

# Summary

## **The passion for vanishing and the passion for preserving: on women writers' diaries**

This book provides an analysis of women writers' intimate writing. The discussion is based on the diaries of Zofia Nałkowska, Anna Iwaszkiewiczowa and Anna Kamieńska. The authoresses of this book argue that the diary is a literary genre that does not only reveal its self-creative and self-therapeutic nature, but also usually includes attempts at figuring out one's own place in the world, somewhere between the vanished past and uncertain future, as well as between the sphere of nature and culture. The diaries of women writers still pose a challenge for those analysing the genre, as they are frequently perceived as secondary or even marginalised texts, which only after many years may acquire their well-deserved place as literary classics. When read from a feminist perspective, these texts provoke the recurring question on the position of writing in women's lives and point to the need to reinterpret the female figure of the text.

Reading diaries implies an analysis of personal experience, which validates one's own voice and ultimately leads to the establishment of one's own agency. Diligence and accuracy are particularly important when analysing the intimate literary form and they also prompt constant vigilance over the researcher's own interpretative tools. Numerous scholars emphasize the diary's overarching aim of safeguarding fleeting experiences against their ultimate annihilation. When reading the personal testimonies of individual existence, it can also be concluded that they set a special ethical task for the reader. Philippe Lejeune, on the other hand, sees the temporal nature of diaries as their rudimentary feature. As a renowned specialist and practitioner of this literary genre, he also argues for "anti-fiction" as the primary indicator of broadly understood autobiographical literature (although

from the other point of view, it can be argued that its primary feature is “auto-fiction”). In this book, *The passion for vanishing and the passion for preserving*, Lejeune’s thesis serves as the starting point for a search whose aim is to find out what it meant for Zofia Nałkowska, Anna Iwaszkiewiczowa and Anna Kamińska to “stand face to face with time”, and whether their diaries helped them to “escape death”. A diary is in fact, in its primary sense, a genre which is directed towards life, and becomes part of its author’s *bios* (life).

A brief dictionary entry defines a diary as a series of traces with a date assigned. However, after the diary is published, it becomes a sign for posterity, i.e. a testimony which, once liberated from its master and organic “feeder”, acquires its autonomy and enters a voyage through consecutive time frames. Intimate diary writing gains a particularly important meaning when its author has to cope with the limits of their capabilities in critical experiences, i.e. to face evil, suffering, death. In such severe conditions, every entry in the diary affirms life, every new day attests to one’s survival powers.

In Zofia Nałkowska’s diaries, her experience of Nazi-occupied Warsaw proves to have an important impact on the narration, i.e. the “war-time” authoress is different from the pre-war distinguished literary figure moving in the academic echelons of the society of that time. She takes her observations of war-time reality to the level of psychological analysis and philosophical deliberations. She engages in a heroic battle to remain herself despite the severe war-time everyday reality of living from day to day without any prospect of survival. With the conviction that she would not be able to survive the war, it was her conscious choice to safeguard in her diary the traces of her own existence and those of her nearest and dearest. Her battle with old age which, as she puts it, “came at the wrong time”, also becomes the ground of her in-depth reflections.

In a different manner, Anna Iwaszkiewiczowa engages in a battle with herself about the sense of writing. Every now and again she expresses doubts about the possibility to keep an “intimate diary”. Although she left behind a few hundred pages of captivating text, she remains convinced about her lack of literary talent. These doubts were certainly determined by her convictions regarding the biological and cultural limitations that women face in everyday life, which was seen as standing in striking opposition to the elitist artistic activity. Although Iwaszkiewiczowa is considered to be a diary authoress who keeps her intimacy concealed, she actually reveals her way of expe-

riencing reality. The eruption of her sensual “I” in the diary becomes an extraordinary testimony to her experience of the world.

Anna Kamińska, on the other hand, focuses in her writing on her faithful commitment to love lost and her literary vocation, coupled with torment of lonesome existence which requires constant articulation and, at the same time, determines her artistic and existential self-awareness. Vanishing, seen by her as a very personal experience, both on the psychological (spiritual, metaphysical, religious) and physical level (physiological, material and every-day-like), is presented against the background of social, ideological and moral transformations of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kamińska’s *Notatnik* also makes it possible to piece together an image of the literary circles of the time, which provides another insight into the way an artist struggles to operate in a continually constricting sphere of collective communication.

All the women writers presented in the respective essays contained in this book prove to be able to transform their most intimate experiences into engaging and evocative texts. They all reveal in this way their sensitivity, various problems related to existence among other people, and difficult phases of their struggle with everyday life. Therefore while reading these intimate records, it was necessary to move with caution and retain the proper distance towards the texts, which obviously do not provide direct “evidence of reality”, but instead constitute long-term self-expression, images of the ‘I’ that is remembered, imagined and reconstructed, and even acted out. Consequently, the obvious choice of interpretative path was an individualised case study tailored for each writer and her work.

An important conclusion that stems from the interpretations contained in this book is that reading intimate writing can provide a basis for in-depth self-awareness and for establishing a special emotional connection with its authors, coupled with an open attitude towards intimacy, even if it is concealed behind convention and artistic gesture. It can also foster sensitivity towards the distinctive nature of a particular existential experience that will always come through the text’s subject matter. The diaries interpreted in this volume provide an insight into the particular variants of 20<sup>th</sup>-century female intellectuals’ lives and make it possible to identify its distinct features against the background of the history of Polish intelligentsia, which is far better researched. At present, female diary writing is gaining well-deserved interest and is contributing to the important transformations within

the discourse of postmodern literary studies. An interdisciplinary approach allows for more diverse reading practice and constant revision of the reading strategies proposed.

The “passion for preserving” allows these female writers to escape death and provides the readers with an insight into the sphere of individual struggles with vanishing. It remains important to transform the research approach and turn it into practice, i.e. an everyday activity, supporting life and devoted to life. In this context, interpreting diaries makes it possible to engage in reading and then re-reading the images of famous people’s lives, but most of all they provide an opportunity to see the distinctiveness of one’s own fate. By putting the ‘writing I’ at the centre, the diary allows for expanding the interpretational (hermeneutic) aspects of self-understanding and also opens up towards the non-transparency of one’s own experience. Reading the diary serves as an experience that opens up two-fold. On the one hand, it uncovers the cultural entanglement of the writers, which, on the other hand, fosters parallel reflections on the network of cultural relations that the readers are entangled in. In this way, it becomes clear that diary studies have a cultural and existential role in determining the contemporary approaches to the perception of agency.

*Translated by  
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