sure if so much attention should be paid to post-modernism and to the polemics with it (which is

performed at the journalistic level) in the situation described by Pethe, when post-modernism was not well known to the writers described. I also have doubts about the appropriateness of including in the work on essays a history of the methodological fashions of Polish literary scholars.

When we ask about the results of some research we also ask about the goal of it. Let us ask then if it is clearly defined? This issue seems to be an important one because the ability to present a research problem and the consistency of argumentation are not strong points of the discourse in this book. We can find in the introduction at least two different (if not mutually exclusive) research directives. We read on page 9: "The most important problems should include not only the generic or structural discriminates of literariness, but also the issues of authors' struggles with literary material", while on page 8 we find this fragment: "[t]herefore, analysis and interpretation in terms of literary studies—based on the tools developed by Hermeneutics—will be applied to twentieth and twenty-first century prose texts, which can be distinguished from the whole of contemporary writing by such specific features as practical religious thinking based on the depth of authentic life in faith, which often take the shape of literary testimonies of the existence and actions of God in the human world and testimonies of mutual God-Man interactions". I ignore the lack of logical precision (structural elements are always generic features), the dubious stylistic elegance of both sentences and syntactic errors, also in both sentences. What I have in mind is that these two fragments describe two different research goals. They imply two different methodological approaches and two different spheres of potential results. Genological analysis is different from Hermeneutics—it requires different procedures and leads to different conclusions. Attempts to connect these two approaches would lead to the return to old ways of understanding literature and anachronistic ways of reading it; to descriptions of form and content, to mechanical enumerations of 'formal' features and superficial description of main themes and problems.

It seems, however, that this is what goes on in this book. We will not know either which type of literary Hermeneutics Pethe has in mind, or how she wants to carry out her genological observations. In the place of correctly presented research goals, we often have questions leading us astray into areas beyond the scope of literary studies (see, for example, the series of questions on page 107). This is an important issue, because properly defined research goals could radically change this book. After all, genological analysis of the essay requires a specific type of sensitivity to its relational character. The methodological proposals of Krzysztof Dybciak and Michał Paweł Markowski tell us that each case of this relational character should be seen as a kind of violation of the system. It is surely possible to think of a work which would show in what ways the essays of Tischner, Pasierb and Szymik go beyond the existing order of forms of theological writings.

While dodging this important research perspective and accepting the structuralist way of thinking about genres, Pethe was confronted with the necessity of proving that the essays she analysed are indeed essays. The research procedure in this case could not be different from listing features of the essay (we have them on page 76) and checking which of these features are present in the works of these three writers (various 'checking activities' are carried out in the three final chapters of the book). The result of such observations is ordinary enumeration and simple recording of the fact that in the works of the mentioned essayists there appears a subjective, authorial 'I' as well as autobiographical elements, dialogues, the predilection to use various intertexts, metaphoric language, structural openness, etc. We do not learn much about the functions and semantics of these categories in individual texts or groups of texts. What is more, because a similar research perspective has separated what is 'essayistic' from what is 'theological', Pethe feels obliged to prove, as well, that these writers were also theologians. In order to do so, she applies various arguments—not always connected with theology. Some of them sound convincing, but in my opinion, she is too eager to equate what is 'priestly' with what is 'theological'. What is more, one may get the impression that according to Pethe, theological

essays are written only by priests or ex-priests. And this is certainly not so.

It is difficult, therefore, not to get the impression that the methodological hybridity of the three final chapters is the result of the conviction that the genological analysis has not led to satisfactory cognitive results. In order to broaden the spectrum of observation Pethe tries to describe some of the problems dealt with by these three essayists. In the chapter devoted to Pasierb we have an attempt to argue that "the theological programme of Pasierb may be reduced to the principle of developing reflections which are directly derived from the Bible and patristic theology, and which in a totally justified manner use 'poetic imagery' as the main method of expression" (163). A bit later we have Pasierb's portrait of Erasmus (164-167) and his "theology of form" (181-194). What might seem strange is that this book really fulfils a simplified model of a description of 'form and content' (it seems that this model has been long abandoned). The 'confusion of discourses'—genological and thematic—has, of course, serious repercussions. As a result, instead of a clear description of a problem and consistent arguments, we often have an associative mode (particularly in the three final chapters).

Therefore, a text on the genological profile of Janusz Stanisław Pasierb's essays must be written once again. The structural axis of such a work could be a phenomenon, mentioned here earlier and constitutive for the essay, a conflict with form, of splitting up of a conventional genre. The first research field which opens inescapably is connected with the fact that Pasierb's books of essays have a recycled, patchwork character. They were built out of varied textual snippets, which had been written for purposes other than a book of essays. Originally, each of them functioned in a totally different *milieu*, and was a whole in itself and its own native situational context. Putting them in a book is connected with a gesture of re-contextualisation and patchwork 'sewing' of separate texts treated in this new situation not as wholes but as fragments which were to form a new complex composition. This is an important thing, because the separateness of these texts is genological separateness. Patchwork

stitching would not be able to connect anything without the search for real possibilities of a dialogue between forms. And this dialogue would not have been possible if Pasierb had not attempted to break stiff structural standards and the ‘essayization’ of the discourse—regardless of the original generic forms of these texts.

The time has come to illustrate these research capabilities with some examples. The comparison of some parts of the essays from Pasierb’s volumes with notes which are preserved in his archive does not leave much doubt for the claim that they were originally written as sermons. In other words that the ‘original’ form was a homily. In *Open Time* we come across a sermon dealing with the description of Jacob wrestling with the Angel described in the Old Testament. A small fragment of it runs as follows:

At night, alone and facing real danger, Jacob meets a mysterious stranger—an angel? God himself? The inconceivable balance of strengths is surprising—how often we experience it, as long as the night of this life lasts—finally a man turned out to be stronger and forced a blessing. God is not envious. I think that he was proud of Jacob’s strength, that he turned out to be so tough, resilient, relentless, that he was fighting till the end. But the meeting was only postponed, it was to be the subject of inheritance: a man has gone away injured by God, the meeting with God became written as a problem in his body, soul. Injured by God... (*Czas otwarty*, op. cit., 40-41).

Each homily’s important element is reading of a kerygma, that is the message of a given Biblical fragment. It is performed according to the rules of Biblical Hermeneutics. The connection of a Biblical kerygma with the existential experiences of an audience is equally important. Of course, we can find it all in the quoted fragment, but it is difficult to deny that we also find in this fragment other elements—connected with essay writing—the exposition of the speaking ‘I’, complex syntax, metaphorical and aphoristic language. The mechanisms of using elements of essays in Pasierb’s sermons definitely require research...

And what about his numerous funeral speeches? This is the fragment of probably the most famous one. The full version of it was published by *Tygodnik Powszechny* (1987, no. 19. 6) under the title "Anna, the Prophetess":

Probably no one here has written about the body in the context of faith. Our religious lyric poetry is usually very haughty and spiritual, it scents the world not through the nose but through the spirit. If a body appears in it, it is usually God's Body (Corpus Christi). Anna's poetry is the experience of the body, which means the experience of life. The body is love. The body is suffering. On 17 February 1873 she wrote: "[t]here is nothing more painful than love, but we will not allow this pain to be taken away from us". That was the unique tone in Polish religious poetry. She was the poetess of the word incarnate and of the body, which in poetry becomes the word. (*Skrzyżowanie dróg*, op.cit.,182)

Although it seems that the speaker tries to save the remnants of the schemata of a funeral oration, it is difficult not to see that he transcends them noticeably. He moves a part of his utterance in the direction of an historical-literary essay...

The strength of the essay as a genre is such, as has been mentioned here, that it 'dismantles' utilitarian genres of liturgy, so strongly based in theology. The reverse situation sometimes occurs in Pasierb's books: his point of departure is a 'lay' utilitarian genre and a point of arrival—a theological essay. I have in mind those texts which have been written as an extension of the borders of a film or a literary review. Pasierb's book includes descriptions of books by Bernanos and Mauriac, and films by Bergman and Reed, but the interpretations of the essayist go far beyond literal layers of enunciations. Pasierb treats them as symbols. He keeps asking for a theological sense till they start revealing it to him. Let us have one example of such a mechanism. In *Branches and Leaves* we come across a review of Reed's film *Odd Men Out*. Pasierb described one scene from this film in the following way:

The priest is upright and good—the best proof is that the odd men trust him and he helps them—yet, he cannot understand this irresponsible feeling:

- Where is your faith, child?—he asks.
- My faith is in my love—the girl replies.

One of the sentences which makes shooting films worthwhile. Touching some ultimate truth: love makes everything simple and means one thing. Through love we join the stream which flows from God. He saves from loneliness and despair the loving and the loved ones. Someone who loves cannot perish, and the one who is loved also cannot perish, because love connects them with God. (*Galęzie i liście*, op.cit., 56)

A scene from a film becomes a source of deep theological reflection—and an important context of it are the works of contemporary theologians of love. Pasierb also makes works of literature and paintings subjects of similar theological hermeneutics and also important events. Reportage becomes another jumping board enabling Pasierb to jump in the direction of essays. And yet this is not the end. We can speak about autobiographical forms—memoirs, diaries, journals—moving in the direction of the theological essay. The material is huge and very complex. It should be thoroughly researched.

The essays of Pasierb are multi-layered texts which demand reading them with other research tools than the ones of genealogical analysis. The problem which should be considered is that of places; the semiotics of places in Pasierb's writing, and together with it the semiotics of travel. The issue of memory—particularly in reference to autobiographical forms—should also be considered. The whole range of tools employed by autobiographical studies could be of use here. Such a list of possible research paths in the area of Pasierb's essays could go on for a quite a while. But this is not the point. It seems to be an urgent research job to evaluate the very interesting and masterly essays of Janusz Stanisław Pasierb. It is difficult to imagine why we have been silent about it for so long.