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FACING THE IRREVERSIBLE. THREE PHILOSOPHICAL ÉTUDES

Abstract: This article takes the form of three etudes and concerns artistic struggles with the experience of threat caused by irreversible change and destruction. In the first etude, the area of this experience is the International Chopin Piano Competition which took place in 2021 with a year's delay due to the pandemic. Despite the rivalry, comparable to the Greek agon, the young pianists experienced many uplifting moments which translated into a high aesthetic value of their performances.

The pandemic also had a creative impact on the character of the second etude, the author of a book about paintings that are, in various aspects, related to the experience of threat and the specter of death. Painter Christopher Neve took advantage of the pandemic isolation to study the works of his masters. His book *Immortal Thoughts* (2023) combines the uncertainty of tomorrow in the times of Covid-19 with a journey to the times of Rembrandt, Cezanne and Michelangelo.

The third etude abandons the topic of the coronavirus threat and presents the prose of Marguerite Duras, in which literary criticism sees a trace of an "incurable wound". Catherine Malabou's philosophical interpretation of Duras's writing in her work *Ontology of the Accident* is also criticized.

Keywords: pandemic, existence, plasticity, arts, value

Death has not required us to keep a day free

Samuel Beckett

Classical musicians and performers know very well what an *étude* is. For some, it is simply a workshop exercise, while for others – an opportunity for a show of virtuosity. Hopefully, for many, an *étude* is not an end in itself, but a means to an artistic end. Hence, the titles of *Symphonic Studies* by Schumann or the *Transcendental Etudes* by Liszt speak of a purpose beyond the technique. However, the three philosophical *études* presented below are intended as a thought exercise of an aesthetic and existential nature. Their subject matter is not only music but also painting and literature. More specifically, these considerations relate to the creation and experience of an artwork in a situation of danger, death, illness, or other existential trial of strength.

Sometimes, a threatening situation speeds up the pace of events, while other times it stops it. Life and art teach each other the phenomenology of time. Therefore, the *three philosophical études* presented here are also studies on temporality; they are portraits of experiencing existence in a moment of horror. Even in seemingly timeless paintings, it is time that conditions the articulation of thought. It is not only in music that breathlessness can be heard but also in a novelist's writing style.

Music proves that an *étude* can be a study on the sound and colour of emotion. Thus, listening to the volatility of emotions is one of the aims of the following reflection.

1. Piano racing: *allegro con brio*

Since the preliminaries of and throughout the 18th International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in 2021, one might have wondered about a possible connection between the unusually high skill level of most of the participants and the presence of the pandemic. Imagine these young artists: the youngest were sixteen and seventeen, while the oldest were in their early thirties. One can guess that their masters told them during preparations:

"Play as if there was to be no more tomorrow".

Perhaps it was isolation or, in a broader sense of humanity, fear of death that made the young pianists play so brilliantly. Or maybe the hunger for a musical experience after the pandemic isolation was so extreme on the part of the audience that it amplified the delight and raised the temperature of emotions.

As John Allison noted in the critics' debate during the competition:

"Suffering and artistic productivity are often perceived as going together. Indeed, for an example of them coming together to produce the greatest artistic achievement, one need look no further than the case of Chopin himself. Over the past 18 months we had a taste of the fear that was held off in the 19th century: death from a respiratory disease,

such as tuberculosis that killed Chopin. It was through the suffering of artists such as Chopin that tuberculosis became a well-established metaphor for creativity"¹.

The timeless community of experience between the performer and composer is crucial for young artists. It forms an affinity of souls regardless of the era and historical context, or rather, with its profound understanding. Sometimes, this path is highlighted in musicological literature, especially that which appreciates the search for a composer's bodily trace in a work. An excellent example of this is the moving book *Romantic Anatomies of Performance*. The author, J.Q. Davies, highlights the relationship between a body affected by weakness and the expression of a work of art: "Where once the Romantic impulse had been to interpret Chopin's music as the expression of a supposedly semi mortal being, now his music merely recalls his this-worldly body, perhaps less pained, but still afflicted"².

The experience of pandemic isolation, concerts and online lessons, combined with the study of bodily and spiritual suffering in Chopin's music itself, must have been a unique experience for the contestants. Let us not forget, however, that modern young people feel very different fascinations from exploring the biographies of artists from centuries ago. Apart from playing the piano, they are rather avid fans of computer games or, like the winner of the competition, go-kart racing.

While critics are looking for an ideal interpreter and the audience is heightening their admiration, the daily media report with satisfaction:

"The Canadian Bruce Liu, winner of the Chopin Competition, found himself challenged in Poznan by the local go-karting champion, Kacper Nadolski. It was a gauntlet he could not ignore. Liu took on Poznan's finest in an eight-minute time test – and won. He then went off to play Chopin with the Poznan Philharmonic"³.

There is a reason why Bruce Liu, called the Tiger Boy by journalists, did not become the protagonist of the award-winning documentary film *Pianoforte* (2023). More than a brilliant victory, the director was interested in the drama of loneliness, overweening ambition, or the participant's toxic relationship with his or her own teacher. Jan Piątek's film shows the shadows of the rivalry. Willingly compared to the Greek agon or the Olympic games, the Chopin Competition allows one to existentially experience the fullness of being on stage *here*

¹ A. Checka, J. Allison, *Critics' Talk: Greatness in the Time of Pandemic*, Chopin Courier no. 15, 18.04.2021, p.3.

² J. Q. Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance*, University of California Press, 2014, p. 64.

³ <https://slippedisc.com/2021/11/chopin-winner-claims-another-polish-trophy/> (25.06.2024).

and now. The stage and the competition force an almost exhibitionist exposure of not only qualities but also weaknesses, since it is in musical expression that we can hear who we are.

It is hard not to notice that, especially in this context, the film's director makes excellent use of the silent symbol of a pandemic mask. The faces of the audience are hidden behind masks. Listeners suffer in masks just like the jurors, many hours a day. As the audience listens to extraordinarily subtle sounds produced by the contestants, the masks absorb more than a few tears of emotion. Only the performers are freed from masks when they take the stage.

This time, the unveiling is performed in a multi-level way: through emotions in the music and the face on which they are painted. Exposure to the public is thus even more pronounced and literal than usual, as is loneliness and fragility on stage. Paradoxically, only the pace of the event itself is dizzying. And it is not just the dizzying pace of the performances of some Chopin's *études* but the internal mobilization of the participants who were allowed into the final.

After months or years of preparation, there is a lot to experience in a short period of time.

2. Late style: *tempo giusto*

When we think about music in an existential dimension, when we consider its relationship to *being*, we often notice two phenomena. The first one is the ephemerality and fragility of a musical work as a sonic event – it is then a poignant metaphor for the framework of life. The second one is music's ability to alter the course of time and expand the experience of duration, which musical work undoubtedly shares with other arts and experiences, such as romantic ecstasy, prayer or contemplation of a mathematical proof. On a broader level, the experience of stopping time rarely happens to people. Usually, we hear complaints about life rushing forward. In an existential dimension, time changes its course only when it demands that the world stop: when someone learns of an incurable disease, when a pandemic of an unknown virus erupts, or a war breaks out in the country right next to us.

Although we may experience such world stops individually for different reasons, universally it happened to people with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Only a few, however, knew how to take advantage of this apprehension in full conscious contemplation of the change, using it to experience art. It was fruitfully and richly experienced by Christopher Neve, an artist who took the pandemic time to write about paintings that herald the end:

"When the plague began – I went to a place in the country where I could write for a year and see nobody. I had the artists who are always in my head for company, so I was never for a moment lonely. On starting to write about them, I came to realize that what we had in common was the experience of producing late work. It was a curious fact that, while time lasted, there was enough time for everything"⁴.

We can read *Immortal thoughts. Late style in a time of plague* by Christopher Neve as a study in art criticism. However, one cannot help but notice that Neve's writing style is distinguished by an uncommon literary taste. His chronicler's diligence prompts him to include a description of pandemic events in the course of the narrative, in addition to analyses of the works of his favorite artists: Cezanne's last watercolours, Bonnard's last paintings, Michelangelo's last drawings and many others. Beyond the late and recent works, Neve is interested in the inconceivability of loss (Rembrandt and his suffering) the experience of alienation and absence (Gwen John) and the phenomenon of *non finito* (Daumier and not finishing).

On a purely artistic level, Neve's prose virtuously operates with a sharp contrast between descriptions of lush nature and drastic hospital scenes. It is also a study of art, but its phenomenon lies in the fact that the study itself, as an essay, wounds the reader by masterfully conveying the state of horror and loneliness in which art speaks. Before moving on to selected examples seen through the author's eyes, let us pause at the *tremendum* and *fascinosum* encounter of pandemic everyday life:

"In Venice, the canals reverted to Canaletto blue because there were no boats to churn up their sediment. Because there was no longer any space in which to bury the dead in New York, trenches were dug in public parks for use as temporary mass graves. All galleries and museums were closed, and thieves broke in to help themselves. A great Titian exhibition, set up in London at the National Gallery, hung unvisited. Rough sleepers died in the streets. Zoos were deserted, the animals set free or abandoned to die after using the last of their feed (...)

The cuckoo arrived, and then the swallows. Ceanothus opened. Bluebells, periwinkles, anemones. A sadder and a lovelier spring⁵.

One gets the impression that Neve is escaping from the maelstrom of everyday life in which a modern hospital and a respiratory virus mix with an explosion of nature liberated from man. Where is he escaping to? To another, more distant reality of suffering, recorded in paintings, drawings and sculptures.

⁴ Ch. Neve, *Immortal Thoughts. Late Style in a Time of Plague*, Thames & Hudson, London 2023, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

He is most keen on painters experiencing the end of life, or the absurd death of loved ones as in the case of Rembrandt, exploring the charms of a *late style* often marked by a different experience of time: slowed down, stopped, sometimes retrospective (an inexhaustible store of memory outside of time, as Neve puts it).

The author therefore asks: "Is it true that only in old age, as Delacroix says, the artist becomes the painter he should have been all along"?⁶

In addition to old age, declining is determined by a premonition of death, as in the case of Schubert's musical works. It goes hand in hand with a different experience of time, also in young artists marked by the stigma of death. For old people, it is accompanied by fragility, powerlessness, vulnerability and helplessness:

"There is no point in lamenting your lack of muscle as you get old. It is knowledge you need, not muscle. False memory soon fills the vacuums in true memory. Why not raise a monument to amnesia and forget where you put it"?⁷

Undoubtedly, the altered experience of time is also linked to memory disorders, although, as suggested by the author, a great artist turns this to the advantage of the work:

"I think it is possible, when I look at late Titian, that he is working off a combination of nerves and unconscious memories, an inexhaustible store of memory outside of time. The unconscious relinquishes nothing, and nothing is forgotten"⁸.

The book portrays more than twenty suffering artists and the last glimmers of genius. One of them is Titian.

"Venice, June 1576. Titian is eighty-seven or eighty-eight. Narrow, bearded face, black gown, clawlike hands. There is about to be a plague here too, one that will kill a third of the population of Venice (...) Titian is the only person of all that 70.000 whom the city elders will allow to have a funeral despite the risks of infection"⁹.

Neve marvels at the cruelty of Titian's last works: *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1570-1576), *The Crowing with Thorns* (1576) *The Rape of Europa* and *S. Sebastian* (1575-1576):

⁶ Ibidem, p. 9.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 26.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 24.

"Their victims are twisted into the pictures' great schemes as parts of the human tragedy. Life is violent, and he paints it violently as if to restate the fact. Old subjects are revisited with greater urgency. Matter and spirit combust together"¹⁰.

However, there is another scenario of facing the end or irreversibility.

A magical way to stop the inevitable is to not finish the work: to avoid the last word, the closure. The work of art, as a symbolic framework for life, helps to maintain the illusion that control over art will ensure control over life. If death comes with the end of the work, it is better not to finish it.

Such an interpretation is perhaps at odds with Neve's idea, which rather teaches readers to appreciate the human gesture in an unfinished work. Someone disappears without saying goodbye, so as not to cause trouble or to avoid idle discussions. This is the case in the analysis of Daumier's work, which begins with the following reflection:

"Some paintings break off as if they said as much as they need to say but are averse to the idea of completion. Better just to end. Like the person who does not say goodbye, but instead exits untainted by valediction"¹¹.

Let us recall two tropes related to the *non finito* principle. One, important for aesthetics, appears in Władysław Stróżewski's book, *Wokół piękna* [*Around the Beauty*]. A work of art unfinished by the artist can reach its optimum value, as if the completion of the axiological layer took place independently of the unfinished form of the work of art. Therefore, the artist deliberately leaves a work unfinished, but it is finished in the dimension of values, even completely independently of his or her will. As Stróżewski says: "Perfection can manifest itself in a work not brought to completion: this fact would confirm the possibility of the manifestation of a value also in a moment not foreseen by the creator"¹². The philosopher sees here the dialectical coexistence of being and non-being in the creative process¹³. In this perspective, the artist does not decide about the emergence of value: it is in some sense objectively given to him. The work and the value live their own lives, independently of the artist himself¹⁴.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 30.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 105.

¹² Doskonałość objawić się może w dziele nie doprowadzonym do końca: fakt ten potwierdzałby przypuszczenie o możliwości objawienia się wartości także w momencie nieprzewidywanym przez twórcę". See: W. Stróżewski, *Wokół piękna. Szkice z estetyki*, Universitas, Kraków 2002, p. 334.

¹³ See: ibidem, pp. 331-334.

¹⁴ A similar intuition, independently of Stróżewski, appears in the book *Grammar of Creation* by George Steiner. However, Steiner writes about the independence and unpredictability of characters created by the artist, as if the heroes and heroines were living their own lives:

Yet, in neuroscience literature, *non finito* does not have this transcending dimension for the artist. It is the brain that produces concepts and ideas. An aesthetic value is always a resultant of his or her longings, aspirations translated into his or her brain concept. Another thing is that all people are universally connected by a similar longing. All desire to transcend their own mortality. The neurobiologist Semir Zeki devotes separate reflections to the principle of *non finito* and incompleteness. Michelangelo is the main protagonist of the former, while Cezanne and the writers: Balzac, Zola and Mann – of the latter. According to Zeki, in Michelangelo's case, the main reason for his unfinished works is “that he found it difficult to translate his brain concepts into sculptures”¹⁵. In this approach, the artist's brain concepts rise to the level of divine revelation. Something that was created through the work of the artist's brain, as one could summarize the argument of neurobiology, surprises the artist himself. What he sees in the concepts is transcending himself, transcending his own suffering.

It is one thing, however, to leave traces of longing or suffering in a work, even if its purpose is the fantasy of overcoming death. It is another thing to bear witness to one's own ruin, to describe one's own decay, which is faultless in the author's mind, comes from outside, like a God's mistake. While the previous two études show an attempt to transcend darkness, the last one is a testimony of resignation.

3. Destructive plasticity: *moderato cantabile*

Sometimes, the awareness of decline accompanies artists almost from the beginning of their work. Such is the case with Franz Schubert's songs and piano works. The same is true of the French writer Marguerite Duras, except that in her case it is not about death itself but the total disintegration of life. Figuratively and literally, old age came to her twice. First it appeared unexpectedly, like an accident that interrupts the normal course of life and takes away hope. Duras, whose real name was Marguerite Donadieu, survived her entire adulthood marked by the stigma of precocious ageing and died in 1996, at the age of 82, because of her second, one might say, proper old age.

The French philosopher Catherine Malabou begins her analysis of Duras' work in just such a way:

“Tolstoy speaks for numerous writers when he tells his editor of the rebellious unpredictable conduct of Anna Karenina as she threatens to break the mould of the novel or, at least, to deflect it altogether from Tolstoy's announced design”. See: G. Steiner, *Grammar of Creation*, Faber Faber, London 2001, p. 35.

¹⁵ S. Zeki, *Splendors and Misereries of the Brain: Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness*, Wiley - Blackwell, New Jersey 2009, p. 109.

“Because of the rhythmic and ontological ambivalence of time, another possibility of ageing is ageing before ageing. Something happens early on that precipitates the subject into a radical eclipse of youth, stealing youth away by condemning her to follow an unmarked, unpredictable track, taking her on the adventure of a sudden and tragic metamorphosis that tears her away from youth in the flower of her younger years”¹⁶.

Malabou uses Duras' prose to analyse the negative plasticity that destroys the person but at the same time creates a new identity. The phenomenon of pathological plasticity can be described as “the distancing of the individual who becomes stranger to herself, who no longer recognizes herself, who no longer remembers her self”¹⁷. Note the deliberate distinction between “herself” and “her self” in the last sentence. The subject does not recognize herself and experiences a sort of separation from the “self”. Strangely enough, this phenomenon is “neglected by psychoanalysis, ignored by philosophy, nameless in neurology (...) nevertheless, it has its own phenomenology that demands articulation”¹⁸.

Moreover, negative plasticity in no way contradicts plasticity celebrated by neurology. As Malabou explains: “This destructive plasticity should be included in the register of cerebral laws. An identity change is not only the consequence of an external event, arising from pure chance, affecting and altering an originally stable identity. Normal identity is a changeable and transformable entity right from the start, always liable to make a *faux bond* or to say farewell to itself”¹⁹.

There is an acute sense of destruction in Duras' writing, both in the matter of the plot and in the manner of writing itself. She lost her father as a four-year-old child and was the victim of sexual abuse by her brother. While living in Indochina, she observed her mother's and brother's addiction to opium, and she herself became addicted to alcohol very quickly. Alcoholism defined not only what she wrote about, but also how she wrote. The hallmark of the decay she makes her reader feel is asyndeton, a rhetorical figure that cripples sentences, shortens the breath of a phrase, and renders the chaos of battered thoughts:

“An asyndeton is a sort of ellipse in which the conjunctions that combine the prepositions and segments of the sentence are removed (...) It belongs to the class of disjunctions, and it telescopes words, which come one after the other, one of top of the

¹⁶ C. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident. An Essay of Destructive Plasticity*, transl. Carolyn Shread, Polity Press, Cambridge 2012, p. 55.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 30-31.

other, occurring as what amounts to so many accidents. They dent each other, lose all flexibility (...) The asyndeton is linguistic alcoholism”²⁰.

In Duras’ novels, asyndeton works well as a symptom of disorder or confusion. At the same time, it makes the text accelerate, derail, run out of breath, as in the following phrase:

“Death, a chain reaction of death, started with him, the child”²¹.

The subject by no means projects herself into the future, but discovers that suddenly, one day, everything is over for her. Here is how Malabou relates this phenomenon:

“Duras was young for only a very short time, just eighteen years. Like Georg Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, she woke up metamorphosized. No one was ever able to see the transition (...) She appears to have been thrown ahead of herself by a secret anticipatory device”²².

The visual transformation of Duras (the scar across her face) did not happen as a result of alcohol abuse but was prior to it. It was like a prophecy, a sentence to which Duras was condemned:

“Now I see that I was very young. Eighteen, fifteen, I already had a face that forhold the one I acquired through drink in middle age. Drink accomplished what God did not. It also served to kill me; to kill”²³.

Duras knew the cause of her despair from her childhood:

“The void you discover one day in your teens - nothing can ever undo that discovery. But alcohol was invented to help us bear the void in the universe - the motion of the planets, their imperturbable wheeling through space, their silent indifference to the place of our pain”²⁴.

To a reader of Malabou, the commentator on Duras' work, things may seem strange. Logic dictates that in this case nothing happened without a cause.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 61

²¹ M. Duras, *The Lover*, transl. Barbara Bray, Collins, Glasgow 1985, p. 111.

²² C. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, op. cit., p. 56.

²³ M. Duras, *Practicalities: Marguerite Duras speaks to Jérôme Beaujour*, transl. Barbara Bray, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990, p. 12.

²⁴ Ibidem, pp. 16-17.

A difficult childhood and the lack of loving parents seem to be a sufficient cause for Duras' spiritual decay.

Yet Malabou insists that the writer's transformation was sudden, inexplicable, like an accident.

Perhaps a clear objection to such an attitude should already be articulated here. Malabou is disturbingly and perversely excited by destruction and despair. She finds them in such Duras' books as *The Lover*, *The Sailor of Gibraltar* and *Moderato Cantabile*, although the latter also echoes a good deal of nostalgia and tenderness. Who knows if these shades of expression do not say the most about Duras as a woman.

Nevertheless, let us return to Malabou and her excitement about the darkness of the human soul. It shows a trace of love for the negative sublime.

The fact is that fate did not give Duras the chance to fight for a normal youth. It is difficult to accuse her of failing to fight her addiction or even preaching paeans to alcohol, which can, incidentally, be read as bitter irony. Undoubtedly, nothing happened here all of a sudden, like a plane crash. Rather, it is "an accident of fate".

It is probably in this sense that Duras' fate should be interpreted in Malabou's book entitled *Ontology of the accident*.

Here is also a temptation to inscribe this kind of fatality in the mythological tradition and to interpret Duras' fate in similar terms to how Malabou describes Daphne fleeing from the advances of Phoebus. The strange metamorphosis through destruction, for both mythological Daphne and the modern novelist, was a form of inability to escape destiny. Since it was impossible to escape the advances of Phoebus, Daphne had to continue as a tree. Since it was impossible to escape wounded childhood, Duras could only persist in prose full of wounded words.

"Nothing left of the former body than a heart that for a time beats under the bark, a few tears"²⁵. This is how Malabou comments on Dafne's fate. One would like to say the same about Duras, who survived until old age thanks to a peculiar veil or a hiding place: written words.

Closure

Art is the reproduction of things, or the construction of forms, or the expression of experiences - if the product of this reproduction, construction, or expression is capable of delighting, moving, or shocking [Władysław Tatarkiewicz].

²⁵ C. Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

Ultimately, all the possible aesthetic experiences that formed the backdrop of our études meet Tatarkiewicz's definition. On deeper analysis, they seem to fulfil the études by way of conjunction rather than alternative. The Chopin Competition during the pandemic revealed a great existential link between the ephemerality of the music and the uncertainty of each participant's and listener's fate. Despite the veil of masks, audiences, jurors and participants were closer to each other than usual. Paradoxically, loneliness on stage (note that, apart from the final participants, the young pianists played only solo repertoire) was an experience of a peculiar transcendence of previous isolation. Before the competition, months of preparation took place in complete loneliness due to the pandemic (online lessons, online concerts). It is therefore not surprising that many young artists, longing to meet the audience, presented their maximum potential more effectively than usual, which explains such a high level of the competition. Jan Piątek's documentary captured this perfectly, not always calling things by their names, but portraying many fragile emotions.

As for Christopher Neve's book, it was striking to follow the anxiety trail of the author-painter, who recorded in his work, as in a diary, the frightening media accounts of the Covid-19, mixed with fear read from the paintings of his favourite old masters. Locked in a house in a remote area, he experienced isolation and wrote about his beloved works of art, transcending loneliness. At the same time, however, Neve revealed the commonality of the experience of epidemics that had haunted humanity in previous eras and left their mark in works of art.

The pandemic trail breaks for the third *étude*. Shock, the absurdity of life, an incurable wound only remain there. Ultimately, experiences shattered by the asyndeton find synthesis in the act of reading. Marguerite Duras' despair needs a reader who can transcend the author's misery. It is in the reader's aesthetic experience that the only possible cure for the author's despair may arise. This is the beginning of a comforting conversation, despite the extremely pessimistic interpretation imposed by Catherine Malabou. As a eulogist of destructive plasticity and, therefore, negative sublimity, Malabou stops only at the author's cry of despair. The philosopher effectively focuses on the "speech of writing" as the object of her study. She forgets, however, about the other side of the aesthetic experience: the salvation that the reader can bring to the work. Summarizing, it is the relational nature of an aesthetic experience, even a negative one, that should be the dominant feature of the sketches proposed above. The subjective-objective nature of the timeless encounter between the artist and the audience creates an opportunity to overcome loneliness and, perhaps, even overcome the absurdity we experience.

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WOBEC NIEODWRACALNEGO. TRZY ETIUDY FILOZOFICZNE (streszczenie)

Artykuł ma formę trzech etiud i dotyczy artystycznych zmagania z doświadczeniem zagrożenia spowodowanego nieodwracalną zmianą. W pierwszej etiudzie obszarem tego doświadczenia jest Międzynarodowy Konkurs Pianistyczny im. Chopina, który odbył się w 2021 roku z rocznym opóźnieniem spowodowanym pandemią. Pomimo rywalizacji porównywalnej do greckiego agonu, młodzi pianiści przeżyli wiele wzniosłych chwil, które przełożyły się na wysoką wartość estetyczną ich występów.

Pandemia wywarła twórczy wpływ także na bohatera drugiej etiudy, autora książki o dziełach sztuki, które w różnych aspektach wiążą się z doświadczeniem zagrożenia i widmem śmierci. Malarz Christopher Neve wykorzystał pandemiczną izolację do studiowania dzieł swoich ukochanych mistrzów. Jego książka *Immortal Thoughts* (2023) łączy niepewność jutra w czasach Covid-19 z podróżą do czasów Rembrandta, Cezanne'a czy Michała Anioła.

Trzecia etiuda porzuca temat zagrożenia koronawirusem i przedstawia prozę Marguerite Duras, w której komentatorzy jej twórczości dostrzegają ślad „nieuleczalnej rany”. Krytyce zostaje też poddana filozoficzna interpretacja twórczości Duras dokonana przez Catherine Malabou w jej książce *Ontologia przypadłości*.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia, egzystencja, plastyczność, sztuka, wartość

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