

grona specjalistów – teologów i medioznawców. Być może dlatego, że ze swoją filozofią, etyką, systemem wartości itd. nie pasuje do standardów współczesnego dyskursu publicznego, dla wielu jego uczestników jest zbyt trudny w odbiorze, a dla młodego pokolenia – może nawet zbyt staroświecki. Ale nie mam wątpliwości, że pamięć o ks. Tischnerze – mimo chwilowo niezbyt sprzyjającego klimatu – należy kultywować, a jego spuściznę, w tym zwłaszcza tę, która jest efektem jego działalności medialnej, trzeba popularyzować. Choćby dlatego, że wiele jego myśli i opinii nie straciło swej aktualności.

Książka Seclera – zachowując naukowy charakter – jest jednocześnie dobrym przykładem publikacji spełniającej funkcję popularyzatorską.

Autor pisze – i to nawet w przypadku spraw trudnych i złożonych – w sposób przystępny i zrozumiały, niewymagający specjalnego przygotowania medioznawczego, filozoficznego czy teologicznego. Konsekwentnie unika też stylu i słownictwa specjalistycznego. Również formułowane przez Seclera opinie i wnioski brzmią wiarygodnie, logicznie i rzeczowo, ponieważ są poparte przekonującymi argumentami i przykładami. Dlatego omawianą książkę można śmiało polecić nie tylko medioznawcom, dziennikarzom i studentom dziennikarstwa, ale także wszystkim, którym bliskie są troska o przyszłość naszego kraju i społeczeństwa oraz poziom dyskusji na ten temat.

*Wiesław Sonczyk*



George Douglas Atkins

*Tracing the essay: through experience to truth*

University of Georgia Press, Athens and London 2005, 180 p., ISBN-13: 978-0820327877

Although the George Douglas Atkins' study entitled *Tracing the essay: through experience to truth* was published several years ago and it does not represent an editorial newness, it still deserves consideration. It is one of the most complex and thorough researches dedicated to the comprehension and the exposition of this 'formless form', that is to say the essay. Nevertheless, the Polish scientific reviews did not give the Prof. Atkins study attention it merits – a gap we are willing to fill in.

Atkins is Professor at the University of Virginia. He considers himself as a scholar, a non-specialist, an essayist and a critic rather than a literature expert. Even though in the last few years he has examined in depth the works of E.B. White<sup>1</sup> and T.S. Eliot<sup>2</sup>, the essence of the essay has constituted the center of his academic interests<sup>3</sup>. The book we are presenting represents his most important achievement in this scientific field.

*Tracing the essay* diverges from others studies dedicated to the subject. In the first place, it has

<sup>1</sup> G.D. Atkins, *E.B. White: The essayist as first-class writer*, New York 2012.

<sup>2</sup> G.D. Atkins, *T.S. Eliot and the failure to connect. Satire on modern misunderstandings*, New York, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to *Tracing the essay* the author published also: *Reading essays: An invitation*, Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2008; *On the familiar essay: challenging academic orthodoxies*, New York, 2009.

been written in a rather reflective and frank style. The author doesn't hide himself behind literature theories or specific and often unclear academic language. The reason of this methodological approach lies in the fact that the objectivity is not the principal epistemological instrument of the essayist. Atkins is aware that writing about essay inevitably leads to write another essay. The essay-writing process, moreover, requires candor (aspect to which recalls E.B. White as 'the basic ingredient of the form'), for it isn't permitted to lie while writing an essay – dishonesty can wreck the whole structure of this literary form. Atkins doesn't exaggerate when he opens the book with the sentence: 'My life changed the day I rediscovered the essay' (p. 1) (he means both personal and professional aspects of his life: he has finally appreciated reading the essays and acquired more certainty while teaching university students how to write them). The essay doesn't merely allow, but even welcomes every autobiographical announcement, for the personal experience establishes the straight link between the author and the reader – the field of their possible communication. Atkins confirms his deep understanding of the essay writing by behaving as an essayist himself. The form represents an interpretation of the subject making the whole study (its style and type of reasoning) very coherent.

The author agrees upon the Renaissance roots of the essay. He hardly believes in the thesis stating the antic origin of the form<sup>4</sup>. He reproduces, in the indirect way, the great – and often overstated – theory of Jacob Burckhardt concerning the birth of the individualism in the Renaissance age. The 16<sup>th</sup> century humanistic 'revolt' paved the way to the exploration of the self. The essay and, we can add, the auto-

portrait – constitute tangible effects of this discovery.

The impact is ethical, to be sure, but ethical in a strictly limited sort of way. Being emerges from and by means of this self-discovery and mapping, rather than via comprehension of the order outside the individual and, indeed, outside man. Experience is the great Renaissance teacher, not the Church. (...) The essay was, historically, the first form to take the experience of the individual and make it stuff of literature; the novel soon followed suit (p. 34).

Atkins gives great importance to personal features of the essayist and – in consequence – of the essay reader. He argues that the process of writing an essay requires a healthy dose of skepticism, but first of all a considerable amount of humility allowing to embrace the reality as it is. He alludes to the famous William Hazlitt's essay *On going a journey* as a perfect example of text which – unfortunately – became unbearable to the today's reader, who is in a constant rush. Hazlitt wrote the essay without any hurry and apparently about 'nothing' (the essay talks about the joy that a journey can provide), managing to create a perfect allegory of the essay itself: a process of trying, tasting and observing deprived of preconceptions and external, objective goals. To compose such a text as well as to be able to appreciate it as a reader demands preparation. Unwillingness to discover the consequences of the action and willingness to concentrate on the same action, resembles the perfect anchoring in the present, which is one of the most exacting spiritual exercises. The essay form is therefore an expedient to improve one's character, a spiritual exercise indeed, a way of healing the soul by giving it back its tidiness. It allows to slow down and pay more attention

<sup>4</sup> *The lost origins of the essay*, ed. Cf.J. D'Agata, Saint Paul, 2009. The editor of the anthology has collected examples of essays from all over the world, among them, before the *On some verses of virgil* by Michel de Montaigne the reader can find texts of Heraclitus of Ephesus, Theophrastus of Eressos or Yoshida Kenkō.

to things we generally neglect. Atkins adds: (...) in my newspaper writing and my scholarship and criticism alike, I had rushed, eager and anxious for the finish line. (...) I was enslaved to efficiency. (...) writing essays requires a change of pace – and of heart. Writing that someone else wants to read, writing that is respectful of its subject(s), entails noting and representing particulars, fleshing out scenes and characters with the details that they deserve and that readers need in order to participate in the “story”. (...) The essay is not a pointed – *à-pic* – form; it is – to use an inelegant phrase – process – rather than product-oriented (p. 81).

So we have arrived to the comprehension of the Atkins' vision of the essay form as a specific process. It includes the story and the reflection upon the story. It is a process of giving shape to the finding one's way, even if it apparently narrates about recently read books or ultimately seen art exhibitions. György Lukács has explained that the essential component of this nonfiction form is the irony, meant as a term describing the tension between the ordinary and the universal ambitions of the essay. The ironic procedure should consist in the apparent lightness of the treated subject and – at the same time – the aspiration to speak about ultimate problems. Atkins does not agree with the Hungarian theorist. He argues that the term of sneakiness a way better describes the basic feature of the essay form. The irony, a strong and dominant rhetorical category, contrasts the aspiration to modesty and humility that the essayist should hanker for. The sneakiness, much fragile as a method, sentences the essay as the second-class kind, the position that not only should satisfy an essayist but even make him feel proud.

Together with the description of the essay as a second-class kind, Atkins often draws upon the formulation that essay ‘lies between’. He means the already mentioned ‘field’ between process and product. In addition, as literature procures the experience, only the essay, says Atkins, gives us a reflection upon experience. That is where the title of the study – *Through experience to truth* – reveals its enigmatic character. Every time, argues Atkins, when a novel inclines to the didactic, it gets closer to the essay. While fiction tells the reader only *what not should be done*, the essay's purpose is exhortative: *what to do and to be*. It lies only a step from the pure reflection, that is to say on the classification area between literature and philosophy. It is commonly known that the object of philosophy is to find the reasons of the truth. The essay is not able to reflect upon pure concepts and ideas because ‘being, for the essay, is always incarnate’ (p. 152). It is rooted in the experience and – at the same time – it strives for the disembodied *eidos*, the truth itself:

The essay cannot save the world, despite the glory with which I seem to have enshrouded it. Nor is the essay by any means the greatest literary form or kind – only distinctive. It is less grand than fiction, more skeptical including itself, than philosophy. In its self-effacing, modest, and humble way, it does, however, point to Ultimate Truth (p. 152).

Atkins has managed to prove that the modest distinction of essay as a form conceals the range of scientific questions which goes beyond literature research.

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