

## ABSTRACT

### *Asceticism, Acrobatics, Alethurgy: Conversion Techniques in the Works of Waldemar Bawolek, Marek Bieńczyk and Andrzej Stasiuk*

This dissertation attempts to discover and analyse conversion techniques in the works of Waldemar Bawolek, Marek Bieńczyk and Andrzej Stasiuk. The study applies the post-Nietzschean concepts of self-creation, primarily Michel Foucault's formula of "technologies of the Self" (based on stoic, epicurean and kynical practices of caring for oneself) and to Peter Sloterdijk's anthropotechnics. On the one hand, the narratives of these prose writers have been interpreted as stories of subjects' transformations into new, more authentic forms of themselves, and on the other, as a medium of such conversions. According to the conversion model proposed in the dissertation, conversion is not an answer to a metaphysical call. The imperative of life change arises here from a subjective sense of being limited and deformed by external, formative powers. Conversion thus appears to be primarily an escape from an inert identity shaped by social principles of subjectivation. In opposition to a firmly determined, closed model of identity, in reference to Foucault, the dissertation proposes a concept of a literary subject (referred to by the reflexive pronoun "Self"), a processual, non-essential, self-fashioned entity, subject to constant conversions.

In relation to classic studies on autobiography and autofiction, the dissertation assumes that autofictional prose develops a specific type of subject that is particularly prone to conversions. As mentioned in the *Introduction*, in such narratives, a fictionalisation of the biographical matter is often part of the subject's conversion, understood as turning from a false self to an authentic one. Therefore, the subject matter of the research consists of works by writers who use the autofictional narrative mode repeatedly, consistently, and in a variety of ways. The selected authors construct a series of texts in which a constant, transformative dialogue is established between their autobiographical facts and fictional elements. Waldemar Bawolek, Marek Bieńczyk and Andrzej Stasiuk belong to the same generation of Polish writers (born around 1960, debuting in the 1990s). This shared experience of historical time is significant, particularly in the context of anachoretic motives in their real biographies and their narratives, which is related to systematically repeated (both by them and their characters) acts of secession from collective forms of life and pursuit of private heterotopias.

In the first chapter of the dissertation, a theoretical model of literary conversions (the conversion triangle) has been developed, drawing on Foucault's and Sloterdijk's concepts of modern, despiritualised ascetic practices as methods of self-fashioning. Conversions of

numerous contemporary literary subjects are assumed to occur in repetitive cycles of transformation, which begin from **ascetic** practice – exercises performed by mutilated, limited, incomplete selves. This is followed by the **acrobatic** phase of conversion – an abrupt release of energy in a gesture of escape from the subjugating, restrictive forms of living. Finally, the subjects become transformed beings, existences that actualise themselves as their hypothetical existence (“the other selves”). From the other self’s perspective, the subject discovers its true nature: being indefinite, devoid of substance, changeable, an outsider who permanently escapes from imposed, restrictive forms of living. Within the literary conversion practices, this discovery is linked with the activation of **alethurgy**, consisting of continual unearthing and renegotiating the truth about oneself, which takes place in a sphere of tensions between the secessionist position of an acrobat and a socially-constructed, inert identity. The following three chapters test this model. Waldemar Bawolek’s works are used to exemplify literary ascetic techniques. Marek Bieńczyk’s writing is presented as an acrobatic phenomenon. Alethurgical themes are highlighted in Andrzej Stasiuk’s prose. Such a construction of the dissertation does not mean that it is impossible to distinguish all three phases of the conversion process (asceticism, acrobatics, and alethurgy) in the individual works of the three authors. Consequently, each chapter, alongside its main theme, outlines crucial elements of the complete conversion cycle.

The second chapter proposes reading Waldemar Bawolek’s works in the context of the kynical ascetic model (“the other life”), as it was described by Foucault. The first section of the chapter commences with an analysis of Bawolek’s reception and artistic biography, conducted in light of his autofictional narratives. In connection with the concept of the sylleptic subject, an attempt was made to read Bawolek’s prose as both a product of writing practice and a medium of personal transformations. By adopting such a double perspective, the study argues that autofictional instances in Bawolek’s prose are designed for the author’s self-fashioning; literary personages practice asceticism in the author’s name and in his stead. The kynical practice of “the other life” presented in Bawolek’s works (based on principles of shamelessness, poverty, vigilance and sovereignty) can be perceived simultaneously as a product of the fiction and as a real-life practice, which is a consequence of the dual status of autofictional subjects. Moreover, the chapter reveals the transformative power of the interdiscursive relationship between the ideal of kynical life in its classic, Diogenesian form, and the ethical pattern emerging from the entire body of Bawolek’s work.

In the third chapter, devoted to acrobatic techniques in Marek Bieńczyk’s prose, an attempt was made to explain how his initially two-handed (academic and literary) writing evolved into

a hybrid, multi-genre essay formula. In light of Sloterdijk's concept of theoretical life (*bios theoreticos*), this evolution was presented as an expression of Bieńczyk's reserve for the coherence and objectivity of academic discourses and for the "lethargic" personality of the academic. This approach is articulated by the increasing appearance of subjective, autofictional personas in Bieńczyk's essays. His literary subjects are placed in heterotopic spaces of acrobatic activism (an alternative to the lethargic attitude of *homo theoreticus*). Furthermore, the structure of Bieńczyk's essays and his micro-genres (a "fugue" and a "container") were analysed. The study demonstrates that the construction of Bieńczyk's essays corresponds to his unstable, multiform, relocating selves. The form of the essay reflects a character of training practises performed by Bieńczyk's autofictional subjects. A separate section of the chapter is devoted to the interdiscursivity of Bieńczyk's prose. This part concludes that the acrobatic dimension of autofictional selves is subordinated to the conversion principle, understood as a rapid transition from imprisonment (in language, theory, convention, genre, tradition) to temporary liberations – flights to spaces created by other artists.

The fourth chapter stems from a search for alethurgic conversion techniques in Andrzej Stasiuk's prose, i.e. for methods of transforming the subject by bringing to light the truth, as opposed to false truths of dominant power/knowledge discourses. Stasiuk's autobiographical confessions about his *anachoresis* (relocating from Warsaw to the remote province of the Low Beskids) set a context for interpreting conversion motives in his fictional and autofictional narratives. In this prose, conversion is not about a positive revelation of life sense but about undermining all predetermined meanings and elevating images of decline, disintegration, and nothingness to the rank of revelation. Stasiuk's alethurgical procedures question the legitimacy of predominant discourses of tradition and progress. The writer attempts to extract the "deep" meaning by removing layers of the false truths, the needless discursive "overburden". This "geological method" leads to negative revelations + epiphanies of nothingness – bringing Stasiuk's prose close to the apophatic tradition (particularly Emil Cioran's *via negativa*).

As the study concludes, the attempt to fit the selected autofictional narratives into the three dimensions of the conversion model (asceticism, acrobatics and alethurgy) proved that autofictional conversions are cyclical processes, constantly reproduced as a result of creative interactions between various incarnations of the self. Within the conversion cycle, the analysed subjects attempt to create new, authentic versions of themselves and reject all stable forms of identity. The dissertation demonstrates that the autofictional construction of the subjects (the selves' roaming between biography and fiction) and interdiscursivity (as a method of escaping from a stable identity) supports the self-replicating conversion process.

