

... Transparency used to be the mark of interference of the authorities into private lives. Today the demand for transparency in public life lets us all hope that our life is not entirely subject to dark powers. However, the modern demand for transparency borders on social exhibitionism. Look here: this is what I possess. Look here: I have nothing to hide.

The author of *Przezroczyść* steadfastly and successfully traces down transparency in the fantasy archives of Western culture. He begins – as is only right – with **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** and his dream of the “**purity of heart**” which would bring down communicational barriers between people, and goes on to unfold before the reader other images of the **glass obsession**: *Glasarchitektur*, the Crystal Palace, glass houses, glass people, crystal-clear texts, all sorts of glass bead games. But these first-rate chapters on the history of a Western obsession are interspersed with an altogether different, more private kind of narrative. Bieńczyk not only describes transparency, he not only painstakingly and passionately reconstructs its history in Europe both centuries ago and now, but also fervently dreams about it, seeking it in himself and in the world around him. Bieńczyk wrote a book in which history matters as long as – just as a transparent polythene bag – it holds a key to understanding himself. **This is how the very best essayists write: ostensibly about the world, but mainly about their own selves. Ostensibly about themselves, but still about the world.**

In terms of form or **genre**, *Przezroczyść* is neither a historical essay, nor an allegorical novel, nor autobiography. ... **Bieńczyk’s book is like life: made up of various bits and pieces, jumping from truth to imagination, from reality to fiction, from narration to reflection, from fantasy to analysis.** Bieńczyk’s voice is easily recognisable, and has been so for quite some time: trembling, uncertain, obsessive, now and then falling prey to treacherous metaphors, fluctuating, far from obvious, hysterical, and sometimes – as in the closing passages – breathtaking. Therefore I would venture a claim that his writing, abolishing all distance between the one who writes and what is being written (or, to use his own words, between the one who sees and what is being seen), is perhaps **the most interesting example of the literature of existence in Poland.** In that sense Bieńczyk wants to be transparent: to show what it is like when the writing is mainly concerned with life, what it is like when life is caught in the cog-wheels of the writing. The reader must be cautious, though. At the very moment when Bieńczyk betrays his dream of transparency, the betrayal is not only a disclosure: he immediately multiplies fictions, makes up himself and his lovers (even disguises himself as one of them – in shame? in fear?), obfuscates his life in the dread of being caught at sincerity. That’s what the author of *Przezroczyść* is like: divided, torn between dream and anxiety, between transparency and opaqueness, between trust and mistrust. Bieńczyk does not trust the world, though he wants to be part of it, he wants to love, yet he is terrified of love. He looks at the world from behind a glass pane, squinting at the sunlight, and at the very moment when he moves forward to claim what seems rightly his in the world, his forehead hits the cool glass, his eyes begin to water.

This sense of indecisiveness, of uncertainty, of profound loss is one of the most interesting things one can expect from literature today. There is no trace of the naïveté of realistic representation, of justice done to the visible world, of mental shabbiness, of foolishly complacent certainty that things are as they are and will not

be any different. If I were to pick just one word which would best describe Bieńczyk's writing, I would unhesitatingly choose tenderness. ...

There is no doubt that although Bieńczyk devotes a large part of the book to social and political contexts of transparency, he is happiest when he can slip away from the public sphere and leap into the metaphysical abyss. "In the social reality transparency is almost always relative, divorced from metaphysics." The narrator-protagonist laughs at being robbed of the word, the idea, the obsession, and decides to steal it back, to reclaim his heirloom, to win again the metaphysical right to a transparency which is unconditional, absolute. ...

From page one, by huge stides and tiny steps the book moves to one simple thesis: if one who dreams of transparency wants to describe himself in one, simple, transparent sentence, to express the essence of his name, to say "this is me" as I really am, genuine and true, this one climactic sentence is uttered when the narrator is looking, with "infinite trust" at the face of his lover. "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". **Bieńczyk's book is a great (perhaps the greatest in the pale literature of our day) praise of love, whose other name is transparency. ...**

Writing is for Bieńczyk a tender calling forth from nothingness of someone dear, even if for a moment, before we all enter the square of yellow sunlight, before we all dissolve in irrevocable whiteness, before we all pass away as if we never were. It would be hard to find a better reason to write, I think, and few writers today apart from Marek Bieńczyk treat literature with such seriousness – and such courage.