

Review by Andrzej Franaszek, *Gazeta Wyborcza* 17/07/2007

The Enron scandal and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's heart, glass houses and Milan Kundera: in his new book Marek Bieńczyk **brilliantly juxtaposes academic discourse with fiction, history of culture with personal experience.**

... What is Marek Bieńczyk's *Przezroczyść*? There is no easy answer. After all, the 50-year-old translator of Cioran and Kundera, a writer (author of *Terminal* and *Tworki*, the latter distinguished with "Paszport Polityki," the weekly *Polityka*'s yearly cultural award, and longlisted for the Nike prize), an essayist who made his name with works on the Romantic poet Krasiński and melancholy, as well as a wine connoisseur and outspoken advocate, in short, Bieńczyk the brilliant man of letters juxtaposes various planes here, academic discourse with fiction, history of culture with personal experience. "What the hell is this, they will mutter behind his back, what are we supposed to make of it, is this an academic essay or what, you can't really tell," he writes with mordant wit, as well as self-irony.

On one level, then, it is a **tour-de-force essay on the history of the concept of transparency**, freely drawing on philosophy, art and literature. The text moves from hermetic poetry to the present-day political debate, which demands that political mechanisms be transparent; from Plato and the Greek term *diaphanes* (forsaken in modern languages in favour of *transparentia*), by which he meant a moment of cognitive certainty when "the world becomes obvious," to the glass walls of highrise buildings and offices. The key figure of the argument is Rousseau, who placed the concept of transparency at the very centre of modern imagination, investing it with an interpersonal dimension, dreaming of transparency of heart, complete understanding of feelings, actions and intentions. Rousseau's idea clashed with flawed human nature, as well as the convention-bound, artificial world of aristocratic France – and so the fantasy of honesty was soon to become one of the foundations of the French Revolution. ...

The more I think about Bieńczyk's book, the more I believe that the work of the historian of ideas came late in the process, as a sort of superstructure over a deeply personal story, the exploration of his own existence, his own mystical craving. ...

Whether reconstructing his own experience or resorting to fiction, Bieńczyk portrays spiritual states opposite to transparency which he calls "hysteria": the uncontrollable, irrational fear which grips the narrator/ protagonist after an accident involving a cyclist, or the experience of bottomless despair after the loss of a loved one. Curiously enough, as we are to learn later, both these descriptions turn out to be false (in that they are the descriptions of his partner Olga's pain, not his own), as if to prove that our hearts indeed are not – as Jean-Jacques would have it – transparent. What Bieńczyk calls "hysteria" (fear, despair, sorrow, spiritual pain) leads us into darkness, preventing us from leaning out of the frame of existence, since "the subject of hysteria discovers, as does the subject of transparency, that the reality he had known slips away, that the past no longer matters, but he refuses to acknowledge this and he does not dare to step into a clear, transparent cube. Hysteria is patently of this world; it provides palpable proof that indeed there is something beyond it (what, a void, heaven, eternity, death?), but we cannot grasp it, being of this world, and so suddenly we are left with nothing, without this life, with only the superfluous self on our hands."

It might be said that once Bieńczyk's curtains of words devoted to transparency, brilliance, light and readiness for the Other are parted, what is revealed is, just as in our own hearts, a terrified, crouching darkness: a body in spasms,

retching, helplessly lying in a heap on a rug. **In this book's perspective, the focal point of existence is another person.** The sense and the density of being, the life partner, the praised beloved, she, Olga: "You, you alone are this sentence of mine, I thought, these few words, a tiny cluster of syllables, yes, no, yes, no, yes, you form it and you sound it. As long as you continue to be, as long as we continue to be. To me you are this sentence, there will be no other; this sentence which encompasses all for me, you are this all, this is me."

Bieńczyk's book ends on a moving, painful note, as does Joyce's story *The Dead*: "And I saw our room without us in it, without our bodies covered with a duvet, empty in the brightness of dawn, going on being there for no one, clean and transparent, transparent, with a square of sunlight on the wall." There is life-giving light and the blackness of despair here, the warm light of childhood and the indifferent light which floods a vacated space. There are Hopper's *Rooms by the Sea* and another of his paintings, the twelve-year later *Sun in an Empty Room*. Outside the window there are green tree branches, but inside the dirty grey walls are dead, the evening sunlight falls into emptiness. There is no door, the window is shut. An empty room. Death.