

THE EVOCATION, OR THE LITERARY BACKGROUND

A society (nation) wishing to explore the truth has still another means at its disposal, albeit one approached rather suspiciously, namely, literature. Continuing his argument quoted above, Mackiewicz adds: “Why, then, not limit yourself to the document itself? Why additionally use a novel? It seems to me that it is to express this truth in its entirety. For how else can we not only present things in another form, but also express the spiritual side (*Geist*), the emotional side of past events? Which is not only the other half of documentary truth, but sometimes even the more important one. It will not be replaced by even the most precise, albeit dry set of facts.”¹⁶

It is worth noting that, according to Mackiewicz, the best way to show existential truth (in its spiritual, emotional or experiential aspect) is embedding it in a literary work. Only literature has means, such as evocation or imagery, which enable not only cognitive, but also polysensory communication. Only thanks to literature can personal testimony, personal experience and, in particular, the document be passed on to be co-experienced.

The two quotations I will use will illustrate the above thesis. The first one comes from Mackiewicz’s monograph about Katyn, the second from *Road to Nowhere*.

I shook my head and stood watching. Before me lay the opened pit, and at the bottom of it, layers and layers, packed tightly like sardines in a tin—corpses. Uniforms and overcoats—Polish uniforms—“Sam Browne” belts, buttons, boots, ruffled hair on the skulls, now and then a mouth open in a distorted gasp. The rain had stopped by now, and a pale sun thrust through the branches of the pines. Tit-pi-tit! The little bird raised its voice in joy. The sun shone right into the bottom of the pit, and for a second glinted on a golden tooth which stuck out from an open mouth of one of the corpses. They had forgotten to knock out that one... Tit-pi-tit! It was ghastly! Arms and legs entangled, everything pressed down as if by a roller. Row after row, faded and dead, hundreds and hundreds of innocent defenseless soldiers. A *Virtuti Militari* Cross on the breast of a body in the top row, with its head pressed under the boot of a comrade. The next one lay face downwards, still in his cap, which was an exception. All the others in overcoats, their shapes scarcely discernible in that sticky, slimy mass. Mass! A word beloved in the Soviet Union!¹⁷

It reminds me of the pond that belonged to my father-in-law, God rest him. It was a small pond. I still remember when I came out at dawn and looked at the water and it was as blue as frozen fingers; the night turned pink... and later on fine days it became clearer and clearer, till at noon if the sun was out, it would shine like a monstenance.... When it fell into shadow it became as green as a leaf, and in the

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 335.

¹⁷ Mackiewicz, *The Katyn Wood Murders*, 147.

evenings it was different again.... When it rained the pond looked like lead; it was dull and heavy. Now if something were to happen which caused that pond to be like lead at dawn, and like lead in the midday sun, and like lead in the glow of sunset, as well as being like lead in the rain, if it were always the same leaden color and you knew that it would never change, then I for one wouldn't want to live near such a pond, not even if it were full of fish, not even if I could catch them in my hands.

It does not take a skilled literary eye to recognize the above excerpts as Mackiewicz's first attempts at literary writing or to notice not only the cognitive, but also the emotional, pictorial, and experiential character of his text. In fact, we are dealing here with literature at its best, where communicative aspects are combined seamlessly with elements of artistic language. The immensity of the Soviet crime and the grayness of life in the communist system are expressed by means of a polysensory evocation, which—insofar as it is possible in language—brings us closer not only to dry facts, but above all, to their pictorial and existential dimension.

For Mackiewicz, the most important mission of literature was transmission of anthropological knowledge, that is, the knowledge of man, in particular that provided in the twentieth century, which abounded in new, often extreme or limit situations. According to the author of the *Road to Nowhere*, the literary ideal consists in writing which, on the one hand, is—like science—sensitive to factual detail and, on the other, remains close to man owing to the author's use of his personal testimony, experience, and, above all, literary evocation of the world.