

## **Autofictional Conversions and the Central European Identity in the Works of Waldemar Bawolek, Marek Bieńczyk and Andrzej Stasiuk**

In a press column *Letter to my Grandson* (“L’Espresso” 2014), Umberto Eco claims that literature is an excellent tool for exercising memory and imagination. Thanks to reading texts and remembering them, we feel that we have experienced not one, boring, predictable life, but many different ones, at different times and spaces. As the ancients already knew, literature is a tool for exercising oneself, for practicing one’s own memory and imagination. The aim of the project is to create and test a method of studying literary texts, which are perceived as tools and, at the same time, the effects of ascetic practice. The subjects’ transformations in contemporary Central European prose will be analysed in the context of the unstable socio-political reality of the region.

The research project will be focused on analysis of artistic prose by three outstanding, contemporary Polish writers: Waldemar Bawolek, Marek Bieńczyk and Andrzej Stasiuk. Why were these writers chosen? Because, apart from similar dates of birth (common generational perspective), they share a tendency to use literature as a tool for their own transformation. Each of them sees writing as an exercise and, in a sense, a therapy, as well as a way to know himself. The subjects they create (characters, narrators) are both textual and real. When they write literary works, they also write themselves. In a literary mill, the actual biographies of writers are milled into flour, from which fictitious biographies are made, which, in turn, are fed by real imagination and subject to literary recycling. In this way, life feeds on literature, and vice versa: literature feeds on life. The three authors’ prose will be also interpreted as a subjective response to the ephemeral, changeable, unstable reality of Central Europe. As Stasiuk wrote in *On the Road to Babadag*: “This is a special quality of auxiliary countries, of second-order, second-tier peoples: the ephemeral tale in different versions, the distorted mirror, magic lantern, mirage, phantom that mercifully sneaks in between what is and what ought to be”. The imperative of life change in this part of Europe is closely related to the discontinuity and provisionality (fictitiousness) of the states, power systems and social institutions. Thus, the autofictional conversions in the selected prose can be interpreted as a fundamental part of the Central European experience. Following such presuppositions, I intend to compare autofictional conversion techniques in the works of Andrzej Stasiuk and Yuriy Andrukhovych, Marek Bieńczyk and Milan Kundera, Waldemar Bawolek and Bohumil Hrabal.

Referring to the philosophical concepts of Michel Foucault and Peter Sloterdijk, it is assumed that the transformation of the subject in the medium of literature follows a certain original pattern, i.e. the conversion triangle. Foucault defines such an open, transformable subject as the Self, opposed to ego, whose boundaries are clearly defined and whose nature is constant. Within the triangle of conversion, the Self appears in three forms: as Self-subject, Self-object and Self-other. The Self is exercised by the means of literature and other texts, which are deposited in the archive of culture. As Eco noted, literary asceticism can be very useful, however, staying in the cultural archive for too long can make us slaves to the exercises performed there and their rules. Therefore, it is necessary to get out of the “base camp” of the literary tradition, which requires an exercise that no one has practiced before. This kind of showpiece Sloterdijk calls acrobatics. Thanks to performance of the literary acrobatics, a figure of the other Self is brought to life as a hypothesis of the subject, a certain artistic experiment, which is the driving force behind the transformation. Being on an acrobatic top allows you to know yourself. This is how the conversion triangle is constructed. The basis of the figure is formed by exercise (asceticism), and the right arm by acrobatics. The left arm of the triangle represents the relationship between the other Self and the Self-subject and object. Within these relations, the subject comes to know a temporary truth about itself. Foucault calls such cognitive processes alethurgy.

This innovative triangular scheme will be used to analyse the works of the three aforementioned writers. What is the research for? To find out, how modern literary training tools are being constructed. Why is it so interesting and useful? The texts of the selected authors give you access to unique life and literary adventure that takes place in the space of literature treated as a tool of transformation (conversion) of the subject. By analysing various literary self-formation techniques, the project will develop and test the three-dimensional model to study the literary subject transformation. The interpretative model may turn out to be useful for the study of many other cultural texts, particularly in the Central European context.