



## Suffering and Writing: Autotherapeutic Functions of Some Polish Writers' Personal Diaries

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Those who suffer often reach for a pen. They keep daily notes, write letters, memoirs, create their own autobiography. In this short article I will only focus on the first case: keeping a personal diary in situations of suffering, pain or misfortune (in practice, they are often difficult to distinguish). Those who write about diaries note that descriptions of the states of happiness, joy, contentment or satisfaction can very rarely be found in diaries. At such moments, the diarist remains silent or limited to short, laconic records of what has been expressed by Stendhal in his famous sentence describing happiness as strange and unfamiliar to the diary: "I do not write the diary when I'm happy, because this insensitive analysis is harmful for happiness..."<sup>1</sup> Diaries often serve for their authors to discharge or compensate for their anxiety or depression, life crises, moments of confusion, apathy, loss of the meaning of life, and suicidal thoughts. The diary is a kind of rescue in a situation of loneliness, unhappy love, mental depression or physical illness.

Before I describe some autotherapeutic functions that personal diaries may have, first let me point out that I treat the personal diary as a written practice of commenting on one's everyday life (with three dimensions of this practice: pragmatic, textual and material).<sup>2</sup> My understanding of diaries is, first of all, based on Philippe Lejeune's works, to which I owe a great deal.<sup>3</sup> "Yet the diary is only secondarily a text or a literary genre," Lejeune notes. "Like correspondence, the diary is first and foremost an activity. Keeping a diary is a way of living before it is a way of writing."<sup>4</sup> Describing a diary as a practice, he underlines the importance of the motivations behind this practice as well as the functions and material dimensions of diaries. Listing several different functions that a diary may

serve, Lejeune demonstrates how a diary may positively affect the diarist's mental condition:

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Paper is a friend. If you treat a sheet of paper as your confidant you can release your emotions without burdening anybody else. Paper lets you freely voice your disappointments, anger, sadness and doubts as well as hopes and joys. [...] A diary contributes to some extent to social harmony and to internal balance of a human being. [...]

How to cope with a situation when you are confronted with severe hardship? How to transform your inside into a fortress where you can prepare for your struggle and gain strength? A diary may give you courage and support.<sup>5</sup>

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To start with, I will describe some common situations when a person is suffering and writing a diary at the same time. Firstly, I will focus on the periodic occurrence of entries associated with the experience of pain, despair, suffering or intense sadness in diaries kept for a long time (often throughout one's entire adult life). An example might be the diary of Zofia Nałkowska, an outstanding Polish writer who kept her diary for almost 60 years (from 1896 to 1954)—from the age of 12 until her death at 70. From the very beginning, in Nałkowska's diary we find records full of pessimism, doubt and sadness, which indubitably are a manifestation of the modernist atmosphere of the turn of the century and of the decadent style. It is significant that records of this kind do not disappear with the end of the *fin de siècle*, but instead they become a permanent feature of Nałkowska's existential condition and a consistent component of her diary. At the age of eighteen, nineteen, young Nałkowska notes:

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Excruciating sadness.

I have already got out [dug up] from the abyss of despair.

I dream about sad things. (...) Scary, boundless sadness.<sup>6</sup>

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Later, these states not only do not disappear but become increasingly frequent and intense. "Excruciating sadness" changes into "opening a window on insanity, madness," "huge emptiness," "horror", "fear," and repeatedly recurrent suicidal thoughts:

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The idea of suicide as the only solution is still rejected by me, but it is persistent. The idea that the world is hideous is persistent too. Ah, how to calm myself down, how to remain myself, to keep my old judgment about things of the world ...<sup>7</sup>

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If previously Nałkowska's idea of suicide was one of the elements of her modernist fascination with death, later it became a sign of a new human condition, shaped by the lack of permanent points of reference as determinants of the meaning of life and of the individual's place in the world. Thus in Nałkowska's diary we find many entries indicating that she is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, depression, mental illness:

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But my mental condition is unbearable. (...) And just then I fall into this bad mood, known to me anyway from various periods of my life, even from my youth. When I think about writing (...) a spasm of fear passes through my heart. It is the same with every project. I don't want anything, I'm afraid of everything. The persistent anxiety, even fear in the face of the phenomenon of life.<sup>8</sup>

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As we can see, experiencing a mental breakdown, Nałkowska is aware of the state she is in. This consciousness is associated with keeping a diary. Recording the state of "falling into this bad mood" offers in this case a possibility of rationalising this state and of mitigating the associated risks. In this sense, the diary fulfils its therapeutic function—if kept for years, it allows the diarist to maintain a relative mental balance.

In this article I also comment on situations where pain and suffering associated with specific causes, for example the death of a loved one—the mother, father, child, husband or wife—are accompanied by diary writing. An example is the diary of Tadeusz Różewicz, one of the greatest twentieth-century Polish poets, published in his book entitled *Mother Leaves*, made in 1957. Keeping a diary in this case accompanied the situation of his mother dying; this allowed Różewicz to become familiar day by day with a new situation that required a kind of abreaction:

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I'm at the bottom. (...). And yet ... I know that what I write makes no sense and has no value. But I cannot scream.<sup>9</sup>

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At that time, thanks to keeping a diary, Różewicz overcomes the discontinuity of life through the continuity of entries, which become a conversation with his dead mother:

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Mom, my darling. I lost because I had to lose, I'm miserable, unhappy and ridiculous. (...) Dear Mom, today is Monday. I'm sitting at home. (...) I will talk with you for a while. My Generous, Beloved Old Darling. I kiss your hands and eyes. I am talking to you.<sup>10</sup>

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Another very special situation where suffering and writing coexist is the keeping of diaries by people who experience depression, mental problems

or mental illness. The decision to keep a journal in such circumstances is either made by the person facing mental problems on his/her own or this activity is recommended by the doctor (frequently it is hard to say whether we deal with a mental disease, disorder or crisis). A good example of such practice is the diary of Jan Lechoń, an outstanding Polish poet, a member of the Scamander group before the Second World War, who during and after the war lived in New York. For the last seven years of his life (1949–1956), Lechoń kept a daily diary, as instructed by his doctor before the war. In his preface to the published version of Lechoń's diary, Roman Loth noted that the poet "has been suffering from nervous disorders since his childhood."<sup>11</sup> In his youth, he attempted suicide several times and he had sought help from doctors in psychiatric clinics and sanatoriums. It was one of these doctors who recommended Lechoń, ten years before the war, to keep a diary, to make writing a tool for pushing aside the evil thoughts and anxiety. Lechoń used this tool twenty years later, when his life began to fill with endless "bad nights and bad days." His mental problems now returned persistently, having their origins in the distance from his homeland combined with the awareness that the world of his youth, after five years of Nazi occupation followed by the new order imposed by the communists coming to power, was a world irretrievably lost. He also experienced, even more painfully, a bout of creative impotence and fear, caused by the inability to openly express his homosexual preferences, defined as criminal by the US law at the time. In this context, daily entries that Lechoń made in his journal can be treated as a kind of continuous struggle with himself, with the inner forces that lead to self-destruction. It was a fight "to keep in shape, to control himself."<sup>12</sup> As Maria Danielewiczowa aptly puts it at the end of her preface to the first edition of Lechoń's *Diary*, published in London: "It was a great and heroic 'struggle with himself,' continued for years, putting off the recurring bouts of despair, discouragement and weakness. If we assume that Lechoń—suffering from suicidal mania—eventually had to commit suicide, we must admit that he was postponing this moment by seeking rescue in religious practices and help from doctors, friends, and his diary. Lechoń's diary, if we read it this way, is a shocking and terrifying document."<sup>13</sup> Let me add here that in diaries we very often find entries demonstrating suicidal tendencies.<sup>14</sup> Quite often—as in the case of Lechoń—diary writing is finally interrupted by the suicide of the diarist. The last entry in the diary of Lechoń, made eight days before he committed a suicide, reads:

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One can always find in one's own intelligence, will or heart something that will help one in the struggle with life and with other people. For the struggle with oneself—there is only a prayer.<sup>15</sup>

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The relationship between a diary, its ending and suicidal death is pointed out by Philippe Lejeune in his paper entitled “How Do Diaries End?” writes:

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Perseverance and resignation: we find the same duo in suicide. A truly successful suicide is silent. It has no other language than the act itself as an enigmatic sign. But many suicides cling to life with a few words. [...] Seven texts in my anthology of diary endings involve suicides: three suicidal impulses or attempts on the part of adolescents, and four successful suicides by adults. The tragic conflict between the acceptance of life implied by writing and the refusal of life signified by suicide can be read in the different forms the diary endings take.<sup>16</sup>

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Of course, there are many other situations where suffering and writing are combined, for example, in diaries kept to endure a chronic, often terminal illness, such as cancer or AIDS. Diaries could also be very helpful in dealing with addiction to drugs or alcohol. Other types of diaries, strongly manifesting their therapeutic function, are diaries kept in prison, in hiding or in life-threatening situations. We know plenty of such diaries from World War II, written by Jews living in ghettos or in hiding outside ghettos, as well as by soldiers or civilians held in wartime camps or people living in occupied countries in daily fear for their lives.

To conclude, I would like to—very briefly, in seven points—describe how keeping a diary can have an autotherapeutic function.

Firstly, keeping a diary is a safe way of discharging destructive, dangerous emotions; it is a kind of a “safety valve” which allows the diarist to release his/her inner tension.

Secondly, a diary, by giving an opportunity to externalise the internal—often incomprehensible and dangerous—states, thoughts or feelings, enables the diarist to rationalise them, often even with a self-ironic, purifying distance. That is why diarists frequently write in the second or even the third person, which gives consolation or encouragement.

Thirdly, a diary is a kind of personal ritual. It makes it possible for the author to banish evil spirits (thoughts, states, emotions, etc.), to pass through periods of destabilisation (for example after the death of a loved one), or to start a new, reborn life. In general, a diary can often be regarded as a kind of private *rite de passage*.

Fourthly, a diary, as a combination of regularity, repetition and continuity, gives the diarist a chance to organise the dispersed, chaotic and totally incomprehensible acts of existence, thus giving them an elementary sense and openness to the future.

Fifthly, thanks to keeping a diary, even in a situation of deep suffering or permanent depression, the diarist can maintain the elementary life balance; it is a kind of homeostasis.

Sixthly, a diary can serve as an alternative form of creative writing, an answer to a deep need for artistic creation, the fulfilment of the desire for writing which, for various reasons, could not take the form of other recognised literary genres.

Seventhly, in addition to all its other functions, for a person who suffers (in many situations suffering is associated with loneliness), a diary can play the role of a friend, a confessor and sometimes even a psychoanalyst. A diary “listens” patiently to what the diarist has to say. Thanks to personification of the diary, an oral communication model emerges, as if based on direct contact between people. In such a personification process, the materiality of the diary plays the crucial role:

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And with all these troubles, my diary is now my faithful companion, almost a friend of whom I think nearly fondly each day when I'm on my way home, where my diary is waiting for me. I'll not be alone, I'll have someone to freely talk to about all things, important and unimportant. Cheers! To your health, my friend!<sup>17</sup>

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The example of Jan Lechoń's diary shows that the autotherapeutic function of diary keeping is problematic in two ways. Firstly, the role that diaries play in a mental illness is not always a positive one. Diaries may also ‘close’ their author in his or her inner world, thus preventing contact with the outside world. A dramatic example of this are journals kept by Vasilav Nijinsky. Besides, diaries do not always prevent their author from a suicidal death. Another Polish twentieth-century writer who like Lechoń kept a diary for many years and committed suicide was Edward Stachura (1937–1979).<sup>18</sup> Secondly, it is also questionable whether reading journals which have an autotherapeutic function may in itself be autotherapeutic. By reading diaries, we get acquainted with the diarist's intimate inner world and we become involuntary witnesses to his or her pain, suffering and drama. Undoubtedly, this is a risky endeavour that may evoke a depressive mood in the reader. At the same time, however, observing diarists' autotherapeutic practices may help the reader to overcome his or her own problems.

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Finally, if we take one more look at diaries kept by Polish twentieth-century writers, we notice that many of them—not just the journals of Nałkowska, Lechoń and Różewicz—have some autotherapeutic or a similar function. Some autotherapeutic entries may be found in diaries of Stefan Żeromski (1864–1925) and in the diaries of Maria Dąbrowska (1889–1965), which appear so markedly different from each other. For Stanisław Brzozowski (1878–1911) and Andrzej Trzebiński (1922–1943),

keeping a diary is a kind of tool of self-discipline. Their diaries include numerous lists of tasks to be fulfilled as well as resolutions and commands addressed to themselves. Also two Polish émigré writers, Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969)<sup>19</sup> and Sławomir Mrożek (1930–2013), have used their diaries to manage their lives. In my opinion, this suggests that diaries written by twentieth-century Polish writers should not be treated as literary works, not even as books, despite the fact that today we read them in the form of books.<sup>20</sup> However, there are also special kinds of literary diaries that are originally written to be published and that are composed by writers as books.<sup>21</sup> But this is a very special case which should be considered separately.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## NOTES

- 1 "Je n'écris pas de journal quand je suis heureux, cette analyse indiscreète nuit au bonheur..." (Stendhal, *Journal*, préface de Dominique Fernandez, édition d'Henri Martin-eau, revue par Xavier Bourdenet, Paris: Gallimard, 2010, p. 932).
- 2 I present this concept in my book *Między zapisem a literaturą. Dziennik polskiego pisarza w XX wieku* (Żeromski, Nałkowska, Dąbrowska, Gombrowicz, Herling-Grudziński), [Between Written Practice of Everyday Life and Literature. The Polish Writer's Diary in the 20th Century (Żeromski, Nałkowska, Dąbrowska, Gombrowicz, Herling-Grudziński)], Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2011.
- 3 Among the Philippe Lejeune's works on diaries see especially: „*Cher cahier...*” *Témoignages sur le journal personnel*, recueillis et présentés par Ph. Lejeune, Paris: Gallimard, 1989; *La Pratique du journal personnel. Enquête*, “Cahiers de sémiotique textuelle”, n° 17, 1990; *Le Moi des demoiselles. Enquête sur le journal de jeune fille*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993; *Les brouillons de soi*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998; „*Cher écran...*” *Journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet*; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000; *Un journal à soi. Histoire d'une pratique* (with Catherine Bogaert), Paris: Les Éditions Textuel, 2003; *Signes de vie. Le pacte autobiographique 2*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005; *Le journal intime. Histoire et anthologie* (with Catherine Bogaert), Paris: Les Éditions Textuel, 2006; *Aux origines du journal personnel. France, 1750–1815*, Paris: Champion, 2016; in English: *On diary*, transl. by K. Durnin, ed. by J.D. Popkin and J. Rak, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.
- 4 Philippe Lejeune, “The Diary on Trial”, in: *On Diary*, p. 153.
- 5 “Le papier est un ami. En le prenant pour confident, vous vous débarrassez de vos émotions sans en embarrasser autrui. Vos déceptions, vos colères, vos mélancolies, vos doutes, mais aussi vos espoirs et vos joies, il vous permet de leur donner une première expression en toute liberté. [...] Il contribue, modestement, à la paix sociale et à l'équilibre individuel. [...] Comment “tenir” quand la vie vous soumet à une épreuve terrible? Comment transformer le for intérieur en camp retranché où l'on rassemble ses énergies et où l'on se ressource? Le journal peut donner courage et appui” (Philippe Lejeune, Catherine Bogaert, *Le journal intime. Histoire et anthologie*, Paris: Les Éditions Textuel, 2006, p. 29–30).
- 6 „Rozdzierający smutek”; „Ale wyrzebałam się już z przepaści rozpaczy. (...) a w głębi chich, dławiący smutek”; „Śnią mi się smutne rzeczy. (...) Straszny, bezgraniczny smutek” (Zofia Nałkowska, *Dzienniki* [Diaries], vol.1: 1899–1905, ed. by H. Kirchner, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1975, p. 231, 290, 291 (13 III 1902, 11 III 1903)).
- 7 “Myśl o samobójstwie jako jedynym wyjściu odrzucam wciąż, ale jest uparta. Myśl, że świat jest ohydny—też. Ach, opanować się, zostać sobą, zachować dawny sąd o rzeczach świata...” (Zofia Nałkowska, *Dzienniki* [Diary], vol. 4/2: 1930–1939, ed. by H. Kirchner, Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1988, p. 324–5 (3 III 1938)).
- 8 „Ale mój stan psychiczny jest nie do wytrzymania. (...) A zaraz później zapadałam w to złe, znane mi zresztą z różnych okresów życia, nawet z młodości. Gdy myślę o pisaniu (...) skurcz strachu przechodzi przez serce. Tak samo jest z każdym projektem. Niczego nie chcę, wszystkiego się boję. Ustawiczny niepokój, właściwie strach wobec samego fenomenu życia” (Zofia Nałkowska, *Dzienniki* [Diary], vol. 4/1: 1930–1939, p. 370 (3 III 1933)).
- 9 „Jestem na dnie. Zwrot retoryczny, naprawdę zużyty, nic nie mówiący. A jednak... Wiem, że to, co piszę, nie ma sensu i wartości. Ale nie mogę krzyczeć” (Tadeusz Różewicz, *Dziennik gliwicki* [Gliwice Diary], in: *Matka odchodzi* [Mother leaves], Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 2000, p. 88).
- 10 „Mamo, kochanie moje. Przegrałem, bo musiałem przegrać, jestem nieszczęśliwy i śmieszny. (...) Kochana Mamo, dziś jest poniedziałek. Siedzę w domu. (...) Jeszcze



- trochę z Tobą porozmawiam. Moja Dobra, Kochana Staruszek. Całuję Twoje ręce i oczy. Rozmawiam z Tobą” (*ibidem*, p. 108).
- 11 Roman Loth, *Ostatnie dzieło Jana Lechonia* [The last Work of Jan Lechoń], in: Jan Lechoń, *Dziennik* [Diary], ed. by R. Loth, vol. 1, Warszawa: PIW, 1992, p. 12–13.
  - 12 Jan Lechoń, *Dziennik* [Diary], ed. by R. Loth, vol. 1, Warszawa: PIW, 1992, p. 100 (27 X 1949).
  - 13 M. Danielewiczowa, *O Dzienniku Lechonia* [About Lechon’s Diary], in: Jan Lechoń, *Dziennik* [Diary], vol. 1, Londyn: Wiadomości, 1967, p. XV–XVI.
  - 14 See: Michel Braud, *La Tentation du suicide dans les écrits autobiographiques 1930–1970*, Paris: PUF, 1992.
  - 15 „Można zawsze znaleźć w swej inteligencji, woli, sercu coś, co pomoże nam w walce z życiem, z ludźmi. Ale na walkę z sobą—jest tylko modlitwa” (Jan Lechoń, *Dziennik* [Diary], ed. by R. Loth, vol. 3, Warszawa: PIW, 1993, p. 852 (30 V 1956)).
  - 16 Philippe Lejeune, “How Do Diaries End,” in: *On Diary*, p. 198.
  - 17 „I z tym wszystkim ten dziennik to teraz mój wierny towarzysz, niemal przyjaciel, o którym myślę z czułością niemal, wracając co dzień do domu, że on mnie czeka, że nie będę sam, że mam z kim pogadać—bez przymusu, o wszystkim, ważnym i nieważnym. Twoje zdrowie, przyjacielu!” (J. Lechoń, *Dziennik* [Diary], vol. 1., p. 392 (30 VIII 1950)).
  - 18 Other examples of writers who kept a diary and took their lives include Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Cesare Pavese.
  - 19 I don’t refer here to the literary diary of Gombrowicz (see footnote 21) but to his diary-chronicle entitled *Kronos*, published in Poland as late as 2013, that is 44 years after the author’s death.
  - 20 In all his writings about diaries, Philippe Lejeune underlines that diaries, also those kept by writers, should not be treated as books from the start.
  - 21 Such literary diaries were kept by two Polish émigré writers, namely Witold Gombrowicz who lived in Argentina and then in Germany and France, and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński who lived in Italy. They both published their diaries in ‘Kultura’—a Polish émigré magazine, and then in the form of books in Instytut Literacki.