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**Literature of Absence and the Experience of Evil  
(*Container* by Marek Bieńczyk, *Is Not* by Mariusz  
Szczygieł, and *Things I Didn't Throw Out*  
by Marcin Wicha)**

Abstract

The article discusses the way in which literature can address evil, understood as the experience of absence and loss. The problem concerns artistic writing in general, as was stressed by Maurice Blanchot; but it also appears particularly in a collection of texts about absence, such as *Container* by Marek Bieńczyk, *Is Not* by Mariusz Szczygieł, and *Things I Didn't Throw Out* by Marcin Wicha. At the same time, they are an attempt to fill the void through literary restitution of that which is lost.

Keywords

Literature, Evil, Loss, Absence, Marek Bieńczyk, Mariusz Szczygieł, Marcin Wicha

The relationship of literature and evil (and perhaps even their strong connection—as will be discussed later) raises a number of questions and doubts. It may seem that by juxtaposing these two areas and notions, we arrive at a somewhat inadequate, vividly asymmetrical juxtaposition in which evil—an ethically important category—is juxtaposed with an area of

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artistic, perhaps merely ludic and reckless, activity. For this very reason, we approach this issue asymmetrically—not in terms of literature and evil, but rather of literature towards evil.

One can regard evil, after Gabriel Marcel, not as a problem, and therefore something to be solved, but as a mystery (Mukoid 1993, 113), or assume after Lev Shestov that one cannot ask the question about the source of evil, as “there are questions whose significance lies precisely in the fact that they do not admit of answers because answers kill them” (Shestov 1928-1937/1966, 230). But would not such an attitude be a form of silent escape from a vital issue? All in all, evil remains something that we must inevitably face, and somehow resolve our affairs with it—as is the case in the texts discussed below.

What is at stake when literature is confronted with evil? If evil is a problem, can literature be an attempt to solve it? Can literature problematize evil or in some way disarm evil, tame it intellectually, and even fight it? Or on the contrary: is this perhaps a trivialization of evil accomplished with words, through fictionalization and artistic means? Does literature attempt to capture that which is lost and cannot be regained, fighting with the destructiveness of evil or does literature take its side? Can literature stand adequately against evil at all (especially when we consider the concept of evil ontologically)? Perhaps it can, if writing texts—creation!—is a way of establishing a certain physical aspect of existence, then literature will always take the side of Being and of Good.

It is difficult to arrive at any definite answers to these questions, and the status of literature in this area seems strongly ambivalent. It seems that this ambivalence is best conveyed in some reflections by Maurice Blanchot, as interpreted by Marek Zaleski.

For Blanchot, writing itself remains related to the ultimate form of loss, which is death. Death, or nothingness, in this approach turns out to be the hermeneutic circle of literature. Writing not only has its source in the experience of loss, but also, paradoxically, finds its positive fulfilment in negativity: “Being, as revealed in the work of art—brought to the point of speaking—remains beyond all possibility, just like death which cannot be tamed despite all suicidal rhetoric, as it is not I who dies, but invariably «one» dies. Hence writing is realized in the experience of inexpressibility, in the ascertainment of a failure, which is the inevitable result of attempts at making a literary presentation, like the ultimate failure of communicating the reality of death. [...] death also constitutes the *telos* of the literary text, or at least it is the space in which each act of writing is inevitably realized, but in which also—vitality—it is carried out” (Zaleski 2005, 202).

This in fact becomes a cruel task for the writer:

“The writer is ‘nothingness working in nothingness,’ while death and nothingness are ‘the hope of language,’” Blanchot writes, “[...] after all, language itself appears in the place of reality, it substitutes for what is vividly absent: if reality, although it seems obvious, was an unproblematic presence to us, language and literature would be redundant. Writing is founded on the sense of void, on the nothingness which undermines our existence, writing articulates the absence which is expressed most vividly in death. It constitutes [...] the incarnation of nothingness. And just like death, it is furnished with the power of negativity: it annihilates what it depicts [...] Writing, all literature, begins with the internalization of the knowledge of the end that awaits us, together with the awareness of the emptiness and insignificance that life is lined with” (202-203).

This, however, is to no avail, as:

Language is unable to save what passes and disappears. According to Blanchot, it even hastens the disappearance of what it names and disowns from being [...] Language, then, takes the place of what “is”. Language denies being! It not only deprives the existing objects of their ontological reality, but also does not have the ability to retrieve the meaning of what is lost in the well of the past. It does not have the power to save what it holds as the object of representation, what it changes into an image or a metaphor. As it builds its patterns, which are supposed to refer to reality, becoming reality’s articulation, it takes the place of what it refers to, substituting itself for that presence and pushing it into oblivion [...] To speak about something, to name something, is to blur it, obliterating the object of our representation [...] What is more, in order for language not to tell untruth, the loss has to be real, hence what is articulated is already non-present and lost, while all articulation only brings about the absence of what it refers to. The non-presence, then, is multiplied (203-204).

So language, according to Blanchot, is endowed with cunning ambivalence: the power of annihilation and the appearance of restoration. What appears in language, replaces reality [...]. Things disappear from reality to reappear in text. Writing brings literature to life, but removes the world to nothingness (Zaleski 2005, 205-206).

All in all:

Writing, then, is a furnishing of emptiness and a disappearing. It is a paradoxical action, as it takes negative fulfilment as its positive aim: it is supposed to utter “nothing,” to express emptiness, articulate absence; it fulfils itself as action that presents nothing (205).

Clearly, then, literature takes an ambivalent stance in relation to evil. It can be treated as a form of struggle with evil, through actualization of what is lost, through restoring it to existence. Perhaps that is why Bataille writes about literature as a kingdom of the impossible, “the kingdom of insatiability” (Bataille 1992, 41). Perhaps literature deprives evil of its metaphysical quality, that is its beyond-physicality, reducing everything to imaginary particulars. Following this nominalistic perspective, perhaps the right to talk about evil should be granted only to literature and art, as domains of the particular, since all discourse is hypostasizing. Literature cannot name or define evil, but it can speak of its manifestations and effects—it can write about it through negative poetics. And perhaps, paradoxically, it is only in literature that metaphysical evil can be captured—since the status of literature and language is beyond-physical.

From a different perspective, one can adopt the view suggested by Józef Tischner, inspired by the Aristotelean concept of mimesis as the probable, and by implication better given that it is oriented towards good, imitation of reality. Tischner proposes the recognition of art (and literature) as something that offers a better, improved, and most of all axiologically harmonious version of reality (Tischner, 1990, 98). In this view, art would indicate how much better the world could be—which at the same time explains the fictional character of artistic actions and justifies that character ethically.

On the other hand, as Blanchot indicates, literature is nihilistic; it attempts to replace reality with words, memories, and illusions. This way, it becomes yet another form of deception—different from the Platonic vision. It lures with the promise of restoring to existence, of filling an absence; it gives false comfort, and in addition, alienates us from reality.

### **Literature of Absence**

How does this ambivalence reveal itself in works that clearly deal with absence and loss? I would like to elaborate on this issue by analyzing some recently published texts which explicitly problematize it: *Things I Didn't Throw Out* by Marcin Wicha, *Is Not* by Mariusz Szczygieł, and *Container* by Marek Bieńczyk.

I will allow myself to describe them as literature of absence, consisting in a peculiar poetics of loss.

*Things I Didn't Throw Out* and *Container* are stories of mourning, in which the authors describe the experiences of the loss of a mother. Bieńczyk's essay is, moreover, an attempt to create a theory of the poetics of loss, a form

of methodological reflection, mainly in the context of Roland Barthes' "Mourning Diary." *Is Not* by Mariusz Szczygieł takes a somewhat different form: it is a kind of writing—or even a documentary or research project which aims to formulate different narratives of loss, of the "is not," as the author calls it, which is experienced by his characters. This piece is all the more important in my discussion, which is mainly concerned with death, because Szczygieł's texts, while describing different kinds of loss, turn out to be in many ways similar to the other two works in terms of thought and poetics. And, in my opinion, most of all, all these works refer to the issue of evil in a substantial way, as I shall discuss in due course.

### **The Condition of a Mourner**

Unarguably, the texts discussed here are self-referential and autobiographical projects, a form of personal struggle with the emptiness that one is surrounded by, but also with one's own transience and death. Szczygieł's narrator writes about his motivation to write *Is Not*: "After the age of forty I discovered that I'm not immortal. And I had to do something about it" (Szczygieł 2018, 255). And even if writing was not a way of taming the sense of one's immortality that declines with age, then perhaps it was a stage of development and maturing: "You become mature only when you lose what you really love" (195).

It is therefore worth outlining on the basis of these texts a brief characterization of the condition of a mourning (and, it seems, deficient) subject. I will only briefly mention three issues: compulsiveness, expressed mainly in the need to tell a story, desire for impossible presence, and paralysis, which leads to the suspension of one's experience of time.

### **Compulsiveness**

The insistence on circling around the issue of loss and absence already implies some sort of obsession, perhaps characteristic of every creative process. But writing about loss seems to stem from a peculiar compulsive need which is reflected in the insistence of style and reasoning. The narrators, especially in the writing of Wicha and Bieńczyk, circle around different issues, objects, situations and images, but eventually always return to what is lost—to the mother. This constant return, as well as the obsession with certain images and associations is particularly vivid in *Container* (for instance in the almost refrain-like re-appearances of a chapter entitled "Mayflies" or of the exclamation "olé").

Absence and loss are events that suck-in and anchor, and are difficult to escape from. They become a source of the compulsive need to tell stories, to record, to orderly arrange. Bieńczyk wonders why Barthes was able to write only an hour or two after his mother's death, and explains this by referring to a physiological writing reflex, which is at the same time subject to self-control (Bieńczyk 2018, 107-108). It can also be a manifestation of a subconscious feeling of guilt connected, for example, with the thought, still during the lifetime of the deceased, that "it would be good" if a given person passed away (Pilecka 2016, 150).

### **The Desire for an Impossible Presence**

The compulsive need to record things may arise from an unsatisfied desire for presence. Mourning involves an imperative of remembrance, of doing justice to the deceased through memory, of honoring commitments and recounting what is left (Ricoeur 2006, 117-118). The task is not easy: "I used to think that we remember people as long as we can describe them. Now I think it's the other way round: they're with us until we can do it. It is only dead people that we own, reduced to some image or a few sentences. [...] But I can't remember it all. Until I can describe them, they're still a little bit alive" (Wicha 2017, 5).

The texts which are discussed here, not only the mourning essays by Bieńczyk and Wicha, seem to play a similar role, inducing the narrators in a sense to negate the present while keeping the past alive. At the same time they project a future in which the emptiness left by the deceased will be accommodated.

### **Paralysis**

The experience of absence can be compared to a kind of paralysis—of will, emotions, cognitive powers, perspective. Like every other experience, it can also have a stigmatizing, defining and formatting character, shaping our way of seeing things (Bieńczyk 2018, 100). These features seem typical of the process of mourning (Freud 1917/1950, 153; Pilecka 2016, 151).

However, it also grants a peculiar peace: "Barthes states directly: mourning is the only space in life free from neurosis: nothing bad can happen, I have disposed of the worst part of me [...]" (Bieńczyk 2018, 248). Indeed, it would be hard to find any distinctly emotional tone, fierce confessions or dramatic expression in these texts. However, this does not imply a lack

of emotion. Barthes points to the resemblance between the mourner and the lover: both are separated from the world, outside of time, almost like the sick (70).

The experience of absence is also paralyzing with respect to the experience of time: "The past of such a mourner, whatever lies behind, is also his future: there was nothing because nothing is meant to be" (151). This state disturbs the narrator to such a degree that they are unable to determine when their mother died (104). Time loses its clarity and gains a peculiar heaviness at the same time: "Of this very time, the time that I call deadness, Barthes states that it is 'compacted, beyond meanings, with no way out' and that it is the time of 'genuine mourning' from which no word can be released, no narrative, no talking" (202).

This paralysis has an almost physiological character. Wicha, following Bieńczyk (118), mentions a laryngeal spasm: the remembrance of his mother is followed by the following remark: "There should be a special punctuation mark. A graphic equivalent of laryngeal spasm. A comma is no use. A comma is a wedge to catch your breath, but we need a typographical knot, even a bump or a stumble" (Wicha 2017, 14).

### **Poetics of Loss**

This state of the deficient subject influences the form of the texts, which in turn contributes to the peculiar poetics of loss. It is the poetics of meandering, periphrasis, oscillations, focus and detachment, of chattering as well as non-naming and silence. It is characterized by paradoxes that are revealed in various forms. The following features can be distinguished: the sense of inexpressibility, compulsive metonymy, oscillating between the trivial and the serious, and fragmentation accompanied by a certain dispersion, and dissolving of the object of loss in a novel. These artistic phenomena have an extensive history and some, for example inexpressibility and fragmentation, have been studied intensely, but for the purposes of the present considerations there is no need to invoke these discussions.

### **Inexpressibility**

Paradoxically, the experience of writing about loss derives most of all from the need to speak and the sense of the deficiency of words, the inexpressibility which is vividly present in Bieńczyk's work, as well as Szczygieł's. When it becomes necessary to refer to death and dying (evil?), the authors do it

without naming the event of death directly: “*It* balances on the verge of audibility and silence, visibility and invisibility, speaking and non-speaking,” “Speaking about it, say it” (Bieńczyk 2018, 164); “*It* has begun. Do you understand? *It* has begun. Do you understand? *It*” (Wicha 2017, 175). As Szczygieł explains: “Maybe it is only about saving one’s own mood, but maybe something more. Maybe it is about our constant, favorite activity—something that in fact is the main content of human life—putting off thinking about ‘is not’” (Szczygieł 2018, 242).

There is, however, another aspect to this. Bieńczyk writes: it is not a matter of expressing the unspeakable, but rather of “how not to express the speakable, how to squeeze out speaking. Until nothing is left, a specter of a word, her [the mother’s] name, a subtle disturbance in the smooth wave of silence” (Bieńczyk 2018, 87).

Just as Bieńczyk interprets Celan’s speech as meaning that only poetry is possible after the genocide at Auschwitz, perhaps the poetics of loss and absence also consists in slipping into the literary, and more specifically in balancing between literature of fact and artistic means. However, the crucial dilemma is whether to write at all: “Writing and death [...] This word which brings my failure, this silence with which I fail a bit less. It’s impossible either way. He [the narrator] would like to stay silent, but has to write. He would like to write, but has to stay silent” (about Barthes, Bieńczyk 2018, 208); “It is impossible to speak about it, but it’s also impossible to stay silent” (230).

### Compulsive Metonymy

An almost compulsive metonymy seems to be the only solution for the problem that it is impossible to remain silent when things need to be said. This literature is in constant transition, circling around, and adhering to deficiencies, complementary filling the void with whatever is at hand—hence the chattering, long-winded mulling over details.

Even titles can reflect this inadequacy: this is clearly the case with *Container*, and to a lesser degree with *Things I Didn’t Throw Out*, as it is only to a small extent a book about things.

Metonymy also applies to speaking about oneself—the motivation to write is perhaps to express one’s own state rather than to recall what is lost. Bieńczyk notices that two profound figures of existence were important for Barthes: his mother and writing (209), and the same applies to the narrator

of *Container*. Perhaps then the theme of these books is not as much absence, but rather those who are metonymic towards absence, those who remain and who experience loss.

An interesting aspect expressed by metonymy is the focusing on things or objects. It can be regarded as a form of escape from emotions, from reminiscing over what or who is missed. But things also guarantee a certain ontological anchorage: they exist as unchanging and tangible beings. Their presence can offer a sense of security through the illusion that they fill a void. After all, a person's absence is also purely physical; it is a non-occupation of space. At the same time, things that are metonymical actualize absence, adhering to what or who is missing: "When dreaming of things we go back to childhood. Inaccessible objects allow us to concentrate sadness in one shape. To describe what we miss" (Wicha, 2017, 74, see also 20, 30).

One form of discourse about things within the poetics of loss is enumeration, a peculiar kind of melancholic collecting, for example as in the list of a mother's favorite books (51), or Eve's life drawn up in the form of a spreadsheet (Szczygieł 2018, 49 and next), or the list of what is missing in a beautiful but lost villa (226 and next).

Perhaps, as the narrator of *Is Not* suggests, our death brings relief to objects (246). This may be the reason for focusing attention, in the books discussed here, on the things themselves, freed at last from servitude and their purely contextual role towards people.

Also, things and telling stories about them can temporarily fill a void: "An adopted object can for a short time take the place of 'is not'" (251).

## Oscillating

The discourse about things reflects another feature of the literature of loss: the intertwining of triviality with seriousness, and at times with the sense of fear; the connection of the macro and micro perspectives. This connection reveals how dramatic the experience of emptiness is—one does not know how to talk about it, how to deal with its coming to (non)being, and all this is revealed through the oscillation of registers and perspectives.

A good example is a story by Szczygieł about Eve's account of her life, typed into an Excel spreadsheet, with all her achievements, failures and fears, and provided with dates. Such an enumeration could be considered a bizarre and incomprehensible way of outlining one's life, but for the fact that it concerns a story which is difficult to describe in other, more conventional ways—a difficult and unhappy childhood and a life filled with strug-

gling with the past for the sake of a decent present. In the context of such an outline, death should be recorded in the cell designated for achievements (49 and next).

The intertwining of the trivial and the serious is vividly shown in *Is Not*, in a fragment describing the ongoing war in Ukraine (158-159). Here the protagonist also explains that it is impossible to speak about everything, and oscillation between seriousness and triviality appears to be a reaction to inexpressibility.

### Fragmentation

“Mourning, and moreover, worry, are essentially partial. That is, if they finally induce a person to speak, they bring pieces of an unspeakable whole” (Bieńczyk 2018, 63). And further: “[...] The Book is not meant to create a Whole, but to break it into pieces, even very small ones [...]” (173). The texts discussed here are often divided into small parts; there are no lengthy arguments. The stories are usually very brief, interrupted with digressions, repetitions and returns (especially in Bieńczyk). There is no clear coherence to the text, and continuity or sequencing are present only locally. Therefore, fragmentation does not offer a promise of completeness, but instead is a symptom of deficiency, defect, and loss.

Narratives about loss seem to lose their own completeness. They are fragmented into short pieces, as if creating or sustaining a longer narrative was impossible, as if the stories needed to begin over and over again. *Is Not* includes repetitive fragments with empty spaces (i.e. Szczygieł 2018, 123, 153 and following), so the narrative is torn apart, discontinuous, and random enumerations occur (i.e. 168). This is also how Wicha ends his book, with coincidental yet dramatic enumeration of mourning instructions and advice, concluded with a trivial “That is all” (Wicha 2017, 181).

Tracing signs of fragmentation furthermore, it can be noticed that we are dealing with yet another paradox: although the main theme is what is lost, it becomes dispersed. Its fragmentation and lack of coherence make the lost object elusive, incomplete, blurred, only partly tangible: “Mother dissolves in the book like red in white [...] she loses her concrete form, granting her features to other figures [...]” (Bieńczyk 2018, 171). As a result, writing resembles “grasping, groping, fondling of emptiness” (283).

With all the sense of the inadequacy of the poetics of loss in the face of emptiness, it is still impossible not to speak about it. This is aptly expressed by Hanna Krall, quoted by Szczygieł: “Everything needs to have its form, its

rhythm, Mr. Mariusz. Especially absence" (Szczygieł 2018, 309),<sup>1</sup> "while dying and death [...] ask [...] directly: how does one write? What is [writing], what should writing be?" (Bieńczyk 2018, 111). An echo of Blanchot's discussion of literature as "furnishing emptiness" is present here.

### Literature of Absence Towards Evil

However, one may wonder whether it is appropriate to discuss these texts in the context of evil. Not all the stories in them about absence and emptiness involve evil. This is particularly evident in the pieces by Szczygieł, who also mentions "is-nots" caused by wars, political changes or actions resulting directly from human beings. Sometimes absence can be fortunate, as in the case of the story about a transsexual, Karol, who after gender confirmation surgery has been liberated from different undesirable emotions caused mainly by identity problems. One of the characters in *Is Not* states: "Emptiness also has value of its own, equal to what may fill it" (Szczygieł 2018, 315). Another character, an Albanian painter, reminisces about the hard times of Communism: "I wasn't an artist anymore, only a sack carrier. Because I had been convicted, to them I did not really exist. There was no me. Ah, no one bothered me, and I felt really free. I could paint without being checked up on, like a real painter. Then I felt the sense of truly living [...]" (202). A disturbing issue is revealed here: absence (perhaps as well as death and evil) can become tempting. In this brooding on and experiencing of loss, at times one can sense a perverse satisfaction.

In the texts discussed here, the sense of loss and regret experienced by the subject is, however, dominantly negative. The already discussed condition of the "deficient subject" torn between the compulsive need for presence and the paralysis of will and emotions, expressed in the poetics of loss characterized by clear deficiencies (!) in the area of comprehensive, precise and explicit expression; the metonymic subject oscillating between extremely different emotions and perspectives, indicates that what we encounter here is suffering induced by evil. It can be argued, by following Tischner, that death is a misfortune (governed by necessity and the laws of nature), rather than an evil (dependent on will and freedom) (Tischner 1990, 151). If we accept this, death and mourning cannot be directly associ-

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<sup>1</sup> Bieńczyk mentioned this during a meeting with readers, stating that he would have felt no need to write about loss had it not been for the emergence of an idea for the form, and in a formal compulsion there is also an existential compulsion (Gdynia, Konsulat Kultury, 30.08.2019).

ated with evil, just like each absence and loss. One can ask whether absence is the source of evil, or if true evil lies at the source of this absence? Maybe this uncertainty is the reason why the word evil is never used in these texts, and why there is very little defiance towards losing things, but instead one can only—only!—deal with the effects of absence.

Death is something natural, and therefore a misfortune, but it generates absence and its consequences give birth to emptiness, annihilating or paralyzing some emotional areas and experiences. And it is the field of the latter that makes it irrelevant whether the absence is a human fault (as moral evil), or stems from natural causes (as in the case of physical evil)—we experience it as something harmful to us. It becomes corrupting to the human will, and in this sense the metaphysical understanding of evil can be related to human actions. Death and other deficiencies turn out to be a kind of black hole which sucks one in, weakens one's will and perception, and perhaps also the ability to do good.

Finally, the experience of death leaves behind a painful emptiness which implies a deep deficiency in reality. It points to its imperfections, its faultiness, and it cannot be explained by Leibniz's theodicy. Death becomes a proof that there is something wrong with the world. Passing away into non-being is a prelude to the nothingness which awaits us. Each loss, even a small one, prefigures our death, and in a broader sense the experience of deficiencies in reality itself, its imperfection and perhaps evil, which is the undesired yet inseparable reverse of reality.

The same conclusions are drawn by Barthes who "proposes a metaphysical thesis: what appears after the death of a loved one is filled with absence. Thus absence is what constitutes reality, from which stems existence between reality and [...] absence itself, in the posthumous world in which it is impossible to reach the hard bottom and start over again. Death, suddenly actualized in a dead body lying in the next room, makes 'everything creak'" (Jaksender 2010, 85). The experience of loss is perhaps also a sign of a moral intuition suggesting that the world ought to be built differently. Mourning is perhaps a state of an acute sensitivity to evil, the most appropriate and desirable state, however, which passes as life is governed by its own rules and dulls our moral sensitivity. Melancholy as nostalgia for that which is not lost can perhaps stem from the same source (see: Bieńczyk 2018, 151)? The mourner, as Bieńczyk writes, sensing their own fragility, notices that everything that surrounds them is vulnerable to the unreliable influence of time, "As if death had opened their senses, induced them to love more, to feel compassion and empathy more deeply" (249).

The depiction of absence as evil refers of course to Augustine of Hippo's concept that "Evil has no nature, it is not anything, it is not physical, it is not part of the world. It is not because it does not exist on its own, it is not a really existing principle [...] evil is a choice of direction; it is turning one's back, and consequently a fall [...] from what is richer in being, towards that which is poorer. In his opinion, the lack of something (*deficare*) is not nothingness yet, but it certainly moves towards it" (Drwiega 2018, 16). Lack is evil here, including deficiency in health, as well as death, which constitutes the lack of biological life (Kowalczyk 1987, 114).<sup>2</sup>

It needs to be mentioned that the Augustinian intuition is retained in French, as Barbara Skarga remarks: "the word *le mal* covers a variety of notions—first of all, it is misfortune, but also harm, illness, pain and suffering. What's more, *mal* also contains negation, *maladresse*, *malaise*, *malheur*, *malhonnete* etc. As if in this very language, so closely related to Latin, a conviction remained that evil is negation, lack" (1993, 5).

Among the authors discussed here, Bieńczyk refers to Augustine directly, and in particular he recalls the experiences connected with the death of his mother, as well as the question "*unde malum?*" which is vital for the author of the *Confessions* (Bieńczyk 2018, 180 and following). Perhaps, then, the Augustinian concept of evil arose as an expression of emptiness, as a reaction to the death of his mother—Bieńczyk's considerations seem to suggest this line of thought, and the chronology of the life and work of the Bishop of Hippo makes it probable.

Other works discussed here also seem in line with the Augustinian concept. It can be assumed indirectly that all representations of the experience of absence that result in suffering hold evil as their source—this indirectly suggests that the similarities are not coincidental, and perhaps supports the Augustinian intuition. Perhaps it is possible to speak of evil only indirectly, and only through its effects, or the way we experience them. But absence, and death as the most painful absence, sometimes give birth to objections to reality. This is aptly depicted in a dialogue between Wicha and his mother: "Where's Piotr?—asks his mother.—He's dead.—But in a moment like this he should be here—she says. She still does not accept easy excuses. She still refuses to accept the workings of the higher power. If he really wanted, he would come. Death is no excuse" (Wicha 2017, 162). One can have the impression that these words—again in the metonymic mode—are spoken

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<sup>2</sup> The origins of this reasoning are much older; they appear in Assyrian-Babylon mythology (Gołaszewska 1994, 153).

by the narrator to themselves. A similar element can be found in Bieńczyk, who quotes the dramatic and at the same time naïve manifesto of Canetti: “The First commandment is [...] you will not die” (Canetti 2019, 21; Bieńczyk 2018, 262).

Loss, whose most painful form is the experience of another’s death, is an experience which is the more painful as it disturbs our sense of immortality: “the death of a loved one disrupts our defensive mechanism of negating reality, negating the possibility of death” (Pilecka 2016, 151).

At this point, one can trace references to another concept of evil, which Jean Nabert calls *injustifiable*—that which cannot be justified (see: Mukoid 1993, 69-71, 93 and next). This idea seems to be reflected in what the authors discussed here are saying—though not directly. The experience of loss, and of death in particular, turns out to be impossible to justify, and perhaps even impossible to forgive. Importantly, this does not mean that it cannot be explained—after all, it is obvious that biological processes, and even political ones, are inevitable—what belongs to the natural world, from the moral and experiential perspective provides “suffering that seems to stand witness indisputably and irrevocably against the existence of such events, which deeply wound our sensitivity” and lead us to the intellectual judgement that “this event shouldn’t have happened, there’s no explanation for it” (Mukoid 1993, 94).

As a reaction to this experience, narratives about loss emerge, and even if they are fragmentary, they offer an illusory sense of control, of working out these experiences, while at the same time they reveal the yawning gap between the sphere of experiences and emotions on the one hand, and that of words and literature on the other. Perhaps this is why Bieńczyk refers to Adorno’s question about the possibility of poetry after the genocide at Auschwitz, which may also explain certain similarities to the Lyotardian view of the sublime. Perhaps writing about absence is an attempt to “privatize” it, to subject it to control, just as in psychoanalytical therapy telling stories offers (the illusion of?) moving forward. In this view, literature of loss would stem from the sense of helplessness in the face of that which we are unable to control.

## Conclusions

In literature of absence we are presented with depictions of the experience of loss as well as attempts to counter the instances of coming to non-being through literary restitution (perhaps retroactive) of what is lost. In their texts, the authors reveal, or expose, to what extent that which is absent de-

termines our presence, how much lack and emptiness influence what is, and who we are. Or: how evil, seen as a lack, or as absence, turns out to be complementary to what exists. In this sense, the works are not only about the experience of loss and deficiency, but about our reality, imperfect and flawed by absence and evil. After all, mourning indicates indirectly that the world is not perfect, since we are doomed to such suffering.

Literature, in the light of the above, appears to be a performative gesture of Human Will encountered with evil, lack, and emptiness. In this view, the literary work can be regarded as a gesture, an action or statement, and not just a creation. This is how some of the authorial declarations can be seen. Bieńczyk writes: “[...] words pretend to be a body, they want to feel its convulsions. This is a well-known writing trick. The lament of my mother’s body was unbelievable, the lament of writing is not to be believed” (2018, 121).

Perhaps at the same time, an adequate response to absence and evil would be perfect silence [...] In the almost compulsive need to make things present, the painful experience of evil as absence is expressed. This edifice surrounding emptiness makes it more visible, makes it scream. But is it possible to remain silent?

Does this imply that the “furnishing of emptiness” advocated by Blanchot—literature in general—is our reaction to the experience of evil, in whatever form, not only in relation to loss? We make a creative effort in order to save our positive perception of the reality that we are doomed to anyway. In this view, writing is a compulsion (87), a compulsion to save reality from the nothingness which we experience as hostile. Due to the inability to turn to the Absolute that could be a salvation from emptiness, the horror of experiencing absence is even more intense. This way, literature replaces religion in the struggle with evil and in the “saving” of reality from the inevitable and gradual annihilation of its different areas.

It can be hoped that this type of literary text addresses the problem of evil, names it and accentuates it, and at the same time without becoming “bad literature”—bad in the ethical sense, nihilistic and corrupting. Perhaps naming evil makes it somewhat less evil? Maybe here lies the power of literature. And its carefree, unbearable lightness in the struggle with evil—maybe a literature of absence is the way—without making claims but also without keeping silent.

Ricoeur expresses a similar view: “We can’t speak to others about their suffering. But perhaps, if we juxtapose it with our own, we can say: let it be [...] Perhaps here lies the ultimate answer to the problem of evil: to achieve

a point of renunciation (...) of desire to be spared from suffering, to renounce the infantile desire for immortality” (Ricoeur 1991, 48). This is what literature sometimes is: telling others that we need to accept the omnipresence of suffering and inevitable mortality. And “reflecting on evil”—it can be added: including literary reflection—“rather than explicating, [it] should seek to excuse, to exorcise despair, as Marcel states” (Mukoid 1993, 185). And if evil understood as *unjustifiable* “stands in opposition to philosophy as meaningful thought, directed to discovering meaning,” what is left is literature—nihilistic and saving at the same time, whose ambivalence was so aptly described by Blanchot.

And secretly one may hope that one day what Canetti, and then Bieńczyk (Canetti 2019, 101; Bieńczyk 2018, 263), so forcefully declared, will come true: “Tell, tell stories, until no one dies.”

Translated by Aleksandra Słyszewska

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