

doi: 10.15584/tik.spec.eng.2020.22

## Melancholics on the Vistula River

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the theme of melancholy in Polish prose of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, using four contemporary novels – *Pokolenie Ikea* [The IKEA generation] (2012) by Piotr C., *Wszyscy jesteśmy hipsterami* [We are all hipsters] (2016) by Dariusz Radecki, *Melanżeria* [Melangery] (2011) by Anna Klara Majewska and *Za pięć rewolta* [Five minutes to a revolt] (2011) by Dawid Kain – as conspicuous examples of its presence. The author suggests that due to the increased pace of social and technological changes the generation of thirty-year-olds experiences a feeling of melancholy, formerly characteristic for elderly people and analyses the protagonists of the novels selected to present how they cope with a reality that does not fulfil them.

**Keywords:** melancholy, youth, consumption, transience, depression

Melancholy is a reverse of utopia that appears in European literature in cycles. These cycles are partly due to the occurrence of social and economic transformations,<sup>1</sup> which confirms contemporary philosopher Odo Marquard's thesis that "in history – the eternal recurrence of what is not the same – its contemporary acceleration is itself a continuation of the eternal recurrence of the same."<sup>2</sup> Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century melancholy "has been a symptom of social, historical and civilizational turning points,"<sup>3</sup> in a way a natural reaction to the failure of the utopian dreams of humanity that expected technological progress to result in development. Against the backdrop of the industrial revolution, individuals participating in the pursuit of novelty noticed the evanescence of human existence. The progressing disintegration of the old world and the encroachment of new consumerist models influenced the social tendency revealing itself in disappearance of

<sup>1</sup> See: A. Mazur, *Pod znakiem Saturna. Topika melancholii w późnej twórczości Elizy Orzeszkowej*, Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2010, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> O. Marquard, "Universal History and Multiversal History," in: idem, *In Defense of the Accidental. Philosophical Studies*, transl. R.M. Wallace, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> A. Mazur, op. cit., p. 11. All the quotations from the Polish sources have been translated by Elżbieta Rokosz.

metaphysical needs.<sup>4</sup> It is worth stressing that the 20<sup>th</sup> century experience of two world wars and two totalitarian systems revealed the sinister face of modernity and became the beginning of mistrust towards all social utopias envisioning fundamental changes in the structure of a nation's functioning. In Poland, after 1989, all attempts to discriminate individuals who did not subscribe themselves to the utopian image of the state created by prominent politicians faced social resistance.

When a utopia ends, melancholy returns, a sign that the productive abilities of an individual are exhausted.<sup>5</sup> A melancholic thus is a modern subject experiencing permanent sadness and postmodern spleen; someone who drifts in the city space, which closes in about him, increasing the feeling of alienation. The constantly modernising world makes melancholics close themselves in their conscious experience of the loss.<sup>6</sup> A lack of control over the changing reality only increases the internal void. Instead of enjoying life (according to the *carpe diem* philosophy), the characters under the sinister influence of Saturn worry about life's evanescence. Their existence, speaking metaphorically, seems to be suspended between the past and the future.

In some of the latest Polish realist prose,<sup>7</sup> the motif of melancholy is popular: it stems, among other reasons, from the disappointment with the dominant consumer life style. The source of the deepening sadness enveloping these literary figures is not only their solitary existence in a metropolis, and a struggle to survive, for example, in the structures of a corporation. Rather, the major problem is the construction of one's modern identity, given the rapid transformations taking place in the postmodern world. In times of globalisation, in which cultural borders blur, existence seems highly problematic because the homogenous image of identity that traditionally had kept the world in order has been distorted.<sup>8</sup> As a result of this, loss of identity and social disintegration seem to be the norm.

In post-1989 Poland, the progressing economic transformation and rapid development of capitalism resulted in many individual utopian projects of quick careers and life in prosperity. Capitalism, as Przemysław Czapliński rightly put it, became a modern religion in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> The unquenchable hunger for consumption can partly be explained by the fact that in the communist era, basic products were scarce. Undeniably, large part of the society decided to participate in a rat race, concentrating on private, material matters and denying more spiritual aspects of life. The world of culture

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> M. Bieńczyk, *Melancholia. O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty*, Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2012, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> I mean here works published after 2010.

<sup>8</sup> T. Paleczny, *Socjologia tożsamości*, preface Z. Mach, Kraków: Krakowskie Towarzystwo Edukacyjne – Oficyna Wydawnicza AFM, 2008, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> P. Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2009, p. 34.

– understood in its broadest sense – started to resemble a cultural hypermarket<sup>10</sup> with general, unlimited access to its products. The postmodern reality, as Agnieszka Trzeźniewska rightly claims, “has the characteristics of a space steeped in instant culture, in which everything is standardised and pleasure-oriented.”<sup>11</sup> The increasing number of retail chains, fast food chains or popular car makes contributed to the formation of a new concept of reality resembling “a global village,” in which linguistic, religious and racial barriers blur.<sup>12</sup> The progressing “McDonaldization” of society led to a new routine in human behaviour, concentrated on the triad: new experiences – pleasure – speed.<sup>13</sup> Direct access to the newest trends influences the formation of modern normative models that seem unescapable in a consumer society and this pressure ultimately overwhelms individuals who do not fit into the set cultural model. Consequently, the postmodern world requires a man:

To have [...] an attractive job, an athletic body, the ability to cook, [...] and to be successful with women, have an off-beat hobby (surfing in summer, skateboarding in winter, bungee jumping, playing cricket, poker, Bourbon and a cigar up to the late morning hours), love children, read fairy tales to them at bedtime, possess brilliant *ars amandi*, be good at computers, know four languages [...] have huge biceps, be more handsome than the devil and be a handy-man.<sup>14</sup>

#### A modern woman is impeccable:

[She] weighs less than 55 kg, has big tits [...] long, hairless legs [...], hips less than 90 cm wide, waist below 63 cm, no cellulite, knows the newest fashion trends, has a “Cosmo” subscription, no stretch marks after pregnancy [...], no gag reflex when changing diapers, Palmers or at least Triumph underwear, two female friends, one of whom is a journalist and smokes, goes to a regular gay hairstylist, and visits a spa, where she enjoys special treatment and has a 30% discount; she has an iPad, is knowledgeable about painting and has a partner looking like Brad Pitt.<sup>15</sup>

The created modern utopian models become the source of obsessions and anxieties in our contemporary society, because the criteria introduced seem to be unattainable. They are particularly harmful for women, who are expected to have impeccable bodies and skilfully divide their time between private (family and friends) and professional life. Men, on the other hand, have to be experts in all fields, including the professional sphere, where a well-paid job provides the means for a sophisticated, snobbish hobby. In consumer society a significant role is played by the “immortal” body; both women and men struggle constantly with the process of ageing. Undoubtedly the obsession with a perfect, young body corresponds with the postulate of our post-Christian era, rejecting the traditional dualistic

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<sup>10</sup> T. Paleczny, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> A. Trzeźniewska, “Człowiek w sieci ‘kultury instant’. O powieści Dawida Kaina ‘Za pięć rewolta’,” *Literacje* 2013, No. 2 (29), p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> T. Paleczny, op. cit., p. 134,

<sup>13</sup> A. Trzeźniewska, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> P. C, *Pokolenie Ikea*, Gdynia: Novae Res – Wydawnictwo Innowacyjne, 2012, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

division into body and soul. In postmodern society, immortality – once a characteristic of the soul - has been transferred over to the body, reflecting the narcissistic structure of contemporary society:<sup>16</sup> youth becomes the superior value in life. The constant pressure of the environment and one's inability to meet the imposed normative patterns often cause depression in individuals. According to the author of *Pokolenie Ikea* (2012),<sup>17</sup> Piotr C., a woman should get married at the age of 25, because that age is “ideal for procreation.”<sup>18</sup> At the contemporary vanity fair a woman over 40 is a “piece of junk,” whose “expiry date is nearing.”<sup>19</sup> For a man, on the other hand, the best age to get married is 39.5, when he reaches “a zen state.”<sup>20</sup> Majka, one of the characters of *Pokolenie Ikea*, feels the pressure of passing time and, observing the consumer life style, states: “Nothing makes sense. Life does not make sense.”<sup>21</sup> Self-reflection makes her realise that the existence she leads is schematic, concentrated only on work and repaying debts. To forget about the unbearable heaviness of being, Majka escapes into hedonistic, accidental and mechanical sex. “Czarny” (Black), the protagonist of *Pokolenie Ikea*, limits his life motto to four words: “Education. Copulation. Senility. Death.”<sup>22</sup> The denial of any metaphysical aspect inscribed into the human existence makes the characters fall into depression. This state of depression is aggravated when disappointment hits once the promises of the American dream of being rich and happy reveal themselves as empty. Day after day, the characters in *Pokolenie Ikea* lose themselves in destructive addictions rather than trying to make sense of the world surrounding them. The matter of maturity becomes a key problem, and so do the ways of exploring and experiencing the world. Treating their own lives as somebody else's project, Piotr C.'s characters experience an inconsistency of self, which increases their feelings of estrangement. As postmodern inhabitants of a large metropolis, they do not take advantage of occasional moments of internal awakening. Rather, they escape from contemporaneity, their existence seems to be lived somewhere alongside, if not outside of them: this resembles Czapliński's “strategy of a retiree,”<sup>23</sup> according to which an individual's life is subordinated to a pre-established routine.

<sup>16</sup> See: Ch. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York, London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991.

<sup>17</sup> The narrator of *Pokolenie Ikea* is a representative of contemporary thirty-year-olds, who work in large corporations and take part in the so-called “rat race.” Their jobs do not give them satisfaction, being only a way to earn money to pay their credits back. Their routine, monotonous existence does not let them enjoy life. One of the assets of the novel is the language used by the characters. It is a compilation of clichés and slogans borrowed from the coaching discourse.

<sup>18</sup> P. C, op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, pp. 98–99.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>23</sup> P. Czapliński, *Efekt bierności. Literatura w czasie normalnym*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2004, p. 74.

The problem of inertia and deepening melancholy among the thirty-year-olds can also be found in Anna Klara Majewska's novel *Melanżeria* (2016).<sup>24</sup> Here, disappointment with the consumer life style is presented over the span of the last forty years, which is of particular significance in the context of the political and economic transformations taking place in Poland. The protagonists of *Melanżeria* are young people who spent their childhood in the gloomy times of the communist era, dreaming of the luxury products available in the West (like a perfumed eraser). After 1989 the protagonists surrendered to the unquenchable hunger for consumption, which then became a compensation for the bygone times of carefree childhood. It emerges that the excitement over the opportunities that the capitalist system gives is rather delusive. Despite rapid career development, Iza, Anita and Tomek experience an inner void. Anita finds herself in a marriage of convenience, longing for a different world and bored with her routine existence. Iza suffers from permanent loneliness. Her sadness is intensified by her relatives, who perceive the world according to the normative patriarchal model into which the protagonist does not fit. As a single person, Iza hates seasonal celebrations because, as an unmarried person, she feels "flawed."<sup>25</sup> She feels the inner void also in the spring, when "nothing hurts so much as May without love."<sup>26</sup> The readers' attention is drawn to the wardrobe in Iza's flat, where she collects clothes for new-borns. That place in Majewska's novel becomes a symbol of the protagonist's subconscious, carefully hiding objects associated with motherhood, which Iza still dreams of and society still expects from her. Tomasz's hedonistic life turns out to be a melancholic one, as well. Like a 19th century dandy, he surrounds himself with beautiful objects. His existence, like Anita's, concentrates on casual sex and shopping in posh European shops.

Boredom becomes the curse of postmodern society; hence it should be fought, for instance, by the creation of an image of a "fake" happy life, a life full of attractions yet deprived of any reflection. The condition of boredom is of particular significance in an individual's life, because it forces people "to pose the most important questions about the nature of the world and man, it is a mirror in which each of us should see their reflection."<sup>27</sup> The protagonists of *Melanżeria* avoid boredom and thus subconsciously resign

<sup>24</sup> Majewska's novel presents the story of three young people who met in Warsaw in the 1990s. Tomasz is a gay playboy, accustomed to living in luxuries. He spent a few years in Italy as a kept man. He was running a company, together with Brajan, which organised various events; later on he opened a restaurant. Iza works in a cosmetic company. Despite the well-paid job, she suffers from loneliness, struggles with numerous complexes. Anita, diplomats' daughter, married for money. Unhappy in her marriage, she gets involved in numerous affairs, falling into addictions.

<sup>25</sup> A.K. Majewska, *Melanżeria*, Warszawa: Wielka Litera, 2016, p. 101.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>27</sup> P. Śniedziewski, *Melancholijne spojrzenie*, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2011, p. 158.

from reflection over the purpose of their existence. Tomek and Anita cannot accept the fact that ageing and death are inscribed in everyone's existence. Focusing only on the positive aspects connected with the hedonistic consumer life style proves to be a delusive experience, which only increases the fear of ageing.

The protagonists of Majewska's novel awaken only when confronted with Tomek's fatal disease, realising how ephemeral their existence is. It is the beginning of re-evaluation of their lives, as well as of growing criticism towards Western culture propagating models of young, happy people, whose life motto is "be yourself." The protagonists of *Melanzeria* are defeated by Greek *hybris*, the illusion that one's existence is based on bodily pleasures only. Tomek's illness changes the life styles of Anita and Iza as well: Iza decides to fight her inner demons ("Come back to the living, enough of this self-flagellation").<sup>28</sup> Anita's existence, however, becomes chaotic: she grows ever more fearful of illness and death, which so far have been absent from her life. The mechanism of denial is no longer effective in defending herself against a painful confrontation with reality. Anita had existed in a world of illusion, which becomes apparent in her exclamation: "Our friends cannot simply die like that. You just don't do that!"<sup>29</sup> Although she would like to help her dying friend, she is afraid of visiting him in hospital, because she avoids contact with terminally ill people. Her internal awakening from the American dream is a bitter experience. In an attempt to help Tomek, Anita tries to bring coherence and harmony back into of her own existence. A conversation with her husband, who criticises her life philosophy, becomes a turning point:

If he is your friend and if his condition is so serious, as you say, maybe you should finally go and see him in that hospital? [...] You know, we are always afraid of the things unknown. And instead of getting to know them, facing them, taming the monster, we come up with ridiculous excuses, theories, reasons why we do not do it. We deceive ourselves, get deeper and deeper into a lie, and it is a strategic mistake. Do you know why? Because the truth is predictable, simple, manageable, and a lie is not. A lie always leads to bankruptcy, both material and emotional.<sup>30</sup>

Anita's husband made her realise that she could not constantly exist in a lie: Unreflectively following the popular ideal of youth is no longer viable in the traumatic situations which every adult has to face. The discrepancy between imagined reality and the real world increases the feeling of melancholy, sadness and apathy in Anita. In the face of her friend's death the protagonist notices the emptiness of her own existence, which she so far has filled with shopping in expensive shops and her numerous affairs.

The dynamic development of capitalism contributed, among others, to the deepening of economic gaps between members of the society. The growing disproportions between the rich and the poor became the source

<sup>28</sup> A.K. Majewska, op. cit., p. 194.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

of disappointment with the consumer life style, especially among people struggling not only for a decent life, but also for survival. That problem is touched upon in the novel *Za pięć rewolta* (2011)<sup>31</sup> by Dawid Kain.<sup>32</sup> The world of the Warsaw men of means is demoralised, concentrated on hedonistic pleasures only, deprived of a deeper reflection on the purpose of human existence. The gloomy reality of Warsaw in Kain's novel resembles the world created by Michel Houellebecq in *Platform* (2001), in which petty bourgeois, bored with their routine daily existence, start a profitable business connected with sex tourism in Thailand. Kain similarly shows the destructive dimension of capitalism, where excess and glut lead to pathological behaviour. In the postmodern society presented in *Za pięć rewolta* a dangerous sect appears, preaching contempt for human existence. Under the influence of a forbidden film entitled *A tomb is the prize*, some of the characters carry out a massacre, aimed at freeing their loved ones from excessive suffering. In a conversation with his beloved, the main character states: "We are dead."<sup>33</sup> The man compares the existence of the young people to a burning cigarette:

We are also burned by some internal fire, we are burning out quickly and turning into smoke, into ash. For some time an invisible hand of some crazy god is squeezing us between his fingers. Time after time, that guy up there is inhaling and sucks out of us what is best, most valuable, and finally extinguishes us in an ashtray, where the remains of our ancestors are still smouldering.<sup>34</sup>

That metaphor, maintained in the spirit of 19th century Decadent thought, accurately reflects the situation of the contemporary young generation taking part in the rat race. Sławek notices the evanescence of human existence. His anxiety is amplified by the fact that as a young man he falls into melancholy, unable to take up any action to change his life. He assumes, in advance, that his existence is doomed to fail. The protagonist is overtaken by postmodern spleen. In a conversation with a journalist he states:

The contemporary times are as stupid as the past. The future will be even more stupid, fortunately without me. [...] All that is happening is a long, boring history, which will continue to flow hundreds of years after our disappearance.<sup>35</sup>

Alicja, Sławek's girlfriend, also suffers from melancholy. Having lost the illusion of an immediate career, she falls into permanent depression:

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<sup>31</sup> In Kain's novel there are two male protagonists: Sławek, wearing a hamburger costume, advertises a fast food network; Tomek is an influential copywriter, who invents events for "A Truer Truth" portal. Looking for a way out of their monotonous, routine existence, Sławek enters a sect, whose members convince him that reality is a prison and human bodies are prison cells made of bones and meat. Tomek, on the other hand, finds out that in his hometown somebody committed an actual crime, the first one in centuries.

<sup>32</sup> For more about that novel see: A. Trzeźniewska, op. cit., p. 59–63.

<sup>33</sup> D. Kain, *Za pięć rewolta*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Nisza, 2011, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

Alicja had great plans. All should have turned out differently. There was to be a peak, but instead there is a lack of future prospects and constant failures. She graduated from a really good school and really tried hard, constantly ready for more, she took up every task with passion, but she always lacked one thing – money. So, day by day, her revulsion for the world was increasing, like a spiky stem in her throat, life was nauseating with its urge to satisfy everybody else's needs, but hers. [...] She'd rather read than exist.<sup>36</sup>

The protagonist of *Za pięć rewolta* sinks into destructive sadness, avoids company, withdraws herself. An introvert specimen of *homo melancholicus*, disappointed with the consumer life style, she becomes apathetic and restrained in the expression of her emotions.<sup>37</sup> Kain creates a study of the pathological condition of estrangement of contemporary thirty-year olds, who due to their routine existence experience an unbearable heaviness of being.

It is very interesting that the motif of melancholy appeared in the prose writers in their thirties, who, recollecting their youth, try to accept their past, lost time. Until recently, in most cases the melancholic subject in literature has been as an elderly person, loaded with rich life experience, who at the end of their existence tries to summarise [e.g. in *Ostatnie rozdanie* (2013) by Wiesław Myśliwski or in Witold Gombrowicz's *Kronos* (2013)]. It turns out that due to the accelerated pace of life in the 21st century, people in their thirties and forties come to conclusions concerning the transience of human existence, similar to those formerly characteristic for the works of elderly writers. That problem is, for example, touched upon by Daniel Radecki in his novel *Wszyscy jesteście hipsterami* (2016).<sup>38</sup>

The narrator is a thirty-year-old man, referred to as Pilgrim, who having completed his higher education in Lublin, moves back to live in the country. The author uses first-person narration, thus creating the impression of an intimate journal in which a detailed analysis of the protagonist's mental condition is recorded. The man, recollecting the times of his youth, organises the events from the past, and writing itself becomes the key process of his self-therapy.<sup>39</sup> The melancholic's world seems "defragmented," and the process of recording the past is one of the ways of saving the slipping by *imponderabilia*.<sup>40</sup> Characterising his friends, the narrator "records on pieces of paper people's fleeting stories,"<sup>41</sup> thus giving into his melancholic urge to describe their youth. Writing itself

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> See: A. Mazur, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>38</sup> The novel is set in a small town in the region of Lublin. The narrator comes back to his hometown to participate in his friend's wedding. The places he visits trigger reflections concerning his childhood spent with a bunch of friends. The reunion which gets organised becomes not only a moment of auto-reflection upon the narrator's own life, but also a confrontation of two worlds: the metropolis and the provinces.

<sup>39</sup> See: A. Mazur, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> D. Radecki, *Wszyscy jesteście hipsterami*, Gdynia: Wydawnictwo Novae Res, 2016, p. 164.



is vital for the melancholic, because it is a painful moment of “gaining awareness of the loss.”<sup>42</sup> The narrative begins with Pilgrim’s friend’s wedding in a provincial small town – meeting his childhood friend becomes an impulse to describe his youth.

Radecki glorifies the youth lost. Recollecting meetings with people close to him, the narrator recalls his youthful ideals of life, resembling romantic associations of friends, for whom openness, sincerity and closeness were the highest moral values.<sup>43</sup> For the narrator friendship and common activities are fundamental for maintaining inner harmony.

We were all young, and we believed that we would succeed, get a career, get married, earn big money, and – despite all that, we would stick together and always help each other. [...] When we become teachers, IT specialists, engineers, journalists, doctors, successful politicians or businessmen, still we will meet at least once a year at Chernobyl.<sup>44</sup>

The narrator’s generation is conscious that they grew up in the times of system transformation, which adds to their feelings of distinctiveness. Chernobyl is a local bar, and synonym of their happy youth. Recalling this symbol of happiness a number of times, the narrator misses the years he has already lived through. In that longing, in Arthur Schopenhauer’s words, an individual is deceived by “the time disguised for space.”<sup>45</sup> A meeting at Chernobyl will not bring back the lost youth, it is only an illusion: with the passing of time everybody changes, matures, and sometimes breaks up with their youthful ideals.

The narrator, a typical melancholic, lives in the past, always pondering on it and thus forgetting about the present. He takes up no activity which would lead to a change in his current life style. It seems that the protagonist has accepted the postmodern “strategy of a retiree” mentioned above: he treats his own existence as a cycle of routine activities which cannot be disturbed. The lingering in passivity is disquieting:

Many people go to church, worship God in various forms, fight for the rights of the silent ones. Others love man, always man and only man. They want social order, great liberation and a march towards wellbeing. They do not know their destination. They just want to go. Others, submerged in melancholy, flounce about in variations of “I.” And they are waiting. For love, for success, for friends. Nobody is knocking. The gate remains locked.<sup>46</sup>

But we are also waiting for non-material things. For change. For the love of our life. For stability. For our time. For peace and quiet. For the moment when “no” will be implied by a natural reaction, not the power of will. For the results of our earlier actions. For happiness. For fulfilment. For an improvement. For returns. And for death.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See: P. Śniedziewski, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>43</sup> See: D. Siwicka, *Romantyzm 1822-1863*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2002, p. 10–11.

<sup>44</sup> D. Radecki, op. cit., pp. 14, 27.

<sup>45</sup> A. Schopenhauer, *Aforyzmy o mądrości życia* [*Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life*], translated into Polish by J. Garewicz, Warszawa: “Czytelnik”, 1990, p. 196.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

Melancholics are disappointed with the mundane style of life; they are passively waiting for a change. Existing in solitude, they lead an alternative, extremely rich spiritual life. Additionally, the place of living negatively influences their mood. Living in the country is:

A quiet retirement home, a death house of generations and a funeral house of the dreams of one's greatness. [...] Towns filled with the voices of the absent ones – Jews, emigrants, doomed soldiers and guerrillas of various options – rich in silence, oblivion and peace. Birthplaces of hundreds of talents, most of which have been wasted. The reasons are usually the same: alcohol, drugs, unprotected sex, being stuck in one place, sloth.<sup>48</sup>

The countryside in Radecki's novel is inhabited by people who have given up their dreams. It is a space which kills creativity, originality, individualism. The inhabitants feel "a spiritual burden connected with the experience of immobility, futile sadness and hopelessness."<sup>49</sup> After a few years their existence has become unified and all actions are directed towards routinisation only.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, inhabitants of the country distance themselves from their former dreams which they treat as a fad. Despite subordinating themselves to the principle that in normal life we should not change anything, the melancholics of the early 21st century have a vital problem with defining their own identity:

The filter of reality makes us look at the clock more and more frequently, scrape together the money earned hard, guzzle only up to a certain hour and avoid looking into the mirror, as not to get scared by a stranger's reflection [...] We dismiss our old dreams with a smile; we keep at a necessary distance from crazy ideas. Maybe we would like to be different, but well, ... that is life. [...] We, people of the 21st century, capable of breaking atoms and sending our representatives into space, and still unable to know ourselves. [...] Looking for fixed points, losing the essence, the little things that constitute the phenomenon of each of us and do not match in any way the stone features of a monument.<sup>51</sup>

Radecki compares life in the country with existence in a metropolis. Lilla, the narrator's friend, states:

I have a flat here, a good job, friends and, first of all, I like this city. I like this absurd Palace of Culture, the beach by the Vistula river, this city constantly breaking down, hipsters and employees of the corporate world. [...] Work is a supplement to the human being. That's what Warsaw has taught me, although most people here come to the opposite conclusions.<sup>52</sup>

Life in the country and in the capital is different not only in economic terms, but in mental terms as well. Lilla, unlike the narrator, has got adjusted to the dynamic rhythm of the city, in which she sees opportunities for development. As a mature person, she did not succumb to uncritical euphoria; she is capable of separating her private life from her professional life.

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<sup>48</sup> D. Radecki, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>49</sup> Por. M. Tański, "Czas melancholii – czasem przemian (transgresji) czy czasem destrukcji?" *Przestrzenie Teorii* 2007, No. 7, p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> Por. P. Czapliński, *Efekt bierności...*, p. 65.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem, pp. 86–87.

<sup>52</sup> D. Radecki, op. cit., pp. 171, 173.

Together with dynamic technological developments, the mentality within society has changed, because, as Rafał Mazur writes, “we are living in the era of activities, quick decisions, deep challenges and cheerful consumerism, which let us take full advantage of the facilities of the global world.”<sup>53</sup> What is more, many people spend much of their lives in virtual reality, a projection of our dreams and desires for a better life. The narrator of *Wszyscy jesteście hipsterami* states:

We all would like to have an interesting life, exchange experiences, create the impression that we have succeeded in various areas. We want to see evanescence in some, stabilisation in others, confirm our views, boast about our achievements, both those less and more significant, give life advice. Flats, credits, children, cars, family trips. We display all that, in front of our house, in front of other people. We want to be better than we are and we naively believe that what we eventually leave behind us will be something more than blood, sweat, sperm and tears. We deprive ourselves of privacy, and gain access to other people’s secrets in return.<sup>54</sup>

Existence in the virtual world shows signs of exhibitionism, revealed in constant commenting and posting photographs confirming our (seemingly) happy life. The blurred borderline between virtual and non-virtual reality deepens the feeling of melancholy in people who are single and who frequently avoid human relations in the material world. That is why, as Dominika Oramus rightly puts it, computer networks have become a metaphor for the postmodern world.<sup>55</sup>

The concept of love created by pop culture turns out to be the source of postmodern apathy. Love is:

the highest goal of contemporary man, if we evoke pop culture ethos. It is present, with its all dimensions, in films, songs, the Internet and television, with inseparable attributes, sweet, naïve, careless, eternal and forgiving. [...] We can manage without it, which does not mean that at the moments of pain, doubt and loneliness we do not long for it. We are desperately looking for fulfilment, sense, prolongation of our existence. And we can find it only in another human being. Whom we love mainly for the fact that he or she exists.<sup>56</sup>

The image of pop culture love has quickly permeated into the social consciousness of young people, who started to search for the utopian model of an ideal candidate worthy of their love. The clichés concerning love, popularised by mass culture, have become an unattainable normative model, only increasing disappointment among sensitive individuals. When recalling his ex-girlfriend, the narrator of *Wszyscy jesteście hipsterami* himself lives in an illusion of such love.

In Radecki’s novel, the experience of melancholy is no longer “a thorny dilution of time,”<sup>57</sup> a period of apathy, weariness and motionlessness.

<sup>53</sup> R. Mazur, “O potrzebie smutku, czyli esej o melancholii i myśleniu w czasach szybkiej radości”, *Fragile. Pismo Kulturalne* 2015, No. 4 (30), pp. 10–12.

<sup>54</sup> D. Radecki, op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>55</sup> D. Oramus, *O pomieszaniu gatunków. Science fiction a postmodernizm*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2010, p. 17.

<sup>56</sup> D. Radecki, op. cit., p. 178.

<sup>57</sup> M. Tański, op. cit., p. 69.

Instead, it gains a positive meaning, because it becomes an expression of respect towards the complexity of the world.<sup>58</sup> Having regained his former love, the protagonist reintegrates into his world, which turns out to be stable and essential. What is more, he says the key words confirming his inner maturity: "Fulfilment means no urge to look back."<sup>59</sup> Pilgrim, integrating his past with the present, no longer feels the unbearable heaviness of life. The experience of melancholy becomes a transgressional experience. The protagonist is aware of the fact that human beings cannot fully get to know or decipher the world that surrounds them, the emotional sphere in particular.<sup>60</sup>

Let us now turn our attention to the titles of the novels discussed here, as they represent instant culture and the glorification of a carefree existence, both deprived of reflection and focused on constant consumption instead. Life is ephemeral, and that is why a postmodern version of *carpe diem* becomes the main slogan. Its hedonistic dimension is reflected in multiple "melanges" – parties with plenty of alcohol (*Melanzeria* – "Melangery"), following the newest trends in fashion to create an original image. That style is the reverse side of the everyday, monotonous existence, typical for the middle class, for whom being online is the priority (*Pokolenie Ikea* – "The Ikea Generation"). All forms of rebellion against conventions or normative models revealed in formation, for example, of subcultures or artistic bohemia seem illusive, because their representatives also participate in the constant process of consumption<sup>61</sup> (*Za pięć rewolta* – "Five minutes to a revolt").

The motif of melancholy in Polish realist prose of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is directly connected with the issues of the identity and maturity of the protagonists. *Homo melancholicus* exists in a world in which "everything that is solid dissolves in the air,"<sup>62</sup> which greatly complicates existence, because individuals frequently cannot define their own identity, both individually and collectively. As a result, such melancholics frequently treat their own lives as somebody else's project, resulting in an inconsistency of self-image and a feeling of estrangement. A lack of self-reflection makes the protagonists feel the unbearable heaviness of their own existence, and a hedonistic lifestyle becomes an ostensible antidote.

In the latest realist prose a reflection on the subject of passing appears among thirty-year-olds, who lose illusions of quick careers which were to ensure (apparent) happiness. That condition is experienced by both

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> D. Radecki, op. cit., p. 267.

<sup>60</sup> M. Tański, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>61</sup> I am writing more extensively about it in an article "Hipsterzy w lustrze dekadentów," *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. Prace Literackie* 2016, No. 56, edited by M. Ursel, pp. 103–112.

<sup>62</sup> See: M. Bermann, „Wszystko, co stałe, rozplywa się w powietrzu”. *Rzecz o doświadczeniu nowoczesności*, trans. M. Szuster, Introduction A. Bielik-Robson, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2006.

inhabitants of big cities (such as Warsaw), and by those who live in the small towns of the Lublin region. Recollections of the past, whose roots can be found in the times of communist Poland, turn out to be a type of self-therapy. Melancholics notice that their life is fragmented, deformed, resembling a jigsaw puzzle, which is to be put together again to form a whole. The progressing depersonalisation and problems connected with defining one's identity make the protagonists wander about in a maze, looking for an exit, metaphorically identified with saving the ephemeral imponderabilia. The experience of melancholy turns out to be an experience of transgression, in the result of which man can find himself through accepting the complexity of the world.<sup>63</sup>

Translated by Elżbieta Rokosz

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<sup>63</sup> See: M. Tański, op. cit., p. 74.

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