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Editorial



In the eighth issue of the *Czytanie Literatury* journal, we are discussing problems located – for various reasons and in various manners – on the fringes of modern literary studies.

Firstly, we have collected answers – obviously formulated in an indirect way – to the question about the status of the essay. We intuitively sensed that it could be the case that the discussions regarding the clearly marginal genre might have reached a dead end. There is always the risk of making the notion obscure as researchers tend to apply it to texts which are not uniform in terms of their genres. It is also possible to enclose it within excessively narrow theme-based, formal, cultural, racial, or gender frames, or in solidified formulations which have almost nothing in common with their literary versions. All this can lead to a false belief in the exclusive nature of the essay as well as to the alleged inclination towards traditionalism and conservative values. Therefore, one should refer to the remarks of Professor Roma Sendyka, a specialist in this subject matter, and discuss the essay while considering that which is usually rejected in the process of homogenising its definition. The essay itself – and this is one of its many conflicting properties – strives to break the seals of excessively coherent and monolithic systems; it is based on pieces of knowledge of unclear statuses and it remains the medium of that particular mode of cognition.¹ The authors whose contributions have been gathered for this issue share similar intuitive reflections. They tend to follow the practice of the bottom-up introduction of theories, discussing various incarnations of the genre while refraining from premature verifications as to whether the texts they discuss meet some specific genological criteria.

Thus, Dobrawa Lisak-GeVala offers an exhaustive overview of essays written since 2000, focusing on those which raised topics which have been marginalised to date. The Wrocław-based researcher proposes a coherent classification of those, arguing that in the light of the present-day decreasing formalities and expanding genre-based formulations which she has noticed, one should not try and find proof of the debasement of the genre. She included *Kontener* by Marek Bieńczyk among the examples

¹ R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, Kraków 2006, pp. 299–309.

of formally-innovative texts. The same text is also the focus of the interpretative article by Agnieszka Czyżak. Here, she discusses the personal dimension of narrative as a raging element which is gradually overtaking the ever-expanding areas of the writer's works, which, as Czyżak indicates, do not translate into the poetics of confession *sensu stricto*. This is because a particular feature of the writer's works involves various mediating artistic devices, which consist of self-creation and encrypting the multi-dimensional *self*, which at the same time prevents the access to the very process of introspection. Przemysław Kaliszuk points to other and much earlier struggles with the form of the essay when he reads *Bez autorytetu* by Stanisław Rosiek and Stefan Chwin. He reconstructs these authors' assumptions and conceptions, and identifies in their book the instances of a strive for transcending the paradigm of the modernist essay.

The group of phenomena which lack the proper discussion in the Polish context includes essays that approach the topics of Shoah and Polish anti-Semitism. Such conclusions have been indicated in the study by Marta Tomczok, who reflects on one of the earliest texts by Jan Tomasz Gross, one of the most controversial Polish essayists. She analyses the consecutive editions of *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej..., ale go nie lubię* and – by using as a context the works by Jan Błoński and Roman Zimand – she ponders the question about how the form of the essay frames the mode of thinking and expression about the Polish-Jewish relations. The problem of difficult memories resonates in the article by Paweł Tomczok; this contribution is devoted to the potential of the essayistic transmission of knowledge about genocide in works by Martin Pollack, an author who struggled with his family's story of involvement with Nazism. Tomczok questions the potency and, mostly, the effectiveness of the Austrian writer's strategy of applying the metaphor of contamination. Then, in turn, the article by Magdalena Koch tackles emancipation issues, though with a different focus – she discusses the specificity of the feminist essay by Svetlana Slapšak, a Serbian author. Her discussion not only indicates a major gap in the domestic reception of the literature in the Serbian language, but it could also constitute a refreshing stimulus for the discussion of the Polish variants of the related writings.

The issue herein also includes works devoted to one of the 'queen' topics of the essay, i.e. plastic arts. Magdalena Śniedziewska elaborates on the series of texts by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński which – in line with the author's genealogical classification – are defined as "medallions" and consist of discussions of four renowned 17th-century painters. Then, Agata Szulc-Woźniak discusses the essays by Joanna Pollakówna, indicating how the experience of the reception of a work of art translates into the form of a text devoted to it. The contribution by Jerzy Borowczyk offers a somewhat different mode of consideration. This author proposes an original reading of Józef Czapski's essays juxtaposed with the essays by Marta Piwińska, tracing in them reflections (thematically not related to one another) on the experiences of work, giving up, and revelation, at the same time confirming the conviction that one always discusses the form of the essay just by using it. The resulting overview of notions is supplemented by the polemic discussion of

the 2017 anthology of the Polish literary essay, released in the National Library series and edited by Jan Tomkowski. Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany, the author of the critical text, disputes not only with the concept and selection of texts proposed in the edition, but also with the very underlying concept of creating a model collection of essays as being antithetical to the specificity of the genre. At the same time, the researcher outlines her own understanding of the form.

The second problem and theme cluster in the issue herein consists of articles written after the '100 years of the Pikador – Poetry, Tradition, Poetics' seminar, which was organised by the Department of European Traditions Studies, Institute of Polish Philology, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, and held on 29th November, 2018, i.e. precisely on the anniversary of the launch of the famous art café, known mainly for the fact that it consolidated the poets of the Skamander group. However, direct literary testimonies to Pikador's operations are just as interesting. Thus, Joanna Maleszyńska discusses the *Mochanicki* poem by Jan Lechoń, wondering about the possible reasons why such a patriotically exalted text was chosen, since it clearly did not match the self-ironic comedy nature of the new venue. As the researcher indicates, it might have been that the paradox reflected the tension present at that breakthrough period. The text itself, if read contextually, reveals additional strata of meaning. Agata Szulc-Woźniak discusses Maria Morska, an eccentric reciter and a muse of various poets, who also performed during the opening night at the café. By interpreting works by Antoni Słonimski and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, the researcher re-discovers the enigmatic artist with a magnetic personality. Eliza Kącka, then, has indicated a telling event in the history of the group's café by reconstructing the dispute which unravelled around the staging of the Pikador's satirical nativity play in January 1923. It triggered an anti-Semitic attack by Adolf Nowczyński, a rightist commentator, to which Słonimski responded with a cutting pamphlet. The researcher does not stop at a mere reconstruction of the polemic; instead, she discusses the complexity which had existed in the community and which the dispute revealed.

A separate group of texts within this issue consists of studies of the works by female poets who orbited the Skamander group, namely Irena Tuwim (whose journal début of 1916 has been discussed by Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany) and Zuzanna Ginczanka (Karolina Olech's and Karolina Król's articles about her offer an interesting duet, i.e. while the former one focuses on Ginczanka's satirical works associated with her presence in the Warsaw community, the latter one extracts from her lyrical poems the traces of the longing for natural landscapes, which expressed a distance towards the Skamandrite idiom). A compelling preliminary study of the reception of Skamandrites is offered by Piotr Mitzner, who discusses the literary preferences of Józef Czapski, who was sceptical of the Pikador artists during the interwar period, but when he was developing an anthology of the Polish war-time poetry in 1942, he did include poems by authors who belonged to that circle. All these case studies are complemented with an overview article by Joanna Roszak, which is devoted to Julian Tuwim's poetry

being used in the practices of the Polish language, literature, and cultural education as well as pro-peace education. She proposes a reading of the poems by the author of *Kwiaty polskie* within the perspective of mindfulness.

Finally, as we have done before, we include in this issue of *Czytanie Literatury* articles devoted to noteworthy events from the history of Łódź literary life: Dorota Samborska-Kukuć discusses Włodzimierz Kirchner, a priest, an apostate, a social activist, and – most of all – the author of the controversial brochure titled *Challenging Poverty in Bałuty*, which was viewed negatively by its critics not so much due to the social diagnoses that it included, but, rather, owing to its mistrustful approach to those in need as well as an aesthetics-based superiority-riddled evaluative tone, which, in turn, could offer a good springboard for a discussion of class discrimination. The *Confiteor* work by Antoni Szandlerowski, the symbolism of which is discussed by Bartosz Ejzak, seems to potentially contain a different kind of controversy. It is a specific contribution as it offers an account of an existential tragedy – a posthumously released collection of love letters exchanged between a priest and a married woman, a converted Jew. Next, Alicja Krawczyk discusses the origin story and the manifesto of 'Meteor', the first Łódź-based literary group.

The issue concludes in three conversations about reading (and translating) literature: an interview with Magdalena Heydel (conducted by Karolina Król) about Stanisław Barańczak's mode of translation; an interview with Marek Bieńczyk (conducted by Olga Żymnickowska) about Milan Kundera's prose and the accompanying essay by the researcher devoted to the Czech writer; and, finally, a record of a conversation between Francesco Cataluccio, Andrzej Franaszek, and Krystyna Pietrych with regard to Zbigniew Herbert's travels, especially those to the south of Europe. In that final conversation, e.g. in the recollection of the already dying author of *Epilog Burzy* still planning a trip to Venice, a suggestion is offered as to the next issue of the journal – it is going to be devoted to the representations of Venice in the European culture.

Anita Jarzyna

READING ESSAY

New Century

– ‘New Essays’?

‘Phenomenon’ *versus* the canon

Such properties as non-definability, resistance to normative poetics, and anti-systemic or experimental approaches have long constituted the core of the dictionary of meta-essayistic clichés. Thus, on the one hand, it would be best to discuss a single essay as a unique textual “phenomenon”¹, i.e. an artistic outcome of the clash of a specific ‘I’ with a specific topic or topics. On the other, though – and this is a cliché of literary historians and editors – it is not possible to avoid any form of organisation and typologisation, and, in fact, the authors of essays themselves have often strived to unify the cultural front by, e.g., publishing texts in a specific periodical or a publishing series, discussing similar themes, or referring to fellow writers.

Such a rather coherent group consisted of authors often defined as the “Stempowski school”, who were associated with the community of the Paris-based *Kultura*. It was mainly them, as Jan Tomkowski argued in the introduction to *Antologia polskiego eseju literackiego*² – which covered texts published up to 2000 – who established the traditions of the “Polish school

¹ R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, Kraków 2006, p. 88. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

² J. Tomkowski, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Polski esej literacki. Antologia*, ed. J. Tomkowski, Wrocław 2017.

The anthologist also indicated the important role of the *Twórczość* periodical, through which many influential essays were released into the Polish circulation. The consolidating function was also fulfilled by the *Podróże* series of the *Zeszyty Literackie* quarterly – vide K. Szalewska, *Pasaż tekstowy. Czytanie miasta jako forma doświadczania przeszłości we współczesnym eseju polskim*, Kraków 2012, p. 19.

of the essay", which could be summarised in this set of keywords: travel – encounters (with major figures) – library – tradition – art – the Self³. The goals of travels were also organised by the anthologist in the form of a list starting with Greece and Italy, then major metropolises (Paris, London, Berlin), next, in short, "other countries" (including Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, Yugoslavia, and the United States), and ending with Russia (which was treated more as the subject of political remarks spun from afar). Thus, framed Polish essay clearly gravitated towards knowledge, cultural aristocracy, and the Mediterranean tradition. It might even seem aesthete-inclined, as it was labelled by the critics of the volume published in the *Biblioteka Narodowa* series. At the same time, they lamented the fact that the perspective pestered the tendencies which had proved influential in recent years⁴. Renata Lis demanded that the editor should give due credit to acclaimed female essayists (e.g. Maria Janion) and she concluded that the very fact of including the 1992 essays by Jolanta Brach-Czaina – which focused on everyday experiences and emphasised femininity – "would have caused the anthology to explode from the inside letting, along the despised other half of human experience, a breath of fresh air into it (...)"⁵.

Though Tomkowski's classification should be treated as a heuristic tool useful when organising the extremely rich and diverse literary material, it is representative of a certain – essentially conservative – mode of thinking about the Polish essay traditions. Therefore, it is also worth considering more recent Polish essays, i.e. essays of the new millennium, and comparing them to thus specified canon, looking for fresh and often less aesthete-focused or aristocratic tendencies, which must had been germinating much earlier. Yet, they surfaced in the 1990s in the form of the breakthrough *Szczeliny istnienia*⁶ [Cracks of Existence], which evades all that is pre-cultural. Of course, after the turn of the 21st century, essays which in a creative manner applied the heritage of the knowledge-based "Stempowski school" were still written in Poland; here, one could mention some of the younger writers, e.g. Arkadiusz Pacholski or Dawid Szkoła, or experienced and distinguished authors, e.g. Ryszard Przybylski, Ewa Bieńkowska, or Wojciech Karpiński. However, one would be hard pressed not to notice that the "old school of the essay"⁷ – i.e. the model associated

³ J. Tomkowski, *Wstęp*, pp. XLII-LXXXI. A.S. Kowalczyk (Esej [entry], [in:] *Literatura polska XX wieku. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, eds. A. Hutnikiewicz, A. Lam, Warsaw 2000). The author added thematic areas such as democratic traditions, metaphysical questions, and the Jewish theme.

⁴ Those were the conclusions drawn from the discussion titled *Wspólny duży pokój. Polski esej literacki* [a debate between A. Frączysty, R. Sendyka, R. Lis, E. Kącka], "Mały Format" 2017, no. 12, <http://malyformat.com/2017/12/wspolny-duzy-pokoj-polski-esej-literacki/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

⁵ R. Lis, *Esej i kwanty*, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/7480-esej-i-kwanty.html> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

⁶ Vide the survey *Efekt szczelin*, ed. A. Frączysty, "Mały Format" 04/2018, <http://malyformat.com/2018/04/efekt-szczelin-ankieta-literacka/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

⁷ M. Krakowiak, *Mierzenie się z esejem. Studia nad polskimi badaniami eseju literackiego*, Katowice 2013, pp. 248-257.

with émigré writers, Eastern Borderland nostalgia⁸, and the exclusively aristocratic type of knowledge about culture – is already a historical phenomenon, and the once fruitful convention of travels to the South or essays devoted to art seem to have become petrified or have even been exhausted⁹. In this article, I wish to indicate that the Polish essay of the 21st century annexes new areas and is anything but in a decline, as Małgorzata Krakowiak once suggested¹⁰; it is simply undergoing modifications, both in terms of its thematic extent and the forms it employs. Those two aspects often prove interrelated: the selection of a non-traditional topic entails a non-canonical cognitive approach or such a worldview which shatters the existing forms of expression, leading to the creation of texts which are distorted in terms of their genres. These are often no longer identified as essays and seemingly remain genologically homeless (that is the case with Andrzej Stasiuk's books, which I have included in this preliminary study for a panorama of non-conservative contemporary essays).

New topics

It is worth to try and create a working map of new previously unpopular topics, points of interest, and destinations associated with the form of writing discussed in this article, though one should bear in mind that the declared – e.g. in the title – topic of an essay usually constitutes for authors only a starting point, a "springboard"¹¹ for developing meandering discussions which race towards various other matters and eventually should become an intermediate self-portrait of the essayistic 'I'. The task of organising more recent literary production which transcends traditional frames is facilitated by series of books¹² announced under a common trademark (the Czarne Publishing House is a leader in this respect).

Travel "somewhere further, somewhere else"

A clear signal of translocation in reference to the canon is offered by the "Sulina" label, which in an after-the-fact manner summarised a certain travel-writing tendency already visible at the turn of the 21st century. "Sulina"

⁸ M. Wyka, *Esej – forma pojemna*, [in:] *Polski esej*, ed. M. Wyka, Kraków 1991, pp. 7-8.

⁹ I discussed the fiasco of the "artistic pilgrimage" project, including the topic of mass tourism and the model of the "anti-travel" – which rejects the connoisseur attitude towards the places being visited – in the paper titled *Contemporary Polish Essays: in Search of the Aura of Paintings and Photographs*, [in:] *On-line/Off-line: Between Text and Experience. Writing as a Lifestyle*, eds. P. Gärdenfors, W. Powers, J. Pluciennik, M. Wróblewski, Łódź 2015, pp. 115-131.

¹⁰ M. Krakowiak, *Mierzenie się z esejem*, p. 248. The researcher also indicated two paths, along which the genre might develop: the pernicious path "towards columnisation" and the promising path "towards a meta-literary essay" (ibid., pp. 255-257).

¹¹ G. Lukács, *O istocie i formie eseju. List do Leo Poppera*, transl. R. Turczyn, [in:] *Pisma krytyczno-teoretyczne Georga Lukácsa. 1908-1932*, selection and introduction by S. Morawski, Warsaw 1994, p. 91. [Georg Lukács, *On the Nature and Form of the Essay*, [in:] idem, *Soul and Form*, trans. A. Bostock, J.T. Sanders, K. Terezakis, introduction J. Butler, New York 2010, pp. 16-34.]

¹² Essays also function in a dispersed state, e.g. in traditional and online periodicals.

is the title of a series of non-fiction books by the Wołowiec-based publishing house, which has operated since 2006, and is intended to present the “unknown faces” of Europe. Apart from some texts which belonged to a different genre, the series included a few collections of essays, e.g. *Gdzieś dalej, gdzie indziej* by Dariusz Czaja (about the lesser known Italian cases), and *Moja Europa* by Yurii Andrukhovych and Andrzej Stasiuk¹³. The series intentionally utilises as its title the name of a Romanian town in the delta of the Danube, i.e. the south-easternmost point of the continent. At that European head, to quote from Stasiuk’s *On the Road to Babadag*: “(...) the continent sinks into the sea, (...) leaves behind people, animals, and plants, (...) shaking off all the noise and histories, nations, tongues, the ancient mess of events and destinies, (...) see it find repose in the eternal twilight of the deep, in the indifferent and monotonous company of fish and seaweed”¹⁴. The newly defined phenomenon of Europe – the non-obvious historically wronged territories falling into decrepitude, i.e. the “layercake of meat, blood and bones”¹⁵ – has been the point of interest of a large group of authors¹⁶. In short, one could say that it is no longer Greece or Italy, nor France, the Netherlands or England (i.e. not the South or the West) that will be the desirable destinations, but, rather, the Balkan states, Hungary, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Russia. It is not a cultural metropolis with its galleries which seem “the Fort Knox of art with marble and canvas instead of gold, where people stop only where they are instructed to stop by the voice in their headphones”¹⁷, but the abandoned provinces, places where one can observe the lives of simple people and nature, trace the complex pasts of regions (e.g. in small-town museums resembling a cabinet of curiosities), and, often – as Stasiuk did in the quoted book – admire the post-industrial “scrap”¹⁸.

The release of *Jadąc do Babadag* (*On the Road to Babadag*) was a clear signal of the turning point of the discussed tendency (which might have been caused, to some extent, by the 2005 Nike literature award for the book). The group of collections of essays describing thus perceived “second world” – which is a wording that often functions in place of the so-called “third” world – also includes earlier books, which were not published by the Wołowiec-based publishing house (e.g. *Wilczy notes* by Mariusz Wilk about

¹³ D. Czaja, *Gdzieś dalej, gdzie indziej*, Wołowiec 2010; J. Andruchowycz, A. Stasiuk, *Moja Europa. Dwa eseje o Europie zwanej Środkiem*, Wołowiec 2018 (1st edition – 2000).

¹⁴ A. Stasiuk, *Jadąc do Babadag*, Wołowiec 2004, p. 185. [A. Stasiuk, *On the Road to Babadag*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company 2011]

¹⁵ A. Stasiuk, *Wschód*, Wołowiec 2014, p. 112. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

¹⁶ Essayists are a minority in this group; it mostly consisted of reporters (J. Hugo-Bader, Z. Szczerek, M. Rejmer, M. Książek). It is also worth mentioning the non-essayistic travel pieces on Hungary by K. Varga.

¹⁷ W. Nowicki, *Salki*, Wołowiec 2013, p. 158.

¹⁸ Regarding Stasiuk’s travel-writing project, vide e.g.: D. Kozicka, *Podróże kształcą? Doświadczenie podróży w twórczości Andrzeja Stasiuka*, [in:] *Literackie reprezentacje doświadczenia*, eds. W. Bolecki, E. Nawrocka, Warsaw 2007, pp. 425-437; A. Baglajewski, *Podróże do Polski Andrzeja Stasiuka*, “Kresy” 2006, issue 3, pp. 57-65; S. Iwasiów, *Postkolonializm wobec podróży. Niektóre przypadki Andrzeja Stasiuka*, “Rocznik Komparatystyczny” 2012, issue 3; M. Nalepa, «Trzeba wciąż gdzieś jechać, wyruszać, przemierzać...». *Andrzej Stasiuk i jego niekończąca się opowieść, “Fraza”* 2014, issue 4.

Russia¹⁹ or the first two books by Krzysztof Środa²⁰), as well as those published later by Czarne (i.e. further volumes by the same author²¹ and books by Andrzej Stasiuk²²). Yet the geographical reality is not decisive in this case; a similar search for somewhat ominous or strange otherness was visible in Środa's travels to Morocco or Michał Paweł Markowski's travels to South America²³. Though all the listed authors, unlike Stendhal imitating Barthes, are no longer tracing the phantasm of the "beautiful Italy", they do exactly as the French writer did – they still seek novelty, which constantly proves "somewhere further, somewhere else"²⁴.

That new model of essayists/travellers seems both intriguing and ambivalent. Just like the enthusiasts of the South before, namely Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Zbigniew Herbert, Ewa Bieńkowska, Wojciech Karpiński, they also openly condemn the tourist industry and the schematically moving visitors. That fundamentally intellectually or aristocratically sounding criticism is coupled with their mockery of the obsession with digital photography (the "*pstrykactwo*"²⁵ [snapshotting] in Stasiuk's words) or the transformation of the visible world through the "modern cicadas" into a "Facebookable world"²⁶. On the one hand, then, the fact of distancing oneself from the mass culture, often associated with the attitude of the model essayist²⁷, remains unharmed, but, on the other, fundamental significance is assigned to anti-connoisseuriness understood as a break from the "high" culture. Stasiuk equally mocks trips "to Tunisia, to sit under a palm tree" and pilgrimages "to Paris, to the Louvre"²⁸. Markowski presents himself as the one who eavesdrops on the conversations of natives, "photographing some lichens and drying pants instead of castles on hills," i.e. as someone who acts completely differently from the former representatives of the "travel guide generation", and who despises "the spectacular commonness

¹⁹ M. Wilk, *Wilczy notes*, Gdańsk 1999. The author continued the essayistic discussion of Russia, viewed through the prism of its peripheries, in his later books: *Wołoka* (Kraków 2005) and four volumes of *Dziennik północny*, published by the Noir sur Blanc publishing house in 2006-2014 (*Dom nad Oniegi*; *Tropami rena*; *Lotem gęsi*; *Dom włóczęgi*).

²⁰ K. Środa, *Niejasna sytuacja na kontynencie. Prywatny przewodnik po różnych stronach świata*, Izabelin 2003; *Projekt handlu kabardyńskimi końmi*, Izabelin 2006.

²¹ K. Środa, *Podróże do Armenii i innych krajów z uwzględnieniem najbardziej interesujących obserwacji przyrodniczych*, Wołowiec 2012; *Las nie uprzedza*, Wołowiec 2016.

²² Books which I have not listed yet: A. Stasiuk, *Fado*, Wołowiec 2006; *Dojczland*, Wołowiec 2007; *Dziennik pisany później*, Wołowiec 2010; *Grochów*, Wołowiec 2012.

As time went by, both authors started travelling further and further east: Środa visited the Caucasus and Armenia, while Stasiuk travelled all the way to Mongolia and China.

²³ M.P. Markowski, *Dzień na ziemi. Proza podrózna*, Poznań 2014.

²⁴ R. Barthes, *Nigdy nie udaje się mówić o tym, co się kocha*, transl. M.P. Markowski, [in:] *idem, Lektury*, Warsaw 2001, p. 223.

²⁵ A. Stasiuk, *Dziennik pisany później*, p. 163.

²⁶ M.P. Markowski, *Dzień na ziemi*, pp. 192, 311. A slight mockery of the Facebook culture was offered by the title *Książka twarzy* by M. Bieńczyk (Warsaw 2011; awarded the Nike award), where the group of 'acquaintances' includes, e.g., A. Mickiewicz and R. Chandler.

²⁷ S.R. Sanders, [From The Singular First Person], [in:] *Essayists on the Essay, Montaigne to Our Time*, eds. C.H. Klaus, N. Stuckey-French, Iowa City 2012, p. 125; A.S. Kowalczyk, *Kryzys świadomości europejskiej w eseistyce polskiej lat 1945-1977* (*Vincenz - Stempowski - Miłosz*), Warsaw 1990, pp. 28, 31.

²⁸ A. Stasiuk, *Osiąkiem*, Wołowiec 2016, p. 79.

flowing lazily through the fingers and which cannot be translated into an accurate turn of phrase”²⁹. The point, then, would be to ensure a different kind of connoisseuriness – finding delight in that which is seemingly most banal.

The identity of Polish travellers has also undergone a modification. While Herbert’s “barbarian in the garden”, despite his sense of inferiority, aspired to become a European or a citizen of the world (after visiting the Lascaux cave, Herbert claimed: “I have never been more cemented in a soothing certainty: I am a citizen of the Earth, heir not only to Greeks and Romans, but to near infinity”³⁰), Stasiuk’s traveller – when asked about his identity – responds “I’m from nowhere”³¹ or provides the name of any of the post-Soviet states. In fact, in his works one will find the largest number of reflections which discussed the non-elevating vision of Polishness as something torn between the East and the West, and stemming not from the traditions of a gentry manor, but from the rural and proletarian cultures.

Therefore, one can note a deep fissure in the travel-essay discourse in recent years. This is why the severe reaction of Marek Zagańczyk, a promoter of the tradition of the *Bildungsreise* to the South, to Stasiuk’s travel project was so unsurprising:

Stasiuk’s world ends there where mine begins, and it is far from that which I myself chose (...). There is no place in Stasiuk’s works for places sculptured with common memory. It lacks that significant for me intertwining of nature and culture. It is a record of decomposition, an image of the world in atrophy. I get lost among the Hungarian, Albanian and Romanian names. No map can help me³².

The division line between those models is not necessarily a strictly geographical one. The focus is rather on the diversity of attitudes: in opposition to a search for order, traditions, and self-assurance, there develops a project of conscious immersion in chaos, exposing oneself to a reality which has been ousted, which has not been penetrated or, even, one which cannot be penetrated. Additionally, the travellers of this second circle (Stasiuk, Środa, Markowski) no longer add a cultural taint to their landscapes; they do not describe it as ready-made painters’ frames or pretexts for talking about an exalted past. Rather, they collect private archives of amateur photographs, which do not, however, lead to adding structure or meaning to spaces; they do, however, foster the diagnoses of own falling behind the lushness of the world or reflections about the time and nature of memory.

In extreme cases, in those authors’ works, the goal in this anti-connoisseur trend appears to be an attempt to transcend “beyond culture”, e.g. into the world of nature. What is intriguing in this context is Wojciech Kuczok’s essays

²⁹ M.P. Markowski, *Dzień na ziemi*, pp. 308-309, 311.

³⁰ Z. Herbert, *Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie*, Warsaw 2004, pp. 19-20. [Z. Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, trans. M. March and J. Anders, Manchester 1985.]

³¹ A. Stasiuk, *Osiągnięcie*, p. 86.

³² M. Zagańczyk, *Droga do Sieny*, Warsaw 2005, p. 77. Zagańczyk was an editor for the *Podróże* series in the *Zeszyty Literackie* quarterly, and he is also among the essayists who perform “artistic pilgrimages” to Italy.

about the visits of this writer/caver to unexplored caves, to refuges which are not only – as the title of his collection would have one believe – “beyond light”, but also beyond time, beyond modern culture and civilisation, even beyond the panoptical opportunities offered by Google Earth³³. Other contemporary authors treat the views offered by this software as an inspiring substitute for actual travels into enigmatic regions, where no tourist paths have yet been devised – they look from above, from the perspective of a satellite, onto diffuse multi-colour blobs, engaging their memory or imagination³⁴.

Civilisational changes have had, in fact, a major impact on the shape of Polish travel essays and the sense of time and space developed within them. The traditional “leisurely passer-by” (as Jerzy Stempowski described himself), nurturing a special kind of a “rhetoric of walking”, overwriting travel-guide trials of the visited metropolises with his own “text”³⁵, has found a rival in the form of a ubiquitous globetrotter, who not only utilises various means of locomotion, but also makes that one of the topics of his essays. Stasiuk and Środa often write about the special atmosphere of travelling by car or plane³⁶. Another kind, an original and feminised transformation of the figure of *flâneur*, can be found in the reflections spun while jogging in Japan (Joanna Bator's *Zen biegania*³⁷). This, however, amplifies the immersion in the modern, though exotic, culture, while the two previously mentioned authors, despite moving at an even greater pace, seemingly breaking with the tradition of deliberateness, choose the “madness of kilometres”³⁸, the constant movement of planets³⁹. Apparently, the outcome is a peculiar looping of the time of travel and the time of memory, which gravitates towards timelessness specific for a philosophical perspective or nature.

Birds, fish, insects, as well as plants

It is nature, as opposed to objects of culture, that often draws the attention of the above-mentioned travellers. When reporting on his visit to the Paris exhibition titled *Napoleon in Egypt*, Krzysztof Środa passed with silence the displayed graphics as he was looking in them only for illustrations of plants and animals. Eventually, he focused on a stuffed European bee-eater⁴⁰. In his essays, he eagerly describes various animals – similarly, in fact, to Mariusz Wilk, who discussed boreal specimens, and Andrzej Stasiuk, who wrote about stray dogs in the Balkans or about Mongolian herds. Środa mainly focuses on birds, snails, insects, and, most of all, fish, and he clearly

³³ W. Kuczok, *Poza światłem*, Warsaw 2012, p. 124.

³⁴ Vide e.g.: W. Nowicki, *Salki*, p. 18; K. Środa, *Podróże do Armenii...*, pp. 20, 26; M. Cichy, *Pozwól rzecę płynąć*, Wołowiec 2017, p. 35.

³⁵ M. de Certeau, *Wynaleźć codzienność. Sztuki działania*, transl. K. Thiel-Jańczuk, Kraków 2008, pp. 99-101.

³⁶ With his *Szkice piórkiem*, A. Bobkowski could be considered the patron of this essayistic tendency.

³⁷ J. Bator, *Rekin w parku Yoyogi*, Warsaw 2014, pp. 97-101. The essayistic nature of the collection was discussed by T. Czerska (*Autobiograficzność w eseistyce Joanny Bator: między esejem, felietonem a reportażem, "Autobiografia"* 2018, issue 1, pp. 141-151).

³⁸ A. Stasiuk, *Grochów*, p. 66.

³⁹ This is the *leitmotif* of *Podróże do Armenii...* by K. Środa.

⁴⁰ K. Środa, *Podróże do Armenii...*, pp. 75-78.

indicated the reason for that: "(..) for some time now I have been of the opinion that entomology, together with ornithology, are sciences which should be lectured at theological academies and seminaries"⁴¹.

As for zoological themes, those are mainly raised by "monographic" books, in which animals as the thematic starting point are mentioned already in the titles. Three of those were published in the *Menażeria* [Menagerie] series (Czarne publishing house once again)⁴², two more were published by the same publishing house, but with a label *Poza serią* [Outside a Series]⁴³. Animals are not treated in them only as literary or cultural motifs⁴⁴, nor do they function exclusively as private symbols⁴⁵, though those two perspectives also prove significant. Then, a kind of a novelty is the introduction of specialist entomological, ornithological, or ichthyological knowledge – though more as a favourably understood dilettantism (e.g. Łubieński as an amateur birdwatcher⁴⁶), and the information gathered from old scientific treatises. That quasi-scientific perspective has even induced Robert Pucek – an essayist whose dream would be for his texts to fill up the "trench separating the world of nature from the world of the broadly understood humanities"⁴⁷ – to strongly object to the author of *Piekło owadów* for mistaking a coenagrionidae for a mayfly⁴⁸ (which, according to him, was a bigger mistake than "if someone mistook Zbigniew Herbert for George Herbert")⁴⁹. Stanisław Łubieński reproaches writers, painters, and art historians for similar cardinal errors⁵⁰. The essays by the authors associated with the *Menażeria* series are, in fact, rather surprisingly bound, as Adorno would have liked it, by diverse domains of existence; through their experiments they merge today's culture divided into opposing "departments"⁵¹. A similar tendency, this time in the context of essays about plants, is visible in *Patyki, badyle* by Urszula Zajączkowska⁵². Even when posing theses of a universalising nature, the professor of botany and a poet, despite her specialist knowledge, does not write about abstract species, but, rather she freely – and from multiple perspectives, almost affectionately – observes the life and movements

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 79.

⁴² R. Pucek, *Pajęki pana Roberta*, Wołowiec 2014; *Sennik ciem i owadów*, Wołowiec 2018; S. Łubieński, *Dwanaście srok za ogon*, Wołowiec 2016.

⁴³ R. Pucek, *Siedemnaście zwierząt*, Wołowiec 2017; K. Środa, *Srebro ryb*, Wołowiec 2019. These two authors are friends and they often reference one another.

⁴⁴ Such an approach to natural objects can be found in, e.g., the meta-literary essays by A. Nawarecki (*Pokrzywa. Eseje*, Chorzów-Sosnowiec 1996; there: *Urtica, Ptaki Hieronima Morsztyna, Mickiewicz i Robaki*).

⁴⁵ Such as in the case of an insect in *The Death of the Moth* by V. Woolf, or cats, crayfish, and turtles in *Kinderszenen* by J.M. Rymkiewicz (vide Z. Jazienicki, "Konwulsje, wzdęte brzuchy, rzyganie, futra pokryte żółtą mazią...". Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz wobec nieludzkiego, [in:] *Zazwierzęcenie. O zwierzętach w literaturze i kulturze*, ed. M. Pranke, Toruń 2018, p. 310).

⁴⁶ Vide A. Szumiec, *Uwaga! Ptasiarze*, "ArtPapier" 2016, issue 7-8, <http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=299&artykul=5508> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

⁴⁷ R. Pucek, *Pajęki pana Roberta*, p. 15.

⁴⁸ Z. Herbert, *Martwa natura z węzidłem*, Warsaw 2003, p. 123.

⁴⁹ R. Pucek, *Pajęki pana Roberta*, p. 13.

⁵⁰ S. Łubieński, *Dwanaście srok za ogon*, pp. 28-29, 31.

⁵¹ Th. W. Adorno, *The Essay as Form*, transl. B. Hullet-Kentor, F. Willl, "New German Critique" 1984, no. 30, p. 156.

⁵² U. Zajączkowska, *Patyki i badyle*, Warsaw 2019.

of selected plants (often individual specimens), boldly going beyond that which is graspable within the scientific model. She also often writes about the complex relationships which exist between trees and humans.

Independent observations of a specimen in its natural environment have major significance for the shapes of all of the listed books about nature, as those very often trigger musings on philosophical or even metaphysical issues⁵³. Therefore, one could conclude that encounters with animals or trees have, in a sense, replaced in those essay collections the traditional encounters with major figures (vide Jan Tomkowski's list). If one compares the texts by Pucek and Bieńkowska⁵⁴, one will notice that the study of, e.g., the colour patterns on a moth's wings may lead to drawing theological reflections just as one studies old paintings, though the perspective is considerably shifted in the case of an outsider "animalier".

However, to what extent does this fulfil the willingness to transcend culture (related to the travels discussed above) and, additionally, transcend anthropocentrism, i.e. an attempt to reproduce the animal perspective? In other words, is Jolanta Brach-Czaina's⁵⁵ postulate to bridle the "swollen human subject", find "our destroyed stone part", and reconstruct the "disdained animal soul"⁵⁶ in order to create "an open subject"⁵⁷ being fulfilled? On the one hand, Pucek, Zajączkowska, and Łubieński are somewhat reversing the perspective. In his début collection, Pucek used the original creation of "Mr Robert" when writing about himself in the third-person form. Instead of anthropomorphising the insects he observed, he viewed humans with a distant gaze, as if they were the subjects of a nature documentary. Next, Zajączkowska offers a tender and humble insight into the inside world of trees (though cut up into samples). She discusses not only series of details of plant anatomy, but also the modes of functioning of those fully respected organisms in specific conditions, e.g. in the rubble of Warsaw in 1945. Despite her restrained respect in the face of the inaccessibility of the plant world, she conducts visible personifications, e.g. when she writes about their dances or death by fire. Finally, Łubieński wonders what Warsaw looks like from a bird's perspective; he also introduces many onomatopoeias⁵⁸, experimenting with polyphonication of his text and giving voice to his animal subjects⁵⁹. Yet those are subtle and

⁵³ Vide K. Czaja, *Przewodnik po zacieraniu granic*, "FA-Art" 2013, issue 1-2, p. 101.

⁵⁴ E. Bieńkowska, *Co mówił kamień Wenecji*, Gdańsk 2002.

⁵⁵ She apparently signalled for an opening of the canon of the Polish essay.

⁵⁶ J. Brach-Czaina, *Błony umysłu*, Warsaw 2003, pp. 119-123. It is also worth mentioning the essay titled *Suka* from *Grochów* by A. Stasiuk, in which the author described the dying of his beloved dog and presented an actually post-humanistic reflection on death.

⁵⁷ T. Fazan, *Raczej istniejemy*, "Mały Format" 04/2018, <http://malyformat.com/2018/04/raczej-istniejemy/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

⁵⁸ Vide M. Wojtak, *Leksyka imituująca i nazywająca głosy ptaków w polifonicznym tekście*, "Stylistyka" 2017, vol. XXVI, pp. 69-84.

⁵⁹ For D. Nowicka (*O literackich lullulach Stanisława Łubieńskiego. Wokół ptasich melancholii, "Polonistyka. Innowacje"* 2017, issue 5), this is proof of a "bird", i.e. post-humanistic as well as eco-critical perspective. A. Jarzyna raised reservations to assigning so much significance to bird onomatopoeias in another text, i.e. *Ornitologia, ornitomania. Sokołowski i (inne) ptaki Jerzego Ficowskiego*, "Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Historicoliteraria" 2016, vol. XVI, pp. 203-204.

rather marginal attempts. At the centre of the essays, there is the "I" of nature enthusiasts, who are both people of learning and amateur philosophers.

The supposed similarity between those collections and eco-criticism demands additional questions: about the degree of their ideological engagement and about their relationship with the ecological tendency within the alternative culture clearly forming in recent years, which impacts the lifestyles of a considerable group of people as well as their consumer choices⁶⁰. A model essayist should, in fact, be independent in their judgements, and should not repeat the common opinions or assume propaganda slogans⁶¹. And this is actually the case – neither of the three "animaliers" moves towards that extreme, and those are foreign to Zajączkowska as well. Stanisław Łubieński, despite writing about species on the verge of extinction and the difficult conditions for birds' existence in concrete cities, retains (as a "cautious optimist", but also a "toned down pessimist"⁶²) a balanced and extreme self-aware and self-critical opinion of a "third way". Robert Pucek, in turn, boldly presents his original worldview which is not free of idiosyncrasy, yet he presents even his polemics (e.g. anti-Darwinist) within the distancing ironic frame. Krzysztof Środa's attitude in this context would be most interesting as it also considers violence against animals, interestingly enough associated with own practices: for example, angling (that hobby was the basis for the *Srebro ryb* collection, which included the author's original photographs of dead catch), eating meat, or collecting insects. Being a philosopher⁶³, he does not accept simple solutions; he discusses the theme of death or leaves unsettling images without any commentary, as the recurring in *Las nie uprzedza* image of severed goat heads at a market in Morocco⁶⁴. Those visions are supposed to proximate, through a metaphorical shortcut, the unsettling atmosphere of recent history marked with wars, terrorism, and the so-called migrant crisis.

The excluded

The above-mentioned topic of extended subjectivity relates, according to Anita Jarzyna, not only to the literary references to the animal world, but also to people's approach to others, aliens, and refugees⁶⁵. She formulated

⁶⁰ Similarly, one could ask about their relationships with the phenomenon of unhurriedness in the *slow life* movement – traditionally viewed as being typical for essays (A.S. Kowalczyk thus wrote about it: "Approach to time applies to the very essence of the essay as a literary genre, and the attitude it establishes" – *Nieśpieszny przechodzień i paradoksy. Rzecz o Jerzym Stempowskim*, Wrocław 1997, p. 225). This mainly applies to M. Cichy's collections titled *Zawsze jest dzisiaj* (Wolowiec 2014) and *Pozwól rzece płynąć*.

⁶¹ Therefore, one could hardly consider as essays two engaged erudite studies with relaxed associative progressions (written with a columnist inclination), namely M. Sugiera's *Po rozum do mirovek* as well as *Łączyć i rządzić* (from: *Nieludzie. Donosy ze sztucznych natur*, Kraków 2015).

⁶² A. Pekaniec, *Pełzaczce, lelki, raniuszki i spółka. Notatnik ornitologa*, "Nowa Dekada Literacka" 2017, issue 6, p. 161.

⁶³ Środa was employed by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences; he wrote his doctoral dissertation on Husserl's philosophy.

⁶⁴ Relating to a film, mentioned in the same collection, from Chechnya of Russian POWs being decapitated.

⁶⁵ A. Jarzyna, *Nie-stosow(a)ne analogie. "Lesbos" Renaty Lis jako narracja poszerzająca doświadczenie uchodźcze*, "Polonistyka. Innowacje" 2017, issue 6.

her arguments in relation to, e.g., the essay titled *Ostatnia wieczerza François Mitteranda* by Stanisław Łubieński⁶⁶, which discussed hunting "alien" migrating birds, e.g. in Egypt and Lebanon, thus echoing the already mentioned devices in Środa's *Las nie uprzedza*⁶⁷. Jarzyna also referred to the final travel-centred part of *Lesbos* by Renata Lis, in which the author wrote about "bird migrants" (flamingos, herons, swallows) that are free, calm, and unaware of borders, and that find safe haven on the Greek island, which also houses refugee camps. To Lis, it appeared to be similar to concentration camps⁶⁸. Therefore, unlike in the realities depicted by Środa and Łubieński, animals in this case do not experience violence but, rather, care. It can be concurred that the story about them is not an attempt at parabolically indicating the dark underbelly of today's reality, but, rather, at offering a counterbalance in order to emphasise the superiority-driven attitude of Europeans to people who arrive on the continent from the other side of the Mediterranean. Yet, Lis goes even further in her discussions. By specifying her own identity using the "I am a refugee" formula, she demands "unconditional asylum"⁶⁹ for both immigrants from Lesbos and lesbians being excluded by the violence-based mechanisms of the mainstream narrative. Since the topic of exclusion can be strongly bound with animals' topics, which I have already discussed as being typical of new essays, one should ask whether it also became a major component of the most recent products of the genre.

Despite the fact that after the year 2000 many texts were published demanding a revision of the status of women and cultural, ethnic, and sexual minorities, one should note that the rhetoric applied in those usually gravitated towards press and column-related engagement (sometimes also towards sociological specialisation)⁷⁰ and not towards the balance and indirect presentations that are specific for the referenced collection by Lis (and common for the genre of the essay). Therefore, it would be difficult to talk about the existence of an entire stream of the essay area devoted to the problem of exclusion; yet, in this group one should highlight two essay collections, which actually prove to be very different.

Renata Lis' *Lesbos* deserves particular consideration due to, e.g., its mode of depicting lesbian love in a universalising manner, within a broad cultural perspective, which is, however, developed based on the micro stories of specific authors (Jeanette Winterson, Narcyza Żmichowska, Anna Kowalska, and Sofia Parnok). The author avoided outright propaganda; she wrote in an extremely erudite and ironic manner, spinning the networks of

⁶⁶ S. Łubieński, *Dwanaście srok za ogon*, pp. 175-192.

⁶⁷ Also in *Podróż do Armenii* (s. 93-97), the essayist wrote about a refugee village hidden under a Paris bridge, and compared the refugees to his idol, i.e. the Cynic Diogenes.

⁶⁸ R. Lis, *Lesbos*, Warsaw 2017, pp. 156, 163, 164.

⁶⁹ A. Jarzyna, *Nie-stosow(a)ne analogie*, p. 42.

⁷⁰ Vide e.g.: A. Graff, *Świat bez kobiet* (Warsaw 2001); *Rykoszetem* (Warsaw 2008); *Matka feministka* (Warsaw 2014); S. Chutnik, *Mama ma zawsze rację* (Warsaw 2012); I. Iwasiów, *Błogotony* (Warsaw 2013); O. Tokarczuk, *Moment niedźwiedzia* (Warsaw 2012); M. Gretkowska, *Silikon* (Warsaw 2000). The differences in terms of the applied rhetoric can be identified in essayistic studies of an academic nature from the *Różowy język* collection by B. Warkocki (Warsaw 2013), as well as from the *Od Żmichowskiej do Masłowskiej. O pisarstwie kobiet w nadwiślańskim kraju* collection by E. Graczyk (Gdańsk 2013). They include autobiographical fragments.

surprising coincidences and subtly expanding a fixed set of leitmotifs and symbols (e.g. a white rose, a fragile cup being a gift for a lover, or an empty box of Huntley & Palmers biscuits, which are manufactured in Reading⁷¹). The empty biscuit box is – as if echoed by other images of containers – concealing works rejected by the heteronormative majority, including a bottle with a letter inside it or a lead drawer in the “dungeons” of the Vatican protecting Sappho’s manuscripts (allusion to Gide is, of course, not accidental). Lis’ idea – even though she wrote somewhat selectively as she defined, first, the status of her target audience by importantly referring to them as “droga czytelniczko”⁷² and, second, an encouragement to become a new Sappho⁷³ – is also a “third way” between two extremes: a closed circle of a sexual minority and the *mainstream* blind to its existence or hastily pigeonholing it. The author does not juxtapose these areas. In following the “post-emancipation” spirit, she tries to write in the “pre-emancipation socio-cultural conditions” – hence, e.g. the distancing spelling of *lesbian* in quotation marks⁷⁴ as well as the use of circumlocutions and irony.

Similar balance can be found in the collection titled *Powlekać rosnące* by Joanna Mueller. Here, the author combines that which is corporeal (her own experiences of being pregnant; labour and motherhood described in detail using original linguistic forms, including neologisms) with that which is cultural (she wrote about women engaged in literature, e.g. Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich, Manuela Gretkowska, Anna Nasiłowska, Krystyna Miłobędzka). She constantly fluctuates between autobiographical elements, literary criticism, and poetic fragments marked by her original language poetry⁷⁵. The multi-faceted nature of her collection places it midway between the anti-cultural essays by Brach-Czaina – focused on corporeality – and the emphatically immersed in culture essays by Lis. Interestingly enough, Mueller enters a polemic with *Otwarcie* by Brach-Czaina (where labour is depicted as a uniting experience for women and animals)⁷⁶, opposing the notion of endowing – like an “existential Robin Hood”⁷⁷ [egzystencjalny Janosik in the original] – the entire human kind with the feminine experience. It is worth adding that Renata Lis, similarly invitingly as Brach-Czaina, stresses that the entire literature needs “lesbian” love, which could introduce a communion of language and desire, subversive for the sterile modern reality⁷⁸, while Mueller seems to intentionally create a non-feminist enclave for that which is feminine and “anachromystic”, while remaining within the genre of the essay, but one which – in an original and subtle manner

⁷¹ It is important inasmuch as it is the city where Oscar Wilde was imprisoned, but also where the biographer of Sappho (best known for disproving the idealised vision of the poet’s life) lived.

⁷² Meaning “dear reader”, where the “reader” is used in the feminine variant of the noun, which in English would be obtained only through the ‘dear female reader’ phrasing.

⁷³ R. Lis, *Lesbos*, p. 112.

⁷⁴ R. Lis, *Lesbos – poza polityką tożsamości*, “Mały Format” 11/2018 (accessed: 8.08.2019).

⁷⁵ E. Soltys-Lewandowska, *Powlekać rosnące Joanny Mueller – wiwisekcja macierzyństwa, “Autobiografia”* 2018, issue 1, pp. 51-52.

⁷⁶ J. Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, Warsaw 2018, 3rd edition, pp. 29-66.

⁷⁷ J. Mueller, *Powlekać rosnące (apokryfy prenatalne)*, Wrocław 2013, p. 161.

⁷⁸ R. Lis, *Lesbos*, pp. 130-131.

- opposes unconditional universalisation. This is a somewhat subversive gesture as the condition of the susceptibility of the experience of the Self to the typical humanistic generalisation was posed in various concepts of the essay⁷⁹.

Material culture

To conclude this overview of non-traditional themes, it is worth returning to the issue of evading culture, but not in the form of probing what is animal, plant or corporeal, but, rather, what – according to conservative divisions – would be placed outside the area of 'high culture' (vide the "biblioteka" [library] and "sztuka" [art] entries in the anthologist's list). The function of that catalyst of essayistic narrative is often not a painting, sculpture or architectural object, but an old photograph which initially serves a special purpose – as is the case in three books by Wojciech Nowicki⁸⁰ – or even a pornographic photograph, as in *Teksturowy samolot* by Andrzej Stasiuk⁸¹. The design of everyday objects, product packaging, and posters may prove a similarly interesting topic, as indicated by Marcin Wicha in his two essay collections (which, surprisingly, are rarely referred to this way)⁸². By starting with, e.g., changes in the appearance of Lego bricks, the author is able to convey historical and sociological reflections (on totalitarianism or modern mass culture) or anthropological reflections⁸³. The dusty covers proved more interesting than the contents of the books from his late mother's bookshelf as they not only indicated the changing trends and tastes in terms of visual design, but they also indicated, on the one hand, the private family history and, on the other, the history of communist economy and the mentality of that period.

The outcomes of architectural "botching up", the exuberant construction fantasies⁸⁴, or even rubbish⁸⁵ – though painful for the so-called 'good taste' – may prove a related object of interest for essayists.

If, then, the canon of the Polish essay up to the year 2000 – summarised with Tomkowski's keywords – appeared "aesthetist", this short overview of the new tendencies would suggest a major change: an 'untightening of the canon' by accepting 'lower' disdained topics (mainly travels to "worse"

⁷⁹ E.g. G.D. Atkins, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth*, Athens–London 2010, p. 61.

⁸⁰ W. Nowicki, *Dno oka. Eseje o fotografii* (Wołowiec 2010); *Odbicie* (Wołowiec 2015); *Tuż obok* (Wołowiec 2018). I discussed the specificity of this stream of writing in *Wizualne odskocznie*.

⁸¹ A. Stasiuk, *Fantomy po przystępnej cenie; Ikony Marie*, [in:] idem., *Teksturowy samolot*, Wołowiec 2001.

⁸² M. Wicha, *Jak przestałem kochać design*, Kraków 2015; *Rzeczy, których nie wyrzuciłem*, Kraków 2017. This group could also include *Duchologia polska. Rzeczy i ludzie w czasach transformacji* by O. Drenda (Kraków 2016), which, however – apart from the introduction – lacks the personal perspective obligatory for an essay, or *Wyroby. Pomyślowość wokół nas* by the same author (Kraków 2018).

⁸³ M. Wicha, *Lego Gutenberga*, [in:] idem., *Jak przestałem kochać design*, Kraków 2015.

⁸⁴ Vide A. Stasiuk, *Badziew z betonu*, [in:] F. Springer, *Wanna z kolumnadą. Reportaże o polskiej przestrzeni*, Wołowiec 2013.

⁸⁵ K. Środa, *Nie mogłem zabrać wszystkich*, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/7998-nie-moglem-zabrac-wszystkich.html> (accessed: 8.08.2019). This essay was published in the *Każdemu jego śmiertnik. Szkice o śmieciach i śmiertnikach* collection (Wołowiec 2019).

geographical regions) and no more reading only books and masterpieces, but also reading the worlds of animals, plants, and regular objects. Several times, the essay has also proven to be a literary tool for reworking existing polarisations (high vs. low, human vs. animal and plant, mainstream vs. minority). However, is it truly necessary to view this tendency as an internal break in the essay? In order to avoid an unnecessary juxtaposition of the 'old' and the 'new' themes, it is worth returning to the source, i.e. Michel de Montaigne, the originator of the genre, who professed the truly Renaissance interest in all topics.

Montaigne's coat

Interestingly enough, in following the wave of criticism of the anthology of the essay published by Ossolineum, critics attributed the author of *Essays* with several derisive and not entirely justified labels. In her statements in a 2017 debate, Lis labelled the author as a specialist in "volumes and travels", whose natural environment was "an ivory tower"⁸⁶. However, "the inventor of «Self» in literature and a lover of the castle cat", locked in his library – as Montaigne was described in that same year by Marek Bieńczyk (i.e. another essayist and an ardent promoter of the genre; omitted in the anthology) – "does not withdraw (...) from the human community, only places above the fighting aggressive community a reflective community"⁸⁷. Evidence for the French writer's broader interests (beyond the disengaged intellectual ones) can be found in the tables of contents of the three volumes of *Essays*⁸⁸. Indeed, one will find there essays declaratively erudite ("Of Cato the Younger", "A Consideration upon Cicero"), but also those which turn towards commonality ("Of Coaches", "Of Smells", "Of Thumbs") or the curiosities of his time ("Of a Monstrous Child", "Of Cannibals"). It was, among other things, Montaigne's freedom in the selection of the starting topic/pretext, as well as the multiple perspectives combining various domains of existence, that helped him gain the favour of later eulogists of the project of the "ideal essay" (e.g. Walter Pater, Virginia Woolf, György Lukács, Robert Musil, Walter Hilsbecher, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Bense⁸⁹). The commonly referenced elitist nature of the essay – viewed through the prism of the attitude of the author of *Essays* – is not a product of the "springboard" topic, but a positively amateurish manner of developing it and, of course, the artistic style of writing. In this case, the book-based knowledge proves to be an occasional starting point, almost never a target, and, essentially, always one of the filters enabling one to face their "I" with various topics. On a side note, all the authors discussed in the context of the new topics eagerly

⁸⁶ R. Lis, *Esej i kwanty*.

⁸⁷ M. Bieńczyk, *Więcej czytania, mniej działania, dostoje panie i zacni panowie*, "Książki. Magazyn do Czytania" 2017, issue 2(25), pp. 44, 46. This special "essay about the essay" is a response to the book – excessively pigeonholing, according to Bieńczyk – titled *Montaigne. Un Biographie Politique* by Ph. Desan.

⁸⁸ M. de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, transl. D.M. Frame, Stanford 1985.

⁸⁹ Vide R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej* (a chapter of "Czysty esej", czyli abstrakcja. O kilku projektach tekstu eseistycznego).

refer to literary texts. Even Andrzej Stasiuk, who seems to possess an anti-book-based knowledge disposition (mocking the cults surrounding Bach or Mann⁹⁰), often appears as a specialised reader who applies the geographical criterion (an enthusiast of, e.g., Cioran, Bodor, Kiš, Bulatović, and Eliade) and who chooses counter-culture (eagerly referring to beatniks). The book-based knowledge displayed by the author, as well as by Stanisław Łubieński, is additionally enriched by his knowledge of popular culture.

In *Książka twarzy* as well as in other books⁹¹, Bieńczyk, whom I have already mentioned, showed that the modern application of Montaigne's attitude may consist of a lack of division into the so-called high culture and the mass culture⁹². Tennis, football, films, wine – or his fascination with the protagonists of Karl May's books – seem to trigger in his collections extended essayistic discussions just as strongly as, e.g., the fortunes of Polish Romantics do. Despite an extensive array of the topics he discusses – and even considering Bieńczyk's pop cultural erudition – he can hardly be termed a dissenter from the canon. He is an author who consciously applies international essay traditions and avoids devices which would otherwise shift his texts too close to other areas of the humanistic discourse, scientific specialisation, or journalistic interventionality (because even though it is difficult to define what an essay is, it is quite easy to indicate what it is not, as Miłosz wisely argued⁹³).

This trans-discipline defence of the shaky balance between the essay and its independence within the limits of its niche – pressed between the fields of solidified discourses – may prove key to rethinking the domain of modern formal mutations of the genre, the authors of which have gone further than Bieńczyk has in terms of 'lowering' the topic. This is because a non-traditional topic or a non-traditional attitude entails non-typical formal solutions, placing a question mark next to a genological classification. As Aldous Huxley argued, the essay, though subjective, cannot simply probe the internal experiences of the Self as this would transform it into personal writing. Moreover, on the one hand, it cannot completely abandon the specifics and life experience in favour of a generalising abstraction, since then it would become philosophy; on the other hand, it cannot become fixated on them, offering an annex to either of the narrow domains of knowledge⁹⁴. Therefore, is it necessary in the 21st century to don the somewhat old-fashioned "Montaigne's coat"⁹⁵, i.e. consciously match the traditions of *Essays*? The liberal framework of the genre specified by the formula presented by Huxley indicates that a negative answer is possible, and that other patterns for the essay are acceptable.

⁹⁰ A. Stasiuk, *Dojczland*, pp. 14, 26.

⁹¹ Vide M. Bieńczyk, *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, Warsaw 2015; *Wszystkie kroniki wina*, Warsaw 2018.

⁹² K. Rutkowski is another author with such a broad array of interests (vide, e.g. *Paryskie pasaże. Opowieść o tajemnych przejściach*, Gdańsk 1995, where he described, e.g. pinsomania or the history of women's underwear).

⁹³ Cz. Miłosz, *Ogród nauk*, Lublin 1986, p. 143.

⁹⁴ A. Huxley, *Preface*, [in:] *idem, Collected Essays*, New York 1960, pp. 89-90.

⁹⁵ E.B. White, [From the foreword to Essays of E.B. White], [in:] *Essayists on the Essay*, p. 105.

New forms

28

DOBRAWA LISAK-GĘBALA

Emphatically, such a possibility was also indicated by Renata Lis. She stressed that it would be possible to write an essay somewhat by accident, even without genological awareness when one has “something important to think over” and the form is sought “empirically” – simply by writing, i.e. struggling with a topic in an open and artistic way⁹⁶. This line of thinking echoes the theses by Brach-Czaina (once Lis’ advisor) expressed in *Konstrukcja filozoficznego eseju*, where she underlined the need for unconventionality and the uniqueness of form reproducing the extra-verbal structure of the internal or external worlds discovered by the “I” within a “risky adventure”⁹⁷. The essayist’s practice fulfils such experimental writing, which remains in line with a kind of a counter-cultural nature of her approach, with doting on the paradoxical dream of escaping the logosphere. Thus, the author of *Szczeliny istnienia* did actually let ‘fresh air’ into the Polish essay-writing through consolidating not only the significance of new topics, but also a certain anti-traditionalistic yet cognitively functionalised writer’s irreverence (for example, she uses fragments which resemble free verse⁹⁸).

In this light, an unclosed, chaotic, or even rough form of work – one that is far from refinement appreciated by readers – which aspires to be classified as the essay, does not necessarily have to entail an artistic fiasco and a downgrading of the text to being classified as a quasi-essay or “kitsch essay”⁹⁹, since, in some cases, it may be a consciously selected reflection on a lack of order of an experienced reality. According to Andrzej S. Kowalczyk, the essay introduces order, it helps one read even difficult phenomena through the “alphabet of tradition”¹⁰⁰ as well as defend humanistic values¹⁰¹, while according to Ewa Bieńkowska it enables one to present one’s own “cultural genealogy”¹⁰². Thus understood essay should be deep, artistically disciplined, and associated with idealised “Europeanness”, which was noticed and mocked already in 1958 by Ludwik Flaszen when he wrote: “Behind essays (...) Poles hide to convince themselves and the world that they are Europeans”¹⁰³. Yet, one should also consider an alternate possibility: an essay which in a time of crisis indicates the existence of chaos and cognitive aporias, be it related to identity or morality, without attempting to apply any polishing formulas and expanding scepticism (originated by Montaigne). The looped and shattered form of Środa’s *Las nie uprzedza* collection could be considered as an example of the fruit of such an “empirical” search for

⁹⁶ A voice in the discussion in *Wspólny duży pokój*.

⁹⁷ J. Brach-Czaina, *Konstrukcja filozoficznego eseju*, “Kwartalnik Filozoficzny” 1996, col. 2, pp. 150, 156.

⁹⁸ J. Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, pp. 56-57, 69-70.

⁹⁹ M. Główski, *Esej i kicz*, “Tygodnik Powszechny” 1999, issue 51-52, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ A.S. Kowalczyk, *Esej* [entry], p. 154.

¹⁰¹ A.S. Kowalczyk, *Kryzys świadomości europejskiej*..., p. 33.

¹⁰² E. Bieńkowska, *Sztuka eseju*, “*Znak*” 1976, issue 1, p. 104.

¹⁰³ L. Flaszen, *Na oleju grzechów naszych. Z notatnika szalonego recenzenta*, [in:] *Kosmopolityzm i sarmatyzm. Antologia powojennego eseju polskiego*, selected and edited by D. Heck, Wrocław-Warsaw-Kraków 2003, p. 174.

the most appropriate form. This is a perspective worth applying to Stasiuk's mantric enumerations and achronological streams of images/recollections, as his amorphic essays – avoiding previous conventions – used to be the object of controversy and disputes, including within a purely genological aspect¹⁰⁴. The conscious choice of a shattered structure complies with the author's thesis when he directly stated with surprise that all the books read, talks conducted, and travels made do not produce any "synthesis" or "wisdom for the future"¹⁰⁵. A similar inability to add coherence to form is specific for Nowicki's *Salki*, i.e. a collection in which the author unsuccessfully attempts – in a looping or elliptical manner – to discuss post-memory, i.e. the burden of unwanted family recollections about the massacres in Volhynia¹⁰⁶.

In such collections, photographs can be an element which adds layering of meaning. They were in a particularly interesting way used by Krzysztof Środa in *Niejasna sytuacja na kontynencie*, a book which in many ways resembles the photo-textual essays by W. G. Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn*¹⁰⁷. Środa declared openly that writing and taking photographs are "two parts of the same project"¹⁰⁸. Own photographs and reproduced drawings are not mere illustrations, but – as elements similar to metaphors, i.e. extremely accurate though non-discursive "replacements of a phase of discourse"¹⁰⁹ – they appear as indications of inexpressible issues or add new content, sometimes even as counterpoints to words.

The formal innovations combine with the comprehensive thinking about an essayistic book emerging no longer as something developing and evolving through many years, like Montaigne's *Essays* – a silva rerum compilation of atomised details (de facto reprinted from periodicals or collective volumes) – but, rather, as a volume designed from the start, often in the form of a collection of shorter thematically diverse texts/chapters, which, however, do not form a monograph of the "essay/study" kind, e.g. one about

¹⁰⁴ Krakowiak (*Mierzenie się z esejem*, pp. 156, 259) basically objected to them being termed "essays", accusing them of being hastened, banal, and excessively subjective. Then, M. Gruszka (*Co dalej z polskim esejem? Przypadek Andrzeja Stasiuka*, [in:] *W szkole polskich eseistów*, ed. M. Krakowiak, Katowice 2007, pp. 143-159) provided indications of the essay character of Stasiuk's earlier collections, though criticising their rough style. Additionally, one should consider the constantly expanding relationship between the author's travel writing and reportage, which is visible, e.g., in the record of dialogues typical for prose writing.

¹⁰⁵ A. Stasiuk, *Fado*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁶ Nowicki also argued against the idyllic vision of the Eastern Borderlands in, e.g., Milosz' works (*Salki*, p. 148), thus breaking with the Borderland tradition of the "Polish school of the essay".

¹⁰⁷ The discussions of Sebald's photo-textual experiments were gathered in the collection titled *Searching for Sebald. Photography after W.G. Sebald*, ed. L. Patt, Los Angeles 2007.

¹⁰⁸ *Dziwny jest ten świat. Rozmowa Katarzyny Kazimierowskiej z Krzysztofem Środą*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" 2016, issue 34, p. 56. One should also mention the galleries of original photographs in Markowski's *Dzień na ziemi*, D. Pawelec's photographs devoid of any commentary inserted in the middle of Stasiuk's *Dziennik pisany później*, and the sets of photographs added to J. Mueller's collection titled *Powiekać rosągę*. On a side note, in reference to such initiatives, there exists the term "photographic essay", which is supposed to indicate a series of photographs that create a certain "narrative" and trigger reflections in popular science collective works such as *Smart obiekt* or *Hawaikum*, published by the Czarne Publishing House.

¹⁰⁹ K. Dybciak, *Inwazja eseju*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 1977, col. 4, p. 123.

a single artist¹¹⁰. Such comprehensive planning is conducive both to bi-medial experiments and to viewing an essay collection as an art book¹¹¹ in which either element can add meaning. Such is the case with cutting out the "m" in the title *Rzeczy, których nie wyrzuciłem* by Wicha as a symbol of "not fitting within words or life"¹¹², or with the application of various fonts for differentiating essay passages from a journal from Łubieński's ornithologist camp¹¹³, or with the surprising loop in the table of contents in *Lesbos* by Lis, who (surely in order to amplify the effect) requires her readers to repeatedly study the same texts on the few discussions of lesbian themes in literature¹¹⁴.

The application of repetitions and providing additional meanings to graphic elements often entails an introduction of non-essayistic fragments, which further complicate the form. When progressing towards the finale in *Rzeczy, których nie wyrzuciłem*, i.e. the pain-filled account of his mother's death, Wicha abandons all auxiliary topics and uses texts of decreasing lengths. The increase in the amount of editorial light was supposed to, according to his statement, indicate his mother's subsiding¹¹⁵. In the final part of his collection, he applied non-essayistic, torn fragments of a feigned dialogue at a time of agony. A similar strategy was applied by Bieńczyk in *Kontener*, a collection in which he attempted to use culture in order to come to terms with a similar experience of losing his mother, e.g. through recurring chapters with the leitmotifs of mayflies and breath. As part of the difficult work of memory under the patronage of Marcel Proust and Roland Barthes, through a dissonance there suddenly appear completely "non-literary" chapters (like "Obcy"¹¹⁶, which constitutes the panic-laden repeating of a piece of information which is also a quote from Albert Camus: "Maman died today"). Such perfected collections could surely be considered as the application of the essay as the "fourth literary kind"¹¹⁷; certainly, among readers they are beginning to function as fiction's competition.

The modern Polish essay – viewed within a broad, inclusive perspective, yet one which remains true to the major concept of the genre – is certainly developing within various paths. Some authors have continued the achievements of the "Stempowski school", while others, following the model of the genre's originator, cherish the ability to connect all possible plots¹¹⁸. Others

¹¹⁰ Vide D. Heck, *Esej*, [in:] *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku*, eds. A. Brodzka et al., Wrocław 1992.

¹¹¹ Vide, e.g., a collection of mini-essays by J. Dehnel, where each one refers to an old photograph, placed on the opposite page, and in a "stereoscopic" manner connects with the following bi-medial pair (*Fotoplastikon*, Warsaw 2009).

¹¹² J. Sobołewska, [review of *Rzeczy, których nie wyrzuciłem* by M. Wicha], <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/ksiazki/1705530,1,recenzja-ksiazki-marcin-wicha-rzeczy-ktorych-nie-wyrzuciilem.read> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

¹¹³ S. Łubieński, *Sosnówka pachnąca żywicą*, [in:] idem, *Dwanaście srok za ogon*. Wołowiec 2016.

¹¹⁴ H. Teleżyńska, *Szukając Safony*, "Mały Format" 12/2017, <http://malyformat.com/2017/12/szukajac-safony/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

¹¹⁵ A statement by M. Wicha in an interview by M. Cegielski: <https://xiegarnia.pl/wideo/program-tv/xiegarnia-odcinek-279-marcin-wicha/> (accessed: 8.08.2019).

¹¹⁶ M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, Warsaw 2018, p. 109.

¹¹⁷ Vide R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej*, pp. 83-84.

¹¹⁸ Vide Ph. Lopate, *What Happened to the Personal Essay*, [in:] *Essayists on the Essay*, p. 128.

still explore new thematic areas and experiment with new forms or even provoke through style, descending below the previously acceptable tone. Do these shifts and mutations justify talking about this third circle of "new essays"¹¹⁹ as emphatically different and dissident forms in relation to the traditions, thus impossible to be framed within the network of the established essay-studies concepts? The above overview triggers one to pose a hypothesis that such variations can also be absorbed by the extremely flexible Montaigne's convention of the genre if one does not close it prematurely in the name of a narrowly defined canon. One must bear in mind that the essay – as a creation which is anti-systemic in its nature – actually provokes one to engage in never-ending revisions and the creative updating of existing modes of writing. In other words: it demands novelty.

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¹¹⁹ Thus R. Atwan, a long-term editor for the American series Best American Essays, defined the contemporary for him distorted forms which boldly apply non-essayistic conventions, including poetry or reportage (*Notes Towards the Definition of an Essay*, [in:] *Essayists on the Essay*, p. 200).

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SUMMARY

This article constitutes an attempt at organising the non-conservative tendencies in Polish essays published in the 21st century, which apply to themes, the lowering of the tone, and forms of writing. One major stream is travel writing, which focuses not on the Mediterranean legacy, but on the 'second world': long-disadvantaged provincial areas. Many essayists abandon the traditional topic of books and works of art, and turn to 'reading' the animal world, the plant world, and the world of ordinary objects. The essay has also become a tool for introducing polarisation between that which is mainstream and that which is marginal and concerns minorities. The fact of choosing a non-traditional topic often entails a non-canonical cognitive attitude, which translates into experiments within the area of the form of expression. The author of this article argues that all those innovations can be accommodated by the flexible convention of the essay as a genre which, in principle, is supposed to constitute an artistic cognitive experiment.

Keywords

Polish essay in the 21st century, travel essays, essays about animals, Brach-Czaina Jolanta, Stasiuk Andrzej, Środa Krzysztof, Bieńczyk Marek, Nowicki Wojciech, Lis Renata, Wicha Marcin, Pucek Robert, Mueller Joanna, Łubieński Stanisław, Zajączkowska Urszula

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A Container with an Insect Corpse: On Essays by Marek Bieńczyk

In his volume of essays titled *Kontener* (A Container), Marek Bieńczyk once again undertakes the topic of death, transiency, ageing, dying of people and things. This time, however, he does so while uncovering primarily his own personal perspective on the issue which inspires melancholy, sorrow, sadness, and despair. In stories constructed around the death of his mother, the author places disparate 'texts of mourning' of other authors struggling with that loss in the horizon of his thoughts. He also unambiguously indicates which of them represent a pattern of his own attempts, writing about *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes:

Like in the case of Proust, who set his mourning in a novel-river, in this book on photography Barthes finds the best form of literature – for his way of writing and for the given moment of his life – to which he is led perhaps by the death of his mother: the essay settled in culture and experienced very personally, full of cultural references, legible for others but fuelled by the ardour of the intimate experience of loss¹.

This way, he stresses the significance of his own choices of speech genres: it is not diary entries from the period of mourning or the plot line of the

¹ M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, Warszawa 2018, pp. 115-116 [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

novel, but an essay set in the cultural tradition and yet personal and full of intimate emotions that is the “form of literature” capable of holding real, extra-textual experience of loss.

The leitmotif of the collection is the breath, sigh, choking of the larynx, stuffiness, as well as all the works on the subject of all forms of ‘breathing’, so different as the short story of William Faulkner *Red Leaves*, or a poem by Stanisław Barańczak titled *Jednym tchem (In One Breath)*. Breath, both as an eternal yet constant sign of life and the as the last ante mortem ‘border’ sigh, becomes a physiological and metaphysical signal of existence in Bieńczyk’s essays. Existence that may and should be written down. In his essay titled *On Aging*, Jean Améry also made references to Proust’s life and his concomitant struggle with creating and breathing:

When tormented with asthma, in an insulated room, with his throat wrapped in woolen scarves Proust was writing *In Search of Lost Time*, he supposed that he would succeed in possessing a more real reality in a memory, and together with it some sort of timelessness or even eternity; a great work was created but it was of no use to him when he took his last breath before breathing, in agony, his last².

An immensely pessimistic view of human condition in the world after the civilisational disaster resulted in Améry not being able to see the point in writing even the greatest works, which – from the perspective of human mortality – turned out to be a gesture not only elusive, but also devoid of the rescuing power. In Bieńczyk’s book, however, it is possible to find another repartition of the traditional topic of ‘creating against death’: cultural traces of prominent creative existence remain a signpost for the descendants as well as masterpieces captured in words, picture, or music. It is important not only for those who, like the subject of the stories collected in *Kontener*, are aware that the moment of breathing “their last breath” is inevitably drawing near.

Writing makes it possible to capture and save the essence of subjectivity. Interpreting other people’s texts allows one to transform individual ways of comprehending oneself and the surrounding reality: as Ryszard Nycz wrote, this results from “the need to reject artificial oppositions: emotion and intellect, experience and understanding. We understand what the text is about as long as we experience it; we are capable of experiencing it as long as it reactivates and changes the acquired structures of understanding in us”³. We are able to understand ourselves in more depth as long as we are both open to what other people tell us and capable of internalising it.

There are numerous descriptions of insects and insect death in *Kontener*: their short existence in the world allows one to capture the nature of transiency and represents its clear cultural sign. The memory of a holiday experience – meeting at night a swarm of mayflies which almost instantly vanish into the current of the river – became an axis of the collection on leaving

² J. Améry, *On Aging. Revolt and Resignation*, transl. B. Baran, Warszawa 2007, p. 37.

³ R. Nycz, *Tekstowe doświadczenia, Teksty Drugie*, 2010, no. 1/2, p. 12.

this world. The first and last chapters of volume, both titled *Jętki (Mayflies)*, represent a frame for considerations on the frailty of existence included in the book. The history of personal, physical (organoesthetic) meeting with the short-lasting insect life cycle appears in *Kontener* in six variants. Each part begins with the same sentence: "The mother had been dead for six months when mayflies came flying"⁴. The continuations and endings are, however, different:

The river turned white, we waited in silence until the whiteness disappeared and the black current came back.

And then, when the mayflies had gone, when they had collapsed into their cemetery rushing with the river, flashes of little torches appeared on the river bank on the other side like the final, patient but already irregular notes as if their irregularity had allowed the tempest to resound in the silence, to introduce its non-human steady drill in the direction of human, more and more human chaos.

Although perhaps, I thought, it is too strongly felt, it is too strongly said, perhaps only the flashing echo of whiteness.

Later I felt gratitude to Dosso Dossi and Mickiewicz that at least for a moment they helped me stay in this story and tell this story; they came from another corner of my home – from books and paintings – to take part in it, put their two cents in. Though they came in vain as it is not this story.

And then on the other side of the river, in the once again smooth surface of the night, little lights lit up, tiny, isolated, casting explorative flashes into the blackness, like the first eyes open after the flood.

And then the white smudges from the little torches sketching incomplete circles over the river acted out our meeting in the distance, and you were a smudge and I was a shadow⁵.

The farewell transcribed on the variant play with the 'ephemeral' experience is not limited to illustrating the common knowledge about the finiteness and elusiveness of life as well as about Nature being indifferent towards transiency. It allows one to follow the path on which the transcript of an 'ordinary' experience going through stages of intertextual mediations becomes an intimate confession. Yet, uncovering the stages of constituting the text may also inspire anxiety and doubt with regard to the real status of the "confession", i.e. to what extent it is a personal confession and to what degree it is an ingeniously constructed element of essayistic argument.

⁴ M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, p. 5.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 7, 58, 140, 196, 259, 297.

Bieńczyk is a self-conscious author, one that reveals the sources of his artistic choices and even secrets of his workshop. In his earlier volume of essays, titled *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida* (*Olga's Apple, David's Feet*), Bieńczyk wrote about *Sylvie* by Gérard de Nerval and the author's variant of melancholic non-reconciliation with the loss:

something that is the space of silence, something that remains in the whiteness for guesswork has its contours, clearly marked boundaries. Nerval's aesthetics of melancholy, and after Nerval the aesthetics of melancholy *tout court*, using vagueness, understatement, it consists in balancing the fogginess of the mood, unspeakable longing, the vagueness of feelings, geometric measurability. Indefiniteness takes place in the concrete, finite place, the elusiveness of feelings concerns perceptible space and it does not wish to cross it; *beyond, somewhere else, another world* are not an inspiration for melancholy at all⁶.

In *Kontener* it is, not only the place of epiphany, the river bank in the darkness of the night, that acquires clear outlines further defined in each of the scenes. Also the experience alone is transformed into a perceptible 'geometric' shape. Already in the first scene of *Jetki*, one can see the picture:

When I took a closer look at them, it began to dawn on me that they are assembled in almost geometric figures. Each mayfly, vibrating in the air, projected a separate, quavering and angular phantom and, gathered in one space, all those phantoms formed a network of cubicles united by some visible turmoil. A new form of the world uncovered so suddenly. As if we were shown its construction which so far had been hidden, its factual pattern or picture⁷.

This way, death ceases to be a shapeless horror looming beyond the boundaries of cognition: it is locked in words and images. It acquires the place in the concrete space of individual experience. And an insect corpse disappears in the depth of the river, as it does annually.

Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida and, most of all, *Kontener* are the volumes in which Bieńczyk, creating his essays, shifts the weight of interest from the 'domestication in culture' to the personal dimension of existence. In earlier volumes, such as, for instance, *Melancholia. O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty* (*Melancholy: On Those Who Will Never Find Their Loss*) from 1998 or *Oczy Dürera. O melancholii romantycznej* (*Dürer's Eyes: On Romantic Melancholy*) from 2002, elements constitutive for the essay, namely discursive-ness and auto-reflexivity, were manifested in different proportions. Those collections surely broke the rigid boundaries of academic discourse, repeating gestures of genealogical subversion from the early 20th century. As Andrzej Zawadzki wrote:

⁶ M. Bieńczyk, *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, Warszawa 2015, p. 233.

⁷ M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, p. 6.

In the non-literary universe, the essay performs, most of all, destabilising and complementary functions: it breaks the closed system of canonical genres, reorganising its layout [...] The essay on non-literary grounds, i.e. non-fictional, is a testimony of the tendency which goes beyond structural limitations imposed by traditional genres, a symptom of the need to supplement the present repertoire of discourse forms⁸.

Reflections on melancholy created by Bieńczyk could function as a discourse on the character of a scientific identification even though the principles of academic discourse were destabilised in it.

With the passage of time, Bieńczyk's texts are beginning to manifest autobiographical elements, which was already visible in *Przezroczystość*⁹ (*Transparency*), and particularly in *Książka twarzy*¹⁰ (*Facebook*). Countless memories of reading experiences depicted as a vital factor in shaping his personality were marked autobiographically even stronger. Many a time the evoked works, events, characters (including characters of collective imagination) were treated more as a clear code of generational affiliation than the subject of research. Establishing contact with the recipient was beginning to shift to gestures of finding an emotional community rather than imposing intellectual orders. Yet, the previously exploited textual practice resulted in the content of the essayistic genre to become a message which belonged more to the literary rather than documentary order even though its framework began to be filled with matter.

If one considers the currently common turn towards autobiographical writing as a kind of safe recognisable convention, in the variant of Marek Bieńczyk this tendency is manifested through a process of conscious moving towards literariness based on the need to fit individual experiences in the network of textual testimonies of existence. His oenological confessions were subject to similar transformations, which is easy to notice in the collection of texts of this kind of writing¹¹. It would be necessary to consider to what extent such a strategy enables one to maintain balance between the element of private confession and interpretation distanced towards the object, as well as which of the elements will finally turn out to be more vivid and which will be subordinated to the main intention of the unfolding narrative.

In the contemporary manifestation of the autobiographical aspect in texts of culture, the classic autobiographical convention has become, most of all, a point of reference which is ironic and subjected to various narrative games. The diversity and hybridity of today's autobiographical literary forms is often combined with critical reflection on the textual representation of elapsed time. The reflection on the stability of the autobiographical subject, identity, and memory often makes the balance point of an

⁸ A. Zawadzki, *Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna w piśmiennictwie polskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku*, Kraków 2001, p. 176.

⁹ M. Bieńczyk, *Przezroczystość*, Warszawa 2007.

¹⁰ M. Bieńczyk, *Książka twarzy*, Warszawa 2011. Bieńczyk received the Nike Prize for this work.

¹¹ Cf. M. Bieńczyk, *Wszystkie kroniki wina*, Warszawa 2018.

autobiographical text (particularly in the case of already acclaimed authors with a considerable output) shift from relating life to the process of writing¹². Autobiography as a study of auto-reflection accounts for the creational and processual character of producing identity, and the constructional aspect of shaping the vision of the past and present, which is perfectly enhanced by recording/reproducing the processes of reading different cultural texts.

Such an activity can be considered one of the types of "self-writing", which Foucault defined in opposition to ignorance: "Writing, as a way of gathering in the reading that was done and of collecting one's thoughts about it, is an exercise of reason that counters the great deficiency of *stultitia*, which endless reading may favor"¹³. The record of the reading experiences is transformed, therefore, into auto-creation in which one of the more important elements is the compulsion to record heavily subjectivised acts of interpretation, identical to both the record of the subsequent stages of cognition/exploration of what is external and the processual clarification of one's own identity. Such an attitude makes it easier to give accounts of breakthrough moments on the way to self-cognition. They may also 'come in handy' when creating a consciously adopted role of an author immersed in tradition; an intellectual, a connoisseur of works of art and, at the same time, a human being keenly interested in the present¹⁴.

The creation of the reader-writer – a tireless interpreter of substantially heterogeneous 'reality' mediated in works – is also a creation of a 'textualised' person who constructs the fragile foundations of their autonomous existence in the world of texts (their own and those of other authors) and who is also capable of noticing the network of dependencies entangling them. Activities in text spaces depicted as 'out-of-date', as they are generally considered anachronistic, will enable one to produce vivid creations of the Author, who reads to write and writes to be read. The figure of the creator preserving the separateness and independence in the era of expansion of all kinds of virtual communication is a creation of a writer using consciously all the strategies (also autobiographical ones) in order to establish contact with the reader, to involve the hypothetical recipient in the space of his own essential experiences, which are both very personal and universal.

Writing can also be manifested as the aim and point of existence coming to an end. Making references to his own texts, interpreting texts of others, placing them in the vast intimist space, Bieńczyk may treat them as clear signs of transformations in the collective history, which at the same time was the space of his personal experiences. The discontinuity of presented,

¹² Cf. M. Marszałek, *Autobiografia*, [in:] *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pomici*, ed. M. Saryusz-Wolska and R. Traba, Warszawa 2014, p. 56.

¹³ M. Foucault, *SelfWriting*, [in:] id.: *Szaleństwo i literatura. Powiedziane, napisane*, ed. T. Komendant, transl. B. Banasiak et al., Warszawa 1999, p. 312. Foucault elaborated on it further: "*Stultitia* is defined by mental agitation, distraction, change of opinions and wishes, and consequently weakness in the face of all the events that may occur; it is also characterized by the fact that it turns the mind toward the future, makes it interested in novel ideas, and prevents it from providing a fixed point for itself in the possession of an acquired truth."

¹⁴ Cf. A. Czyżak, *Dziennik, esej, interpretacja jako narzędzia autokreacji (staroświeckich) inteligentów w dobie Internetu*, [in:] *Autobiografie (po)graniczne*, ed. I. Iwasów, T. Czerska, Kraków 2016.

as if by the way, series of autobiographical experiences seems to represent the fragmentary nature of the matter of memories, their selective functioning in the processes of creating identity. The auto-portrait of the writer being a reader and an ardent literature lover at the same time, becomes, as a consequence, a literarily negotiable public property and a recognisable 'brand'. Therefore, adding continuations of the stories written or just signalled earlier can represent both a comprehensible complementation, stylising, and transformation of the existing picture, and the following chapter of the same story anticipated by the recipient.

If, however, writing a diary – even with the awareness that it will eventually be published in print – can be an escape from literature, then writing essays is connected with directing the discourse to the concrete (if only hypothetical) recipient and as such requires conscious ordering and founding of the text. A book composed of heterogeneous particles turns out to be a work which is coherent due to its author's clear auto-creation, but also as part of reception oriented at filling in the gaps. Finding their own experiences not only on the plane of personal confessions of the subject, but also in the order of evoked common books, films, or media events, the recipient will always manage to find testimonies and challenges (simultaneously) in the volume of autobiographical confession, and will make the text coherent within the recognised convention.

Already in the first reviews of *Książka twarzy*, a collection of "literary profiles", it was stressed that this was also a kind of meta-story: a story on both reading and the reader. As Tadeusz Sobolewski argued, "Bieńczyk's essays form a passionate autobiography of a reader of literature and a connoisseur of life at the same time"¹⁵. Hence the book "is like a mirror which reflects the author's face, the contemporary world, and the vast space of literature"¹⁶. The uncovered face is not, however, similar to a 'profile photo' chosen for the purposes of social media, but, rather, it becomes an auto-portrait chiselled in the subsequent scenes of literary and cultural peregrinations.

On the occasion of reviewing another volume of the author of *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, Dariusz Nowacki, putting forward a thesis about a writing formula crystallised in Bieńczyk's work – which is impossible to be forged and which combines the advantages of novel, essayistic, and autobiographical prose – confessed to his terminological helplessness:

How to call what we deal with in *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, since it is impossible to separate what is creative from what is reproductive, writing fiction from commenting on other authors' writing, quotation from the original? I do not know how to call it, but I do know who practices this kind of bordering masterfully: Marek Bieńczyk, needless to say¹⁷.

¹⁵ T. Sobolewski, *Nagroda dla sztuki opowiadania*, [in:] Wyborcza.pl/Kultura, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,12626885> [accessed: 26.05.2016].

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ D. Nowacki, *Czary, mary, Bieńczyk!*, [in:] Wyborcza.pl/Kultura, <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75475,17647094> [accessed: 26.05.2016].

In the book *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida* – similarly to the case of *Kontener* – the essayistic element leaning towards fiction is closely interwoven with the autobiographical matter, which, however, is treated primarily as a set of elements to be used in the text. One important difference recognisable to the recipient is the time of writing the texts: before and after the author's mother's death. For the recipient, these are the moments of the biography treated at the same time as literary concepts ready to be transformed.

One example of this seeming¹⁸ 'difference' may be a fragment from *Jabłko Olgi...*, titled *Gruba* (*The Fat One*) and devoted, as it seems at the beginning, to the history of cultural (rarely foregrounded) imaging of obesity, which eventually turns out to be a tale dedicated to the author's mother, a special melancholic textual conceptualisation of her fate and various 'worries' which accompanied her life and also her son. It was books that warded off the mother's weight loss (she was remembered by her son as "always fat") resulting from depression and being a clear manifestation of losing her willingness to live. The process of returning to health was also a process of devouring: "She read, she read more and more, and she ate more and more, ate reading, read eating"¹⁹.

The reflection of the son, surely happy with the improvement of his mother's health, is transformed into the praise of literature, its not so much cognitive as rescuing dimension:

She gained twenty kilograms, she ate again, and I had positive opinion on literature again, that it may have some point even if we are all finished. Yes, it had a point, a smile sometimes returned to her cold lips, something happened in her eyes when she spoke of what she had been reading, the shadow from the armchair, the animal from the burrow was here again, among words and letters, among other people; they came to the daylight, returned to human shape²⁰.

The story about a "return to life" with the help of literature is the point of departure for signalling the determining impact of the trauma from childhood, which was the deepest reason for the author's mother's subsequent both emotional and mental as well as physical and physiological problems. The story told this way is aimed at both uncovering and covering past experiences. Hidden behind the curtain of thick narrative saturated with intertextual references, they remain signals which the reader has to fill in accordance with their own knowledge, less existential and more 'textualised', discursive – although these are still stories about defeating the fate, the limitations of the human condition, weakness, or resignation.

¹⁸ Explaining the difference between the socially sanctioned 'mourning' and – closer to the author emotionally – deeply internalised 'worrying', Bieńczyk writes in *Kontener*: "Worrying begins earlier, before the nearest and dearest pass away, and as opposed to mourning it has no social intention, it does not send the world any conventional signs. It is hard, compact, not to be diluted. It is anarchist, unsystematic, straying unhooked by the passing time" (p. 21).

¹⁹ M. Bieńczyk, *Jabłko Olgi, stopy Dawida*, p. 123.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 123.

In *Kontener*, in turn, the moving images of death (not only that of insects), transiency, and old age acquire the dimension of the vision of the final end. They are aimed, however, at revealing the condition of the subject and hiding it behind the veil of artfully constructed stories at the same time. The poignant fragment titled *Dzielnica* (*The District*) features the eponymous “container” to which people throw away objects belonging to a lonely old woman who is neglected, ill, and affected by the mania for collecting unnecessary things. The act of removing unnecessary stinky, musty, disintegrating rubbish is transformed into a gesture of rejecting equally ‘redundant’ existence:

The courtyard remained in quarantine, not a soul in sight. Not counting the pigeons. It could be felt, not knowing why, that everyone around hated the old woman; perhaps we all did. It serves her right, for those pigeons and the nightmare of her old age, for her shabby crooked shrivelled body and for the fact that she is going to die soon, because she is plodding here and sitting here. She sat still on her bench, facing the container²¹.

The suffocating odour lingering in the air for a longer time is the only ‘tangible’ testimony to the existence of the old woman at death’s door, the only remnants of her life. Could a literary record of the events turn out to be a more durable ‘trace’?

In turn, in the essay also ‘insect-ly’ titled *Pszczoly i osy* (*Bees and Wasps*), which depicts a seemingly innocent picture of feasting together in the open air, the central point consisted in the gesture of killing the insect “unlawfully” wandering on the plate with the dessert. The grandmother of one of the characters of this story used a fork to exterminate the creature that was disturbing her:

Suddenly, with a movement as clumsy as it was ruthless and decisive, she lowered it onto the bee dabbling in melted ice-cream and she began to mash it. The way you mash a soft potato, only worse. She apparently had no skill in mashing a bee with a fork. This not wholly crushed abdomen, the remains of the head like crackling. In the meantime the other bee sat on a puddle closer to the edge of the plate, it must have had an equally important mission, the antennae swooshed briskly, tiny sticks caressing the surface of the drum. The fork skidded down its body and pressed its very edge into the cream. The bee crawled out of the liquid, froze for a moment and we had a passing thought that out of a sudden there was something human in it and this something was surprise²².

The surprise, which accompanies death despite all the preparations or cultural domestication, and thus counterpoints its inevitability, was multiplied in the essay through showing the reaction of the eye witnesses of the incident,

²¹ M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, p. 132.

²² Ibid., pp. 251-252.

'surprised', like the killed bee was, by the need to inflict death revealed in the action of the old woman at the end of her life.

The project of creating specific textual amalgamates in which different inhomogeneous types and genres of discourse are mixed poses a challenge for the reader who is sometimes lost in the tangle of quoted and interpreted works, portraits of people who are fictional and real, historical and contemporary. Surely, however, such a strategy makes simple empathetic reading more difficult. It does not lead only to evoking a reaction of sympathy, but also to active decoding and, at the same time, co-creating the message (or rather depicting one's own version of it). In the variant created by Bińczyk, as years pass, it is the reception directives inscribed in the essays that are changing above all.

The contemporary status of the subject, described with such adjectives as nomadic, processual, or performative, is defined with regard to the categories of changeability, becoming, and making. The level of biography still remains the easiest way to establish contact with the reader within communication circuits functioning today. In the variant created by Bińczyk in his latest books, this is a half-fictional essayistic confession created on the basis of an autobiographical pact which is subject to review. In this case, the traces of the author – defined by Małgorzata Czermińska as a reflection of the polyphonic structure of 'I' composed of different voices²³ – include consciously left trails whose interpretation is supposed to lead to the active participation of the recipient not only in the biographical matter, but also in the universe of the author's cultural experiences.

The Model Reader of works of the writer-erudite is surely similar to him, namely a well-read lover of books. Being able to understand this, the reading experience becomes fully-fledged and capable of decoding the signs left in interpretations of works. Yet, also a recipient who is less sophisticated in the space of countless texts, conventions, and pacts can find a space of communication in the confessions created this way – in the sphere of hidden and covered existential feelings which are to be extracted and reconstructed, and which are aimed, nonetheless, at seeking general rules and principles of human existence in the world. The identity created processually and relationally can become an identity which is clear and recognisable precisely through exposing the act of auto-creation – signals of the subjective, individual subordination of the matter of common (communal and species-wide) experiences.

Essay-writing, understood as a specific kind of auto-reflexivity aimed at revealing the deepened, variously contextualised reflection on the condition of the human kind, requires an adoption of a certain analytical perspective as well as focusing attention on ways of manifesting the subject. Roma Sendyka stresses that attempts at reconstructing the individual experience of reality within the framework of the essay led to the condition in which "the broken, indefinite «thinking self» trying to determine its identity and

²³ Cf. M. Czermińska, *Autor – podmiot – osoba. Fikcjonalność i niefikcjonalność*, [in:] *Polonistyka w przebudowie*, vol. 1, ed. M. Czermińska, Kraków 2005, p. 216.

related to Montaigne's I" was in the centre of attention²⁴. The connection with the activities of the founders of the genre inclined to filter all reality elements through 'I' being constituted still in different ways (during tireless 'attempts') marks the range of activities undertaken by its successors, even though it does not limit the shape of individual realisations. Today, it is clear without any doubt that creating essay poetics constructed with the use of traditional tools is impossible. As Katarzyna Szalewska ascertained, such attempts are accompanied by "a threat of disintegration of the theoretical construct into a catalogue of exceptions, schools, philosophical and axiological systems of individual authors", and this happens as there are "too many variables to be able to reconstruct from them a solvable equation, a universal formula for the essay *sui generis*"²⁵. Essay researchers are, therefore, left with no choice but to establish each time the relations between the very general output assumptions of the genre and its concrete realisation, between the fossil of the existing clearest models and the element of an individual experience transformed into text.

In the case of Bieńczyk, it became clear in the 2010s that, despite his recurrent declarations that he longs the storyline, it is essay-writing that became his primary (the only) formula of his (literary) expression. Essays are not a complement of other types of works (as it was in the times of the essayistic *Melancholia*, which performed certain explanatory functions with regard to the novel *Tworki*), but a frame of his participation/presence in the world. His essayistic texts remain a clearly articulated discourse on the contemporary times challenging the norms of community communication in power. The contemporary principles and circulations of collective polylogues encourage the creation of artistic discourse connected with the public space; nowadays, probably nobody writes with the aim of storing the work in a drawer, or counts on the hypothetical recognition from their 'grandchildren'.

Marek Bieńczyk invites one both to contemplate the artistic shape of the discourse and reflect on the topics which are discussed or rather knocked out from stabilised interpretations. The sphere of subjective relations with the world becomes the vehicular plane for artistic objectives understood this way. As explained by Sendyka, the category of 'self' now defines the new understanding of the subject and its "reflexivity, processuality, social rooting, symbolic/discursive placement, and interactivity"²⁶. In the differentiations between various forms of textual 'I' formulated before – for instance in the findings presented by Agata Bielik-Robson – 'ego' comprised increased awareness, clearly articulated arguments, the principle of conformity, and defensive adaptation. In turn, the 'self' (*selbst*) conversely "represents the creative element of the human psyche in the perspective of

²⁴ R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, Kraków 2006, pp. 202-203.

²⁵ K. Szalewska, *Pasaż tekstowy. Czytanie miasta jako doświadczania przeszłości we współczesnym eseju polskim*, Universitas, Kraków 2012, p. 27.

²⁶ R. Sendyka, *Od kultury ja do kultury siebie. O zwrotnych formach w projektach tożsamościowych*, Kraków 2015, p. 52.

which the world appears as open and non-determined, prone to fantasies and creative interpretations”²⁷.

It should be remembered that the essayistic subject always remains not only auto-reflexive, but also mediating the matter of existential experiences. According to Sendyka, it is characterised by reflexivity understood twofold, i.e. “the recurrent need for auto-reference and the compulsion for auto-interpretation at the same tie”²⁸. Sendyka concludes: “As the interpretation of *self* will never be completed (each attempt at this, each contact, interaction with the aim of the auto-reference shapes, and therefore changes, the *self*), the *self* will have to undertake its work of auto-identification”²⁹. However, the reconstructible stages of constituting *self* in the subsequent volumes of Bieńczyk’s essays uncover a certain constant “increased awareness” of the subject.

The essayistic subject – changeable, processual, interactive, auto-reflexive – reveals itself performatively in each act of writing and tends to be placed in a “symbolic, social and biological constitution”³⁰. Yet, in the case of Bieńczyk there is a special displacement: the biographical processuality of the self-cognition act seems to remain outside the text. Having contact with essays, the recipient has only access to the reflection on ‘processuality’ (already transformed into literary records, artistically reformulated and ordered), understood here more as a category which is specifically vehicular, allowing the recipient not so much to have contact with a series of somebody else’s experiences, as get to know their intricately processed twists and tangles. Similarly, irony (and auto-irony) or melancholy are not means of expressions for showing individual experiences or revealing personal confessions; rather, they represent categories that make it possible to explore the issue of limitations and frailty of the human condition as well as the principles of human existence in the world.

Nowadays, recognising categories such as essayistic writing or auto-biographicality may turn out to be not so much about finding formal indicators of depicted perspectives as about a search for intentional actions of the discourse subject. In the past, the Cartesian subject was trying to take control of the place given to him in the world, whereas contemporary authors are aiming at negotiating the changeable relations with the unstable space which escapes cognition and does not provide any point of support. Under such conditions, the sphere of necessary and available or more measurable explorations comes in the form of ‘internal worlds’, treated as a specific laboratory of traits, styles, conventions, models, and poetics. In his *Melancholia*, Marek Bieńczyk – somewhat prophetically when one considers his later literary achievements – ascertained: “Mothers, the Satan, Irony, and Laughter – those different companions of the melancholic retreat, regress, if you will, open to the gaze cast inside «I» different, be it benevolent or sinister, ways

²⁷ A. Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości*, Kraków 2000, p. 58.

²⁸ R. Sendyka, *Od kultury ja do kultury siebie*, p. 76.

²⁹ Ibid., 77.

³⁰ Ibid., 77.

of interpretation of the mirror reflection”³¹. Hence the writer’s essays depict not a record of the stages of searching for ‘I’, but, rather, a game revealed under his own principles between the constructs of ‘ego’ and *self*, and, primarily, their (auto)interpretations which have already been accomplished.

There is a series of questions in the penultimate part of *Kontener*, titled *Jutro w Bogocie* (*Tomorrow in Bogota*): “Tell me: what is this all for? This worry, those returns, those melancholies? Those graves, this brooding?”³². There may be only one answer: “This is because I so much don’t want to die” (in the version of a personal confession) or “This is because we so much want to live”³³ (in the variant leaning towards a supra-individual and supra-species generalisation). In the whole volume, the closeness of one’s own death, felt deeper after the loss of a close person, becomes a point of reference for the narrative which can be interpreted as a tale about life, its inalienable value, and existential need to find one’s own places – or a discursive record of the deepest convictions about the irreducible role of art and the constancy and timelessness of literary testimonies of existence.

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³¹ M. Bieńczyk, *Melancholia. O tych, co nigdy nie odnajdą straty*, Warszawa 1998, p. 74.

³² M. Bieńczyk, *Kontener*, p. 295.

³³ Ibid., p. 295.

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SUMMARY

The article contains considerations on Marek Bieńczyk's literary output and his book *Kontener*, published in 2018. All essays from the volume manifest their auto-biographical and literary character. The main aim of the paper is to make a diagnosis connected with the particular and common (mis)understanding of the relations between death and life, mourning and vitality, melancholy and literature. This objective is accomplished through essay strategies. In texts that are part of *Kontener*, the suggestive and expressive subject makes continual new inquiries in order to find the essence of their (Bieńczyk's) personal, and especially textual, identity.

Keywords

essay, autobiography, speech genres, subject, identity

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“Risky Forays

into Border Lands”: *Bez autorytetu*

by Stefan Chwin and Stanisław Rosiek, and the Depleting Modernity

1.

The critical book, which is the most common definition of *Bez autorytetu* by Stefan Chwin and Stanisław Rosiek¹, has not been discussed in many studies². Usually, the text was analysed within the broader perspective of a debate on the condition of Polish literature in the second half of the 20th century, particularly in the context of the reality of politicised culture and the formation of the alternative cultural and social circulation³. The time of

¹ S. Chwin, S. Rosiek, *Bez autorytetu*, Gdańsk 1981, hereinafter BA and page number [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish].

² The most interesting of all the studies was a polemic written in 1981, yet printed in 1984. I am referring to the study by Andrzej Urbański titled *Gra o świadomość, czyli spóźniona glosa do krytyki lat siedemdziesiątych*, “Alm. Lit. Iskier” 1984, issue 1. Other: L. Bugajski, *Filologowie w rozterce*, “Kultura” 1981, issue 42; T. Nyczek, *Nowa prywatność krytyki*, “Literatura” 1981, issue 36; K. Krasuski, *Bez autorytetu, ale odpowiedzialnie*, “Odra” 1982, issue 7/8; A. Ogrodowczyk, *Terapia krytyki*, “Miesięcznik Literacki” 1982, issue 10; J. Sochoń, *Dopiero zaczynamy*, “Akcent” 1982, issue 4; A. Nowak, *Granice niezależności*, “Poezja” 1984, issue 3; K. Dybciak, *Programoburcy i programotwórczy ostatniego żywierćwiecza (2)*, “Literatura” 1981, issue 50, p. 12.

³ P. Czapliński, P. Sliwiński, *Literatura polska 1976-1998. Przewodnik po prozie i poezji*, Kraków 1999, pp. 37-38, 42-44, 145-146. A different perspective was proposed by Dorota Kozicka, who indicated the issue of the continuity of meta-critical reflection in the post-WWII decades. *Bez autorytetu* signalled a certain oversaturation with the discussions of the goals and objectives of criticism. D. Kozicka, *Krytyk w PRL-u. O kilku problemach w badaniach nad krytyką powojenną*, [in:] *PRL – świat (nie)przedstawiony*, eds. A. Czyżak, J. Galant, M. Jaworski, Poznań 2010.

its publication (1981) basically prevented any broader and direct – i.e. not burdened by the need to engage in games with censorship – analyses of the proposed theses as well as the indicated observations and diagnoses developed by the Gdańsk-based critics.

Literary historians lost from their sights not only the issue of subjecting the concepts of which Chwin and Rosiek's discourse was woven to in-depth analysis⁴, but also – what is equally important – the issue of the tool itself through which those concepts have been formulated. The book, as it has been conventionally assumed, functions as an interesting element of the landscape of that era and, essentially, its value is purely that of an antique⁵. The marginal nature of *Bez autorytetu* is puzzling after all. The publication was not re-issued (it was actually typical of texts from that era which were considered manifestos, e.g. a similar situation concerned *Świat nie przedstawiony* by Kornhauser and Zagajewski). It is used in fragments to a limited extent – in selections of Polish 20th-century essays and in anthologies of literary criticism there is only a mere excerpt which does not fully indicate the formal and problem-based complexity of the essay collection of the Gdańsk-based critics, though, actually, the basic stimulus of the meta-critical intention is clearly visible⁶. This situation could be considered as the outcome of a gradual loss of interest in the topics which were central in Chwin and Rosiek's critical reflection, which would mean that their analyses, postulates, and concepts were merely by-products of the literary situation which existed at that time and, therefore, already when initiated they were sentenced to being strictly time-limited. It is possible that the indicated marginal character had a deeper dimension and was a result of not overtly expressed observations regarding the meaning and status of meta-literary texts (critical and meta-critical) at the end of the 20th century, i.e. in the reality of fully fledged modernity. Somewhat contrary to their own overtly

⁴ It seems that the first literary history analysis of *Bez autorytetu* was conducted by Marek Zaleski (*Przygody myśli krytycznoliterackiej*, [in:] *Sporne sprawy polskiej literatury współczesnej*, eds. A. Brodzka, L. Burska, Warsaw 1998). In discussing the course of the changes in self-reflection of the literary criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, he indicated the major conditions of critical activities: the institutionalisation of criticism and the saturation of critical discourse with the procedures of literary science. Chwin and Rosiek's argumentation could have become a major element of a broader debate on the condition of critical writings as a special mode of evaluation of literature, a debate which returned in a somewhat altered form after 1989.

⁵ The importance of Stefan Chwin and Stanisław Rosiek's position in the context of uncovering the map of the changes in literary criticism at the turn of the century was consistently indicated by Dorota Kozicka, who raised the issue that their book did not trigger a debate to the extent as the new wave manifestos did, the project of which cast a new light on the 20th-century changes of the critical discourse in Poland. D. Kozicka, *Krytyczne (nie)porządkie. Studia o współczesnej krytyce literackiej w Polsce*, Kraków 2012.

⁶ "Kartografowie dziwnych podróży". *Wypiski z polskiej krytyki literackiej XX wieku*, editing and introduction by M. Wyka, K. Biedrzycki, J. Fazan, D. Kozicka, M. Urbanowski, J. Zach, Kraków 2004, pp. 120-130. When summarising the major Polish essays of the final decades of the 20th century, Jan Tomkowski consistently omitted texts which feature the trademarks of literary criticism (cf. J. Tomkowski, *Dwie dekady z esejem*, [in:] *Sporne sprawy polskiej literatury współczesnej*, eds. A. Brodzka, L. Burska, Warsaw 1998); moreover, this mode of defining the nature of the essay as a literary issue and thus constructing a particular hierarchy and a canon of the Polish literary essay was continued in the collection titled *Polski esej literacki. Antologia*, editing and introduction by J. Tomkowski, Wrocław 2018.

expressed ambitions of overcoming the world-view crisis of literary criticism and the introduction of new practices of critical writing, Chwin and Rosiek conducted a pragmatic record of the impossibility of such a transformation which would be imposed by the belief (declared in spite of impossibility) in the "logos of modernity"⁷.

2.

Chwin and Rosiek's essay is a whole divided into separate parts which can essentially be read as self-sufficient studies, yet only when considered within the whole collection do they form a broader story on the condition of criticism and the options of meta-literary writing (including about the essay as a form of meta-literary reflection). The tension between the separateness of an individual voice and the multi-voice complementariness of the whole determines – as one factor – the contradictions and the specific internal dialogic character of *Bez autorytetu*, which features refrain-like repetitions. There occurs a recurrence of notions, reflections, problems, and ascertainments in individual texts as independent in terms of their original wholes and as dialogically set-up elements of the entirety. Thanks to this conceptual and stylistic property, the aim of the work declared by the critics becomes problematised (the risk of "forays into literary border lands" increases) and – which, in my opinion, is just as important – this is where the fissure or ambivalence exists, which caused the already mentioned marginality of the entire project. The attempts at universalising that which is currently happening in criticism and in literature uncover the contradictions in the processes of the fully fledged ('over-mature') modernity of the culture of that period. The striving for a reconciliation of qualities such as idiomaticity, personality, and individuality on the one hand, and universality, generalisation, and collectiveness on the other is no longer possible within the framework of a non-discrepant critical manifesto or within the space of the practice of criticism which would be supposed to fulfil such a manifesto; such oppositions prove increasingly problematic.

I believe that the form used by the authors of *Bez autorytetu* constituted the necessary mechanism of conceptualisation of the difficulties of building a satisfactory language of literary description, as well as a means for indicating the problematic situation of literature as an institution grounded in modern reality. Because of this, the discourse of the critics illustrated a more serious problem of the exhaustion of previous options for writing about literature and, in turn, it revealed the questionable status of literature itself, which ceased to occupy a privileged position among other social practices. The crisis of literary criticism, which Chwin and Rosiek described and somewhat tried to fix, was a symptom of these exact processes which have been gradually transforming the literature-centric culture of fully fledged modernism, which – as one might assume – has progressed in parallel with socio-political transformations and was obscured by them.

⁷ L. Burska, *Awangarda i inne złudzenia. O pokoleniu '68 w Polsce*, Gdańsk 2012, p. 271.

54 A major issue for explaining the mode of reflection developed in *Bez autorytetu* is the reconstruction of the manner of understanding the essay and essayistic nature. The authors answered the “what is the essay?” question several times in a peculiar manner, somewhat as a side remark to the main problem area, considering an essayistic text as a major tool for articulating the observations in which they were interested. The trademarks of genological awareness – or, rather, the awareness of the formal qualities of the essay as a mode of thinking and writing – appeared several times and they always constituted a major element of the argumentation.

3.

The understanding and definition of the essay is rooted in modernity⁸ – the critics emphasised its formal specificity, they appreciated its heterogenic nature, and admired its complexity. Therefore, the essay in their analysis is a line of thinking and a style of the expression and definition (virtually idiomatic and thus avoided) of a personal world view; a personal distance towards extra-personal notions. At the same time, the essay – contrasted with the report – enables one to avoid unilateral evaluations or judgements as well as rigid (and devoid of complexity) interpretations of own experience (both regarding texts and discursive everydayness) of the Self of a writer (or of a speaker – the essay could, therefore, be also an oral tool). Thus, Stefan Chwin wrote in a part titled “Przestrzeń zdrady”:

Unfitness for the essay, as that is what this is all about, unfitness not only for a certain style of thinking but also a style of expression, a style of expressing personal attitudes to notions, so emphatically present in criticism, stems from the fact that the modern culture of public expression is to a major extent a **culture of report**. (...) the “report”, i.e. a special type of concision, a certain rigidity of style, a type of mitigated emotionality, or even the application of typical intonational rhetorisms combined with a special solidaristic sentimentalism, is commonly considered the model form of the emergence of a person in public life. (BA, p. 123)

Other values of the essay that are desirable according to the critic include, first of all, the ability to develop a reflective view of reality by stimulating and triggering the critical subjectivity of a writer, and, secondly, the ability to construct a holistic vision. The essay stimulates cognitive processes. It establishes them, clarifies them, and, finally, makes them independent of a priori judgements forcing the Self to face independently the chaotic space of discourses and ideologies which organise the everyday reality. In another chapter, titled “Socjologia milczenia”, the critic argued that:

⁸ R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, Kraków 2006, pp. 299-308.

Consciousness which cannot find nourishment in domestic works, turns to translations – that has always been the case in similar situations, and that is the case now. There readers seek out the language which they cannot find here. I am thinking about the huge sales success of the series with the infinity sign, which offered the works by renowned authors of world essay, and the recent fascination with Spanish and Ibero-American literature. Those facts seem completely unrelated at first glance. Their genres are different, as are their styles and problem issues. And yet they are an expression of the same, still unsatisfied, hunger. I am referring to the philosophical hunger, the hunger for reflection boldly encompassing the entirety of the world, which seeks answers to basic questions, which cannot be properly satisfied with Polish literature. It is the language of the essay – intellectually comprehensive and yet saturated with emotion, specific and stimulating for the imagination, metaphorical and open – that offers a valuable promise. It is clearly aligned with contemporary sensitivity, and it evokes trust by not trying to hide its pedigree, teaching how to individually seek out the truth. (BA, pp. 189-190)

The essay is supposed to provide language – the tools for critical thinking, which can enable one to escape the automatic processes of dominant conceptualisations within the applicable academic, literary, philosophical, and political paradigms. The essay might enable people – the moment of doubt in the fragment quoted below seems significant to me – to express their individual experiences which have not yet been "colonised" by the dehumanising discourses of the Self aggressively ousting them. Chwin argued for the need for the essay as a kind of an uncertain remedy in the difficult conditions of everyday existence in the part titled "Rany wewnętrzne. Trzy fragmenty o kolonizacji doświadczenia":

To descend further, under the surface, to seize the **colonisation of experience**, the hidden erosion of its symbolic foundation, but mainly to expose the yet uncolonised areas of existence, the rebellious forms of persistence which avoid external pressures, which cannot be enclosed with the rigid limits of the common anthropological hypothesis. A fascinating and extremely difficult aim: we do not know the language in which a discussion on experience could be truly conducted, it might be the language of the essay, which combines poetic confessions and the psychological and sociological reflection on the limits of customs and internal life, or it might be the new psychological novel, which will depict the not yet discovered mental processes. Surely, that requires the discovery of a genre, literature is going to face a trial of form and cognition – it is necessary to take the risk of breaking a genre, and, what is even more important and much more inconvenient, overcoming own competence. (...) The political psychoanalysis of experience – that could be the name of that horizon of literary cognition – has not yet been developed. How is it possible in poetry, in the essay, in the novel? (BA, pp. 237-238)

The observations regarding the ability of the essay as to the expression of existential and spiritual experience, as well as concerning the problems of literature and literary criticism, are not formulated exclusively within the manifesto/intervention mode. Chwin and Rosiek changed theoretical remarks into practical solutions within their own critical project.

4.

The key figure which organises the conceptual zone and the problem area, and which determines the mode of writing, is contradiction. It manifests as an opposition, paradox, aporia; it is subject to reflective perception and it functions in a text at the stylistic level⁹. Chwin and Rosiek traced contradictions by means of analysing the mechanisms of the inner workings of literary criticism, deconstructing the hidden rules of evaluation, and creating proposals alternative in relation to the existing discourses of critical writing.

Another important mechanism which initiates discursive activities throughout the volume is critical dialogueness – usually present as a strategy of intertextual writing¹⁰ as well as a synonym of an attitude shaped by the hermeneutic philosophy and the philosophy of dialogue¹¹ (which, in fact, was declared by the authors in individual essays). The act of grasping, identifying, and describing the various contradictions which determine literature and the 20th-century literariness (especially in the decades after the Second World War), and the resulting consequences for literary criticism writing, as well as the following critical reflection focused on those contradictions were all supposed to occur through a dialogue, a dialogic motion progressing in various directions, resonating in various – often mutually exclusive or seemingly opposing – problem areas.

The structure of the volume was planned with meticulous precision. It combines the accuracy of an academic delimitation of the discussed problems with the openness of the stylistics of literary criticism, which utilises suggestive metaphors and 'controversial' slogans. Individual parts and the essays they include centre around a pre-defined set of issues, which, to varying degrees, emerge in every text: the intertwining relations of language, literature, reality, and the cognitive and ethical disposition of a human being formed by the transformations of modern times. The progression of consecutive parts is managed by a reflective/problem-focused rhythm, which defines the special nature of the entire project: an austere analysis of the existing situation of literary criticism (as well as an analysis of the condition of literature) bearing the features of a literary science study combines with a kind of a framework manifesto, which refers to both criticism and literature, invented as a 'corrective manifesto'. The analysis indicates four basic problem areas located in individual parts: "O ukrytych normach" ["On the

⁹ Cf. T. Nyczek, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Thus, the authors came close to the key – almost ontological – quality of the essay, namely the practice of quoting, of establishing oneself through intertexts. Cf. M.P. Markowski, *Cztery uwagi o eseju*, [in:] *Polski esej. Studia*, ed. M. Wyka, Kraków 1991, pp. 173-174.

¹¹ J. Sochoń, *op. cit.*, pp. 139, 141.

hidden norms"] concerns the conditions of critical writing; "O rytułach" ["On rituals"] discusses the aims and functions of literary criticism; "O milczeniu" ["On remaining silent"] defines the tools of criticism and the material of literature, i.e. the functioning of language in the existing cultural and social context; finally, "O spustoszeniu" ["On devastation"] constitutes a portrait of the existing reality and a diagnosis of the place of a human being, and it defines the role of literature and the tasks of criticism in thus defined landscape of the era. Significantly enough, in consecutive texts, the share of the 'manifesto-forming' element gradually increases. The conceptualisation of the formula for escaping the deadlock becomes more emphatic in the final sections – simple calculations indicate an interesting regularity: the introduction consists of two texts ("Punkty oparcia", "Fikcjotwórcy"), parts I and II also include two texts each, while there are four texts in part III and five texts in part IV. The organisation, captured in the title formulations of consecutive parts and in the titles of individual essays, is deliberate and as such it indicates a certain analytical and interpretative discipline, which is masked and revealed at the level of titles.

The procedure of reconstructing the current state of literary criticism and literature – and the designing of their possible shapes – progresses from a detailed definition of conditions, through outlining the aims and defining the tools, to an exhaustive description of themes (each part constitutes a specific stage of the procedure). Moreover, that precision is amplified by a formal device that is specific to the academic discourse: the authors used notes in order to identify quoted texts, fix them clearly within the context of a literary-criticism debate, place them within the framework of a specific academic discipline, and properly expand the argumentation without disturbing its main course. They wove the essay, usually observing the rules which they themselves had imposed, i.e. to curb the dialogue in which they entered with various texts (regardless of the texts' origins), which protected them against the accusation of arbitrariness or non-verifiable impressiveness, generalisations, and the use of clichés.

This sort of discipline existed side by side with an opposite, somewhat 'anarchistic' drive: 1) the academic, at first glance, inclination to construct bibliographic references and extensions or supplements outside the core course of the discussion, is not consistent throughout and sometimes it even amplifies the personal quality of reflection (note 4 in the text "Mowa niczyja" by Stanisław Rosiek); 2) the impersonal and objective tone seems suspicious (it exists, e.g., in the title formula of *Bez autorytetu*) and should be replaced whenever possible by a personal tone, a clearly defined personal instance of the writer – this was, in fact, argued by Chwin and Rosiek regarding the critical discourse (personal and private, since existential nature of a text and a critical comment ensures accord); 3) the typographic solutions in the initial sections – i.e. the introduction "Punkty oparcia" and "Fikcjotwórcy", and then in part I essay 1 ("Pewność i wahanie"), as well as in fragments of "Fikcjotwórcy 2" and "Fikcjotwórcy 3" – use italics, which indicates stylistic and conceptual diversity: a personal confession and self-reflection offer an insight into the act of writing, they are stories on the formation

of convictions and concepts which shall develop the notional architecture of the remaining essays; they are the meta-critical stage of extracting and formulating personal convictions, an intensively experienced self-analysis with emphatic course. Due to this particular reason one commentator defined the mode of writing of the authors of *Bez autorytetu* as a kind of critical prose coming close to literature¹². Allow me to add that, considering the volume's narrative nature, such an analogy seems justified.

The loosening of methodological discipline – verging on academic doctrinism – occurs through the application of ambiguous notions¹³ (or by resorting to saturating own discourse with notions with visible pedigree of a specific branch or discipline) and references to various orders of knowledge in a somewhat amateurish form; the authors referenced certain concepts and lines of thinking about the issues in which they were interested, yet they used them as stimuli for their own discursive machine. They ensured the clarification of the original context of the notions and concepts they had initiated, and then included them within the mode of reference or modification in the area of their narrative.

The literary science precision is stripped of the doctrinistic ossification, one that is typical – according to Chwin and Rosiek – of the structuralist school, the main sin of which was the removal of the human dimension from a literary text and the monolithic nature of the methodology paralysing other interpretative opportunities¹⁴. A kind of transgression against the academic nature¹⁵ – including against structuralism and, more broadly, against the strict path of objective and impersonal literary science interpretation by grotesquely emphasised alleged objectivity – comes in the form of removing author references and placing them only in the table of contents. The authorial stigma is revealed through the careful reading of the essays, i.e. when one can notice the stylistic differences and the resulting conceptual shifts regarding other essays (Chwin focused on developing the manifesto and universalisation – which can be seen in his inclination to formulate more general philosophical/reflective observations, while Rosiek was more critically and analytically focused, especially in deconstructing the critical discourse from the stylistic and socio-literary side). Identification is possible, though impeded, thanks to the self-critical remarks regarding own texts – particularly in the case of Rosiek's essays there are relations which refer to other original texts. The problem is that such an investigation (I shall omit

¹² A. Urbański, *Gra o świadomość*, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹³ Being one of few polemicists, Leszek Bugajski argued that the theoretical machinery applied with finesse by Chwin and Rosiek was used by them to reinvent the wheel and, as a result, all of the initiated theories are an unnecessary burden. Cf. L. Bugajski, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Cf. M. Zaleski, *Przygody myśli krytycznoliterackiej*, pp. 214-215, 227-229.

¹⁵ From Leszek Bugajski's perspective, Chwin and Rosiek's basic problem was the saturation of their own discourse with philological apparatus. In this sense, the rise against literary science, to which they referred, did not occur. It is not critics but philologists who complicate and confuse the intuitively working writing of literary criticism. For Bugajski, critical practice related to theory was something different; in fact, pragmatic indifference towards attempts at the meta-critical constructing (or reconstructing) of the procedures of evaluation and their hidden premises seems symptomatic. Cf. L. Bugajski, *op. cit.*

the authorial references in the table of contents) would be a bibliographic tracking of library traces of the current literary criticism.

The saturation with 'temporariness' constitutes yet another non-academic, and non-essayistic, element. Every text is marked with a date (month and year) and the arguments are interlaced with references, indications, and allusions to life at that time; moreover, the authors emphasised the historicity of their writing, stressing the current moment. They created tension between interventionality with commentary qualities and its critical transgression by means of analyses of broader contexts of the currentness of literary circulation; initiating a further temporal perspective – which spurred the referenced literary-criticism texts, manifestos, and paradigms – and formulating their own critical alternative reflections regarding the existing system of forces which determine critical writing. The currentness – which from today's perspective seems excessively journalistic, which is why Chwin and Rosiek's project tipped towards currentness – is necessary and, I believe, ineffaceable if the whole 'corrective' project was supposed to be formed and if that special form of critical writing proposed by the authors was supposed to be possible. The dialectic condition of the mode of writing through critical identification of the era by means of being rooted in its reality (that currentness) seems to be another dimension of dialogicality, as well as a clear manifestation of contradictions with which the discourse of *Bez autorytetu* is bursting.

5.

Chwin and Rosiek observed the contemporary literary situation in such a way to initiate as many contexts surrounding and outside literature as possible, e.g. by common or similar notions used in literary reflection (be it theoretical, critical, or historical) and in related domains (in the sociology of literature or in linguistics) or somewhat related (in philosophy, psychoanalysis, or sociology). These notions are, to name only those most often used in the essays: language, speech, reality, truth, experience, word, consciousness, world view, dialogue, criticism, discourse, the society, and authenticity. Such a broad approach devoid of orthodoxy enabled various intriguing decisions which placed the issue of literary criticism in the network of non-obvious relations and conditions (the authors of *Bez autorytetu* usually discovered that which is associated with habitus, distinction, and field), and averts the threat of stylistic monotony caused by the critical-essayistic 'I' closing itself in the area of the formal properties of a single discourse, a strictly defined mode of writing (such a situation would not foster dialogueness – so important for Chwin and Rosiek's entire project – as a mode of thinking, developing the reflection, or as a stylistic property). "Forays into border lands" are "risky" as they entail the realisation of losing from one's field of view the specificity of that which is literary, but at the same time these forays are necessary due to the ineffaceability of the extra-literary context of literary and meta-literary expressions. Chwin and Rosiek drew far-reaching conclusions from the trivial statement that literature does not operate in a vacuum;

they abandoned an isolated view of a literary text as a self-sufficient whole owing to their academic experiences (disappointment in structuralism and expert reading in general) and the observations of the workings of the machine which evaluates, in their view, the procedures of literary criticism.

The relationship between language, ethics, and axiology in the discourse of *Bez autorytetu* attributes individual essays – and, mostly, the whole – with a utopian air¹⁶ while producing a taint of scepticism. Why is the notion of language so important, almost key, within the discursive structure of *Bez autorytetu*? Not to mention that it is a flickering and paradoxical notion, which stands out in the context of the entire volume through the fact that it incessantly gains and loses focus. Language analysis enables that which critics have termed the “psychoanalysis of political experience” (BA, p. 238). The privileged position within the procedure is occupied by a search of truth, i.e. the personal expression founded in authentic interpersonal relations as a quality prior to literature; to be more precise, reading is an interpersonal relationship in which a reader (critic) and the author are engaged. A literary text is supposed to be a meeting place through language – the medium of experiences. The striving for authenticity remains deep in the narratives of critics – it is sometimes expressed directly as genuine language, not adulterated language, an ethical attitude, the truth of speech, etc. It also has an influence at the level of stylistic solutions (personal tone, a visible Self instead of an impersonal form or an undefined ‘I’, the poetics of confession, and self-reflection).

Reality is marked by incoherence, a painful fissure which becomes evident only when critical reflection concerns language, speaking, and communication, and the patterns of conceptualisation of extra-linguistic exterior they establish. The piercing sense of the imbalance has the clear form of a modernist crisis of expression resulting from the identification of the ambivalent relationship between words and objects. This modernist blemish becomes evident several times throughout *Bez autorytetu*, though the book also includes a subtle distance which enables one to see in these observations a critical reaction to the paralysing nostalgia for the expressiveness of modernists.

That which is general appears within the area of public dialogue devoid of the personal stigma, ossified in depersonalised words, dead and monumental, while that which is personal degenerates in struggles of ideas sealed off from life which are important for the entire community. There is not language which could combine both zones. One which could become a space for authentic creation of ideas. (BA, p. 125)

The dream of the adequacy of language in relation to experiences is, clearly, partly quasi-anonymous; a reaction to the rhetoric of official public life. At the same time, the striving for authenticity is sometimes perceived as ideological fiction and a utopian dream.

¹⁶ Cf. P. Czapliński, P. Śliwiński, *Literatura polska 1976-1998*, pp. 145-146; P. Czapliński, *Powrót centrali. Literatura w nowej rzeczywistości*, Kraków 2007, pp. 171-178, L. Bugajski, *op. cit.*

Thus, following the narrow path **between** no one's speech and schizophrenic speech, the words of strangers and shattered words, I can say once **more**: we do not possess such a language. It is no one's speech. What remains is silence or the hopeless (?) search for own words. (...) In this text (...) I intended only to wrap a preliminary web of metaphors and suppositions around the existing (not for me) no one's speech – the source of foreignness. The outcome of that, no I know that, will always be partial at best. Is it even possible: "to utter foreignness in speech?" (BA, p. 148-149)

Finally, when language functions in the discourse of *Bez autorytetu* in the sense of a separate idiom – a separate personal language – there emerges the aporia between the need for unconstrained expression of the Self of a specific language user (a system which ensures communication of a community) and the need to guarantee basic communication within a community. The vision of a compelling language system which removes the personal quality of the speaker comes close to the crisis vision of the depersonalisation and unification of the individual. The critics faced an unsolvable dilemma (unsolvable from the point of view of modernity): for the price of communication with others, 'I' will not express itself; thus, it will not establish its own subjectivity and identity. Eventually, in both cases – i.e. an idiom and a "person with properties" and the anonymous being within a communication community – the highly desirable truth, authenticity, and uniqueness will not become established within language.

In order to avoid violating the generally applicable linguistic ritual, i.e. violating the universal social order (who would willingly choose banishment), we speak with the words of others. (...) Passiveness, defence, instantaneous yielding to the words of others and the resulting pragmatic acceptance of other people's world quickly leads speakers to an acute conflict between **that which is expressed** and **that which is kept silent**. (...) We continue to realise that we probably will never muster the courage to become one person by **repeating** the same **word** everywhere. (...) We ourselves, constantly being someone else, become more and more no one, "a person without properties." (BA, pp. 168-169)

Chwin and Rosiek's essays are marked by the striving for unconstrained speaking, a longing for authentic speech which was prior to authority (the extra-individual determinants which define styles, rhetorics, narratives, and ideologies), which blocks any free linguistic operations and communicational freedom. Language proves to be that concept which due to its own ambiguity and ability to trigger its own meanings depending on the context enables one to emphasise the multi-lateral relations of literature, and to show literariness as the outcome of the influence of various factors. Language is a material as well as a tool for communicating and thinking, the natural cognitive medium and conceptual laboratory; an abstract set of rules, hierarchies, and dichotomies, and an instrument for establishing basic interpersonal relations and building relations with the world.

The title signals this desire, yet it is also an expression of a certain conceptual problem. What kind of a declaration hides under the title formulation? The answer is as obvious as it is inadequate. It seems a reference to Barańczak's "ethics without authority" or, more broadly, to the principles included in new-wave slogans, yet that is a seeming parallel¹⁷. In fact, the critics argued that:

Suspicion is an unreliable path: it also turns against itself; it covers not only the world but it also undermines own foundations. A cursed circle of negation. Distance. Irony which kills itself. (BA, p. 212)

Then, in another place – by criticising the manifesto slogans and poetic strategies – they partly uncovered their own problematic position of critics struggling with a lexicon of the notions of modern literature:

That is why the breaking of allegory, the exposing of that which is hidden, can be a painful wake-up call at most. It basically changes nothing. From an illusion of meaning it tosses into void. From a pretence of order into chaos. Grotesque, irony, parody, realistic unmasking, criticism of language – all that is not enough. Those are mere defensive strategies. (BA, p. 215)

The fact of abandoning a self-portrait is an expression of distance towards the problems of literature's engagement in the criticism of social practices, mainly the official rituals of the collective life. The title deficiency is understood twofold: 1) the abandonment of a priori assumptions, the undermining of authority as a convenient alibi which relieves readers (or critics) of the duty to conduct an in-depth dialogue-focused reading, authority as a synonym of unwarranted oppression towards a text and a consent for a lack of self-critical reflection; 2) the need to develop self-aware critical attitudes (sometimes transforming into the procedures of reading), which would consider the uniqueness of a text as the meeting of equal personalities of the author and a critic. The need to abandon authority results from the fact of noticing a certain regularity in how literature functions. The institutionalisation of the literary circulation produces experts whose job is to read literature: critics, historians, and theoreticians, who somewhat monopolise specialist knowledge and transform it into purveyors of truth, theories, diagnoses, generalisations, and paradigms. The refusal to follow authority is a refusal to recognise the need to trust such an expert system, though essentially there is no escaping it¹⁸.

¹⁷ Perhaps Leszek Kołakowski's "ethics without a code" would be a more justified context. Cf. L. Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze. Zbiór rozpraw*, Warsaw 1967, first printed as: *Etyka bez kodeksu*, "Twórczość" 1962, issue 7.

¹⁸ In this context, one should ask whether Chwin and Rosiek completely abandoned the legitimisation of their discourse by authority figures. For example, Kazimierz Wyka, Jerzy Kwiatkowski, and Jacek Łukasiewicz were subjected to deep critical analyses; their outputs were the focus of reflection. Then, Mochnacki, Brzozowski, and Irzykowski appeared as patrons. Modern critics and creators of manifestos, especially the new-wave ones, were treated incredulously: books and essays by Barańczak, Zagajewski, and Kornhauser were the objects

Bez autorytetu, stretched between various genres and types of expressions, became, as its authors wrote in the introduction, a series of “risky forays into the border lands” of literature. The texts by the Gdańsk-based critics fulfilled the typical of the essay strategy of combining contradictory threads which cannot be reconciled within a single mode of writing. In the case of a manifesto, it is about a critical reflection regarding modernity, an academic precision of analysing literature free of the subjectivity of literary criticism, though, at the same time, about considering the relationship between the readers and a literary text.

Chwin and Rosiek’s discourse fluctuated between an academic paper, a literary-criticism text, and a commentary, while the ‘essayisticity’ competing with ‘academicity’ constitute – in *Bez autorytetu* – a key opposition, around which the process of formulating conclusions and ideas, stating hypotheses, and constructing arguments was organised. This special opposition, actually criticised by contemporary (few) commentators¹⁹ (they demanded either ‘normal’ literary criticism or pure academic discourse), signalled how problematic the thinking about meta-literary (critical, academic, or manifesto/theoretical) languages is, not only within the categories of mutually-exclusive alternatives, but also as tools which could be fully integrated.

I believe that *Bez autorytetu* is a record of a certain turning point in how the strategies of meta-literary writing are understood. The authors made attempts to break the limits of how the essay was understood as a genre (or the strategies of writing) founded in the modern sensitivity pestered by ever new crises, which longs for grandness²⁰. *Bez autorytetu* – as a specific essay of modernity in the process of being exhausted, though not exhausted completely – could be a way of emphasising the doubts as to whether the modernist *status quo* should be maintained. This was phrased acutely in the introduction by Stefan Chwin:

We knew (...) that literature was no longer an act of bull leaping, that there were no books at which one could erupt with the flames of outrage, that there were no books which brought some grand news. There were better and worse books, but one thing was certain: that there were no important

of polemic. A similar fate applied to other literary-criticism narratives, which established ad hoc formulas, e.g. the ‘new privacy’, a trend in the 1970s. Basically, the only positive references concerned the critical texts by Jan Błoński and Tomasz Burek.

¹⁹ Cf. J. Sochoń, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

²⁰ The moment of turn in the conceptual zone – within the sphere of thinking about the relations between literature and literary orders, which results in methodological changes – was captured by Andrzej Urbański when he was formulating his objections to Chwin and Rosiek: “Everything is reading: of texts, people, relations” (A. Urbański, *op. cit.*, p. 87). The critic could not accept that basically ‘pantextual’ vision of reality, which transformed into the object of constant interpretation, which actually did seem to be a kind of conceptual possibility to the authors of *Bez autorytetu*, yet it was never expressed anywhere in the book. Nonetheless, Urbański’s observation was also triggered by the ‘hermeneutics of suspicions’, in which everyone who was engaged in the 20th-century literature and culture has been trained.

books which would shatter the foundations of our ethos, which would take the ground from under our feet, which would threaten the world. (BA, pp. 15-16)

The attempt to restore literature's power through a critical revitalisation of criticism in *Bez autorytetu* is immersed in the shadow of certain ambiguity. If a statement on a work of art (in this case – literature) is supposed to be a work of art in itself (it then acquired 'essayistic' qualities)²¹, then *Bez autorytetu* is problematic twofold. First of all, it more eagerly criticises literary criticism and the general literary context than literature itself, thus making statements about a work of art (so it would be meta-critical); secondly, it approaches its own universalisation of reflection in an ambivalent manner (by emphasising its currentness and rooting in a specific moment in time), and it abandons the artistic form or the heterogenic literariness specific to the essay. This triggers a doubt about whether *Bez autorytetu*, fixated on modernist role models, is a modern essay, or perhaps its internal tensions are so powerful that they lead to a formation of a genre which would be closer to the post-modern essay²². It seems that it is key to pose the question about truth as the fundamental purpose of writing²³.

Chwin and Rosiek's essay combined various elements specific not only to domains related to literature, but also domains typical of extra-literary discourses, in order to try and avoid the temptation of expressing the Truth or seeking some Universal Rules to the benefit of individual experience (eventually they did not manage to avoid that temptation, or escaped it only for a moment). For this reason, unlike in the case of the canonical essayistic works of Polish modernity²⁴, *Bez autorytetu* was somewhat doomed for 'locality', for a gradual – possibly somewhat journalistic – loss of currentness. The fact of including temporariness, the special kind of self-placement in the centre and yet at the fringes of the main debates of the era, seems to be a price necessary to pay in order to be able to formulate reservations

²¹ M. P. Markowski, *Czy możliwa jest poetyka eseju?*, [in:] *Poetyka bez granic*, eds. W. Bolecki, W. Tomasik, Warsaw 1995, p. 117.

²² Ibid., pp. 116-118. Vide B. Choińska, *Esej jako następstwo pesymizmu teoriopoznawczego*, "Slupskie Studia Filozoficzne" 2007, issue 6, pp. 64-65.

²³ Another dichotomy seems interesting in this perspective, namely the one proposed by Lyotard: the essay would be, within all the paradoxical nature of this statement, post-modernist, while a fragment, having a Romantic provenance, modernist (J.F. Lyotard, *Odpowiedź na pytanie: co to jest postmodernizm?*, transl. M.P. Markowski, [in:] *Postmodernizm. Antologia przekładów*, editing, selection and foreword by R. Nycz, Kraków 1997, pp. 58-61). What was important to Chwin and Rosiek was the tradition of the grand engaged criticism established in the writings of Maurycy Mochnicki. As academics, they both ran the orbit of Romantic focus, which is why their essayistic volume could be viewed as a cracked fragment of post-Romantic modernism, which reformulated itself into a text close to the essay (if, of course, one was to keep to Lyotard's premise). The issue of those relations is so complex that, basically, the essay by Chwin and Rosiek – or, actually, the essayistic form, which celebrated contradictions and which was amateurish yet professional – could be considered as the application of Romantic irony promoted by Friedrich Schlegel. I mention all this to indicate the problematic nature of the concept of the French philosopher, though it was certainly an intriguing thought.

²⁴ Cf. A.S. Kowalczyk, *Kryzys świadomości europejskiej w eseistyce polskiej lat 1945-1977 (Vincenz - Stempowski - Miłosz)*, Warsaw 1990.

towards the ossifying modernity. However, as I imagine, it would be excessive to classify the text by Chwin and Rosiek as a post-modern essay. This is because, on the one hand, the declarations regarding the need for stability within the domain of axiological and cognitive criteria or the tirades against the inauthenticity of language situate *Bez autorytetu* clearly within the domain of modernist traditions of longing for grandness. On the other, however, the indications of noticing a situation of the exhaustion of the modern culture and tiredness with the existing models of literariness suggest that the essayistic volume by Chwin and Rosiek suffers from an interesting ailment of a discrepancy between diagnoses and theoretical-manifesto formulas.

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SUMMARY

The article concerns a critical book by Stefan Chwin and Stanisław Rosiek, titled *Bez autorytetu*, which is treated as an example of the process of a certain turn in the Polish modern literature of the end of the 20th century. The author discusses the basic assumptions of critical concepts and indicates the questionable places of the problem structure emerging from those assumptions. In so doing, he treats *Bez autorytetu* as a form of a modern essay which developed in the conditions of mature modernism, which was reflected in the various attempts at transcending modernistic conditions, both formal and conceptual.

Keywords

modernity, essay, literary criticism

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Essay as the Autobiographical Heresy

“(...) it took me long to decide what I admire in this text”
Józef Czapski¹

1.

This portion of the discussion shall focus on the statement by Karol Sauerland: “An essay should demand such focus as the act of reading a poem”², which was included in the preface to the selection of studies by Theodor W. Adorno. However, it should not be considered directly by analysing the essence and the meaning of comparing the essay to poetry, but, rather, in reference to Jan Tomasz Gross’ previous works, which utilised metaphors and complex structures, and which require multiple painstaking readings. Since the focus of the discussion indicated as the main one (or at least the first one) will be dominated by a study of Gross’ central problem of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War, it is worth considering already at the beginning, if only superficially, the issues associated with the aesthetics; despite appearances, the style of argumentation applied by the author of

¹ A fragment of Czapski’s letter to Jan Tomasz Gross regarding his essay *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej, ale go nie lubię*, discussed in this article, which was included in the collection *Jan Tomasz Gross w rozmowie z Aleksandrą Pawlicką “...bardzo dawno temu, mniej więcej w zeszły piątek...”*, Warsaw 2018, p. 135. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

² K. Sauerland, *Wstęp*, [in:] T.W. Adorno, *Sztuka i sztuki. Wybór esejów*, transl. K. Krzemień-Ojak, selection and introduction K. Sauerland, Warsaw 1990, p. 12.

Sąsiedzi has, in this case, a fundamental significance for all other properties of his text as it decides not only about **how** but also **what** was said in it.

The socio-political commentary-writing of the mid-1980s, to which Gross' *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej..., ale go nie lubię* belongs – being the core topic of this study – has served as the foundation of the modern thinking about the attitude of Poles towards the Holocaust, both in notional terms and formal terms, so to speak. Apart from Jan Błoński's essay titled *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto*, there appeared a dozen or so other important texts by major Polish intellectuals, e.g. Andrzej Smolar, Jakub Karpiński, and Roman Zimand, which – in terms of the level of the formulation of thoughts and the degree of their complexity – were no different than the best philosophical essays of the first half of the 20th century. However, the influence of the erudite nature of those texts on modern times is negligible: almost no one remembers about any of those, yet Błoński is remembered far too well. The brilliant career of his text became one of the reasons why the other essays were forgotten. Yet the poetic nature or rather the complexity of the structure transitioning into the cognitive meanderings of Smolar's and Zimand's studies is worth more than one reading and it is visible even at the level of the very titles of the texts: *Szoah, drugi upadek*³ [*Shoah: The Second Fall*], *Asymetria*⁴ [*Asymmetry*], *Tabu i niewinność*⁵ [*Taboo and Innocence*], *Piędzien i popiół*⁶ [*Bitter Wormwood and Ash*]. Some, like the title of Zimand's essay, have been absorbed by the Polish language in the form of lexicalised maxims. But is there anyone who still remembers their sources? The essays of the 1980s have been forgotten not only because Jan Błoński managed to close the decade and retain it in his text (in which, it seems, he did not succeed). It has been forgotten mostly because it proved too difficult, too demanding, requiring the already-mentioned painstaking repeated readings, which is not much different from the hermeneutics of a poem. Simply consider that *Piędzien i popiół* implicitly referenced Czesław Miłosz' poetry (e.g. *Gwiazda piędzien*) in order to understand that the discussed collection of essays includes an interpretative challenge much more difficult than the analysis of the bombastic sentence: "Bóg tę rękę zatrzymał"⁷ ["God stopped that hand"], which comes from an essay that – unlike the texts by Karpiński or Zimand – features transparent structures; most thoughts are formulated directly and quotations from poetry are 'on the surface'.

One such challenge, possibly most emphasised by Gross, concerns the changes introduced in the consecutive editions of the essay, which applied both to its structure and significance. One should realise that many of the texts I discuss in this article were created with the intention to be published in cultural and social periodicals, for debates conducted in weeklies and

³ P. Śpiewak, *Szoah, drugi upadek*, [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi 1936-2009*, vol. 2, selection and introduction A. Michnik (ed.), Kraków 2010, pp. 934-948.

⁴ J. Karpiński, *Asymetria*, [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi...*, pp. 997-1006.

⁵ A. Smolar, *Tabu i niewinność*, [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi...*, pp. 1030-1075.

⁶ R. Zimand, *Piędzien i popiół. Czy Polacy i Żydzi wzajem się nienawidzą?*, [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi...*, pp. 1109-1160.

⁷ J. Błoński, *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto*, [in:] idem., *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto*, Kraków 2008, p. 33.

monthlies, and less often for academic purposes, such as symposia or conferences. The time of lively disputes, which the 1980s became, did not favour ready-made narratives; it did, however, favour essayistic narratives, and not in the traditionally hermeneutic meaning. In writing about poetry as the metaphor of the essay, Sauerland indicated that traditional methods of reading – which suggested the reading of the whole based on fragments – had fallen; instead, he suggested the reading of fragments independently, without the need to seek a conclusion or to find more than one summation or ending.

The ‘putting together’ of Zimand’s and Gross’ essays – the authors of sagacious revolutionary studies devoted to a part of Polish history which was avoided in the 1980s – proves difficult even today, and its utility has to be justified⁸. These are not essays of hard proof but of ‘fancy’ reasoning, often only later verified and corrected by historians who have at their disposal different notional tools and a much more precise methodology than the indicated essayists had. I am proposing to return to their works. This is not to overlook errors, but to reject the category of error as a whole, viewing the essay as an attempt at alternative thinking as opposed to science, which cannot produce an imperfect, incoherent, or non-model language, through which authors can pose fundamental breakthrough theses for the society.

2.

The discussion of the essay by Adorno in his study titled *Esej jako forma* [*The Essay as Form*], which was published in Polish in a collection from 1990, offered an important context for those writings. Let me mention one of its postulates regarding the differences between the genre specified in the title and science as such:

Aktualność eseju jest aktualnością tego, co anachroniczne. Czas jest dla niego bardziej niełaskawy niż kiedykolwiek. Dostaje się on w tryby między zorganizowaną nauką, w której wszyscy usurpują sobie prawo kontrolowania wszystkiego i wszystkich i która wyklucza tych nie przykrojonych na miarę consensusu z obłudną pochwałą dla tego, co intuicyjne i pobudzające.⁹

⁸ Cf. A. Calderón Puerta, T. Żukowski, *Wina obojętności*, [in:] *Opowieść o niewinności. Kategoria świadka Zagłady w kulturze polskiej (1942-2015)*, eds. A. Calderón Puerta, K. Chmielewska, M. Hopfinger et al., Warsaw 2018, pp. 345-387. The authors of the study juxtaposed the essays by Błoński and Gross in order to compare the ways in which both authors discussed the topic of Polish culpability. This study indicated that the author of *Widzieć jasno, w zachwyceniu* appears to have repeated most of the anti-Jewish patterns present in the socio-political writings of his time, and to have analysed historical sources in a superficial manner, while Gross – who approached patterns and sources in a completely different way – indicated the many instances of reticence about the Polish culpability. Despite this, as argued by the discussed academic narrative, the main object of the study of the researchers was Błoński’s failing: “He utilised a mode of thinking proposed by candid Catholics in the 1940s and he was successful. His position was treated by many as the final word in the matter of Polish culpability”. A. Calderón Puerta, T. Żukowski, *Wina obojętności*, p. 385.

⁹ T.W. Adorno, *Esej jako forma*, [in:] T.W. Adorno, *Sztuka i sztuki...*, p. 98. [English version: T.W. Adorno, *The Essay as Form*, [in:] idem., *Notes to Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York 1991].

[The contemporary relevance of the essay is that of anachronism. The time is less favorable to it than ever. It is ground into pieces between an organised system of science and scholarship on the one side, in which everyone presumes to control everyone and everything and where everything not tailored to the current consensus is excluded while being praised hypocritically as "intuitive" and "stimulating".]

In Adorno's argument, the essay reaches the status of a discourse competing with science, which, on the one hand, wins with the latter, and, on the other – if incorrectly evaluated – it can be ruthlessly discredited by the proponents of truth and method. Not all texts which are essays send sufficiently clear essayistic signals, such as, e.g.: the title (in Gross' case, it is the subtitle of the collection, in which the discussed study was included), or genre reference (in Zimand's case, it is stated overtly¹⁰ in the language in which it was written¹¹ and in the Polish translation¹²), but, mostly, a complex digressive structure (Śpiewak) intertwined with overt and covert quotations, paraphrases, and allusions to literature. Some Polish essays which raised the topic of the Holocaust conceal their genre affinity while not fitting into the model of scientific narrative due to a lack of a conclusion or the personal musings of their authors. The most distinct example of activities which violate the coherence of academic argumentation is *Piotrun i popiół*, which offers several hypotheses simultaneously, a parallel course of the story, and a narrative which fulfils that which Adorno called the "anachronism" of the essay. In the case of Zimand's study, a major role was also played by the fact of undermining the illusion of a simple world, as the author of *Minima moralia* argued, so perfect "for defending that which is non-existent"¹³. Instead of offering proof of a known reality, the essay summons a non-existent reality which could exist, and which basically does exist yet it is not accepted, noticed, or recognised by everyone. By opposing the third Cartesian rule – i.e. "to conduct my thoughts in such an order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex"¹⁴ – Adorno demands that readers should see in the essay a counter-narrative or, rather, an anti-scientific narrative, at the same time mocking a discipline which leads to nowhere, and a perfect instance of the truth, which acquires its prerogatives only by dint of appropriate presentation.

That detailed listing of the non-systemic qualities of the essay mainly serves to indicate that it became a more appropriate form for writing about the Polish-Jewish relations than any other form, including for the authors of later renowned academic studies, e.g. the already mentioned Gross, Śpiewak, and Zimand. Since the intentions behind this article are extremely

¹⁰ Namely that it is an essay.

¹¹ English 'essay', French 'essai'.

¹² An attempt.

¹³ T.W. Adorno, *Esej jako forma*, p. 91.

¹⁴ R. Descartes, *Rozprawa o metodzie*, transl. W. Wojciechowska, Warsaw 1981, vol. 22. As quoted in: T.W. Adorno, *Esej jako forma*, p. 90.

modest and are limited mainly to a discussion of the difficulty in reading Gross' early essays – and only later to indicating the similarities and differences between the first version of *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...* and the subsequent ones – I primarily wish to propose the consideration of the essay as a form of convenient reasonable thinking and the evolution of the form in Gross' works as the main problem. Later, I intend to answer the question about whether all the mental excursions and inconsistencies he proposed in those texts did not actually supplement Adorno's extensive theory, which discussed the value of over-interpretation and the value of discontinuity and fragments in the theory of cognition. The essay, as Adorno argued, displays independence in reference to the "priorities of fact"¹⁵; it rejects that which does not exist and turns to that which is not, but which might be. Considering the receptions of *Piotruś i popiół* and *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej* (a few colleagues of Gross saw in the early version of the text the author's "mental aberration"¹⁶), one should conclude that both studies refer to heretic traditions¹⁷, i.e. these are intellectual excursions into the academic pathways of thinking about how one should profess history and write about the attitudes of Poles during World War Two.

3.

According to information provided by Gross in 1986, before *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...* was published in the *Aneks* periodical, the text had been altered three times: in 1980 when it was sent to the *Res Publika* periodical; the second time, in 1985, when Gross delivered it during a lecture in Oxford; and the third time in 1986 in *Aneks*. The first version was directly influenced by the polemic by Rafael Scharf and Andrzej Szczypiorski, which Gross read in 1979 in *Kultura*. Soon afterwards, the researcher prepared a response, which he sent to *Res Publika*, where it was supposed to be published along with a polemic commentary. Sadly, though, the commentary was never created, the study was not published, and the periodical closed down. In 1985, Gross presented a paper at a conference on Polish history, partly devoted to – judging from the context – the issues discussed in the text on which this article focuses. It stirred a tempestuous reaction. What happened next could be called a persistent work to sharpen the argumentation first challenged by the editorial board of *Res Publika* and, later, by the participants to the conference. A new version of the text was first presented at the Institute of Polish-Jewish Studies in Oxford, and later it was printed in *Aneks*, which placed it next to studies by Karpiński and by Smolar. That version was published in 2010 by Adam Michnik in the second volume of the *Przeciw antysemityzmowi* 1936-2010 anthology, disregarding the fact that in 1998, in the collection *Upiorna dekada. Trzy eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemów*

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁶ J.T. Gross, *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej..., ale go nie lubię*, [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi* 1936-2009, vol. 2, selection and introduction by A. Michnik (ed.), Kraków 2010, p. 1009.

¹⁷ T.W. Adorno, *Esej jako forma*, p. 99.

*i komunistów 1939-1948*¹⁸, another fourth version of the study was published. It is possible that the decision to publish the third version once the fourth version had been published was made by the author himself, yet he did not add any commentary on it even in a consecutive edition of *Upiornej dekada* in 2007¹⁹. When interpreting his decision as intentional and caused by an organisation different than the bibliographical order, i.e. the writer's logic, one should analyse all the indicated versions of the *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej..., ale go nie lubię* study (which was published also under the title *Ten jest z Ojczyzny mojej..., ale go nie lubię*²⁰) and consider what form of the essay genre Gross fulfilled in them or what form he gave up, proposing the actual one instead. Since only the third and the fourth versions are available, I shall also include Gross' text which he wrote in the mid-1980s as a voice in a stormy debate – which historians remember almost exclusively as a monody – and a text from the late 1990s, almost two-thirds of which were altered. These two texts – bearing similar titles and with a common pedigree – mainly prove the evolution of their author's thinking, though they are also statements about Poles and Jews living side by side, and partly also about the 1941 anti-Jewish massacres. Though they display the features of a precursor or even prophetic texts, they do not include such a strong set of evidence as the one the researcher presented in *Sąsiedzi*. When considering the style of the circumstance-based similarity which Gross used in them, one should bear in mind Adorno's argument. Similarly to Erasmus of Rotterdam, this author mocked the academic art of argumentation: "Its interpretations are not philologically definitive and conscientious; in principle, they are over-interpretations – according to the mechanized verdict of the vigilant intellect that hires out to stupidity as a watchdog against the mind"²¹. However, in order to notice that which basically only Gross was able to recognise, one should humbly accept the livery of a servant and listen to the admonitions of colleagues:

(...) rzetelny opis nawet najprzykrzejszych wydarzeń jest potrzebny. Zresztą to nie akademickie opisy są wykorzystywane przez wrogów obu narodów. Tak wykorzystuje się raczej wrażenia, uogólnienia i podejrzenia, pobudzone emocjonalnie legendy i stereotypy, o wiele bardziej nośne społecznie i chwytliwe politycznie niż te prace historyczne i socjologiczne, których autorzy chcą się czegoś dowiedzieć, wiedzą, co piszą, i odpowiadają za słowa w tym sensie, że sprawdzają, czy mają rację, i próbują swoje wypowiedzi uzasadnić.²²

¹⁸ J.T. Gross, *Upiornej dekada. Trzy eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i komunistów 1939-1948*, Kraków 1998.

¹⁹ J.T. Gross, *Upiornej dekada. Trzy eseje o stereotypach na temat Żydów, Polaków, Niemców i komunistów 1939-1948*, Kraków 2007. The only piece of information about the changes introduced in the second edition was included underneath the main title in the form a note that read: "new, corrected and expanded edition". A quick glance at the table of contents indicates, however, that the differences mostly applied to the final chapter in the new edition, titled *O kolaboracji* [On Collaborationism], which departed from the 1998 edition.

²⁰ In the first version, the title of Gross' essay was included in *Aneks* and in Michnik's anthology, while in the second version it appeared in both editions of *Upiornej dekada*.

²¹ T.W. Adorno, *Esej jako forma*, p. 80.

²² J. Karpinski, *Asymetria...*, p. 1006.

[...] a reliable description of even the most unpleasant events is necessary. In fact, it is not academic studies that are used by enemies of both nations. Towards that end people usually use impressions, generalisations and suspicions, emotion-driven legends and stereotypes, much more socially resonant and politically catchy than those historical and sociological studies whose authors want to learn something, they know what they write and they are responsible for their words in the sense that they verify whether they are right, and they try to justify their positions.]

Gross' views, recreated based on both versions of the essay on the history of Poles and Jews living side by side, were based on various methods of reaching the outcomes listed by Karpiński: generalisations, suspicions, and, most of all, emotion-driven stereotypes, which the author tried to verify. This is why *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...* was often attacked, while its book version, corrected and supported by additional pieces of evidence and with an altered introduction and conclusion, "passed almost unnoticed"²³. What does actually differentiate both versions and why did Gross decide to, without any commentary, introduce in them corrections without withdrawing any of the two?

The 1986 version consists of three extensive parts. The first one, untitled, applies to, e.g., the above-discussed origins of the essay, and it explains the attitude of the writer, presumably composed in response to the above-discussed accusations. Gross placed his reflections within the area of focus of the Polish identity being reconstructed after years of captivity, making the Polish-Jewish relations during World War Two part of the reflection on the topic of the 200-year-long struggle of Poles for independence. That was not an obvious remark. Particularly because the line of thinking of Poles in the first half of the 20th century was dominated by history, there was not enough willingness or time to recall what those relations consisted of. The post-World-War-Two history of Poland unfolded in such a way that historians could have afforded to forget about that part of the past. Yet the essayist proposed to revise it and view it from the perspective of contemporary concerns, i.e. about the Polish identity. He calls himself a Pole; he recalls his mother, a member of the Polish szlachta, and his father, a Jew she was hiding. He primed the narrative perspective in such a way as to ensure everyone that he had the good of the nation in mind, not of the Jewish community: "I write this article with the conviction that for Poles the notion of Polish-Jewish relations during the war is a matter of momentous importance"²⁴. At the same time, Gross utilises tomfoolery, pretending not to understand why

²³ J.T. Gross, *Upiorna dekada...*, 2nd edition, p. 9. The remark applied to the first edition of the collection. Yet, considering the contents of three studies devoted to Gross' works published in recent years by Magdalena Nowicka-Franczak, Paweł Dobrosielski, and Piotr Forecki, one should state the same about the second edition of *Upiorna dekada*. It did not cause any particular interest even among monographers. Cf. P. Dobrosielski, *Spory o Grossa. Polskie problemy z pamięcią o Żydach*, Warsaw 2017; M. Nowicka-Franczak, *Niechciana debata. Spór o książkę Jana Tomasza Grossa*, Warsaw 2017; P. Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem. Anatomia pamięci funkcjonalnej*, Warsaw 2018.

²⁴ J.T. Gross, *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...* [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi...*, p. 1009.

the topic gives Poles the chills, or even makes them feverish; why they are opposed to talking about it in calm tones, debating reflectively, or making it a topic of study²⁵.

The second part of the essay²⁶ consists of the explanations by Jan Józef Lipski and Andrzej Szczypiorski regarding the lack of Poles' efficient aid for Jews during the Second World War. Lipski mainly emphasised the similarities of the experiences of both nations. In the well-known essay, titled *Dwie ojczyzny, dwa patriotyzmy. Uwagi o megalomanii narodowej i ksenofobii Polaków*, in response to the question about whether enough was done to oppose the Holocaust, he used the notion of social margin – one disputed with full force by Gross in *Sąsiedzi* – in order to prove that the phenomenon of *szmalcowniks* was occasional at best. Thus, it should be 'accepted' by the same virtue as one understands that goodness and evil exist side by side, and that weeds grow among flowers. Gross, however, was not convinced by such an explanation not only due to the error of perspective (what might that margin actually be?), but also due to the exclusion of that which was not marginal, i.e. the attitudes of regular Poles during Word War Two.

The other opinion discussed in this part, i.e. by Andrzej Szczypiorski, applied to the emotional costs of not helping. It is true, Szczypiorski argued, that Poles did not help as much as they should have, but who could expect heroism of people overcome with mortal fear for themselves and their loved ones? Further in that discussion Gross ironically paraphrased Szczypiorski's exceptionally naive argument: since Poles did not always help, they were pestered by remorse. The emotion was so severe, complicated, and experienced in utmost solitude that it would take at least Fyodor Dostoevsky to write about it. Gross had a counterargument: completely unnecessarily. If Poles had a conscience – being the devout Catholics they claim to be – they would have surely atoned for their sin of omission.

In the third part²⁷, Gross mainly doubts the price and the value of the Polish occupation fear. While understanding that Poles were afraid of hiding Jews facing the threat to their lives and the lives of their families, the essayist wonders why they were not afraid of other activities "punishable under the German occupation by the death penalty"²⁸, e.g. engaging in the

²⁵ This applied to the following fragment, which was, in fact, rather flippant: "Why should some of us feel offended by the fact that there once existed some Polish *szmalcowniks* or that other Poles established ghetto benches? There is no such thing as collective responsibility so for us feeling guilty for the sins of some of our forefathers would be just as ridiculous as burdening Chancellor Kohl with the guilt for Auschwitz or the footballers of Dynamo Kyiv for Kolyma". As quoted in: J.T. Gross, *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...*, [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi...*, p. 1010.

²⁶ One titled "O tym, jak brzmi obiegowa wersja polsko-żydowskich stosunków w czasie wojny i dlaczego jest nie do przyjęcia" ["On the common version of the Polish-Jewish relations during the war and why it is unacceptable"].

²⁷ Namely, "O tym, że antysemityzm rozpowszechniony w czasie okupacji wśród polskiego społeczeństwa był przyczyną, dla której Niemcy tak brutalnie i bezwzględnego mordowali Polaków za pomaganie Żydom, i dlaczego Polakom trudno jest o tym mówić" ["On that the anti-Semitism spread during the occupation among the Polish society was the reason why Germans so viciously and without exception slaughtered Poles for helping Jews, and why it is so difficult for Poles to talk about that"].

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1014.

underground. The fact of comparing the underground and hiding Jews forced the author to draw a conclusion which revealed the weakness of the attitudes of Poles towards Jews during World War Two: "Activity in the underground entailed universal respect (...), lots of people engaged in those efforts, while few people were engaged in helping Jews and in their efforts they did not receive wide support"²⁹. As Gross argues, perhaps if Poles had helped as often as they worked with the underground, helping would have become more common, it would not have caused the society to oppose it, and it would not have made it possible to transform into the object of trade, betrayal, and blackmail.

The second conclusion drawn in the previous part is much more intriguing and it applied to the introduction to the essay, which made the Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War an element of Poland's reclaiming its Romantic ethos. Gross argues that the course of the restoration of the identity did not consider the division which emerged most acutely before World War Two – that Poland, up to that point aware of the fact that it had an ethnically diverse society, did not handle the fact that that society was a product of an accord between the majority and various minorities, between those who were strong and those who were weak. The monolith, which the society considered itself to be, was not able to absorb Shoah and adjust it to its Christian model of the redemptive meaning of a sacrifice. This is why the history of the Polish-Jewish relations were extracted from the public discourse for many years.

The major differences between the versions of *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...* published in the periodical and in a book form are as follows. The book version of the essay consists of three parts, while the introductory and the final parts differ from the original version published in *Aneks*. Only the middle part ("O tym, że antysemityzm rozpowszechniony w czasie okupacji wśród polskiego społeczeństwa był przyczyną...") is equivalent. The text's potential lies in the altered parts, which include crushing evidence in the form of uncirculated fragments of Karski's report (released in print as late as 1992) and extracts from Zygmunt Klukowski's journal. In combination with excerpts from underground press, they convey a terrifying degree of Polish anti-Semitism during World War Two, leaving no illusion as to why Poles did not rescue Jews in that period. In explaining the reasons for that, Gross referred to the 1966 study by Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna, titled *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939-1945*, in which they collected nearly two hundred accounts from both sides of the wall. The authors' intention was to emphasise the mediating role of recollections, not anti-Semitism as such. For that, in fact, they used as a motto Słonimski's 1943 poem titled *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej*. In it, the poet depicted a utopian vision of brotherhood consisting of endless empathy towards the victims of wars³⁰; the vision which Gross had in mind did not venture outside Poland and this is why it proved so difficult to fulfil. Unlike in the periodical version of the essay, in the book

²⁹ Ibid., p. 1026.

³⁰ Cf. A. Słonimski, *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej*, [in:] *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939-1945*, eds. W. Bartoszewski, Z. Lewinówna, Kraków 1966, p. 5.

he did not call for a change of the attitudes of Poles towards national identity and history. Instead of using the tone of an appeal, he used a view about the common circumstances of the Holocaust, for which both those past Poles and those alive now are responsible. Instead of unclear ironic statements vaguely placing guilt – e.g. “Why are some of **us** [emphasis – M. T.] supposed to feel offended by the fact that there once existed some Polish *szmalcowniks* or that other Poles established ghetto benches?”³¹ – Gross writes about shared guilt and shared responsibility, preparing the field for *Sąsiedzi*: “(...) Shoah occurred among **us** [emphasis – M. T.]”³² He repeated with emphasis that Polishness did not necessarily consist of noble deeds (such as saving someone’s life), but, more often, of deeds which were daring (the underground) and shady. What is noteworthy, though, is that the author of *Upiorna dekada...* was no longer interested in constructing identity or recreating the community, which made for extremely potent topics during the early Solidarity years, when most of the essays which I discussed at the beginning had been created. In the case of the previous version of Gross’ study, one could talk about his hope for changes, his trying to fit into the Polish community, and triggering a factual debate about the “poor Christians” and the disliked neighbours. The quotation marks used by Gross in the following version – thus not only differentiating Słonimski’s original content, but also stressing his own distance regarding the expression – actually signified a wall. In the anthology by Bartoszewski and Lewinówna, there were two sides to it, i.e. Polish and Jewish; in Gross’ case, there was only one, the Jewish one, non-reducible to any Polish experiences.

4.

There is no doubt that the process of developing new versions of *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...* brought Gross closer to *Sąsiedzi*, be it in terms of the form, the structure, or the material. Yet one should also attribute much value to those parts of the study which he decided to remove, considering them no longer valid, possibly even petty and excessively emotional. I am mainly referring to his private statement of faith in Polishness, combined with a short autobiographical story which emphasised the extensive influence his mother had on his life, as well as the unique nature of her relationship with his father, which could be referred to as a *mésalliance* if it had not been for the bourgeois scornful significance of the noun.

The autobiographical confession, further expanded in the 2018 collection of interviews with Gross by Aleksandra Pawlicka, constitutes the most sensitive moment in his essay as it applies to the broken fortunes of Gross’ family, exposing him to a series of blows:

(...) kiedy niepoprawiona przeze mnie wersja tłumaczenia oksfordzkiego wykładu dotarła do kilku znajomych w Polsce, skomentowali mój tekst

³¹ J.T. Gross, *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...*, [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi...*, p. 1010.

³² J.T. Gross, *Upiorna dekada...*, 2nd edition, p. 44.

jako aberrację umysłową, że oto pod wpływem filmu „Shoah” odezwała się we mnie krew Machabeuszów. (...) mój artykuł jest reakcją na zew krwi piastowskiej raczej...³³

[...] when a version of the translation of my Oxford lecture not yet corrected by me reached some of my colleagues in Poland, they commented upon my text that it was a mental aberration, that lo and behold the film *Shoah* stirred in me my Maccabean blood. (...) my article is rather a reaction to the stirring of my Piast blood...]

Talking about a “stirring of blood”, Gross did not, however, yield to the pressure to offer a brotherly statement, nor did he use that patriarchal argument to strengthen Słonimski’s rhetoric. One should rather infer that through a series of figures shielding the ‘I’ – e.g. a warrior of the Maccabean clan or the descendent of the Piast dynasty – Gross became a heretic readying for a serious battle against an opponent who conceals their plan. According to Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany:

Najwięksi, którzy o Zagładzie pisali, próbowali odnaleźć formę dostatecznie pojemną – w eseju, opowieści biograficznej, opowiadaniu, powieści, wierszu. Te formy albo się rozпадały, albo naruszały wiarygodność (bo jeszcze przez chwilę po Zagładzie wierzono w prawdopodobieństwo, mimesis itd.). Może najmniej rozpadł się esej, jego amorficzność okazywała się jedynie nadwątać kategorię wiarygodności, a nie całkowicie podawać ją w wątpliwość.³⁴

[The greatest who wrote about the Holocaust, tried to find a form sufficiently capacious – in the essay, the biographical story, the short story, the novel, or the poem. Those forms either fell apart or spoiled reliability (because after the Holocaust people still believed for a moment in probability, mimesis, etc.) Maybe the essay fell apart the least; its amorphous nature only appeared to weaken the category of reliability but not completely question it.]

In the case of Gross and his Holocaust essays, there was something more than the weakening of the category of reliability, mainly associated with the narrative of a witness. The main point was to find a form, a “*kondycja*”³⁵ [state], as Kuczyńska-Koschany put it, which would enable the essayist to **delay the moment of revealing the truth, to obfuscate, to play roles which were not always true, and to multiply and solve made-up conflicts**. Then, the essay would mean a ‘test ride’, it would be a **trial of academic thinking** free of all burdens, which Adorno mentioned, especially from

³³ J.T. Gross, *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...*, [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi...*, p. 1009.

³⁴ K. Kuczyńska-Koschany, *Eseści kondycji żydowskiej. Po Zagładzie: Maurice Blanchot i Bogdan Dawid Wojdowski*, “*Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka*” 2017, no. 30(50), p. 390.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 392.

gravitating towards completeness and positive solutions. The **negativity** of Gross' essays is a quality which surely distinguishes them from all other texts of the mid-1980s. It is, however, progressive, involutionary, not direct, based on generalisations, tactical bluffs, jokes, irony – suffice it to say that due to these exact reasons and not the conceptual purity specific for *Upiornej dekada*, the text published in *Aneks* reads so well. Though the reasons why Gross supplemented it are understandable, the outcome itself is considerably weaker. It is in the 1986 essay that one will find all the 'faults' of the form, indicated by Adorno; it is specifically in it that "the violations of the orthodoxy of thought reveal something which orthodoxy secretly and objectively has intended to keep invisible"³⁶. What is this? These are not domestic struggles or burning neighbours, i.e. the hatred-filled Polish-Jewish relations. Gross wrote about these *expressis verbis*. He somewhat *en passant* added in *Aneks* the remark that his intention was to comprehend the fear of hiding others, as he himself was "the fruit of that phenomenon"³⁷. Why did Gross remove this fragment from later versions? Was it because it sounded too personal? One may assume that the story, somewhat explaining the circumstances of Gross' birth, constitutes a truly essayistic location in both texts by Gross – one which was opened and removed. One which meant to him just as much as all the later academic findings did. If not more.

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Jan Tomasz Gross w rozmowie z Aleksandrą Pawlicką "...bardzo dawno temu, mniej więcej w zeszły piątek...", Warsaw 2018.

³⁶ T.W. Adorno, *Esej jako forma*, p. 99.

³⁷ J.T. Gross, *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej...*, [in:] *Przeciw antysemityzmowi...*, p. 1009.

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SUMMARY

This article discusses the special kind of Holocaust essay which, on the one hand, remains in opposition to academic texts and, on the other, is a text which resembles an autobiography, and which reveals its author's personal engagement in the discussed problem. By analysing Jan Tomasz Gross' study titled *Ten jest z oczyszny mojej..., ale go nie lubię* and its consecutive printed versions, the author of this article discusses the benefit of engaging in essay-writing for the scholar, who fluctuates between the academic and non-academic discourses. To this end, she also discusses other Polish Holocaust essays published in the mid-1980s (by, e.g., Jan Błoński and Roman Zimand) and the theory of the essay by Theodor W. Adorno, which triggered Gross' formal and notional search.

Keywords

essay, Holocaust, antisemitism in Poland

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The Essays of Contaminated Landscapes

The essay as a literary form, and the essayistic mode of thinking¹, has been applied in the discussions of so many problems and topics that it would be difficult to try and find some content-based associations between the essay and specific issues. Nonetheless, it seems that the relationship could be reversed, i.e. sometimes certain topics – and especially perspectives from which people try to approach a specific topic – attract or push away certain literary forms. It is the essay that has proved to be such a form of literature in the case of remembrance and knowledge about genocide. The direct reaction to the experience of genocide usually comes through works of literature which is based on the record of own experiences, i.e. various autobiographical forms as well as short stories which utilise first-person narrative. As time goes by, though – as remembrance ceases to constitute the element of the nearest experience in temporal terms and it becomes an element of knowledge, including academic knowledge – it is the genre of the essay that offers an opportunity to combine various forms of that which is intermediate with the reflective synthesis of knowledge and moral judgement. It is the essay that finds a place for a historical analysis of past events as well as for outlining the problematic place of the writing persona, their moral doubts, and cognitive hesitations. Finally, the essay offers an opportunity to

¹ The difference between the essay as a form – i.e. a literary genre – and the special mode of thinking and writing it represents has been discussed by various theoreticians and philosophers of the essay. The major discussions include essays by György Lukács and Theodor W. Adorno. Vide G. Lukács, *O istocie i formie eseju: List do Leo Poppera*, transl. R. Turczyn, [in:] idem., *Pisma krytyczno-teoretyczne 1908-1932*, selection and introduction by S. Morawski, Warsaw 1994, pp. 82-92; Th.W. Adorno, *Esej jako forma*, [in:] idem., *Sztuka i sztuki. Wybór esejów*, transl. K. Krzemień-Ojak, selection by K. Sauerland, Warsaw 1990, pp. 79-99.

arrange in a text one's own personal involvement in the past being described. The common combination of the essay and travel² as well as the fact of recording events, thoughts, and pieces of information gathered during a journey are both major elements of the tradition of the essay and of the various reflections which form based on visits to genocide locations. Many of the formal and historical features of the tradition of the essay make it an extremely capacious genre for writing about genocide, particularly when it is necessary to have some time separation as well as the transcending of the limits of an academic study or a reportage.

I would like to discuss several works by Martin Pollack – an Austrian journalist, writer, reporter, and essayist – as an example of that particular essayistic knowledge about genocide. These various professional and genealogical divisions often fluctuate in the case of the indicated author. Many of his texts possess a clearly journalistic and reporting nature, especially those which concern the recent political history. Yet his various works about the past, even if nearing the form of a historical reportage, possess a rather essayistic style³. Pollack stresses not only his own epistemological position, but also his family's history, which forms the moral context for his texts about genocide.

In 2014, Pollack published a collection of essays developed based on guest academic lectures. *Kontaminierte Landschaften* [Contaminated Landscapes] became not only a major work which triggered extensive studies and reflection on the issue of forgotten and hidden genocides, but also a catchy metaphor which has been present ever since in the titles of academic conferences and collective works⁴.

In this article, I shall analyse the intertwining of two threads of Pollack's prose works. The first one is the history of his family, the recollections about Nazi ancestors, and the dissonance which formed inside him regarding his family's past. The other one is the study of space understood as uncovering its "contamination", the sinister past which has marked the specific portion of the landscape. Pollack merges these two threads throughout his essays, which is particularly visible in *Kontaminierte Landschaften*⁵. In the final part of the article, I shall discuss the argumentative role of this intertwining. I would like

² Jan Tomkowski listed journey as the first possible topic for an essay. Vide J. Tomkowski, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Polski esej literacki. Antologia*, ed. J. Tomkowski, Wrocław 2017, p. XLIV.

³ One example of a historical essay is his book about Galicia, which has the structure of a historical reportage on his journey through Galicia and Bukovina. Pollack based his work, however, not on an actual visit to the areas of the USSR at that time, but on his readings of the regional press from the turn of the 20th century, as well as various books about Galicia. Just as his later books, this one also met with an interesting academic reception; it triggered extensive studies into Galicia, which intensified after 1989. Vide M. Pollack, *Po Galicji. O chasydach, Hucułach, Polakach i Rusinach. Imaginacyjna podróż po Galicji Wschodniej i Bukowinie, czyli wyprawa w świat, którego nie ma*, transl. A. Kopacki, Wołowiec 2017. Vide also C. Moos, *Habsburg post mortem. Betrachtungen zum Wieterleben der Habsburgmonarchie*, Vienna–Cologne–Weimar 2016.

⁴ Vide, e.g., 'Kontaminierte Landschaften'. *Mitteleuropa inmitten von Krieg und Totalitarismus. Eine exemplarische Bestandsaufnahme anhand von literarischen Texten*, ed. A. Höllwerth, Berlin–Bern–Vienna 2019.

⁵ M. Pollack, *Skażone krajobrazy*, transl. K. Niedenthal, Wołowiec 2014. Quotations indicated directly in the text refer to this edition.

to pose a question about the possibility of decontamination, i.e. expunging that contamination from these landscapes in order to make them once again locations which foster life instead of being empty cemeteries.

Family stories of Austrian Nazis

Similarly to many other essayists, Pollack also eagerly refers to the myth of happy childhood, one that in his case was unfortunately fatherless, but with loving grandparents instead. However, he confronted the carefree images of hiking with his grandpa or hunting stories with other stories. His beloved grandpa was a member of the Nazi party since 1931. As a lawyer, he participated in the 'de-Jewing' of real estate and, after the Second World War, he was arrested and spent two years in prison. The writer's grandmother held similar views. He terminated any contact with her after she had disputed his choice to pursue Slavic studies. He was able to challenge his family's Nazism owing to the experimental school he attended, where he met pupils from other countries⁶. Thus, Pollack tells his biography as a departure from his family and the abandoning of his emotional ties, especially with his father's family. Yet the main figure which defined the mode of writing about his family's past seems to be the figure of multi-faceted denouncement. He wrote: "Yet I remembered my childhood as being carefree, safe and happy"⁷ (TP 60) just to note soon afterwards that that idyll was false and the time of his early childhood posed various threats caused by, e.g., the necessity to move frequently. Probably the best definition of that condition is the title of the chapter about his grandpa, i.e. "Niesamowita normalność"⁸ [The Incredible Normality]. It contains the warm recollections of the stories of the former hunter or of the loving care of the writer's grandmother as they remain forever contaminated with the later realisation that until their dying days they both remained confident national socialists for whom their post-WWII inconveniences were instances of unjust persecution. Therefore, in their own narrative, they could have placed themselves in the position of the victims while denying knowledge of their own crimes.

Pollack discussed the problem of his family's sins to the fullest in the book titled *Der Tote im Bunker. Bericht über meinen Vater*⁹ [Death in Bunker: The Story About My Father], devoted to Gerhard Bast, who was murdered in 1947 at the Austrian-Italian border. The SS officer attempted to flee a trial which he would have faced in Austria for his many war crimes. In this example of the literature of reckoning, the author reconstructed his family's story based not on memory – as it was either shattered or blocked – but, rather, on various archived documents; he was forced to seek out reliable information in these as his relatives avoided difficult topics.

⁶ Vide K. Bielas, *Tropiciel złych historii. Rozmowa z Martinem Pollackiem*, Wołowiec 2018.

⁷ M. Pollack, *Topografia pamięci*, transl. K. Niedenthal, Wołowiec 2017, p. 60. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

⁸ He referred to the title of a collection of essays regarding Austrian Literature, i.e. W.G. Sebald, *Unheimliche Heimat*, Frankfurt am Main 2003.

⁹ M. Pollack, *Śmierć w bunkrze. Opowieść o moim ojcu*, transl. A. Kopacki, Wołowiec 2006.

An interesting mode of indirect learning about one's family – one's father in this case – came in the form of the encounters and interviews by Pollack the reporter. In the reportage titled *Ścigający i ścigany. Dalsze życie numeru SS 107 136* [The Hunter and the Hunted: Later Fortunes of Number SS 107 136], he presented Rolf-Heinz Höppner, an SS officer accused by Julian Leszczyński of playing a key role in designing mass killing of Jews. When the reporter met the SS man, he began reflecting about his own father: "Maybe today this is what my father would have looked like if he was alive. Maybe. Their stories were so similar."¹⁰ He also quoted a question by his friend who suggested that the conversation could be "an ersatz encounter with father."¹¹ Thus, the reckoning with the past of his dead father became a broader attempt at settling the score with the suppressed unofficial history of the entire society which had had to apply complex processes of suppressing its recent history.

Another example came from the introduction to the *Topografie der Erinnerung* [A Topography of Memory] collection. Owing to the popularity of *Der Tote im Bunker*, Pollack was able to talk to a witness of the exhumations of the bodies of hostages shot by his father's order in Radziejowice in 1944. That meeting became the starting point for a double reflection: on the recollections of a witness, a teenage altar boy during the 1945 exhumation, who kept silent about those events for seventy years; and, most of all, on the fake recollections of the writer's family who, for many years, considered themselves the victims, not the perpetrators of the crimes. That short text about the meeting with the witness concludes with a rather complex reflection on the responsibility of private family memory. Pollack started with his recollections on the breaking off of his relations with his father's family, and he discussed the filling of the white gaps in his biography, but he ended up with an important discussion of the complicated (lack of) dialogue between generations:

Sitting opposite him I wondered what it would have been like if grandma and uncle suddenly started telling us everything. (...) I think I would rather not hear their recollections. Not from those years. There were many issues in our family which, even when they were alive, I considered as wrong. Despicable. Evil. All those years I was afraid that I might learn too much; I preferred not to ask about anything and leave many understatements.

Today, I am cross with myself for doing so as no one should allow themselves to be driven by such reasons, no one can shut their eyes and cover their ears trying to avoid those recollections whenever they are confronted with them. And certainly not when that applies to the recollections of the perpetrators, even if they are our loved ones.¹²

This statement revealed the basic problem of Pollack's essays. It is not simply the knowledge of Nazi past, nor is it some inherited guilt for the

¹⁰ M. Pollack, *Dlaczego rozstrzelali Stanisławów*, transl. A. Kopacki, Wołowiec 2009, p. 23.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 24.

¹² M. Pollack, *Topografie pamięci...*, p. 15.

crimes of his ancestors or the society. Another tension moves to the foreground, i.e. the tension between the will to gain knowledge and the will to remain ignorant. The former one transitioned into the ethical imperative to remember about the perpetrators and their victims, one that is as intense as the strength with which knowledge about family or collective crimes have been suppressed and passed over in silence for decades; as intensive as the will to remain ignorant or the effort not to learn anything new in order to contain the crimes within the set of suppressed low-key gossip and topics which should not be raised.

Space

Therefore, Pollack's family story was marked by an obligation to expose to the greatest possible extent the political aspects of family life, in particular the stories of his father and grandfather, who were active in the Nazi movement. That will to acquire the broadest possible knowledge on war activities and attitudes of his relatives was expanded to include other issues. However, the writer did not intend to track other similar stories or expose the forgotten biographies of Austrian war criminals. Instead, he focused on space, on the uncovering of mass graves, many of which are located in Central and Eastern Europe.

In order to describe those spaces with hidden graves, Pollack created the notion of "contaminated landscapes", which he defined as follows:

These are landscapes which were the locations of mass killings which were, however, perpetrated covertly, away from other people, often in utmost secrecy. They were in a place where after a massacre the killers did everything to cover their tracks. Inconvenient witnesses were taken care of, the pits into which corpses were tossed were filled with soil, levelled, and in many cases sowed with grass and carefully planted over with trees and bushes to enable the mass graves to disappear. Those places are hidden carefully. (SK, p. 20)

Some examples of such mass graves include Babi Yar, Katyń, and Ponary; they have started to function as symbols of many other places where similar events had taken place. Yet the writer did not focus on these well-known places which have entered collective memory as well as the politics of memory of nation states. Those already uncovered contaminated landscapes have often received a status similar to World War One cemeteries (vide SK, p. 15), which Pollack also mentioned – a kind of cities of the dead (vide SK, p. 17), in many cases looked after and referenced during state celebrations for many years. Those spaces – excluded from everyday activities – seem to be the destination of Pollack's essays, a model of commemorating collective death which defines a special *nomos* of contaminated lands, a law which excludes them from regular usage and reserves them for various mourning ceremonies, e.g. in the form of state celebrations and – in recent years – also for historical tourism, which is particularly concerned with, *inter alia*, the locations of grand battles.

Yet specific stories do not apply to the best-known locations of mass killings or the very process of killing. The writer closely examined the area where thousands of corpses had been hidden, and he even mentioned “landscapes conducive of crimes” (SK, pp. 56–58), i.e. locations where nature overgrows, quickly levelling the dug-up terrain.

The very fact of hiding and concealing graves in everyday regular space drew Pollack’s attention. The story does not centre around already uncovered places but, rather, it is founded on the possibility or an intuition that somewhere else, possibly quite close, such locations of crimes might also exist. One example of such an obsession with contamination is the story about a fork which the writer dug up in his backyard. That piece of cutlery included the SS symbol, a fact which in itself can constitute a starting point for discussing the secrets hidden in the writer’s space. In the calm normal surroundings, a crime may be hidden – incredible, filled with terror, yet forgotten and suppressed.

Pollack compared the search for locations of mass killings to the work of archaeologists (SK, p. 52) spotting sites for possible digs based on a careful analysis of the terrain. A similar effort should be made in the case of contaminated (at least potentially) landscapes, i.e. first, one needs to identify possible locations where mass crimes might have been committed and bodies might have been hidden; only then can one conduct studies and exhumations. Pollack’s drive requires him to uncover such places. He declared: “We need to do everything to tear unknown victims from mass graves in contaminated landscapes and from oblivion, and to restore their names, faces and stories” (SK, p. 43). As was the case with his family’s Nazi past, also here there exists the tension between banned memory (and often forced suppression) and attempts of some recollective compensation – as if the ban on remembering demanded some excessive commemoration, which should never be forgotten as is the case with other dead, about whom new generations gradually forget. That memory against the perpetrators appears to be without limits, be it temporal or personal, and it is rather supposed to touch the space of a crime for ever, just like Babi Yar will be for ever marked by the stigma of history (SK, p. 23). Referring to Karl Schlögel’s book titled *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit*¹³ [We Read Time in Space], Pollack even wrote about a map of contaminated landscapes on which the known places of mass crimes would be marked. Please note that this would entail the establishing of a new territorialisation of Central Europe, which would make it dependent on the events from many decades back.

Inhabiting contaminated landscapes

Archaeological or cartographic studies are supposed to uncover and maintain the contamination. Considering the fact that “[c]ontaminated landscapes are everywhere” (SK, p. 30), the contamination would cover the entire

¹³ K. Schlögel, *W przestrzeni czas czytamy. O historii cywilizacji i geopolityce*, transl. I. Drozdowska, Ł. Musiał, Poznań 2009.

space, turning it into a huge cemetery. Pollack's goal is to ensure memory which will maintain contamination; which will prevent the contaminated space from being brought back to life. Such an ethical imperative is motivated by the intention to counter the actions of the perpetrators whose goal was to conceal and mask their crimes so that they can become forgotten. And the places were supposed to grow over and level in order to one day continue to function as regular environs, a regular landscape¹⁴. Allowing the locations of crimes to fall victim to amnesia (SK, p. 103) would mean that the perpetrators won (SK, p. 103).

There appears another perspective – one of a major group of people interested in contaminated landscapes, i.e. the inhabitants of the areas where mass killings took place. These are people who during the Second World War performed various functions: from witnesses forced to keep silent, to participants, helpers, and the perpetrators of the crimes. After the war, contaminated landscapes often became the sites of amateur digs where, among the corpses, people tried to find valuable items, and the fact of the existence of an "Eldorado" (SK, p. 96), i.e. a gold mine at the site of a crime, also usually becomes ousted from the official memory¹⁵.

Pollack often asked about how one lives in contaminated landscapes, "how such events impact people who live here. How do they react to the fact that under the field where their cattle grazes and in the forest from which they get their wood for building their houses or for keeping warm there is a mass grave?" (SK, p. 69). And he continued: "Do we see such a landscape, a location where despite that we live (we have to live) – because that is our land, those are our houses, our fields – after discovering a mass grave the same way we once used to?" (SK, p. 70). These questions open a somewhat different problem area, which Pollack did not attempt to discuss, i.e. the question of how one can bring contaminated landscapes – which, mind you, are everywhere – back to life. The examples which Pollack analysed indicate how difficult, probably impossible, the process of cleaning contaminated landscapes is; landscapes which always carry the threat that they might become something like Rechnitz, a town in Austria where towards the end of the Second World War guests to an aristocratic reception in the castle killed approximately two hundred Hungarian Jews; after the war, no one to date has been able to identify the specific location of their mass grave. Today, according to Pollack, Rechnitz is "a condemnable example of being an accessory to the crime and of an obstinate denial" (SK, p. 35)¹⁶. In this case, ethical judgement does not apply to past crimes, or even the memory of them, but, rather, to the attitudes of the inhabitants who, for various reasons, have not been able to complete the expected rituals of guilt and mourning. And for

¹⁴ In order to learn more about the problems of the 'normalisation' of various un-places after the Holocaust, vide the *Inne przestrzenie, inne miejsca* book, in particular its part titled "Ślady (nie)obecności". Vide *Inne przestrzenie, inne miejsca. Mapy i terytoria*, ed. D. Czaja, Wołowiec 2013.

¹⁵ Pollack referred to the book: J.T. Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*, Oxford 2012.

¹⁶ Pollack discussed Rechnitz in more detail in *Topografie der Erinnerung* (pp. 83-93). Vide also: M. Muskała, *Między Placem Bohaterów a Rechnitz. Austriackie rozliczenia*, Kraków 2016.

that reason, Rechnitz is somewhat twice as contaminated: once due to the mass killing and, secondly, due to the terrible symbolism which turned the town into a sign of that which is condemnable. How could the inhabitants react to such a symbolisation of the place of their everyday lives? Clearly, they will develop various defensive reactions to protect their good name and the good name of their space.

Another case which Pollack mentioned applied to Oświęcim and his conversation with an owner of an ice-cream parlour, whom the writer asked:

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What is it like to live a town which has this name? He became irritated. He could not stand it anymore, all he was hearing was Auschwitz this, Auschwitz that... He only wanted to sell ice cream, in Oświęcim, in Auschwitz (...) He was proud of his products (...) and there was nothing he could do about the fact that seventy years ago such things happened there. He lived in Oświęcim, he had to earn a living there, support his family (...) nothing else mattered for him. (SK, pp. 103-104)

That scene was supposed to document the indifference of the local community to the contaminated landscapes, yet it actually indicated something quite different. Pollack came from the outside – as a descendant of Austrian Nazis – to ask Poles around how it was to be living in a place where Jews had been murdered.

In another instance, the writer quoted a question by a Ukrainian: "How are we supposed to live with all those dead people underneath our pastures and fields?" (SK, s. 91) Bear in mind that the intention behind this question was not only to uncover contaminated landscapes and to commemorate them, but also to turn those spaces into places for living; to do something so that they can stop being contaminated fragments swelling around with a toxic mixture of remembrance and forgetting. Pollack's project came close to this problem, but it stopped at the imperative of memory, which is supposed to maintain the contamination, not expunge it.

Conclusion

Martin Pollack's essays draw their moral strength from the rhetoric of exposing and denouncement. The combination of discussions about his own family, the history of Austria's complicity in the Nazi genocide, and his reflections on contaminated images creates a strong argumentative interrelation, the central figure of which is a child's unawareness and ignorance, which the author gradually overcame by learning about the views and actions of his loved ones. Pollack transferred this construct of denouncement onto space; hence the obsession that even his nearest surroundings, e.g. his background, may prove contaminated, just as his father – whom he barely knew – and his beloved grandpa were. The 'normality' of the landscape which he used to perceive was a mere product of his childhood naivety. However, the transfer of his family's framework onto space leads to an obsession of expecting incredible and criminal things everywhere. The space

of Central Europe offers many examples of such stigma, e.g. the Slovenian Gottschee, which in Pollack's grandpa's stories "was a synonym of simple life in accord with nature, without tension or ethnic conflicts" (SK, p. 41), while after the Second World War it became the site of a mass grave.

Remembering the victims and marking mass graves are the two main goals of Pollack's essays. Yet the fact of uncovering the contamination of a landscape does not result in a simple introduction of a piece of information onto a map. It mainly entails an interference with the space where many people were once killed, but where today there are people living; people who often have little to do with those past events. Therefore, contaminated landscapes cannot commemorate past crimes as much as they contaminate and destroy the current lives of people living there. This is why the act of uncovering the contamination of landscapes should lead to cleaning them and making them favourable for future life. This could be the positive outcome of writing: not so much the memory of some terrible past, but, rather, making a space favourable for living a regular everyday life.

Unfortunately, this is not Pollack's aim. It is visible e.g. in the quoted conversation with the owner of the café in Oświęcim, whom the writer kept asking about how he could continue to do business in such a place. A whole town cannot be reduced to a monument of the Holocaust; it is now also a regular place of living. Pollack displayed a similar attitude towards his Austrian neighbours, whom he tried to remind of long-forgotten sins. Of course, such gestures match the long tradition of the works by Thomas Bernhard or Elfriede Jelinek, and it would be difficult to challenge their moral purpose¹⁷. One might, however, debate their effectiveness, i.e. do they truly incline inhabitants to try and tackle their difficult past? Or maybe they only consolidate them in their opposition to discussing the historical events? Therefore, is the fact of exposing these contaminated landscapes a sufficient strategy? Perhaps it should be supplemented with a system of commemorating contaminated landscapes by thinking of how to restore them for usage. Life continues in the bloodlands, it must continue. The question, then, for humanists is about what can be done for this life to be free from the stigma and not haunted by various past spectres.

Timothy Snyder suggested an alternative metaphor for areas located slightly more to the east¹⁸. The title *Bloodlands* metaphorises genocide spaces as places where the blood of millions of victims was spilled, yet the lands remain almost entirely outside the researcher's focus. However, the metaphor of contamination entails a different perspective: while the fact of spilling blood belongs to the past, contamination persists, it is present now and it is going to remain here, it is supposed to remain for the future. This excellent metaphor – which enables one to grasp the current problems with contaminated space – requires to be complemented with another metaphor, e.g. that of Bernhard's *Auslöschung*, namely one about expunging, a gesture of annihilation in which the act of overcoming guilt requires one to also abandon

¹⁷ Vide K. Franczak, *Kalający własne gniazdo. Artyści i obrachunek z przeszłością*, Kraków 2013.

¹⁸ T. Snyder, *Skrwawione ziemie: Europa między Hitlerem a Stalinem*, transl. B. Pietrzyk, Warsaw 2011. Pollack also referred to Snyder (vide SK, p. 55).

their heritage, their family history. Yet another option for the 'decontamination' of landscapes comes in the form of the ideas presented by Ewa Domańska in *Nekros*, in which the author tried to accept the presence and the decomposition of corpses, which are not supposed to negatively stigmatise the space of living but, rather, be included in the rhythm of nature¹⁹.

In reference to the ethical dimension of Martin Pollack's essays, Katarzyna Szalewska mentioned that it is the ethics of "un-membering", the restitution of meaning and the reanimation of memory²⁰. Ethics does, however, establish a law in this case, the *nomos* of the contaminated lands, which is supposed to stigmatise them with death even more. Nonetheless, the purpose of studying contaminated landscapes could be to try and regain those lands and suspend their incredible spectral influence. Instead of memory – entangled in a web of complicated relations with the perpetrator-devised forgetting of the crimes – a much more neutral knowledge might emerge; knowledge that at those locations crimes had been committed, but that they do not have to mark or stigmatise the entire area anymore.

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¹⁹ E. Domańska, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała*, Warsaw 2017.

²⁰ K. Szalewska, *Przyroda i stygmat historii – o 'Skażonych krajobrazach' Martina Pollacka*, [in:] *Poetyki ekocydzu. Historia, natura, konflikt*, eds. A. Ubertowska, D. Korczyńska-Partyka, E. Kuliś, Warsaw 2019, p. 134.

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SUMMARY

The article presents an analysis of the essayistic knowledge about genocide. For this purpose, the author used works by Martin Pollack. Further, the article indicates the intertwining of two threads in Pollack's prose. The first one is the history of his family, recollections about Nazi relatives, and the dissonance which formed inside him regarding his family's past. The other one is the study of space understood as uncovering its "contamination", the sinister past which has marked the specific portion of the landscape. The aim of the article is to check whether it is possible to decontaminate, i.e. expunge that contamination from these landscapes in order to make them once again locations which foster life rather than are mere empty cemeteries.

Keywords

genocide, essay, "contaminated landscape", 'place once again favourable for life'

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Svetlana Slapšak's Feminist Essay: A Polygraph of Contemporary Culture

Contemporary discussion on the essay. Introductory remarks

The discussion on the changing and modifying role of the essay seems a major issue in the contemporary humanities. The purpose is not only to review and once more analyse the paths of the evolution of the essay as a genre, but, most of all, to reconsider/refresh – and certainly to update and enrich – the thinking about the essay from today's methodological perspective, as well as to examine its new modified contemporary instances. The genre has caused researchers many problems as the phenomenon has successfully avoided any definition or precise specifications¹, yet this elusiveness of its form and its ability to produce various adaptations and permutations testifies to its intellectual appeal and resilience. Even the global attempt at

¹ I am referring to the rich and exceptionally interesting literature regarding the essay. Cf. W. Hilsbecher, *Esej o eseju*, [in:] id., *Tragizm, absurd i paradoks. Eseje*, selection and introduction by S. Lichański, transl. S. Bałut, Warsaw 1972; M. Н. Эпштейн, ПАРАДОКСЫ НОВИЗНЫ. О литературном развитии ХІХ-ХХ веков, Москва 1988 (especially chapters: Эссеизм как явление культуры, Эссеизация литературы и философи, Эссе и миф, Эссема и метафора); *The Politics of the Essay. Feminist Perspectives*, eds. R.E. Boetcher Joers, E. Mittman, Bloomington 1993; M.P. Markowski, Czy możliwa jest poetyka eseju?, [in:] *Poetyka bez granic: Z Dziejów Form Artystycznych w Literaturze Polskiej*, eds. W. Bolecki, W. Tomasik, Warsaw 1995, pp. 109-119; K. Chmielewska, Jak możliwa jest poetyka (eseju)?, "Teksty Drugie" 2001, issue 3-4, pp. 134-138; R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, Kraków 2006; R. Sendyka, *Od kultury „ja” do kultury „siebie”. O zwołtych formach w projektach tożsamościowych*, Kraków 2015.

discussing it and developing a huge English project which produced the monumental compendium titled *Encyclopedia of the Essay*², edited by Tracy Chevalier – though providing many interesting outcomes and gathering an impressive material – still in many respects leaves readers craving for more. It was especially the case with minor literatures, e.g. Serbian (or other post-Yugoslav) literature, whose none of the female or male representatives was included in the encyclopaedia despite the fact that the area produces interesting phenomena. I obviously believe that one should recognise the multi-perspective interdisciplinary description of the genre and its strong organisation, as well as the discussion of its distant and more recent histories. However, even such an all-encompassing attempt at grasping the essay within the global scale, despite excellent entries prepared by outstanding specialists from various countries as well as the volume's impressive size (2191 pages in the 2006 digital edition), did not lead to developing a common method of analysis of the phenomenon, or even a definition of the essay. Additionally, it was published in 1997, i.e. nearly twenty-five years ago; in all this time the essay has progressed into an interesting direction, particularly in the countries which formed on the remains of Yugoslavia.

I would like to propose a discussion on the modern essay which is developing in the Serbian culture, with special consideration of a variant which I would refer to as the feminist essay. This is how I term essays with emancipation and feminist themes, which have already developed a certain tradition in the Serbian culture³. They have surely had major impact on the conceptual formation of the women's movement in Serbia, particularly in the first half of the 20th century, and they reached excellence at the turn of the 21st century. They have also gradually influenced the change in women's awareness, supported the intellectual formations of their community, strengthened a special literary culture, and between that which is personal and that which is relational they have co-created a broader community of thinking and acting, charting a narrational map of various problems, thus promoting a critical analysis of tradition. The genre is currently a special kind of a polygraph which identifies and predicts changes occurring in a culture, and there were quite a few of those after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the war of 1991-1995. In recent history, it has also fulfilled the role of a tool for creating an analytical and methodological platform, and it has been a means of rapid anthropological and cultural analysis, and a form of transfer of social or philosophical ideas.

In the 1990s, the essayistic works by many female authors in the region entered a very important new stage. It was a stage of rebirth and of a transformation of the essay itself, which in many respects was exceptionally dynamic, and which offered inspiration for independent thinking and evaluations of

² *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, ed. T. Chevalier, London-Chicago 1997.

³ I have devoted several last years to studying this phenomenon, and I discussed tradition and the contemporary times in more detail in *Mistrzynie myślenia. Serbski esej feministyczny (XIX-XXI wiek)*, which was published in the autumn of 2019 by Adam Mickiewicz University Press in Poznań. I devoted a considerable portion of the book to Svetlana Slapšak. I based this article herein on that particular research and fragments of the book.

the situation. The necessity to find oneself intellectually and institutionally in the new situation after the Yugoslav Wars and the breakup of Yugoslavia – as well as in the phase of creating new identity narratives and redefining the existing ones – certainly fostered the wandering attitude (e.g. emigration or seeking refuge, since inconvenient male writers and female writers/essayists who openly criticised the realities of the newly-established states were forced to leave their countries) and a reflection recreated in the 'nomadic' genre, i.e. the essay. This is because, as Tatjana Rosić wrote, the essay at the turn of the 21st century has the qualities of a genre which is, in a sense, nomadic, since, according to its genological nature, it constantly wanders between topics, problems, and ideas. Its unstable and variable structure seems the perfect medium for a constant transforming of fluid identity. It also matches the experience of an outcast from own country, from own culture (surely from its main course), and, partly, also from the language. Since the nature of the essay consists of its ability to enter into close relations with historic moments (today even with the situation of redefining or dismantling the markers of a civilisation), during the breakup of Yugoslavia it became, as Rosić argued, a convenient genre for redefining the outcast situation and for reflecting on the phenomenon of migration and the condition of migrants owing to the fact that within it there are intertwined memory and forgetting, melancholy and euphoria, ideology and aesthetics. It became a genre which at the end of the 20th century in Yugoslavia defined the limits of the zone of Otherness/Difference – especially regarding the excluded and the marginalised, which – in the situation of war that entailed the process of repatriarchalisation, also applied to women. For those reasons, in my opinion, at the turn of the 21st century the essay (re)gained its due dignity as a genre, and since the feminist essay has not previously had a clearly defined or stable position in literature, the female authors, marginalised, were even more entitled to engage in such writing with great passion. This has supported the development of a new discourse in opposition to the official ideology promoted by the authorities. This kind of essay has also become a part of the strategy of resistance to the repressive and nationalistic regime, enabling (post)Yugoslav female intellectuals to seek alternatives and create a mental 'diagnostic apparatus'.

A major factor in the development of the feminist essay in the 1990s was, as Judita Šalgo (1941-1996) argued in 1994, the compactness, fragmentariness, and the ease of packing within its framework fragments of own life and experience, i.e. that which has constituted the immanent feature of this form since its beginnings:

Life can be stored the longest in classical genres, in reliable narrative poems and novels, constructed out of a natural literary material, yet it can be packed the quickest and with most ease into the essay, **that universal and portable form** [emphasis – M. K.], which in this century of war-time escapes and interplanetary relocations could prove extremely important.⁴

⁴ J. Šalgo, *Četiri fantazije na temu: esej*, [in:] eadem, *Jednokratni eseji*, ed. V. Pavković, Belgrade 2000, p. 114. Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations in English were translated from their Polish versions, which had been translated into Polish by Magdalena Koch.

Svetlana Slapšak's engaged essays

Undoubtedly, Svetlana Slapšak (born in 1948) is one of the most important – if not the most important – figures of contemporary feminist essay written in Serbian⁵. For the past three decades, she has exerted an immense influence on the shape of both the essay and the feminist thought developing in the states of former Yugoslavia. In the 1990s, Slapšak has assumed – somewhat predicting the concept of the new humanities – that thinking and writing is an active operation (*writing as acting*), which she often mentioned in interviews⁶ and texts⁷. For that reason, she has long referred to her essays as **textual interventions** that are supposed to produce a change of everyday life. Therefore, she believes in the causative nature of the essay and she has practised the essay in line with the thought which Ryszard Nycz referred to as “culture in action” or “participation culture”, indicating a tendency of an action-focused model of culture, which is supposed to lead to practical outcomes, changes within the domain of worldview attitudes, mentality, sensitivity, identity, and experience – both individuals and communities actively participating in the projects being fulfilled⁸.

This would mean that the writing of essays in the spirit of feminism or from the point of view of gender has become for her an element of criticism and contestation, a gesture implementing the assumptions of “engaged humanities which undertake analytical interventions in the fields of social mentality, memory, and cultural identity”⁹. It is a result of “distrust and opposition to existing conventions”¹⁰, and it accumulates the power to object not only to the existing literary and cultural field, but also to the socio-political one. The essay as a form of expression became for her the embodiment of engaged humanities, meaning that Slapšak practises “the humanities which are practical, performative, active – the humanities of action”¹¹, which cannot be reduced to pure contemplation of the world but, rather, has the ambition of changing it or influencing the changes occurring in it. The contemporary formula of the feminist essay fulfils this task very well.

On top of that, the feminist-anthropological perspective proves a major feature of Slapšak's texts. One could say that her essayistic activities are to a large extent based on her notion of personal causativeness – which some

⁵ However, I must admit that other contemporary Serbian female essayists (Judita Šalgo, Žarana Papić, Jasmina Lukić, Ljiljana Đurđić, Radmila Lazić, Nada Popović Perišić, Biljana Dođinović, Dubravka Đurić, Tatjana Rosić) or Croatian female essayists (Dubravka Ugrešić, Slavenka Drakulić, Rada Iveković, Andrea Zlatar) – to mention only the major ones – deserve to be discussed in separate studies or even a stand-alone monograph.

⁶ *Линија испод које се не може ићи*, Разговор са Светланом Слапшак водиле Биљана Дођиновић и Ана Коларић, „Књижевност: часопис за студије књижевности, рода и културе”, 6/2016. <http://www.knjizenstvo.rs/magazine.php>

⁷ Cf. S. Slapšak, *Žene, Jugoslavija, antikomunistička narkoza i novi kolonijalizam: mape, putevi, izlazi*, “Poznańskie Studia Sławistyczne” 2013, issue 5, pp. 249–263.

⁸ R. Nycz, *Kultura jako czasownik. Sondowanie nowej humanistyki*, Warsaw 2017, p. 63.

⁹ Ibid., p. 163.

¹⁰ E. Domańska, *Historia egzystencjalna. Krytyczne studium narratywizmu i humanistyki zaangażowanej*, Warsaw 2012, p. 157.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 151.

might find naive – and on the ethics of responsibility and activism. Particularly after the war in the 1990s, which brought about the breakup of federal Yugoslavia, i.e. in a time of redefining the reality and various reckonings, the fact of practising a responsible essay from the position of personal experience while considering women as people became a key issue for the authoress. Her critical polemic expressed in her essays resembled the mode of developing the citizenry reflection. In 2007, she wrote:

The deconstruction of the post-war culture requires **not only an anthropological analysis** but also a **polemic**. (...) There are no more grand fronts nor minimalistic requirements which everyone would have to accept; nor is there a collective false majority-based **energy of the necessary opposition**. No one is simply “ours” anymore, nor am I “we”. It is high time to establish the criteria of **severe criticism** to have a focussed view.¹² (emphasis – M. K.)

Through essays, Slapšak focused and personalised her view. She spoke based on personal experience, her own knowledge, and the feminist views she had. When she wrote about Slapšak and other female authors, Tatjana Rosić aptly noted that the feminist essay at the turn of the 21st century became in the Serbian culture a diagnostic genre and a comprehensive political undertaking which triggered the thinking about the future of post-Yugoslav narrative¹³. Through the prism of self-referential analytical and textual practices, this form opposes the community of silence; it has become a tool for the feminist criticism of the phenomenon of repatriarchalisation (backlash), which – since the war – nationalistic right-wing groups have tried to implement in the national states forming anew on the remains of Yugoslavia. Slapšak wrote about the return of the masculinisation of public space during the war and after it, and about the re-exclusion of women from anything which was not reproduction or feeding the nation. Therefore, her version of the essay tried to deconstruct the collective ideology of the ‘national community’, and she provided feminist readings of ‘nationality’, ‘nation’, and ‘memory’ (or, rather, of the processes of controlled amnesia, intentional forgetting or ousting inconvenient topics and forging the past). For individual representatives of civic individualism, it was the essay that became a privileged genre, the best medium for articulating the critical and polemic feminist vision of the post-war world. It became a major personal trace being left in the culture. There is, as Rosić stressed, another side to the phenomenon. As the author states, “Nonetheless, there is still apprehension about feminism as a minority movement which produces «minority» knowledge, which is marginalised, and which will never have the same status as the hegemonic narrations of a «universal» nature”¹⁴.

¹² S. Slapšak, *Uvod*, [in:] eadem, *Mala crna haljina. Eseji o antropologiji i feminizmu*, transl. from Slovenian J. Petrović, Belgrade 2007, p. 10.

¹³ T. Rosić, *Feministički eseji u srpskoj književnosti i raspad Jugoslavije*, “Književna istorija” 2015, vol. XLVII, issue 157, p. 244.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 241.

Svetlana Slapšak's voice became that clear and leading voice of personal opposition not only in Serbia, but also throughout the region. For Slapšak, the ethics of feminism has often been more important than the mere aesthetic factor. A distinct feature of her language was the feminist reading of the nation and war-time experience as an experience of sexes juxtaposed with the corrupt Balkan system of "brotherhood at rule following the tribal/totalitarian framework"¹⁵. The essay became for her a medium through which she changed the political discourse of "brotherhood and unity" to an alternative discourse of "sisterhood and diversity". Thus, Slapšak turned the essay into a significant methodological instrument of literary criticism of pro-active cultural reflection.

In fact, since the 1990s Slapšak's essays have not been monolithic – they underwent an evolution under the influence of the authoress' new personal circumstances. On the one hand, I am referring to her fluctuations within the line from academic theoretical reflection (*vita contemplativa*) to social practice and activism (*vita activa*). On the other, then, to the issue triggered by the former one – from reflection on the current affairs associated with the 1990s wars, all the way to the post-war cultural anthropology trying to describe the mechanisms of culture from the position of an active female intellectual who tried to translate the former (Yugoslav, pre-war) culture to its new form (post-Yugoslav post-war situation), with all the changes brought about by the wars of 1991-1995. After decades of methodological studies in anthropology, philosophy (including classical), and sociology and feminism, for Svetlana Slapšak a theory must mainly be proven in action and trigger the nerve of activism and causativeness in order not to become petrified. Therefore, for years she has tried to find a method for transitioning from analysing the current political imagined world to a new articulation, and to create her own narrative-problem map of the post-Yugoslav feminism.

It is exactly the essay of the interventional character that became the proper genre for Svetlana Slapšak's activities, a trademark of intellectual thinking and diagnosing the social situation, including the contemporary situation of women. The writer has created in the post-Yugoslav region – i.e. not only in Serbia or Slovenia, but also in Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where her texts are published and read – a model of bold feminism, using nothing but the essay itself. In it, Slapšak successfully combines her expert theoretical knowledge and analytical critical mind with literary practice and engaged socio-political activism. Through the practice of the essay, she seeks a new language for the contemporary feminism and new form(ula)s for reading various phenomena, and, as a result, she still carries the postulate of the second wave of feminism formulated by Kate Millet, namely that "the personal is (still) political". Most of all, her writings reflect the influence of *La French Theory*, since already in the 1970s within the field of her intellectual impact there developed the Serbian (and, more broadly, Yugoslav) theoretical thought¹⁶. Such is

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 245.

¹⁶ Ewa Domańska wrote about the influence of *La French Theory* on the development of engaged humanities in Europe and the USA. Cf. E. Domańska, *Teoria jako praktyka interwencji*, [in:] eadem, *Historia egzystencjalna...*, pp. 150-155.

the theoretical foundation of her essays, including the feminist ones. She indicated that women always lose as a whole when nationalists and their elites gain power. In many of her texts, she broadly diagnosed the phenomena of xenophobia and homophobia, framing them within the contexts of the repatriarchalisation of the society and the reactivation of nationalist politics in the newly formed national states. In this context, she diagnosed the position of women and described the changes through the prism of their experiences. She also examined the post-war (since 1995) democracy, to which she referred to as 'salival' (from the Latin *saliva*, meaning the same as 'saliva' in English), as it was used exclusively to vilify (by the figurative spitting on them) the Other (including women, the feminist movement, or the movements of other minorities). She strongly opposed the post-war processes of 'deculpabilisation' (from the English word 'culpable') of the Serbian culture, i.e. the politics of 'forgetting' and the suppression of own crimes committed during the recent war. During the war and a dozen or so years after it, the essay has mainly become a **tool of liability** in the post-Yugoslav context. It formed in the aftermath of a severe and tumultuous polemic with the mainstream. Slapšak sided with the civic resistance movement. In her hands, the feminist essay has become a special form of opposition, a critical practice which uncovers the roots of hegemonic patriarchy. Her essay is a mature genre, the best tool for expressing the feminist critical and poetological vision of the world. Slapšak has applied the category of sex onto cultural phenomena. In doing that, she professed the philosophy of wartime and post-war everydayness, one that is focused on its regular signs¹⁷.

Thus, she has fought for establishing new literary, academic, and intellectual criteria in the post-war cultures of Serbia and the region. One of the characteristic features of her essays is the creation of new terms which she usually derives from ancient Greek or Latin, as one could expect of a classical philologist (I have already mentioned the 'salival' culture or 'deculpabilisation'). This also translates into a refreshing of the form and role of the essay, and into new proposals for its existence, which is also expressed in the linguistic and terminological inventiveness. She branded some of her essays as *chronospores* ('chronospore': from the Greek *chronos* meaning 'time' and *spore* meaning 'seed'). Those essayistic and at the same time metaphorical short commentaries on the reality – peculiar "time seed" essays – mainly

¹⁷ In Poland, in her excellent and now classic essays, Jolanta Brach-Czaina wrote somewhat differently, i.e. in a philosophical and not anthropological manner, about the hustle and bustle and everydayness. Cf. J. Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*, Warsaw 2018. This collection of essays was first published in 1992 (Wydawnictwo PIW), and then in 1998 (Wydawnictwo eFKA). It became a major literary occurrence, being referred to – among others – as a cult book and "the bible of feminism" (due to its emphasis on the everyday roles of women). In a similar style, with an emphasis on the philosophy of existence, the authoress wrote another book which also became a cult item. Cf. J. Brach-Czaina, *Błony umysłu*, Warsaw 2003. Here, she made an additional matrilinear author's gesture: she signed it as "daughter of Irena, granddaughter of Bronisława, great-granddaughter of Ludwika", thus opposing the phenomenon of structural amnesia (the fact of descent on the distaff side is carefully concealed in our civilisational practice, sentencing inter-generational bonds between women to be forgotten; women bear the names of their fathers and husbands). Cf. J. A. Barnes, *A Structural Amnesia*, [in:] idem., *Models and Interpretations. Selected Essays*, Cambridge 1947.

assume present-day-related significance. Yet, according to the author herself, they can also develop their inherent potential, which can become active in another time after a period of their existence in the dormant form; then the essay will be able to disturb the existing reality. In other words, she sees the causative power of the essay also for possible future diagnoses.

In her essays, she tries to combine feminism which is "politically radical and theoretically refined at the same time"¹⁸. Yet, her activism is also fuelled by her deep academic consideration and reflection, saturation with experiences and deliberation on the issue of sex and gender and the tracing of the abuses of patriarchy. This should not be surprising to anyone as I am discussing the output of an authoress who is a familiar figure in the regional (both Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav) context and in the international context (both European and American) alike. She was born in Belgrade and at the local university she acquired all the academic degrees and titles: from a master's degree, through a doctorate, to becoming a professor. She is a specialist in classical philology, cultural anthropology, and women's and gender studies. In 1972-1988, she was a faculty member at the Institute of Literature and Art (*Institut za književnost i umetnost*) in Belgrade. She was fired due to political turbulence and accusations. Since 1991, she has been living and working in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where she emigrated with her husband Božidar Slapšak, a Slovenian professor of ethnology. As a professor, she successfully – and with a theoretically-driven enthusiasm – developed in Slovenia studies of the anthropology of ancient worlds, gender studies, and Balkan studies at the highly appreciated *Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis* (ISH), a post-graduate faculty of the humanities in Ljubljana (since 1997), a doctoral school of which she was the dean (*dekanesa*) for a decade (2003-2013), where many significant doctoral dissertations were developed, including some under her direct supervision. She was a lecturer at the University of Ljubljana, where at the Department of Slavistics she taught courses in Serbian and Croatian literatures (1985-1992) as well as she ran a 'Balkan women' course (1995-2012) in a sociology-of-culture programme. She retired in 2014, yet she is still creative and intellectually active, still writing books and essays. She was the editor-in-chief of the *ProFemina* journal, published in Belgrade, which throughout its existence (1994-2011) had a huge impact on the feminist community in the region. In 2009-2013, she was the manager of the Serbian Cultural Centre Danilo Kiš in Ljubljana. She is the author of several dozen books: a dozen or so academic volumes and essay collections, two dramas, three novels, and numerous translations from ancient Latin and Greek, as well as from modern Greek, English, French, and Slovenian. She has recently published: *Leon i Leonina* (2014), *Ravnoteža* (2016) – for which she received the *Zlatni suncokret* ['Golden Sunflower'] award and the Peace Prize of the women's section of Slovenian PEN-Club – and *Škola za delikatne ljubavnike* (2018). One immediately notices the level of the knowledge and self-awareness of the intellectual, the theoretical knowledge of the professor,

¹⁸ J. Bednarek, *Linie kobiecości. Jak różnica płciowa przekształciła literaturę i filozofię?*, Warsaw 2015, p. 167.

and the fresh pen of the writer. The combination of all these abilities in the essay produces a completely new quality.

This is precisely what I am most interested in, i.e. her essay collections, including those with various awards, in particular those in which the sub-genre of the feminist essay developed, i.e. *Mala crna haljina. Eseji o antropologiji i feminizmu* (2007)¹⁹, *Ženske ikone XX veka* (2001)²⁰, *Ženske ikone antičkog sveta* (2006)²¹, *Antička miturgija: žene* (2013), and – albeit to a lesser extent – *Hronospore II. Eseji i komentari* (2010) and *Muške ikone antičkog sveta* (2018). I would like to focus on a discussion of two strategies of Svetlana Slapšak's feminist essay: the interventional and polemic strategy on the one hand, and the academic strategy – which has developed the anthropological essay associated with the mythology of everydayness (modern and ancient) – on the other.

Essayistic chronospores or the Little Black Dress

I shall begin with the authoress' intervention essays, a good example of which is the already mentioned *Mala crna haljina* (*Little Black Dress*). The book was published in Serbian only in 2007, but it was first written in 1993 in Slovenian after the author had emigrated and that version was the basis for the Serbian translation (which, in fact, was published in Austria during the Yugoslav Wars). Therefore, it includes texts which were chronologically older, indicating the author's essayistic approach in the final decade of the 20th century. Even though the Serbian edition was reduced in size considerably, the seed essays of the yesteryear which were included in the collection were still sufficiently subversive. They openly indicated the disgrace and corruption of the Serbian establishment which was close to the authorities, the complicity of intellectuals in inciting the war (already by the end of the 1980s), the shameful lives of some of them during the war as the "classics of Serbian nationalism" (according to Slapšak, those included leading writers and intellectuals involved in the ideology, e.g. Dobrica Čosić, Antonije Isaković, Milorad Pavić, Vidosav Stefanović, Predrag Palavestra, and more)²², as well as – after the war in the newly established national states – the glaring deficit of ethical capital among the representatives of the so-called political elite of the authorities. The uncompromising nature of this collection of essays also resulted from the fact that the authoress was interested, as she admitted in the "Introduction", in **women and pacifists**, i.e. two groups which – even though treated as minorities in the authorities' discourse – were in terms of their numbers a majority in the country, and yet their voice did not resonate in the public space. Through her essays, she also opposed the diktat of post-war Serbian democracy which she defined as 'salival', focused on vilifying its opponents and discrediting the Other

¹⁹ S. Slapšak, *Mala crna haljina. Eseji o antropologiji i feminizmu...* The book was first published in 1993 in Slovenian: S. Slapšak, *Mala crna obleka*, Ljubljana 1993.

²⁰ S. Slapšak, *Ženske ikone XX veka*, Belgrade 2001.

²¹ S. Slapšak, *Ženske ikone antičkog sveta*, Belgrade 2006.

²² S. Slapšak, *Mala crna haljina...*, pp. 9-11.

(including women/feminists). The personal dimension of this book is best expressed by the maxim "I write so that I can remember". For Slapšak, the essay became not only a tool of liability for her own vision of reality and for her reflection, but also – and mainly – a function of memory and a Barthesian method of the tradition of reading of mutually conflicted texts of everydayness. As she argued in one of her essays, "In fact, I cannot accept yet another attempt at pushing a critical voice (my voice) under the carpet only because it cannot be subjugated to either of the existing groups"²³.

Mala crna haljina, translated into Serbian, appeared as a book published by the Women's Studies Centre (*Centar za ženske studije*) in Belgrade, i.e. by a centre of major importance for feminist reflection, as it was there that a new communicational and educational network was being developed, and Slapšak's voice was its major element. The very title of the collection, which doubled as the title of its opening essay, is telling. It constitutes a model of Svetlana Slapšak's essays.

First of all, central focus and reflection is placed on the symbolic attribute of femininity and fashion, the refined yet practical "short black dress" (*la petite robe noire*). The author treated it as "the most symbolic, provocative, socially most subversive element of women's clothing"²⁴. The first text includes the trademark features of Slapšak's poetics as her feminist essay was written in the spirit of anthropological everydayness: she started with an everyday female detail, a practical garment for every occasion; she shortly outlined the differences between male and female perceptions of the 'little black dress' (LBD); from universal symbolism and history (as a Mediterranean additional to European fashion – the influence of Spanish and French traditions), she transitions from detail and her own experience (moment of purchase, the distinctive time of 1990, i.e. still before the war, and the purchase was made in the company of her friend, almost her peer Dubravka Ugrešić, also a well-known essayist) towards a broader anti-war context of the 1990s and the 'Women in Black' pacifist movement²⁵.

The indicated attribute of femininity carries ambiguous coding, since symbolically it occupies a position between death (funeral clothing) and seduction (an all-purpose modest yet elegant evening dress for every occasion). In addition, it evokes fear, respect, and desire in men, conveying an immediate and clear social message from women's perspective. A female supporter of LBD tries to avoid being conspicuous and resort to modest minimalism on the one hand; however, on the other hand, she does not reject the seductive

²³ Ibid., p. 128.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁵ 'Women in Black' (*Nashim BeShahor* in Hebrew) is an international women's movement which was originally established in 1988 in Israel during the first intifada. At that time, women in Jerusalem met every Friday, dressed all black, which was to indicate their mourning of the victims on both sides of the conflict. The movement later spread to other countries and it inspired feminist and peace movements around the world. It was particularly active during the Yugoslav Wars of 1991-1995 (the Belgrade *Žene u crnom* group – established on 9 October, 1991 – has existed ever since) and it carried the banners of anti-war, anti-military, anti-nationalist, anti-sexist, and anti-patriarchal slogans. Members of the movement oppose all forms of discrimination (based on sex, race, sexuality, or religion). See: <http://zeneucrnom.org/index.php> and womeninblack.org.

quality which the piece of garment carries (a knee-long dress, fitted, and sometimes low-cut). The expanded semiotics of LBD refers to its history, i.e. to its symbolism as a strong expressive feminine sign within the public space.

In the book, most of the essays discuss the feminist movement and the women's perspective within the optics of the nationalist discourse. Her own voice, with which the author tried to co-create an alternative space of culture, also resonates in the text titled *Feministički Rašomon* (*Feministic Rashōmon*²⁶), which discusses the domination of the male voice within public space, the complex history of feminism around the world, the past and recent errors, stumbles, and external prejudice in this regard, as well as the contradictions within feminist movements themselves, and the need to combine pacifism and feminism, and to create communicational networks between women. The authoress devoted several texts in the collection to outstanding though prematurely deceased much inconsolable fellow female writers: Biljana Jovanović (*Biljana Jovanović (1953-1996)*)²⁷ and Žarana Papić, a sociology professor, a feminist activist and essayist (*Nepripadnost, rod, svojstvo, soj: o Žarani Papić*)²⁸. She also reflected upon – and admired – the Italian journalist Oriana Falacci (1929-2006) in the essay *Oriana Falaci: punto e basta!*²⁹. Thus, action and thinking, writing and reading are all linked in Slapšak's works.

The difference of women's experience translates into existential and cultural capital introduced to the essay. The gender perspective allowed Slapšak and her readers to indicate various points of view and, at least this way, provoke polemics with the "holders of discourse". It is a tool useful in the feminist re-appropriation of discourses. It introduces a counter-discourse which constitutes an act of alternative communication and dialogue with the nationalistic framework of the Serbian culture; it demystifies the main discourse, which legitimised war and was openly anti-feminist and misogynous. Slapšak's feminist essay is anti-systemic; it opposes the trivialisation and falsification of history and tradition; it dismantles the myths of androcentric universal union; it demands that women be treated within the space of culture equally to men. Her critical analysis of tradition in the spirit of feminism stands against the existing ideology and prevents the feminist voice from being subdued.

Icons and mythurgies in Svetlana Slapšak's feminist essays

Another extremely interesting group of feminist essays – probably even more interesting that the former one considering the continuing applicability of the message – consists of essays collected in three books: *Zenske*

²⁶ S. Slapšak, *Mala crna haljina...*, pp. 63-69. In this instance, Svetlana Slapšak referred to the title of the famous 1950 film by Akira Kurosawa, titled *Rashōmon*, in which the same stories of violence and crime are perceived by each eye witness or participant in a completely different way: no one knows who the culprit and the victim are. Each party tries to vindicate themselves and incriminate others so that it is not possible to know for sure which of the accounts is true. Slapšak updated Kurosawa's construct and strategy to match the contemporary situation of the formation of the feminist discourse.

²⁷ S. Slapšak, *Mala crna haljina...*, pp. 57-61.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 203-205.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 121-126.

ikone XX veka (2001), Ženske ikone antičkog sveta (2006), and Antička miturgija: žene (2013). The value of these three titles and their intellectual significance is best indicated by the fact that all three were published as the prestigious and known for high factual standards Biblioteka XX vek (Library of the 20th Century, since 1971) editions³⁰. Within the already mentioned author-text constellation, the thinker is represented extremely well as six of her essay collections have been published in the series: apart from the above-mentioned three, to which I shall return in a moment, there were also collections of anthropological essays, e.g. *Leteći pilav. Antropološki eseji o hrani* (2014), *Kupusara. Ogled iz istorijske antropologije hrane i seksualnosti* (2016), and *Muške ikone antičkog sveta* (2018). I shall not discuss the last three books here – interesting and recommendable as they are – as they do not (fully) fit into the category of the feminist essay.

The first two books which discussed the notion of the icon stirred particular interest. In her initial remarks, the author stressed that she used the ancient Greek word *eikōn* (εἰκών), which means both an image and a representation, content and description, a notion itself and its chain of associations. She avoided the first meaning of the icon as an East Christian religious painting, and instead referred in both her works to semiotic references discussing icons as signs based on major elements of the secular sphere of everyday life and model-building matters and figures which are role models or manifestations of meaning. In both books, an icon as a concentration of reference is the keyword. Since, however, the author used the term “female icons”, it became clear that she intended for a (re)creation or extraction of the elements of the culture associated with the broadly understood notion of *femina*, and the crystallisation through essays of the cultural history of women presented in the form of short several-page-long texts centred around the titular notion. The alphabet is the principle which structured the material of all three of the mentioned books. It is understandable considering the fact that thus organised individual figures, notions, and phenomena acquire a neutral non-hierarchic character; a list based on one’s own selection of notions. Thus, there formed a special lexicon, an abecedarius of issues important to women and feminism. The arbitrariness of the organisation does not indicate any authorial preferences as to importance (by introducing order, an alphabetic approach somewhat seduces one with its ‘objectivisation’), which is beneficial

³⁰ In it, there are published academic books and essay collections by both domestic Serbian (or regional) authors and foreign authors discussing a broad range of anthropological issues. The purpose of the edition was to enable Serbian readers to become familiar with the recent thoughts from the modern world as well as with the latest authors. Authors whose books were published in this intellectual series include, e.g., Clifford Geertz, Roland Barthes, Edward Said, Claude Levi Strauss, Mary Douglas, Mikael Herzfeld, Vladimir Propp, Maria Todorova, Arjun Appadurai, Aleida Assmann, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, to mention only the major figures. As for regional authors (from the states of the so-called former Yugoslavia), the series included works by its founder and head editor Ivan Čolović, an outstanding intellectual and Romanist scholar, and by other great minds, e.g. Božidar Jezernik, Žarana Papić, Mitja Velikonja, Dubravka Stojanović, Ranko Bugarski, Predrag Piper, Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin, Miljenko Jergović, Muharem Bazdulj, and more. Poland was also represented in this circle by the books by Roch Sulima, Krzysztof Czyżewski, Andrzej Mencwel, and the Polish-Albanian anthropologist Rigels Halili.

to readers as they do not follow other people's tastes and they can read essays in any non-linear order without losing anything of the original intent. At the same time, the essay as a form automatically presumes the subjectivity in the selection of topics and in the approach to them. All three books have a somewhat enumerative character; they constitute lists of discussed issues which, if necessary, could be later complemented (even independently by readers) without harming the entire concept.

The first of the books, i.e. *Ženske ikone XX veka* [Female Icons of the 20th Century], has been composed by the essayist of model-building persons, figures, and notions which seemed to her more or less representative of the 20th century as they created the cultural paradigms of femininity. It consists of sixty essays which can be divided into several categories. One of these consists of model-building icons on the global scale, and the starting point is an autobiographical essay as it mentions actual people - e.g. Agatha Christie - and female writers whose names are usually associated with the development of the principles of feminism: Virginia Woolf, Gertruda Stein, Margarite Duras, and Rebecca West, or Angela Davis who fought for the rights of African Americans. There are also actors who were icons of sex and femininity, e.g. Brigitte Bardot, Marlena Dietrich, Anna Magnani, Mellina Mercuri, Jeanne Moreau, as well as a Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. There is Maria Skłodowska-Curie, a scientist and the biggest - according to Slapšak - intellectual icon of equality between the sexes. There is Taslima Nasrin, a Bengali feminist and activist of the women's movement. There is Valentina Tereshkova, the first female astronaut. There is Juliette Greco, a singer and a muse of existentialists. And there is Wilma Rudolph, a black sportswoman. There also appear categories of women who represent attractive and more or less desirable qualities, e.g. *Ballerina, Nurse, Diva, Feminist, Princess, Vamp, 1920s female film character*; or professions, e.g. *Model, Journalist, Secretary, Worker, Partisan, Muse*; or local ethnicity (*Balkan woman, Romani woman*). In the essays, there also occurs the iconisation of everyday items associated with femininity, e.g. underwear, flowers, a hat, a swimsuit, legs, perfume, trousers, a cigarette, needlework, a sewing machine, and a scales. Additionally, the categories of female relationality within the public and private spheres are described: woman and ideology (*Žena i ideologija*), woman with a vacuum (*Žena sa usisivacem*), woman with a veiled face (*Žena pod velom*), and a female driver (*Volan*). The author offers an array of possible readings and interpretations of these categories, thus creating a series of historical and anthropological references to femininity; she weaves a web of references which become useful in mapping the 20th-century feminism.

Slapšak applied a very similar device of the iconisation of female figures in the second book, i.e. *Ženske ikone antičkog sveta* (2006) [Female Icons of the Antiquity]. This time, she used ancient Greco-Latin mythology and once again focused on reading it from the feminist position. The reading of past myths is accompanied by contemporary interpretations, updates of those, and a conviction of the inexhaustible freshness and the re-emerging (also manipulated) application of myths. For this purpose, the author developed a collection of seventy-seven mythical figures: from Aphrodite, Alcmene,

and Arachne; through Danaid, Aegina, Europa, Flora and Fauna, Hera, Iphigenia, Cassandra, and Cybele; to Medea, Nymphs, Pandora, Penelope, Rhodopis, Theano, and Vergina. She was interested in two areas: firstly, the narrative core of myth and, secondly, the intertwining of symbolic meanings and their contemporary updating as well as the paradigmatic nature of female icons of antiquity and their narrative application within the current gender studies. At the same time, as an added value, these devices offer a refreshed modified form of the anthropological essay, which enriches the contemporary discourse with a distinctly defined feminist perspective. The author was mainly interested in the principles of including women in mythology within the framework of past patriarchal procedures, the modes of creating a feminine cult, the very process of mythicisation and modification of myths, and their endless capacity and the ability to utilise them under any historical circumstances and conditions. At the same time, the author argued critically against abusing and manipulating myths, and the processes of iconisation of myths that she uncovered became for her the outcome of the processes of the everyday work of cultural memory. In each of the essays about particular mythical female figures, she posed questions regarding their contemporary functions, the memory of them, and the adjustment of meanings to the contemporary needs. Yet, she did that in a style made possible by the very utilisation of the essay as a genre: with the learned knowledge of a professor of classical philology combined with the musings by a contemporary feminist armed with theoretical knowledge. However, the author enriched these essays with a pinch of personal irony and distance. She utilised mental shortcuts and fragments while maintaining the whole in a light and literary tone.

The continuation – or, rather, a conceptual expansion and supplement – of the book on female icons of antiquity came in the form of her next work, titled *Antička miturgija: žene* [Ancient Mythurgy: Women]. Even its introduction bears a symptomatic title which combines both publications, namely “Uvod. Miturgija ili druga knjiga ženskih ikona antičkog sveta” (“Introduction. Mythurgy or part two of female icons of the antiquity”). This time, the essayist no longer referred to icons of culture, nor did she interpret them. She focused on the narrative paradigm: the mechanism of constructing stories about female figures in Greek myths. Thus, she introduced the notion of mythurgy, which she understood as the contemporarily applicable mode of discussing myths and as the analysis of the methods of reading mythology. One can sense in it a clever blending of the words *myth* and *liturgy*, signifying a ritual, a mystery, a kind of an initiation. Then, in the combination with the titular object (“mythurgy: women”), the book discusses narratives which enable the mythurgisation of women. Mythurgy, according to the definition offered by the author in the introduction, refers to the methods of approaching myths, to stories about stories, narratives about narratives, which, however, include a series of contradictions:

Mythurgy as a term emerges from the approach to myth (...) it talks about telling a story (...) a myth is a story defined by a context and the mode of

narration and listening/reading, yet it does not explain, normalise, or legitimise anything, it does not direct or inform anyone, it only **seduces and leads to repeating a narration, as well as to thinking**.³¹ (emphasis – M. K.)

This time she was also interested in mythology as a kind of linguistic strategy and a method of narration, as well as the result of extensive knowledge about language. But mainly it enabled her to reach “the instances when myths were abused in the recent history of the region where I was born”³², presumably referring to Serbia/Yugoslavia, possibly more broadly to the Balkans. In this book, when compared to the previous ones, one will find in the introduction more self-reflective remarks explaining the evolution of Slapšak's own approach to the anthropology of antiquity. She mentioned her two major authority figures who led her to that mode of thinking. These were Roland Barthes with his concept of everyday myths associated with the production of myths in the past, and Jean-Pierre Vernant³³, who focused on the figure of the mythographer, a professional, the person who invents, compiles, records, and sells myths³⁴. Svetlana Slapšak was interested in the mechanism of stereotyping of myths and how it is abused in the creation of the discourse of the authorities. Slapšak refers to the mythographer/professional using Vernant's referent of the “technician” of myths („*tehničar mita*”); the historian was essential to her as a figure indicating that the act of telling myths does not entail any rituals, cult, faith, or philosophy, i.e. higher spheres of thinking, but that it involves the method of opposing any higher authority instead. Thus, mythical narratives through the process of mythicisation are reclaimed for the broader social context. In the second part of the title and throughout her book, Slapšak clearly referred, though, to female figures in ancient mythurgy; to the methods of introducing them into mythology and their later usage. The feminist reflection showing the process of utilising notions within this concept was of fundamental importance to her. She was interested, just as Barthes was, in interventions into myths, into the development of myths, the communicational control over myths maintained by authorities; not their “eternal”, psychological, or anthropological universality etched in the Western line of thinking. For this reason, too, Svetlana Slapšak is, in my opinion, a symptomatic and unique figure for the Serbian feminist essay.

In order to illustrate the author's method, allow me to discuss the first of the book's fifty-five essays, titled *Amazonke: mit o muškim strahovima* (Amazons: Myth about male fears), as its model of narrative about ancient mythurgy of women is similar to that applied in the remaining essays. At the very beginning, the author indicated the thesis on the foundations of the Amazon

³¹ S. Slapšak, *Uvod: Miturgija ili druga knjiga ženskih ikona antičkog sveta*, [in:] id., *Antička miturgija: žene*, Belgrade 2013, p. 10.

³² Ibid., p. 11.

³³ Slapšak referred to the series of lectures by Jean-Pierre Vernant, which he delivered in 1996 in Ljubljana at the Institutum Studiorum Humanistatis as part of the Anthropology of Ancient Worlds programme, which she had co-created.

³⁴ Cf. S. Slapšak, *Uvod: Miturgija ili druga knjiga ženskih ikona antičkog sveta*, [in:] id., *Antička miturgija: žene...*, p. 9.

myth: warrior women who generate male fear. She discussed the ancient mode of thinking of Greeks about women as a “different race” (*druga rasa*), positioned between livestock and barbarians (aliens), which constituted the cause of the chaos in the otherwise well-organised male world. The myth about the dangerous women appeared within the Greek imagined map of the world – as Slapšak interpreted it further on – for political reasons: the ideological paradigm of scaring men with the independence of women and a struggle between the sexes. The essayist saw the ideological plain of the myth in the efforts to maintain the thought of the need to tame the ‘wild’ female nature, and she saw its manipulative strength in the lack of a narrative whole of the myth as it was only based on the typical fragments of visualisation (women without the right breast, androphobic, using men solely for the purposes of fertilisation or as slaves, and raising daughters to become warriors). Slapšak referenced historically subsequent mechanisms expanding the framework of the myth: in Western cultures the designation of Amazon was applied to independent women who found in the myth traces of the European culture of matriarchy. Nonetheless, in the 19th century, an ‘Amazon’ referred only to an elegant woman of the gentlefolk, who practised horse-riding or who accompanied men in hunting. Slapšak disavowed the colonisation power of the myth and indicated how it was ‘exported’ even outside Europe: the fact of naming the longest river in the world the Amazon (presumably stressing its wilderness, natural primitiveness, inaccessibility, and lack of civilisation) – and the region in South America as Amazon – are clear symptoms of colonisation, i.e. imposing the trademarks of the European culture on other cultures around the world, thus imposing own evaluative paradigms. Another stage of the mythurgisation of Amazons is the contemporary shifting of the myth towards a dialogue between matriarchy (its utopia) and patriarchy (a concrete concept)³⁵.

According to the authoress, the narrative is necessary today only to show the process of the “struggle of the sexes” and that the times of women have passed and the time for men’s rule has come. Based on this description in the five-page-long essay, one can infer the rules of mythurgisation: the starting point is a myth or its variants (ancient Greek and/or ancient Roman), next the historical general discussion tracing the presence of the myth in arts (literature, theatre, painting, sculpture, film), and then its various permutations and cultural adaptations in time and (geo)space. Thus, the myth is first recalled, then it is updated to include the feminist interpretation, and new meanings are assigned to it.

What was important to the Serbian essayist, as she herself declared in her texts, was the therapeutic communication with past myths of everyday life, updating their meanings, and the modes of establishing links with other cultures, but also the ethical basis of this dialogue with the past and, most importantly, the discovery of the paradigm of myth creation; the transition

³⁵ It is regretful that the author did not include one more, the most recent meaning – a medical one – of Amazons, i.e. women suffering from breast cancer who had to undergo mastectomy, which is removal of a breast. Also missing from the narrative are ‘Amazons Clubs’ established by those women.

outside the autism of national mythology and mythology as the source of collective identity, and their communicational intentions. Svetlana Slapšak used this inspiration to develop her own essayistic discussion; she crystallised her views through such texts; she performed a deep revision of culture; and she used the practice of her own "Yugoslav feminism", as she herself called it, in order to discuss mythological stories from the women's perspective in general. Thus, the author opposed all kinds of authority, and her essay strengthened and personalised the form and style of the contemporary Serbian feminist essay, giving it a new format. Apart from a focus on knowledge and polyglotism, it offers freedom unconstrained by the modes of thinking of others. Svetlana Slapšak has created a new quality within the existing essayistic form. She thus became for her contemporaries a master of independent thinking and courage, making her polemic voice clearly heard. Her essays sparkle with brilliant observations which do not obscure her devotion to facts, and her sensitivity to women's issues goes hand in hand with the engaged and refined form. With her new and updated reading of the signs of the European culture (including its sources located in the mythology of antiquity), Slapšak created an interesting narrative, intentionally opening several 'Pandora's boxes'. First of all, the anatomy of the paradigm of iconisation and mythurgisation enables one to uncover the mechanisms of manipulating myths in the history of one's country. Secondly, the re-thinking of ancient myths – associated with figures of femininity – has, in Slapšak's case, as I have already mentioned, therapeutic significance: she uses the material of ancient myths to diagnose which contemporary challenges the space of mythurgy faces in relation to the cultural role of women. Thirdly, she indicates the power of communication/dialogue with both former myths and their new updated meanings emerging within the line continuation-rupturing-defining new paths for myths, often contrary to their general understandings (e.g. the myths about Xanthippe³⁶ or Aspasia³⁷). Most of all, the three books discussing icons and the mythurgy of femininity indicate the potential and power of the feminist perspective and a re-vision of the figures of women who exist in culture. The contemporary essay became for the authoress the best form of alternative and independent thinking, a genre of intellectual intervention, thus becoming an excellent medium and example of the humanities in action.

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³⁶ S. Slapšak, *Ksantipa, ženomrzački mit*, [in:] eadem, *Antička miturgija: žene...*, pp. 133-137.

³⁷ S. Slapšak, *Aspazija, osuđena na mit*, [in:] eadem, *Antička miturgija: žene...*, pp. 39-43.

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SUMMARY

The article discusses the problem of the theory and practice of contemporary Serbian feminist essay. The text indicates how – at the turn of the 21st century – the essay participated in the reading of the nationalist culture of fear during the breakup of Yugoslavia, how it became the tool for creating an analytical and methodological platform and a means of quick anthropological and cultural diagnoses, as well as a form of transfer of social or philosophical notions. This new strategy of the essay was illustrated through the examples of books by Svetlana Slapšak, a leading figure of the (sub)genre in the Serbian culture, a professor of cultural anthropology, classical philologist, and feminist critic: *Mala crna haljina. Eseji o antropologiji i feminizmu* (1993/2007), *Little Black Dress. Essays on Anthropology and Feminism*), *Ženske ikone XX veka* (2001, *Female Icons of the 20th Century*), *Ženske ikone antičkog sveta* (2006,

Female Icons of the Antiquity), Antička miturgija: žene (2013, *Antique Mythurgy: Women*). It becomes clear that one of the trends of the contemporary essay in the Serbian and post-Yugoslav cultures is the application of the genre in the spirit of modern engaged humanities and textual intervention.

Keywords

Serbian contemporary essay, feminism, textual interventions, power of objection, Svetlana Slapšak

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Admiration in Place of Imitation: Four Medallions by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński¹

Towards genology, i.e. escaping it

In Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's output one might identify a small set of texts devoted to painters. Their genological status is uncertain. It is significant (and it hampers any classification at the same time) that the writer included these works in his journal². Similarly to his short stories, they too are part of a greater whole, namely *Dziennik pisany nocą* [The Noonday Cemetery and Other Stories], a kind of Herling-Grudziński's *opus magnum*. The author's decision stemmed from, as I see it, the need to utilise the autobiographical interpretative key in their analysis, which can be even more surprising as the texts are not devoted to current affairs, but to past painters, their biographies and works. Those works were created in 1990-1992 and all were included in *Dziennik pisany nocą 1989-1992*. They exist in it alongside texts such as *Kieł Barabasza* [The Eyetooth of Barabbas] and *Cmentarz południa. Opowiadanie otwarте* [The Noonday Cemetery: An Open Story], which can undoubtedly be considered as short stories. In the case of the latter one, the author himself indicated the genre ('*opowiadanie otwarте*' [an open short story]) in the subtitle. However, it would be difficult to regard

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² Regarding the hybrid nature of the genre of *The Noonday Cemetery and Other Stories*, vide B. Witosz, 'Dziennik pisany nocą': Między gatunkowym a indywidualnym stylem wypowiedzi, "Język Artystyczny" 2001, vol. 11, pp. 29-46.

the texts on Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer or Ribera as short stories. So what are they?

A small genological hint was included in the title of the text on Rembrandt: *Rembrandt w miniaturze* [Rembrandt in Miniature]. In this case, a question immediately arises about what a miniature is or what kind of a miniature Herling-Grudziński was referring to. In *Słownik terminów literackich* [A Dictionary of Literary Terms], two separate entries exist: a miniature understood as a small illustration and illumination, and a poetic miniature, i.e. a small poetic work³. So what is one supposed to do with non-rhymed literary miniatures?

Herling-Grudziński began his text about Rembrandt with a discussion of the status of a text while indicating that he was not concerned with debates on a genre affiliation but, rather, with authors' intentions:

In a miniature or *in nuce*? It doesn't matter, what matters is the intention (and the desire) of the writer. I intend to miniaturise a giant, I wish to extract the core of his genius, similar to a gem with many facets, to a pearl with many shades, describe with utmost conciseness several of those as I believe that love for grand artists, just like falling in love with one person, is a feeling which demands an embarrassing economy with words. The greater the love, the fewer the words. Savour the art of your beloved, speak up when you truly have to, admire his masterpiece while in a rarely disturbed silence. (RwM, 171)⁴

Herling-Grudziński did not engage in a genological debate. He somewhat dismissed any attempts at this made by readers by posing a question and answering with a telling "Wszystko jedno" ["Whatever"]. What was more important to him was to convey silence (understood as admiration and meditation), hence the frugality with words. Therefore, the titular miniaturisation should be read as lapidarness, a kind of discreteness, but also the creation of a literary illustration, a mini-portrait of a painter, i.e. a medallion. It is no accident that all four texts that I shall focus on were included in the 1994 collection titled *Sześć medalionów i Srebrna Szkatułka* [Six Medallions and a Silver Casket]. The fourth cover page of the book reads:

In the ovals of the six title medallions, there appear the portraits of Parma and Siena – two of the numerous Italian treasure troves of wonderful works of architecture and art – and then the images of four painters: Caravaggio, the revolutionist, Rembrandt, the genius, Vermeer van Delft, the mystery

³ Vide M. Główński, *Miniatura*, and T. Kostkiewiczowa, *Miniatura poetycka*, [in:] *Słownik terminów literackich*, ed. J. Ślawiński, Wrocław–Warsaw–Kraków 1998, p. 311.

⁴ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dziennik pisany nocą 1989–1992*, Warsaw 1997, p. 104. I quote all the texts about painters from this edition referencing the quotations directly in the text and indicating an abbreviation and a page number. C – Caravaggio: światło i cień [Caravaggio: Light and Shadow], RwM – Rembrandt w miniaturze [Rembrandt in Miniature], PV – Perły Vermeera [Vermeer's Pearls], R – Ribera – Hiszpańczyk Partenopejski [Ribera: A Parthenopean Spaniard]. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

man, and Jusepe Ribera, the “master of Spanish rural realism”. The true gem of the collection is the story about a Silver Casket – an object which is beautiful and just as fascinating due to the mystery it holds.⁵

The next genealogical hint left by Herling-Grudziński, according to which texts devoted to the painters ought to be treated as medallions, proves extremely broad: it includes both a piece of information about the miniature dimensions of a work of literature and a suggestion that it offers an image, a representation of the face, a special form of portrait, valued highly by Herling-Grudziński; moreover, a medallion is also a form of commemorating people, which is why it can be treated as a kind of a diary. Finally, by defining his works as “medallions”, the writer placed clear emphasis on the significance of the biographical context.

For the sake of clarity, one should note that in the *Dzieła zebrane* [Collected Works] series edited by Włodzimierz Bolecki, the works appeared in 2017 in the *Eseje* [Essays] volume⁶. However, I would like to stress that even if those texts could theoretically be attributed with many ‘names’⁷, I believe that Herling-Grudziński’s “medallion” most comprehensively indicates their specificity and humble – very miniature-like – richness.

What seems absolutely crucial is the fact that in the titles of Herling-Grudziński’s medallions, there appear the names of painters in whom the writer was interested. I shall list these works in chronological order – *Caravaggio: światło i cień* (March 1990), *Rembrandt w miniaturze* (November 1990), *Perty Vermeera* (July 1991), *Ribera – Hiszpańczyk Partenopejski* (March 1992). What is worth emphasising is that Herling-Grudziński did not select contemporary artists; he mainly focused on the 17th-century art (though the biographies of Caravaggio and Ribera, and in the case of the former one also his artistic career, began in the second half of the 16th century). The writer often stressed that he did not find painting experiments by many modern artists appealing even though these included Cézanne, Turner, van Gogh, Modigliani or Morandi, whose works were particularly close to him. If one finds a discussion of painting in his texts, it is usually an interpretation of the art of the past centuries⁸.

All four medallions have similar structures. Herling-Grudziński focused in them on biographies and selected paintings (calling them “pearls” and, interestingly enough, he did not do so exclusively in *Perty Vermeera*), though he did not avoid remarks in which the author’s ‘T’ came to the

⁵ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Sześć medalionów i Srebrna Szkatułka*, Warsaw 1994, 4th cover page.

⁶ Vide G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dzieła zebrane*, [in:] ed. W. Bolecki, *Eseje*, vol. 10, Kraków 2017.

⁷ I am referring to a concept by Roma Sendyka, who called various traditionally established definitions of the essay with his original names. Vide R. Sendyka, *Nowoczesny esej. Studium historycznej świadomości gatunku*, Kraków 2006, pp. 15-16.

⁸ Vide ‘Cienie wielkich artystów’. *Gustaw Herling-Grudziński i dawne malarstwo europejskie*, eds. A. Stankowska, M. Śnidziewska, M. Telicki, Poznań 2013; M. Śnidziewska, *Siedemnastowieczne malarstwo holenderskie w literaturze polskiej po 1918 roku*, Toruń 2014; M. Śnidziewska, *Niekonwencjonalne portrety. ‘Madonna del Parto’ Piera della Francesca i ‘Betsabee’ Rembrandta w oczach Herlinga*, [in:] *Świadectwo – mit – tajemnica. O Gustawie Herlingu-Grudzińskim*, ed. Z. Kudelski, Warsaw 2019, pp. 275-296.

foreground. Each time he strived to find and propose an original interpretative key present in the works, as if placed in it immanently. He also utilised quotations (usually from the works of art historians or writers who discussed the painters he was interested in), which became the starting point of a small yet significant polemics; to a lesser extent, he used them to prove his theses. However, one might get the impression that Herling-Grudziński spoke not because he wished to place himself in opposition to the findings of art historians; he neither wished to dispute nor supplement their studies, but he decided to voice his opinions as he had things to say which, from his perspective, were important. He did not conceal the fact that he assumed the point of view of an amateur specialist – he formulated judgements as a creator of literature, for whom his fascination with painting was a course of endless inspiration. When interviewed by Bolecki, the writer stressed: “I do not, of course, intend to compete with people who devoted their whole lives to studying art and who know their craft well, even though their opinions are not always convincing for me,” and he added: “I am not entering, as Shakespeare said in *Hamlet*, between the blades of grand fencers, I observe art «from aside»”⁹. It seems that this viewing “from aside” was the core of Herling-Grudziński’s writing strategy. The author of *Sześć medalionów i Srebrna Szkatułka* did not consider himself a specialist in art, yet he suggested that the fact of being ‘beside’ did not necessarily mean ignorance; it was merely a different mode of contemplating painting.

In his medallions, Herling-Grudziński examined various labels which have been used to classify his favourite painters. He argued that any attempt at classifying them was reductionist and unfair. The text titled *Caravaggio: światło i cień* opens with a discussion on *naturalism* and *realism* as notions which are supposed to define the poetics of Caravaggio’s output. Herling-Grudziński approached such generalisations with exceptional care, if not distance:

If Caravaggio is supposed to appear as the originator of the house of “naturalists” and “realists”, one can with clear conscience disregard all the inclinations towards classification-based naming. He opened in the history of painting a chapter which was the opposite of all types of pigeonholing; one which is mysterious, ambiguous and offers various registers, and which transcends the canons of vision and craft available for the eye. So what if we attach to him the label of a “realist”? Is it even possible to frame the “reality” painted by Caravaggio within any pattern? (C, 104)

The writer asked about the cognitive benefit of calling Caravaggio a realist. He questioned the utility of a classification particularly when discussing an outstanding artist whose genius manifested itself in ambiguity, in transcending conventions and breaking patterns, in a fluent transition between various languages of painting. Herling-Grudziński did not, however, dispute people’s intention to classify altogether (though he discussed them with a pinch of salt):

⁹ G. Herling-Grudziński, W. Bolecki, *Rozmowy w Dragonei*, Warsaw 1997, p. 364.

The classification mania is acceptable, if absolutely necessary, when discussing an artist with a specific and distinct philosophical profile. It is too tight and even ridiculous regarding the tumultuous revolutionary changes in arts. Caravaggio was a revolutionary. Like a river in spate, he flooded the surrounding area. He broke through dividers and dams. In a sense, he himself was not in control, including as a painter, of the power and violence hidden inside him. (C, 104-105)

In the context of this discussion, I would like to examine my own inclination to classify: the attempt to specify the genological status of the four texts on Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Ribera. In drawing conclusions from thus formulated judgement, one could ask: what difference does it make if I assign these texts the labels of 'medallions', 'studies', 'miniatures' or 'essays' when what is more important is their literary power, the potential of Herling-Grudziński's imagination, and the writer's lesson in admiring painting? In fact, *Dziennik pisany nocą* itself, which includes these texts, is – to use Herling-Grudziński's words about Caravaggio – "mysterious, ambiguous, and it offers various registers, and it transcends the canons of vision and craft available for the eye". Herling-Grudziński moulded it out of texts of various genological statuses, intentionally not striving for its coherence either in terms of the topic or form. Additionally, he plays with the etymology of the word '*dziennik*' [journal], pointing out that the time of creating is other than daytime [*"pisany nocą"* means "written at night"]; thus, the titular expression includes a paradox, the significance of which can be utilised in different ways.

However, there were situations (not so rare, in fact) when Herling-Grudziński seemed to yield to organising inclinations, intentionally stressing genre affiliations in the titles of his works. I am referring to texts such as: *Inny Świat. Zapiski sowieckie* [A World Apart: The Journal of a Gulag Survivor]; *Drugie Przyjście. Opowieść średniowieczna* [The Second Coming: A Mediæval Story]; *Z biografii Diego Baldassara* [From the Biography of Diego Baldassar]; *Piętno. Ostatnie opowiadanie kołymskie* [Stigma: The Final Kolyma Story]; *Ugolone z Todi. Nekrolog filozofa* [Ugolone Da Todi: An Obituary of a Philosopher]; *Krótką spowiedź egzorcysty* [The Exorcist's Brief Confession]; *Dżuma w Neapolu. Relacja o stanie wyjątkowym* [The Plague in Naples: An Account of a State of Emergency]; *Monolog o martwej mniszce* [A Monologue About a Dead Nun]; *Cmentarz Potudnia. Opowiadanie otwarте* [The Noonday Cemetery and Other Stories]; *Zeszyt Williama Mouldinga, emeryta* [The Notebook of William Moulding, Pensioner]; *Portret wenecki* [A Venetian Portrait]; *Rosyjski niedźwiedź. Divertimento narracyjne* [A Russian Bear: A Narrative Divertimento]; *Szczyt lata. Opowieść rzymiska* [A Peak of Summer: A Roman Story]; *Madrygał żałobny* [A Madrigal of Mourning]; *Legenda o nawróconym pustelniku* [A Legend of a Converted Hermit]; *Ofiarowanie. Opowieść biblijna* [The Offering: A Biblical Story]; *Zima w zaświatach. Opowieść londyńska* [Winter in the Beyond: A London Story]; *Zielona Kopuła. Sycylijska opowieść epistolarna* [The Green Copula: A Sicilian Epistolary Story]; *Biała noc miłości. Opowieść teatralna* [A White Night of Love: A Theatre Story]; *Odlot i powrót Gołubowa. Opowieść imperialna* [Golubov's Departure and Return: An Imperial Story].

The most common subtitle further specifying the kind of text that readers are about to read is “*opowieść*” [a story] (with the accompanying epithets). A special case is *Zielona Kopuła. Sycylijska opowieść epistolarna*, which features the additional genologically loaded adjective “*epistolarna*” [epistolary], through which Herling-Grudziński stressed that this story would manifest in the form of letters. Considering the definition in *Słownik terminów literackich*, only *Biała noc miłości* could actually be referred to as a story, since Janusz Ślawiński defined a story as a “narrative prose text the length of which exceeds that of a novella or a short story but is shorter than that of a novel. The story is a genre having not clearly defined morphological assumptions; in today’s literary perception, it possesses a strictly relational nature: it is classified exclusively as an intermediate type between long and short epic forms which covers works close to either «short novels» or «long short stories»”¹⁰.

However, I believe that Herling-Grudziński was not focused on the length of a text when he defined his works as “*opowieści*” [stories], but, rather, he cared to attempt to escape any classification. Paradoxically, the special kind of categorisation was supposed to help these texts avoid a rigid genre framework. This conclusion could be drawn from the fragment of the interview by Bolecki regarding the texts *Parma* and *Siena*, which, similarly to the works about the painters, were included in *Sześć medalionów i Srebrna Szkatułka*. In it, Herling-Grudziński confessed: “I am a huge enthusiast of a book which is extremely beautiful and with which I feel related in its description of cities – that is a book by Paweł Muratow entitled *Obrazy Włoch*. He approaches Italian cities similarly to how I do, but, of course, with greater historical knowledge than mine as in his books there are several-dozen-pages-long chapters on the histories of cities. Muratow has considerable knowledge about painting, yet he does not overdo with showing it off. It is a story, not an academic study”¹¹. In that instance, he clearly contrasted a story against an academic discourse. Texts filled with facts, in which what mattered was only the knowledge of the one who writes, did not stimulate Herling-Grudziński’s imagination. He was a proponent of writing not for a tight circle of specialists, but for a wide group of recipients. Thus, the inclination of a text towards a “story” became the measure of its accessibility. This is why Herling-Grudziński’s output includes so many “stories”.

Therefore, it can be surprising that the subtitle of one of his works includes the word “*opowiadanie*” [short story]. Yet, even this seemingly firm category was intentionally opened by Herling-Grudziński in *Cmentarz Południa* [The Noonday Cemetery]. Therefore, he intentionally engaged in a play with the genological inclinations of literary scholars, and he applied evasions positioning himself rather on the side of ambiguity than of any rigid genre framework. A similar situation applied to other labels, such as “*zapiski*” [notes], “*divertimento narracyjne*” [narrative divertimento], “*madrygal*” [madrigal], “*spowiedź*” [confession], “*legenda*” [legend], “*nekrolog*” [obituary],

¹⁰ J. Ślawiński, *Opowieść*, [in:] *Słownik terminów literackich*, p. 359.

¹¹ G. Herling-Grudziński, W. Bolecki, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

“*relacja*” [account], “*z biografií*” [from biography] or “*zeszyt*” [notebook]. These designations were both specifying and enabling new options for interpretation. Thus, as I decided to choose Herling-Grudziński’s formula of “medallions”, I am not closing the discussion on the genological status of his works on old painters; on the contrary, I am intentionally leaving it opened as Herling-Grudziński’s writing “needs to remain opened. Opened (...) to all sides, depending on the sensitivity and imagination of readers”¹².

The writer’s Self, i.e. on the power of imagination

When asked by Włodzimierz Bolecki in an interview titled *Teksty o malarstwie* [Texts on Painting] about the intertwining of biographies and art in his texts devoted to Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Ribera, and the fact of including the author’s Self in the discussion, Herling-Grudziński stressed: “Among my studies, the most exemplary is the one about Ribera – upon viewing his paintings, I look at him as a co-émigré from Naples. I once said that I had come to terms with living in Naples, yet that happened thanks to that what I knew about Ribera’s life in Naples. So that is certainly an extremely personal text”¹³. The *Ribera – Hiszpańczyk Partenopejski* medallion actually begins with a presentation of Mergellina. It would not have been strange (considering that Ribera was associated with this borough of Naples) if not for the personal confession of the author which precedes the description of the borough: “Usually, for many years, my longer walks led me to the Mergellina fishing port. Since my heart attack, they became obligatory curative walks prescribed by my doctor” (R, 348). Therefore, the model nature of the text about Ribera hinged on the fact that Herling-Grudziński focused in it not exclusively on the painter’s biography and the mark his Naples fortunes had on his works, but he also developed the story along two lines: he intentionally included in the discussion a very distinct autobiographical thread, which enabled him to better understand the Spaniard’s life. This complicated relationship was deep and, in a way, bilateral as the fact of knowing about Ribera’s life helped Herling-Grudziński – after the many years of his struggles with his new place of residence – to fully accept Naples as his town. When unfolding his reflections on Ribera’s life and works, the writer was surprisingly sure of his statements. He wrote of the artist’s “*zrośnięcie*” [growing into] Naples, the inhabitants of which made him their “*przybrany syn*” [adopted son] (R, 348); he was convinced that in the painting titled *Communion of the Apostles* “Ribera knew that he was painting his final painting” (R, 352). He imagined the artist nearing his demise as he timidly ascended the ladder to finish his work, and he stressed that Ribera felt reconciled with Naples, which he chose as the place where he would die. Therefore, on the one hand, Herling-Grudziński created in his imagination consecutive key stations in the painter’s life, and, on the other, he wrote as if he knew. There is no contradiction in this as the writer was in fact offering

¹² G. Herling-Grudziński, *Cmentarz Południa. Opowiadanie otwarte*, [in:] idem., *Dziennik pisany nocą 1989-1992*, p. 287.

¹³ G. Herling-Grudziński, W. Bolecki, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

an account of his own experiences. These were autobiographical reflections of *polacco napoletano*¹⁴, which Herling-Grudziński assigned to Ribera.

Therefore, one can see that even in the case of a text devoted to another artist, Herling-Grudziński intentionally included his autobiographical Self in it. Yet it was not an expression of self-love but, rather, an attempt to learn something about himself, a kind of a literary self-analysis. In this he resembled Rembrandt, about whom he wrote that:

The sheer number of self-portraits throughout Rembrandt's life, starting with the youth one in the rimmed collar and ending with a series of three in the final five years prior to his death is not a proof of or a subconscious reflex of his egotism. An egotist painter would not have looked at himself with such cruelty as the Rembrandt smiling with a senile toothless grin, maybe not one step away from his grave, but surely having it within an eye's reach. In his self-portraits, Rembrandt intended to systematically and persistently monitor his own face as an expression of his mental changes. (RwM, 173)

In this context, no one should be surprised by the multitude of self-portraits which can be found in Herling-Grudziński's works. As the narrator of short stories, Herling-Grudziński offered readers an examination of himself – his work is filled with so many literary self-portraits that one could consider him the Rembrandt of literature, who intentionally and with exceptional awareness presented his face to the readers. Literary egotism? Certainly not. Herling-Grudziński, similarly to Rembrandt, viewed himself in a 'cruel' way, on the one hand using artistic conventions and, on the other, trying to remain honest when writing about himself. In *Dziennik pisany nocą*, he spoke overtly of leaving an author's trace in his texts. Interestingly enough, he once again used notions of "*miniatura*" [miniature] and "*autoportret*" [self-portrait] from the area of fine arts, which is significant from the point of view of this discussion.

For me, the perfect journal, a version which I consider unequalled, is the truth – yet there is no reason not to profess it. In it, there shifts, sometimes quicker, sometimes slower, sometimes in the foreground, and sometimes in the back, the "history set loose" as Jerzy Stempowski aptly defined our times. And in the left-hand lower corner, emulating some Renaissance paintings, there is a miniature and roughly sketched self-portrait of the observer and chronicler.¹⁵

¹⁴ I discussed this in more detail in the chapter titled *Conrad, Joyce i Ribera jako 'wspólnicy losu'*, [in:] M. Śniedziewska, 'Osobiste sprawy i tematy'. *Gustaw Herling-Grudziński wobec dwudziestowiecznej literatury włoskiej*, Warsaw 2019, pp. 63-71. Regarding the importance of the 'Italian autobiography' in Herling-Grudziński's short stories, vide A. Ajres, *L'autobiografia italiana nei racconti di Gustaw Herling-Grudziński*, Rome 2018. In this book, Alessandro Ajres discussed how the fact of using his own biography in his works of literature enabled Herling-Grudziński to extract a kernel of the great mystery of existence. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁵ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dziennik pisany nocą 1973-1979*, Warsaw 1995, pp. 388-389 (emphasis – M.Ś.)

The self-portrait (similarly to medallions, miniatures, and portraits) in Herling-Grudziński's works acquired the status of a notion which referred to both painting and literature. He intentionally blurred the line between these two different art forms. He did, however, stress that a self-portrait was not the central element of his work. Quite the opposite: it was a humble miniature signature and yet an exceptionally significant gesture confirming his presence. This is not surprising when the medium is a journal.

It was by no accident that Herling-Grudziński included autobiographical threads also in his discussions of painters and their works. The author's Self is most visible in the fragments in which he allowed himself to be carried away by his imagination. Even if realising that he was only guessing or making things up, he shared his observations with the readers. He thus wrote about Rembrandt: "I see him (though that is probably my purely personal view) as a painter who new sought out anything in others, who only drew from himself, who reproduced, expanded and imitated only his own visions" (RwM, 172), even if such claims were disputed in works by art historians (e.g. *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* by Kenneth Clark¹⁶, a researcher of old-time painting, whom Herling-Grudziński appreciated and quoted). In another location, in interpreting one of Rembrandt's masterpieces (and entering into a polemic with Svetlana Alpers¹⁷, who wrote about the Dutch master's theatre model), he concluded:

The magnificent *The Night Watch* is a separate chapter. The proponents of Rembrandt's "theatricality" have found various arguments in it for supporting their thesis: the armed men seem to enter the stage as if in Shakespeare's drama, the fragment of the gate visible in the background could be the scenery. Yet I think that Rembrandt painted much more than the turmoil of war, an army patrol surrounded by a crowd in a besieged town. The scene is too lively, too authentic for the pacing figures to sound the squeaking boards of a stage. (RwM, 175)

The polemic interpretation is introduced with the words: "Yet I think that Rembrandt painted much more". Once again, the readers saw Herling-Grudziński appearing only when he had something new and important to say. Then, he concluded a fragment describing a made-up scene of Rembrandt's death with the words: "It doesn't matter, it completely does not matter whether this was how Rembrandt died. This is how I imagined his death" (RwM, 180). His fascination with Rembrandt's self-portraits brought Herling-Grudziński to formulating unverifiable assumptions about the moment of the Dutch master's demise. What was important to the writer was not the historical truth but, rather, literary vision which enabled him to come closer to Rembrandt as a human who struggled with the mystery of his own face. Herling-Grudziński applied a similar rhetorical figure in the text about Caravaggio:

¹⁶ K. Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance*, London 1966.

¹⁷ S. Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market*, Chicago 1990.

On 17 February 1600 Caravaggio was most certainly in Rome. Yet only one of his biographers mentioned that he was seen quickly crossing Campo dei Fiori and "do the sign of the cross" while turning away from the stake. He did not take a knee; he only did the sign of the Cross to fend off the Evil Power.

I do not believe in that version. In my imagination I see Caravaggio sitting until the evening in a corner tavern, at the corner of the street that leads to Palazzo Farnese, his face more than angry – furious rather, motionless, turned towards the burning stake. In the evening, when Campo dei Fiori became less crowded, he rose, drank the last glass of wine in one gulp, and slightly tottering crossed the entire square to stop at the pile of smoking ash. Suddenly, a bright flame burst as if only at that moment Bruno's soul escaped for the Heaven. Caravaggio stepped back blinded by the Light of the dying stake. He stood in the Shadow and used his clenched fists to hide his face which we know from his self-portrait in Goliath's severed head. (C, 112-113)

There, too, his inclination for polemics on the one hand and the power of his imagination on the other became visible. The phrase "in my imagination" could be considered as the definition of Herling-Grudziński's literary devices as he strived to miniaturise master painters.

All four medallions include important fragments in which he recalled biographical details important from his point of view. In the text about Rembrandt, he stressed that the context of the artist's life was one of major interpretative keys enabling one to understand the series of paintings in which the Dutch master portrayed himself: "One needs to know that life not to satisfy own biographical curiosity, but to better understand Rembrandt's self-portraits" (RwM, 173). These words could be paraphrased and referred to their author: "To understand (having traced) the self-portraits scattered around Herling-Grudziński's work, one first needs to learn about his life".

In this context, one should not be surprised by the discussion regarding Vermeer, whose art – veiled in mystery – the writer wished to read by analysing the exceptionally strong bonds which connected the painter and his family town:

Among all the questions, hesitations, and doubts which I have indicated above, the most significant is, in my opinion, Vermeer's chaining to Delft; no, no, chaining suggests pressure while in this case it was more of a devotion, love for one place. I understand the temptation of sending Vermeer to Amsterdam, to visit Rembrandt; I share the desire of the imagination to see them together, next to each other, Rembrandt showing his guest *Susanna and the Elders* and Vermeer unwrapping *Girl in a Turban*, a gift for the host. The imagination's drive emboldens one even to listen on to what they are saying. Yet for the attempts to penetrate Vermeer's secret what is worth much more are his forty-three years of motionless embedding in Delft than yielding to the rushing meanders of imagination. In order to come closer to him, it is best to state at the start: he never crossed the limits of his family town. (PV, 255-256)

Yet Herling-Grudziński sought not only an answer to the question about the artist's tangled fortunes. He also tried to find a unique interpretative key which would enable him to come closer to the mystery of his art. In discussing the topic of the special use of light in Rembrandt's paintings, the writer formulated the following hypothesis: "About most of Rembrandt's paintings one could say that he painted them intentionally before dusk, when the sun was setting" (RwM, 178), yet a moment later he corrected it by stating that:

The more I think about it, closely examining Rembrandt's paintings, the more I am tempted to replace the sun's reflection with a reflection of a distant fire glow. Not, of course, to say that Rembrandt literally wrapped the visible world and its biblical or contemporary inhabitants in the glow of fires. I want to believe that like any truly grand artist he utilised his hidden very personal metaphor, in this case a metaphor surrounding us forever at the horizon of flames. (RwM, 179)

The discovery of that "hidden very personal metaphor" proved a challenge for the writer, but it was also the reason for him deciding to start writing in the first place. This creative strategy could be reproduced in its fullest with the use of the example of *Perły Vermeera*. The titular pearl – growing slowly, almost imperceptibly – became the key for uncovering the secret of both the biography (a kind of amalgamation with Delft) and Vermeer's output; in the painting discourse he reflected the notion of "frozen time". In this medallion, Herling-Grudziński overtly characterised his texts about Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Ribera: "I, not being an art historian, disregard judgements and explanations which are balanced, based on the so-called concrete premises, and in my images of selected painters I seek something completely different. What? The same thing which constitutes the basis for a short novella: a poetic core; in the case of the images of painters – the poetic cores of their art" (PV, 262).

Admiration in place of imitation. On ekphrasis

Being a painting enthusiast, Herling-Grudziński identified two notions by means of which one can describe a human being's (usually an artist's, though not always) attitude towards art. These notions are "imitation" and "admiration". He evaluated imitation (which he did not view within the categories of creative emulation) negatively, and juxtaposed it with admiration as the most desirable attitude:

I have already discussed Maria Węgierska's tomb, the figure of a woman lying on the catafalque, who has an oblong face. When I stood in front of the sculpture I cried to my wife who was at that time with me: "But this is Modigliani's face!" And I am very proud that now in relation to the one hundredth anniversary of Modigliani's birthday someone found letters by the teen-aged Modigliani who spent a few months at his relatives' in

Naples and all the time go and view the tomb of Maria Węgierska by the grand master Tino di Camaiano. So he became charmed by it.

I believe that there are two aesthetic-emotional categories in art. One is imitation, the other is admiration. There are many imitators, all they can do is copy paintings, and usually their works are of poor quality and produce little admiration. Whenever I visited Maisons-Laffitte I visited Józio Czapski and I could see his admiration, at least while he was still visiting exhibitions, because later he almost completely stopped leaving his place. His admiration was not based on the fact that he noticed in someone else's works things which he could introduce in his. He admired fragments of art which he had not previously noticed, or admired the fact that something could be painted differently. In fact, Czapski was like that, he would return home filled with admiration and it was a joy to watch a man happy in seeing beautiful paintings.¹⁸

How, then, should one understand admiration for art as defined by Herling-Grudziński? First of all, he mentioned painters who admired the works of other painters – who treated them as inspiration, a starting point for painting transformation, and a revision of own skills. Therefore, their goal was not to copy other artists' solutions, but to achieve a creative (r)evolution. Secondly, he also mentioned the admiration of a human being (not necessarily a painter, though his example was Józef Czapski) viewing a painting; a person who feels a kind of happiness when seeing beauty.

What, then, would the admiration by a writer discussing paintings in his texts be? Surely an escape from imitating them: a verbal inventory of colours or the items, figures and scenes collected in a painting. In other words, such writing which would oppose the classically considered ekphrasis, i.e. a precise literary description of a work of art, an act of creating its literary copy. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that classical ekphrasis is hard to find in Herling-Grudziński's texts. Very rarely do his texts include descriptions of works of art, and if some notes on what was painted do appear in them, they are neither detailed nor exhaustive. This is because Herling-Grudziński did not intend to provide a complete description of a painting but, rather, to show how captivated by it he was. Suffice to consider two pearls in Caravaggio's output through Herling-Grudziński's eyes:

Caravaggio followed a certain principle which we shall try to uncover later on. For now, allow pure admiration to do its work, not obscured by any other considerations, admiration when viewing two paintings: *The Rising of Lazarus* in Messina and *The Calling of St. Matthew* in the French church in Rome.

A stream of light surrounds the outstretched and still stiff body of Lazarus and the figures holding it; the relatives of the one returned to life, torn away

¹⁸ G. Herling-Grudziński, W. Bolecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 375-376.

from the clutches of death. The rest of those present move in the shadows. The contrast extracted by Caravaggio becomes a paradox: it is them, that rest, who seem to be immersed in death's darkness while Lazarus, though still dead, has never really departed from life. Caravaggio reversed the conventionality of meanings trying to say (and he did manage that in my opinion) that our divisions and differentiations are frail: Lazarus was alive and only dormant when the dead dug him up. At first, that sounds ridiculously, but one must remember to what a great extent Caravaggio's works were art which blurred excessively clear limits. In the centre of the painting, one of Lazarus' hands rises. It is a combination of light and shadow, a surprising sign from the borderline.

In *The Calling of St. Matthew*, in the shadows there is Christ pointing to (calling) an illuminated Matthew. In this painting, the role of the hand from *The Rising of Lazarus* is played by, once again in the centre, a window; matt, neither light nor dark. It is also a mysterious sign of the borderline.

I maintain my position. Caravaggio was a painter of an incessant fight between light and shadow. For him it had the same aftertaste of mystery as the elusive struggle and the mutual permeation of life and death. (C, 107-108)

This clearly indicates how important the notion of "admiration" was to the writer; he further specified it with the epithet "pure", suggesting that that which counts the most is unbiased contemplation which leaves its trace in the memory of the viewer for ever. Herling-Grudziński strived to discover the "poetic core" in Caravaggio's works, making it the guiding principle of his descriptions of the painter's works. Most of all, he wanted to indicate that Caravaggio's paintings featured a Manichean struggle, which was expressed in them through a struggle, perceived metaphorically, of two opposites: light and shadow. Was it not this struggle that Herling-Grudziński always depicted in his texts?

He stressed that in the case of admiration, it is all about the special kind of picking something which one could use in their own works. Yet is it possible to talk about such devices at the division line between two arts: literature and painting? I believe it is. In his works, Herling-Grudziński tried to transfer painting genres (such as miniature, medallion or portrait) onto the field of literature. Additionally, some characters of his short stories – e.g. the protagonist of *Błogosławiona, święta* or Sebastian from *Pietà dell'Isola* – were presented in such a way as if they were elements of a painting representation. And, finally, the literary model of describing landscapes, which occupy a special place in Herling-Grudziński's oeuvre, is extremely vivid. He discussed this overtly in *Rozmowy w Dragonei*:

I simply love my landscapes. And I could say that what Albert Camus said about them when he came to Italy as a twenty-year-old boy, that landscapes have the power to heal. I completely agree with him. When I spend my time in a landscape, such like, for example now in Dragonea,

even though I have been coming here for so many years, this landscape still has an extremely soothing effect on me. I am simply attached to this landscape. Landscapes are very important to me, they are something like my private art of painting done with words. I even feel grateful to landscapes for having such a soothing and calming effect on me. I was surprised when I found that note by Camus.¹⁹

Therefore, one could conclude that Herling-Grudziński, inspired by the landscapes presented by grand painters, became a literary landscaper, thus expressing his fascination with nature. In this context, the fact that since 1955 he lived in Italy seems rather significant. His works were a testimony to his admiration for Italian landscapes, paintings, and architecture. In his writing, he clearly avoided imitation, an act for which he reproached his fellow writer Wojciech Karpiński:

The things he writes cannot be compared to what Zbyszek Berbert writes – not to mention specialists. All in all I am a writer and I can absolutely appreciate what Zbyszek can do and what he has learnt. He has a unique talent of tracing the secrets of painting. That is surprising because he does that with an incredible sense of measure, not losing anything of his poetic potential, which is no easy feat. Allow me to offer an example of a Polish writer and critic in whose case his deep interest in technique changes into boring enumeration. I am referring to Wojciech Karpiński's book about van Gogh, *Fajka van Gogha*. That is, in my opinion, truly pointless. I am sorry to say this as he is my friend and I appreciate him highly as a writer and a critic, but this is pointless. Such enumerations could be done by Berenson and others, for example enumerating fifteen shades of different colours. That may remain afterwards in the mind of some specialist of painting who knows what all that means, who reads such studies, like a mathematician reading mathematical formulas knowing that one of those shades means something special. But absolutely nothing of that is retained in readers' minds. So I oppose such writings. Zbyszek Herbert never does that. Herbert is very frugal with the use of details and pieces of information.²⁰

Herling-Grudziński's point-blank opposition towards enumerations as a creative method could be treated as his rejection of verbal imitation. According to him, focusing on details was destructive, because then one could easily lose the essence of the whole. For similar reasons, Herling-Grudziński criticised Proust, who in his novel made Bergotte – who was viewing Vermeer's masterpiece – focus exclusively on "a little patch of yellow wall":

Let us, then, start with the town, with *View of Delft*, which Proust called "the most beautiful painting in the world." Proust also considered via Bergotte's eyes the little patch of yellow wall in the right-hand corner of the painting

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 378 (emphasis – M.Ś.)

²⁰ Ibid., p. 366.

as painted so superbly that if viewed separately it could easily be considered as a creation of "self-contained beauty." In his death-bed delirium, Bergotte kept repeating: "Patch of yellow wall." Such refinements, similar to pointing a finger at "one particular line" in a long poem or "one particular metaphor" in an huge novel, do not naturally lead to anything apart from a flaunttable "patent of expertise" so desired by their author. In the case of *View of Delft* those are even worse because they are irritating. The miracle of the city painted by Vermeer is the miracle of the whole. (PV, 256)

Therefore, one should ask about what Herling-Grudziński proposed in exchange.

View of Delft, i.e. the universe of a home town, reflected at the bottom in the surface of the water, elevated in the broad and tall frame of the sky. The panoramic richness did not prevent the author from perfecting the details, perfecting as if carefully cutting glass, yet free of any excessive pedantic touch of a thin chisel. Also the colour range is richer than usual, while Vermeer's yellow is shifted to the background by the imposing russet shade of the walls and the red of the roofs. The town viewed concurrently in reality and in a dream vision. The figures in the front, on that shore of the sandy shoal, on the other side of the canal, seem cut off from the panorama, excluded from the painting. Seemingly withered Delft yet alive deep inside, precisely as saved from a dream, fortunately not some fleeting, spectre. Underneath in the absolute and secret silence of frozen time something is happening in the dream/real town. Very slowly, in an imperceptible motion, just as a pearl grows and matures in a shell. (PV, 257-258)

Herling-Grudziński used details, yet he managed not to overwhelm readers with excessive detailing. He indicated the colours of the painting, yet his remarks did not lead to a dry enumeration of the pigments used by a given painter. However, what is the most important from his point of view is that he proposed an original literary interpretation of *View of Delft*, including it in a broader discussion of Vermeer's mythical Delft, the "frozen time", and – the metaphorically perceived – pearl. There may be something too poetic in all this, yet he did express something inexpressible: admiration for a true masterpiece.

The medallions devoted to Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Ribera are a major collection of texts within Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's entire output. Through them, he proved that he was able to write a moving text about painting while avoiding elements such as the academic tone, flaunting his knowledge, and the dangers of ekphrasis transforming too often into irksome detailed inventories of the elements of a painter's presentation. The decision to refer to these texts as medallions was equally a genealogical concept and a clever hedge, and a starting point for a discussion of the ambiguity of the very notion of a "medallion". Herling-Grudziński would not

have been himself if he had abandoned autobiographical reflections. When considering artists and their works “from aside”, he multiplied assumptions, proposed apocryphal versions of some biographical threads, and formulated bold unverifiable hypotheses – this was because he sided with a literary story, not an academic discourse. Even if without those texts the grand masters of European art would not have been forgotten, one should appreciate this particular writing effort to protect their biographies and reproduce the original admiration when viewing their painting pearls.

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SUMMARY

The medallions devoted to Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Ribera are a major collection of texts within Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's entire output. Through them, he proved that he was able to write a moving text about painting while avoiding

both the academic tone and flaunting his knowledge, as well as the dangers of ekphrasis transforming too often into irksome detailed inventories of the elements of a painter's presentation. The decision to refer to these texts as medallions was equally a genealogical concept and a clever hedge, and a starting point for a discussion on the ambiguity of the very notion of a medallion. Herling-Grudziński would not have been himself if he had abandoned autobiographical reflections. When considering artists and their works 'from aside', he multiplied assumptions, proposed apocryphal versions of some biographical threads, and formulated bold unverifiable hypotheses – this was because he sided with a literary story, not an academic discourse.

Keywords

medallion, ekphrasis, autobiography, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Ribera

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How to Rise to Texts?

On Joanna Pollakówna, an Essayist

There is a beautiful paradox in the fact that I was awarded for writing about painting; what does it mean to write about art if not a form of delight? So I was awarded for being delighted. What does it mean to analyse a painting if not a way of entering into it, its mysterious reality? So I was awarded for repeated attempts to get to know the reality created by humans longing for the supra-human dimension. What does it mean to follow processes which occur in art if not following the principles which govern the spiritual sphere? So I was awarded for looking for an order different than the order of temporary existence, which is typical of every man¹.

J. Pollakówna [a rough draft of a speech made probably on the occasion of receiving the prize of the Culture Fund]

¹ J. Pollakówna, a rough draft, Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw. Pollakówna (1939-2002), poet, historian of art, author of three books of essays on painting: *Myśląc o obrazach* (*Thinking about Paintings*), *Glina i światło* (*Clay and Light*), and *Weneckie tęsknoty* (*Venetian Longings*), published between 1994 and 2003. A selection of her drafts titled *Zapatrzenie. Myśląc o obrazach, myśląc o malarzach* (*Reverie: Thinking about Paintings, Thinking about Painters*) was published in 2012. She had written about art in an essayistic way much earlier, though. The tendency to go beyond the scientific description can be found in her PhD dissertation devoted to formists (*Formiści*, 1972), in *Tytus Czyżewski* (1972), or in *Malarstwo polskie między wojnami* (*The Polish Painting between the Wars*, 1982) as well as, or perhaps especially, in her texts on Józef Czapski, an artist particularly close to her (*Czapski*, 1993). Each of these books concerns different stages in the history of art and other stylistics: the drafts include works which, as it may seem, differ from one another more than they are similar (fervent presentations of mystical ecstasy by Francisco

Voir clair. The direction of beauty

Joanna Pollakówna preceded the collection of essays from the 1994 volume *Myśląc o obrazach* (*Thinking about Paintings*) with a quotation from *Drugie Berga* by Vladimir Nabokov: "What has been seen once may never come back to chaos". This choice is remarkably in accordance with the poetic idiom of the author of *Dysonanse* (*Dissonances*) highlighting the role of the sense which affects the shape of her writing the most². But it is special for other reasons as well. It brings to mind the family context of Pollakówna's work, namely the works of her father, Seweryn Pollak, an essayist and translator, a connoisseur of Russian literature, who had died six years before the publication of the book³. It also brings to mind their correspondence containing vivid discussions on authors from behind the Eastern border, recommendations of new books, and reflections on language. Of the utmost importance for interpreting the motto can be the fact that in 1995 Pollakówna devoted her only poem about her own act of reading precisely to a novel by Nabokov.

Czytam „Pnina” Nabokova.
Przezroczysta Rosja
rzewnych i świętych białych
emigrantów
jak zjawiskowy okręt Sindbada
Żeglarza
pływnie po trzeźwym niebie
Ameryki.
Cudowny „Pnin”.

(...)

W przypływach pamięci
nachodzących falami ostrego
widzenia
Pnin widzi swoją utraconą Rosję –
Atlantydę zalaną nieszczęściem
i krwią.
Co za piękna lektura.

I am reading Nabokov's *Pnin*
Transparent Russia
of wistful and wonderful white
emigrants
is sailing through America's sober
sky
like the phenomenal ship of Sinbad
the Sailor
Wonderful *Pnin*.

(...)

In the inflow of memory
Coming in tides of sharp vision
Pnin sees his lost Russia –
Atlantis soaked in misfortune and
blood.
What a beautiful read.

de Zurbarán and melancholic paintings by Artur Nacht-Samborski, crowded canvases of Jacopo Bassano, and minimalistic experiments of Jacek Sempoliński). The principle determining Pollakówna's choice of these rather different works of art remains a secret. It is difficult, however, to deny that there is some secret code, since reflections on different authors are treated by the poet as an opportunity to save the same values: beauty and dignity of life. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish]

² "Each poem by Joanna Pollakówna (...) confirms the fact that she was a born poet, but each of her poems also proves that not only poetry was her domain, but also fine arts". J. Drzewicki, *O tym, co widzialne i co niewidzialne* (*On What Is Visible and What Is Invisible*), "Rzeczpospolita" 2003, no. 155, p. 20.

³ Pollak highly valued the auto-translations of the author of *Lolita*, and in his theoretical works he made references to his views on translation, entering into polemics with them. Cf. S. Pollak, *Granice swobód*, "Twórczość" 1974, no. 4, p. 86.

Jak wszystko na siebie zachodzi:
 realność doświadczona,
 realność zmyślona,
 światy wyobraźni, roziskrzonej
 myśli,
 światy bólu i śmierci – wszechludz-
 kiej i swojej;
 światy słowa – wznoszące
 w powietrzu najściślej
 zręby nieogarnionej, pospólnej
 budowli.
 Wielki smutek nad życiem
 i zachwyt nad życiem.

(*Przy lekturze*)

How everything overlaps:
 reality experienced,
 reality invented,
 worlds of imagination, of sparking
 thought,
 worlds of pain and death – univer-
 sal and one's own;

worlds of words – erecting in the
 air most accurately
 frames of infinite common building.
 Great sadness over life
 And delight at life.

(*While Reading*)

The model of reception presented in the poem is interesting. First, because the person speaking comes across as someone extremely trustful towards the admired text: ready to follow it with her faith in the meaning, co-participating and co-feeling. Second, contrary to the logics of loss, her being lost in the book does not mean abandoning 'I', but, rather, it enriches the uniqueness and separateness of her own reflection.

Traces of being carried away by the novel can be found in somewhat naive exclamations (without exclamation marks), closing the two descriptive stanzas ("Wonderful *Pnin*", "What a beautiful read"). They seem to be signals of helplessness in the face of an experience which is impossible to describe and which escapes attempts to reason it. This powerlessness can be associated with the condition of a layman blinded with unknown beauty, unable to react adequately when faced with miraculousness experienced so suddenly. This can be the nature of delight itself. It makes one aware of the mysterious perfection in the face of which one's own deficiency is highlighted. It restrains from complicating description formula. It urges one to return to primary notions – not yielding to any transformations and reductions – notions which are made obvious by illumination itself, even if they had been questioned before (for reasons which one still remembers), such as truth, good, and beauty⁴.

Drawing attention to the escape from the last of these categories (and preferring loftiness) in critical and literary discourse, Marek Zaleski ponders on the non-compatibility of the contemporary language of description,

⁴ *Voir clair dans le ravissement* (or, to be precise, *voir plus clair...*), a phrase from *Swann's Way* by Marcel Proust, recalled by Jan Błoński in the title of his essay on the works of the French artist, seems to confirm that delight enables one to achieve a special standpoint, a clarity of vision. A wider context of the quoted slogan shows that a 'clear' vision of the reality is the opposite of concentrating on fleeting sensations and 'opaque words'. Cf. M. Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, Paris 1946, pp. 210-211; J. Błoński, *Widzieć jasno w zachwyceniu: szkic literacki o twórczości Prousta*, Warszawa 1965.

shaped through “avant-garde experiments” and “intellectual provocations” with authentic experiences of reception⁵.

Why am I reading aloud an old poem by Mickiewicz and I know it is beautiful? Why am I reading a new poem by Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki and I know that this poem is beautiful? Why, though, when talking about this poem am I beginning to speak a language which deceives the voice, and why do I know that my voice deceives my thoughts? (...). Delight is no longer enough, it is more interesting to investigate the reasons for our delight⁶.

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Zaleski’s observation, surprisingly true in relation to some interpretation practices, was evoked with an antithetic intention as it does not have much in common with the essay-writing discussed here. Pollakówna, a historian with an impressive workshop, a connoisseur of painting, is drawn to works of art not through the willingness to participate in the intellectual game or catalogue meanings, but because of the need to rise to the mystery, the need to answer the call of beauty. “I do not understand” and “I do not comprehend” – as strategies of being towards paintings – do not only open, but also close many of her essays.

“This abundance of the 17th-century Dutch painting! The reasons for such a magnitude of talents at different times and places of Europe are beyond comprehension (...)", as the poet begins her essay *Światło i miara* (Light and Measure)⁷. She ends *Alchemia światła* (Light Alchemy) with words: “And we will remain like that: illuminated and anxious when the power of the painter’s call through time takes our wistful delight somewhere beyond the painting into some non-localised region which is hardly possible to be sensed” (p. 149). Fascination with the work of art remains both obvious (in the certainty of feeling, a spontaneous act of giving beauty the reason for existence) and incomprehensible (as it makes one aware of the imperfection of notion categories imposed by the human kind). This paradoxical bi-direction of art reception (clear, but incomprehensible) brings to mind mystical experiences.

“(...) Rapture leaves behind also a certain strange detachment, which I shall never be able to describe” (p. 177) are the words of Saint Teresa of Ávila as quoted by Pollakówna. This experience for the mystic (she also referred to it as “ecstasy”) is a sign of being carried away by God (“The Beloved suddenly gathers the soul up (...) The divine cloud ascends to heaven, taking the soul along with it, and begins to reveal to her the heavenly wonders God has prepared for her”⁸). In the writing of Saint Teresa, the experience of delight is independent from a human being’s will: this is a divine secret to which one may respond only with meek acceptance. Ecstasy embraces

⁵ M. Zaleski, *Słowo zapomniane?*, [in:] *Dwutygodnik.com. Strona kultury*, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/360-slowo-zapomniane.html>, [accessed 1.08.2019].

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ J. Pollakówna, *Zapatrzenie*, [in:] *Zapatrzenie. Myśląc o obrazach, myśląc o malarzach*, Gdańsk 2012, p. 180. The subsequent quotations from Pollakówna’s essays, unless it is indicated otherwise, are quoted from this edition, with the page number in brackets.

⁸ Teresa of Ávila, *Księga życia*, transl. H. Kossowski, Kraków 2014, p. 269.

both the soul and the body. The significance of dealing with the Absolute and supernatural phenomena which accompany it causes fear: "And further, I confess that it threw me into great fear, very great indeed at first; for when I saw my body thus lifted up from the earth, how could I help it? Though the spirit draws it upwards after itself, and that with great sweetness, if unresisted, the senses are not lost; at least, I was so much myself as to be able to see that I was being lifted up"⁹.

Pollakówna recognises the mystical dimension of delight, which is like an outburst of spiritual reality into the human world. Fascination with the painting (including, like mystical ecstasy, agreement to her own deficiency, to "I do not know where from" and "I do not know why") brings the poet to transcendental regions, inaccessible to knowledge and senses – towards presentiment, but also, perhaps, towards the desire of truth contained in beauty¹⁰.

*

Coming back to the poem *Przy lekturze*, what delights Pollakówna in the novel by Nabokov is the property of each work of art which leads to (spiritual) synthesis in accordance with Baumgarten's aesthetics that is so close to her. It is difficult to resist the impression that reading is already preceded by the desire of the pervasive sense enabling one to feel it ("As everything overlaps"). *Pnin* (but also the mystery of any other text or painting seen 'clearly in delight') triggers a special potential of the subject experiencing delight: readiness to go beyond the reaction of the senses, awaken the intuition of the principle governing the world.

This perspective allows one to look for inspiration with modern aesthetics in the situation of reading which was evoked in the poem, with the moment of its birth or even the prenatal moment for its constitution.

The notion *aisthesis* was originally used at the turn of the 17th and 18th century – still before Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* was written – in theological debates among pietists in Halle. The topic of those discussions was the problem of communication between God and human beings or, to be more precise, the way in which God passes the revealed truth to humans and the role human senses play in this process.

[August Hermann] Francke (...) considered the category of *aisthesis* with regard to the exergies of the Biblical text. One of the methods of reading it was to grasp it considering its *analogia fidei*, i.e. reading it as a certain closed narrative, a stylistic whole, as an order which the author wanted

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Describing the painting titled *Joseph the Carpenter* by Georges de La Tour, Pollakówna notices "peculiar ambiguity, simultaneousness of worldly and eternal existence, physical and spiritual". J. Pollakówna, *Święty Józef Cieśla (Joseph the Carpenter)*, [in:] id., *Myśląc o obrazach*, Warszawa 1994, p. 25.

to convey, and at the same time accounting for its affective side, i.e. the spiritual condition of the author, which is manifested in the given order¹¹.

The synthetizing tendency, understood as looking for a code in a work of art that enables one to understand the world's mysteries, is manifested not only in the presented poem by Pollakówna, but also in her essay-writing. *Aisthesis* is connected with the aforementioned trope as it points to the fact that the sense of beauty calls for a reaction. "How can we pay off the debt of delight to paintings which attract our attention?", the poet asks on the back cover of the volume *Myśląc o obrazach*¹². A similar question appears in the poem *Wieczność* (*Eternity*): "How to rise to the texts inaccessible to the worlds?"¹³.

Nabokov's novel performs a mediating function in Pollakówna's work. It has an uncertain status. It is something more than just a pretext (for a poetic answer), yet something less than its destination. The creative reception of the text caused by its uniqueness is finally directed at itself and looking for general truths, already detached from *Pnin* and his lost Russia. This interpretational excess (not being, however, an over-interpretation) seems to be an effect of the feeling of beauty making the subject to situate towards the work of art.

Certain doubts are raised with regard to the unique kind of contact with the text and image motivated, on the one hand, by careful perusal, pursuing of the sense, and the state of the pre-understanding ("pre-feeling") of looking and experiencing 'I' on the other. Does the creative surplus in the reception, a tendency to rise above the art object itself, still fit in the scope of the interpreter's competences¹⁴? Perhaps this question should be asked in a different way: is it only such an interpretation filtered through poetic sensitivity that stands a chance of truly getting closer to the work?

¹¹ P. Kozak, *Estetyka A. G. Baumgartena jako pietystyczna lektura filozofii C. Wolffa – draft*, https://www.academia.edu/10784122/Estetyka_A.G.Baumgartena_jako_pietystyczna_lektura_filozofii_C.Wolffa, [accessed 10.08.2019]. Kozak, rehabilitating the author of *Aesthetica*, argues that: "Baumgarten was convinced that sensual knowledge exceeds the boundaries of scientific cognition and approaches the cognition of metaphysical material truth (...)".

¹² J. Pollakówna. *Myśląc o obrazach*, p. 19. The same words – about the debt that needs to be paid off, the debt incurred to beauty – are used by Błoński in his introduction to an essay on Proust. Cf. J. Błoński, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹³ J. Pollakówna, *Wieczność*, [in:] *Wiersze zebrane*, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

¹⁴ This question touches upon problems undertaken in the field of, for instance, the theory of literature over the last few decades, summarised in the question: what content extracted during the perusal is on the part of the work and what content is on the part of the recipient? Reflections on this topic, including issues centred around literary communication, have been undertaken by researchers representing different methodological schools and are alive till now. It is worth mentioning here, for instance, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jean-Paul Sartre as well as, in Poland, Edward Balcerzan, Michał Głowiński, Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska, and Janusz Ślawiński. Looking for a formula for a non-empirical transmission instance, Umberto Eco proposed the concept of the Model Author, being, firstly, the subject shaping the author's image in the text and, secondly, a hypothesis constructed by the reader. Cf. U. Eco, *Autor jako hipoteza interpretacyjna*, [in:] *Lector in fabula. Współdziałanie w interpretacji tekstów narracyjnych*, transl. P. Salwa, Warszawa 1994, pp. 90-96.

For Pollakówna, the reaction to “I do not know” caused by illumination consists in using her imagination, which is the only one capable of withstanding the mystery of beauty. It seems that crossing boldly the borders of “interpreting” towards “adding” represents the greatest value of her essay-writing. In his review of *Weneckie tęsknoty*, Przemysław Trzeciak notices that:

Joanna Pollakówna was the closest to the truth of the painting in those situations when she subdued her workshop of the art historian and launched her poetic imagination, since the only language capable of saying something true about the painting is the language of poetic synthesis and condensation. Paul Ricoeur granted poetry the authenticity of higher order, since it is capable of uncovering paradoxes which represent an essential aspect of truth. Art may be expressed only through art or silence saturated with emotion so strong that it becomes inarticulate¹⁵.

Georges Didi-Huberman explains that capturing the visible should be replaced by “capturing through the visible”. Hence, the reaction to the impact of the painting may not be an attempt to describe it or to catalogue the senses. Contact with a work of art requires involvement in the process of “producing and transforming” on the part of the recipient:

(...) the efficacy of these images is not due solely to the transmission of knowledge-visible, legible or invisible-but that, on the contrary, their efficacy operates constantly on the intertwinings, even the imbroglio, of the transmitted and dismantled knowledge, of produced and transferred not-knowledges. It requires, then, a gaze that would not draw close only to discern and recognize (...). Something like a suspended attention, a prolonged suspension of the moment of reaching conclusions, where interpretation would have time to deploy itself in several dimensions, between the grasped visible and the lived ordeal of a relinquishment. There would also be, in this alternative, a dialectical moment (...) consisting of not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus of *letting go of one's knowledge about it*¹⁶.

Thus, the way in which the poet describes the work of art goes beyond the level of interpretation. From illumination on “letting go of one's knowledge”, or even making it naive (“Wonderful *Pnin!*”), through in-depth and creative reaction which leads the author in the direction of spiritual precognition.

¹⁵ P. Trzeciak, *Barwy Wenecji*, “Nowe Książki” 2003, no. 7/8, p. 11, translation mine. In a similar way, the works of the author of *Glina i światło* are assessed by Marek Zagańczyk: “Pollakówna's essays go beyond descriptions of a work of art. They are an attempt at extracting meanings, discovering the essence of the admired work. Nonetheless, Pollakówna does not write directly what is concealed behind the matter of the canvas. She knows that words tend to destroy the fragile construction”. M. Zagańczyk, *Rozmyślania o obrazach*, “Zeszyty Literackie” 1994, no. 47, p. 129.

¹⁶ G. Didi-Huberman, *Przed obrazem. Pytanie o cele historii sztuki*, transl. B. Brzezicka, Gdańsk 2011, p. 16.

Przy lekturze, a poem seemingly distant from the issues important in Pollakówna's essay-writing, speaks volumes about the model of the reception of art that is characteristic of the poet. The relation between the painting and the admirer, which becomes asymmetrical in Pollakówna's essays, is indeed, as the poet writes, a kind of "reverie", half-prayer contemplation, conducted in humbleness, in accordance with the *ars longa, vita brevis* principle, and indeed it contains a magnitude of space for personal, poetic response, and as such is a sign of 'being captured' by the work of art. It is due to this acceptance of being carried away by the painting that the contact with beauty may be reminiscent of a mystical experience. The reception of art is supposed to be – in accordance with the motto from *Drugie Berga* – the remedy for the chaos of the world, liberation from the prevailing chaos. It is also supposed to be an attempt at the spiritual experiencing of "everything" – "clear ecstatic seeing of the whole"¹⁷.

Closer to the essay: Making the present

Poetry-inspired recognitions concerning the reception of art by Pollakówna (and longings being part of this reception) should be confirmed by reading her essays. It is worth stressing here, however, that the two areas of the author's literary output are fundamentally inseparable. Her poetry and prose are very close to one another in imaging, metaphors, and directions of artistic search. Some essays or poems by Pollakówna seem to rhyme. The same desires can be heard in them and they raise similar questions: about the boundaries of cognition and ways of experiencing the world. One should not, therefore, make references to her drafts on painting, while at the same time forgetting about her poems, or reference poetry without considering the context of her essayistic works.

In *Spizarnia mistyczna* (*The Mystical Larder*), one of the most interesting texts from the volume *Myśląc o obrazach*, the author ponders on the uniqueness of still lifes by Sánchez Cotán, a 16th-century monk and painter. The point of departure for the reflection is the aforementioned "loss of knowledge" that results from experiencing beauty. Pollakówna confesses to disorientation, being aware that without experiencing uncertainty each answer is always vague and hasty. She expects the unexpected in a work of art; she looks for what is concealed in what is visible, available to the eyes and senses. Preparing for the unknown requires verification of the tools of cognition. Reason and experience merely suggest the correct path.

Bodegones (...) are neatly ordered larders (...); brightly lit baskets of fruit placed on cornices against a dark background and flowers, vases or

¹⁷ J. Pollakówna, *Spizarnia mistyczna*, [in:] id., *Myśląc o obrazach*, p. 19, translation mine. The simultaneousness of experiencing delight and loss (of knowledge) is also striking in the essay on the works of one of the most outstanding Kapists, also known as Colourists: "It is the surprising fullness of painting by Nacht-Samborski that makes it so difficult to grasp. Even if sometimes reflexes of artistic trends of contemporary times are visible in this rich substance, they are reprocessed, alloyed in a specific and unique way" (p. 325).

cakes appearing out of nowhere. These specific and beautiful images of smoothed things spoke only about themselves. The background was dark, the objects existed just for their own sake and light was supposed to reveal their splendour. Why do we suspect that there is something more to Cotán's *floreros* and *bodegones*, why do we get entangled in futile speculation, gazing, involved in the puzzle, wishing to understand something from the mystical experience which, as we guess, was their creative element?¹⁸

The poet involves readers in the illumination with the work: it is their vision that makes her suddenly choose the plural form. Those who she perhaps would like to see with her in the museum in Granada, in front of *Cardoon and Carrots*, faced with a mystery together with the author, feeling the same way. They are equally surprised by the secret code encrypted in *floreros* and *bodegones*, ready to agree with Pollakówna and also with Herbert, who expressed their common intuition in a very accurate way: "Our task is not so much to solve riddles as to become aware of them, lower our heads before them and prepare our eyes for constant rapture and surprise"¹⁹.

An attempt at getting closer to the work of art does not take place without an attempt at getting closer to humanity; this concerns not only the collectivity of reception but, most of all, the need of contact with the creator. The thought about the author precedes considerations about the artistic message itself. Draft portraits of painters can be nearly always found at the beginning of Pollakówna's essays. The author also begins *Spizarnia mistyczna* with presenting Cotán.

The Baroque painter, the author of *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, had lived in Toledo for the first forty years of his life before he entered the monastery in El Paular. It is precisely that Spanish town - a place where Academia de Matemáticas was founded in 1582, St. Theresa set up the Convent of the Carmelites, and El Greco created *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* - that becomes the most important source of knowledge on Cotán for Pollakówna. This is a special knowledge - specialist, carefully selected, regained from hardly accessible archives, but necessary to such an extent to which it is possible to hook the nets of imagination in it. The poet suggests a relationship between the painter's outstanding, unobvious skills (he was capable of repairing hydraulic devices and monastery clocks) and the spiritual and mental climate of the 16th-century Toledo, a town of "astronomy, mathematics, geometry, and religion"²⁰.

Cotán is portrayed with the use of just a few lines: in a nutshell, metaphor, detail. Pollakówna is not interested in ordering biographies or collecting dates or names. She is capable of looking with affection at the property inventory made by the artist, "a work on music with no title", only to draft a wide perspective of the atmosphere of the whole epoch soon after. There is ample space for speculation for both the readers and the author between the

¹⁸ J. Pollakówna, *Spizarnia mistyczna*, p. 18.

¹⁹ Z. Herbert, *Martwa natura z węzidłem*, "Fundacja Zeszytów Literackich", Warszawa 2003, p. 137.

²⁰ J. Pollakówna, *Spizarnia mistyczna*, pp. 18-20.

detail, the remnant, and the broadly sketched background. It is possibly this place that gives rise to their spiritual liaison, the specific "emphatic pact"²¹.

It seems that the frugality of 'informing about', the reluctance to notify that is typical of Pollakówna, is an expression of respect for the uniqueness of a human being and the uniqueness of a work of art. As it is impossible to say everything (and because the perspective of "everything" will be different for each person), it is rather appropriate to suggest, put into consideration. Hence the poet uses the vast knowledge and detailed notes in a critical and fastidious manner: in her essay on Francesco Guardi, she quotes the testament of one of the clients of his studio, while writing about Jean Baptiste Chardin, she pays attention to the property inventory of the artist's first wife.

Several comments concerning Pollakówna's approach to the topic of biography may be found in her essay titled *Malarstwo i życie (Painting and Life)*, devoted to Józef Czapski. The poet expresses her conviction about the internal integrity of the artist: "Biographical facts are not to be skipped when one analyses the painting of a man who constantly smelts his life and impulses from life into the precious ore of consciousness. The vividness of experiencing the world on the religious, emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic levels is pulsating in Czapski with an unwaning intensity" (p. 261).

The factual detail is not sufficient in collecting knowledge (collecting entails greed, constant insatiability threatening with getting stuck in obviousness), yet it is sufficient for imagination. And it is imagination used where scientific methods reveal their whole impotence of objectivism that is capable of making an author and a work of art present.

The essay on Tytus Czyżewski begins like a short story:

One May evening of 1903 a short, slightly disabled young man, a student of Cracow Academy of Fine Arts, having seen a performance on Bolesław II the Generous in the Cracow Municipal Theatre, sat down on a bench with a friend of his in the Planty Park at night and spent the short spring night engaged in a conversation until dawn, full of delight, overwhelmed by the play they saw. (p. 224)

This is a snapshot, one frame from a film: still unknown characters captured in a moment which we see through the eyes of the narrator. In her attempt to get closer to authors, Pollakówna uses strategies developed on the ground

²¹ It is possible to sense both sensitivity and imagination in the silhouettes of painters drafted by the poet. Also the tone of humour mixed with affection can be heard here. We may read in *Ufność tragiczna* that: "Having acquired great artistry in painting animals, Jacopo Dal Ponte, a painter of Bassano, decided to paint a picture in which his skill practised many years would shine the most. That won him popularity which was slightly ambiguous as theoreticians of the 16th and 17th century painting sneered at such low topics as animals and objects, and the abundance of shining copper crockery, gaudy foul and fluffy game in Biblical scenes painted by Jacopo offended their sense of taste. This kind of religious vision full of love for the details of the visible world did not ensure the painter with too many orders for Venice churches and public buildings for many years" (p. 150).

of poetry: she saves the moment, suspends the principle of verifiability²². The poet introduces readers into the works of the author of *Akt z kotem* (*The Act with a Cat*) not with a list of his merits, a critical commentary, but with a picture of a man excited with the issues of art, involved in the discussion which continues till the clear dawn in May. Czyżewski – alive and possible to be seen – is most important to her.

Pollakówna's characters, fished from the depths of history, saved from pale characteristics in lexicons and encyclopaedias, become tangible for a moment. The fragments collected by the author clearly include also these that remain a poetic speculation. This speculation based on thorough studies is not difficult to believe, though²³.

The concentration on the moment as a method of the poetic making-present also refers to the transition from the person to the work. As this space between the subject and the very effect of their work is also vital for the author: what does the painting workshop look like? How are alchemic recipes for hues and shades made? Is the artist's domain to accomplish the subsequent stages of the work meticulously and precisely, or is it just madness, anxiety, and following the inspiration?

Pondering on two almost identical versions of still lifes by Jean Baptiste Chardin, an 18th century master of genre scenes, the poet writes:

It is poignant to think how the painter, painting a replica, slightly moved the objects; one may imagine the hand which slightly draws the trough handle to himself millimetre by millimetre, pushes the white root of the leek somewhat outside the edge. These are careful, affectionate movements. And they are instantly followed by a flush of infinite concentration, remembered in the ways of co-existence of those several shapes which are round, flat and oval, in the mutual penetration of their colours (p. 193).

Revealing the moment of painting the picture happening in the 'now' of the reader requires that Pollakówna should find herself in the 'then' of the painter. Experiments with time and trips of imagination connected with it

²² The thought about capturing the moment (in a possibly large frame, preserving the multitude of colours, meanings, contexts) as opposed to the impossibility of saving the whole time (as abstract, inaccessible to the senses) stands out both in Pollakówna's essays and in her poetry. In one of her poems, the poet writes: "Nie umykaj z tej chwili/, z jej bladego lśnienia/ bo popadniesz w bezdomną/ wieczność przeoczenia" ("Do not flee from this moment/, from its pale shining/ as you will fall into homeless/ eternity of negligence"). In her essay on Jean Baptiste Chardin, the poet preserves what is possible to see in one moment: "When Jean Baptiste Simeon Chardin painted his three small pictures depicting kitchen utensils approximately in 1734, he was thirty-five years old. Ten years before that he obtained his master title in the Académie de Saint-Luc and married sickly and poor Margueritte Saintard. Soon after, in 1728, he was admitted to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture and renounced his previous much less honorable title" (p. 192).

²³ The apocrypha in the essay on Pierro della Francesca save the human kind: "There is no trace left after the frescos painted allegedly by both masters [Pierro della Francesca and Domenico Veneziano – a note by ASW] in Sant'Edigio. We can imagine that twenty-something Pierro della Francesca looked at powerful and delirious frescos by Uccello painted nine years earlier in the galleries of Chiostro Verde near Santa Maria Novella (...). Next to them, in a church, a work which he could not have been indifferent to: majestic *Holy Trinity* by Masacci (...)" (p. 8).

mean withholding the principles governing the world. The meeting of the painter and the recipient, of the poet and the reader, which is an inherent part of the contact with art, questions the temporary order, challenges the obviousness of transiency, which is, in fact, the principle of detachment²⁴. The community of delight reveals new ways of time existence.

In the same essay on Chardin, Pollakówna asks (and responds):

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Does the human spirit know only one way of approaching another dimension (...)? The most urgent gaze, to the point of getting lost, of melting with the visible. With the one being created. This intensified concentration establishes its own time, beyond the roundness of human notions of the past and future. It knows only the present and drowns these several suddenly sanctified shapes in it, like in amber, like in a clotted lump of light. The thick paste of the paint transports through years that inviolable, triumphant and meek delight²⁵.

A part of Pollakówna's essayistic work consists in the poetic making-present of painters and moments of creation, a special work of imagination, sometimes inclined to micro-observation ('micro-inspiration'), sometimes with panache abolishing the limitations of time and the detachment of history.

Standing in front of the painting, where she was brought by a presentation of "superhuman dimension", the author looks for traces of "something more". She peers into the canvass. She looks, tastes, touches, listens. "What does considering the painting involve if it is not a way of entering the picture, its mysterious reality?" The way in which this "entry" is made brings to mind illumination: it is unique and intimate, experienced in a flash of ingenious thought, in accumulation of impressions entangling with one another. Some ekphrases seem to be clairvoyance: they capture impressions which are available to only this one chosen person trying to keep in contact with the Unnamed on behalf of the readers. The boundaries of heresy are tested here, it is examined what a human being is still allowed to do and what is concealed from them.

The notes of the poet from art galleries preserve her first responses to paintings: her attempts to stop the escaping feeling. Pollakówna's sketchpads are unique 'documents of seeing', registering in hasty uneven writing the toil of keeping pace with the reaction – of the senses? Intuition? Imagination? "The sky full of clouds churning with pastel foam, fleeting shapes, blown through, trembling (...)" – we read on *Healing of Tobias* by Antonio

²⁴ In *Głód nieśmiertelności* (*The Hunger of Immortality*), her last essay, Pollakówna watches Renaissance portraits being an expression of faith in the possibility of suspending transiency rules. The context of the near end of her life gives these considerations a particular heroic dimension: "Rebirth is the time when human beings entrusted themselves to memory. Memory was supposed to save the fleeting human existence which gained the highest value when we were expecting to revive the glory of the ancient. It was the time when the nameless mass suddenly scattered into a community of individual people, from which each in their separateness born once for eternity was worthy of and desired prolongation of their fate beyond the boundary of death, some projection into the future" (p. 159).

²⁵ J. Pollakówna, *Myśląc o obrazach*, p. 11.

Guardi from the Venice church San Raffaele Arcangelo – “avian featherness, the giddiness of Angels spreads to people, their trembling silhouettes”²⁶.

Also in Venice in the Church of Madonna dell’Orto, Pollakówna’s attention is drawn to *Presentation in the Temple* by Tintoretto. Her handwriting, normally fine and neat, becomes difficult to read as she describes the painting in a few sentences. Some words are replaced by abbreviations. It is worth paying attention to poetic inversions which make the note similar to a record of mystical illumination: “Tawny light, powerful half-turned figure of a woman leading a girl onto stairs. On the l. an old man in agitation of robes pale golden. Everything ascends on huge stairs turning upwards and left into the overcast sky and [illegible] illuminated”²⁷.

Only small changes are introduced between notes and essays: sentences are subjected to grammatical discipline, they are linked to theoretical and historical comments. Editing the notes does not order, however, the signals which are synesthetic from the beginning, permeating each other, received by different senses at once. Different senses at the same time. The simultaneousness of experiencing textures, hues, shapes, and sounds results in the condensation of the description, its synthetisation. The text which is created is a pure essence, an extract from experiencing the work of art²⁸.

“It is possible to hear (...) the painting sonority of this ascetic and intricate composition in colour”, as Pollakówna writes on *Still Life* by Cotán. It would seem that the overwhelming power of the (multi)sensual, immediate sensation of the painting would move considerations on its content into the background. But it is not so. Savouring the work of art is unhasty and precise. The poet is capable of subjecting her impression to careful critical analysis. “The painting sonority” of *Still Life* by Cotán is confirmed by the thorough summary of the performance: “the cool yellow of the quince; the greens of its leaves and the cabbage, tart and only slightly warmed with yellow light. Another green, lighter, on the skin of the melon, is intensified by darker stripes and the place of the cut is highlighted by concentrated green hue only to turn brightly into pale salmon pink of the revealed pulp with palpably painted seeds”²⁹.

The author reveals the content of the painting filtered through her poetic sensitivity which does not become obvious through this revelation: conversely, its spiritual, still inaccessible content becomes even more manifested. The unnamable remains unnamable. At the same time, though, the assiduity of the feeling, the curiosity of the imagination, and the senses are rewarded: “an order different than the order of temporary existence” emerges against the background of the reflections – the presentiment of “the spiritual whole”, which is borrowed (for good) from the painter, becomes the gain of the interpretation.

²⁶ J. Pollakówna’s private archive. The materials were made available by courtesy of Wiktor Dłuski.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ The word “extract” is also used by Pollakówna in the title of an essay on the painting of Nicolas de Staël. Cf. J. Pollakówna, *Ekstrakt widzialnego* (*The Extract of the Visible*), [in:] *Myśląc o obrazach*, p. 119.

²⁹ J. Pollakówna, *Spizarnia mistyczna*, pp. 16-17.

Comparing (...) the still lifes by Cotán we are beginning to imagine how the purification of his seeing thought gradually progressed. How the idea of super-order began to shine through things, embracing, like almighty music with its gaps of silence, all that was created.

Cardoon and Carrots as well as *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* seem to be the records of the illumination, clear ecstatic vision of the whole (...). The reflection itself comes to life in them which goes far outside its porch: word or sparse picture. It contains second sight of more general harmony, extended into a mystery³⁰.

Reading essays of the poet: The directions of perception

A lot has been written on where to look for the point of departure for Pollakówna's essay writing. Attention was paid to the spiritual, meditative dimension of her contact with the work, to the particular emphatic attitude to artists among whom she chose "broken, not fully fulfilled who did not find in themselves the classical composure of Rafael"³¹. In her valuable synthetic draft titled '*Rozmyślające widzenie*'. *Projekt eseistyczny Joanny Pollakówny* ('*Meditating vision*' Joanna Pollakówna's *Essayistic Project*), Dobrawa Lisak-Gębala notices that the author of *Glina i światło* "made works of art her «escape from reality» enabling her to speak indirectly about other fundamental topics and provoking indirect manifestation of her own thoughts and feelings"³². The researcher notices that "(...) Pollakówna's writing realised the path of essayistic reflections described by Lukács, leading from the concrete object (...) to «ultimate issues of life» to answers to the question: «What is life, a human being, fate?»"³³.

It is worth adding that these answers are always attempts of hope. Trying to find in painting the truth on immortal art, Pollakówna tames the truth

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ D. Mazur, *Eseje Joanny Pollakówny o malarstwie – otwarcie na doświadczenie mistyczne*, [in:] *Strony Joanny Pollakówny*, eds. A. Kozłowska, J. Zieliński, Warszawa 2016, pp. 295-310; A. Arno, *Gęstość słowa*, "Zeszyty Literackie" 2014, no. 4, p. 216. The author of *Weneckie tęsknoty* left surprisingly many comments on the tasks to be fulfilled by her own essays and reasons for reflecting on art (surprisingly many as opposed to the few auto-comments concerning her poetic output). She writes in *Zapatrzenie*: "Participation in the delight of generations is exhilarating in itself. The feeling that this century-old delight may be repeated, that one may agree with it from the depth of one's gaze. But the gaze looks for words to describe itself with great effort. Memory shifts facts, dates, groups associations, confronts interpretations. Attention suggests some reflections, incites to engage in a shy and obstinate squabble with some from among the teachers of our emotions" (p. 7).

³² D. Lisak-Gębala, '*Rozmyślające widzenie*'. *Projekt eseistyczny Joanny Pollakówny*, [in:] *Strony Joanny Pollakówny*, eds. A. Kozłowska, J. Zieliński, Warszawa 2016, p. 255. Lisak-Gębala also formulates the primary stages of Pollakówna's essays in which the reflection moves "from gazing at paintings, through activation of erudition to the stage of formulating her own or universal opinions by Pollakówna" (*Ibidem*, p. 261). Lisak-Gębala devoted a part of her outstanding book to Pollakówna: *Wizualne odkrycie polskiej eseistyki o malarstwie i fotografii*, Kraków 2016.

³³ D. Lisak-Gębala, '*Rozmyślające widzenie*'..., p. 259.

about mortal life. This could signify a direction of the interpretation, which saves the painter from the suspicion of tragic doubt: "Sudden vision of the human world, a sensation – through a wink-long sharp vision – of existence in its loneliness, cruelty and, at the same time, acute human closeness is one thread", the poet writes on Józef Czapski's painting, "But there is still (...) another one, extremely important (...) – there is the transparent silence of a held breath in it" (p. 271). "Death, that last act of life not taking the matters of life into consideration, has nothing to do with the act of creation which always carries the measure of the future and manifesting itself as an act of hope in this sense" (p. 119).

In Pollakówna's essays, the attention of critics is drawn not only to the specific duality of the discourse (matters of art and matters of life), but also the very method of approaching the discussed paintings: their poetic making-present which is far away from abruptness and abstractness of scientific terms. As Jan Zieliński notices, "One specialty of Joanna Pollakówna's writing on art is *ekphrasis*, verbal descriptions of paintings. They are distilled from the course of the narration with sudden condensation, build-up of rare but not necessarily scholarly words, transition to a different register, full of poetry but at the same time concrete"³⁴. Jacek Sempoliński, probably the first one to appreciate the uniqueness of the essayistic diction of the author of *Glina i światło*, writes that:

There really are few books on art in the Polish literature which are not as much dissertations or collections of reviews as a presentation of a free thought subject only to the willingness to get closer to the phenomenon of the work. (...) A historian of art is not so much a person who got to know, read, saw a lot of things, as someone who developed a certain disciplined mental control, noticed regularities, created an overall own Form, and perceives the world of art through the feeling of this form (...) ³⁵.

In their letter from 1996, thanking for Pollakówna's radio commentary on the painter's exhibition, Stanisław and Waleria Fijałkowski admit that: "(...) we were captivated by the precise discourse of an analyst with all the features of real poetry which opens specialist terms to the spiritual dimension, how real and spiritual at the same time the matter of the creative process is"³⁶.

Sometimes, however, the very features of Pollakówna's essayistic writing which determine the uniqueness of her sketches become reasons for not understanding them. The precision of poetic metaphor, the uniqueness of the feeling of art – appreciated by Sempoliński as well as Stanisław and Waleria Fijałkowski – are elements sometimes received as negligence of the scientific workshop. Zieliński notices that:

³⁴ J. Zieliński, *Wymiary aniołów*, "Zeszyty Literackie" 2003, no. 3, p. 232.

³⁵ J. Sempoliński, *Władztwo i służba*, "Twórczość" 1994, no. 9, p. 122.

³⁶ A letter from Waleria and Stanisław Fijałkowski to Joanna Pollakówka – 12 January, 1996 – Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw.

She was a historian of art and she was a poet. These two domains intertwined so ideally that some readers of Joanna Pollakówna's books on art were reserved about ekphrases included in them, descriptions of concrete paintings written in language full of poetry. As if they did not want to believe in the possibility of achieving scientific precision with the use of words which are not commonplace and sometimes even words which are used only once having been coined to convey the shade of a colour or the way in which a lump of pigment exists³⁷.

The correspondence of the poet with publishing houses and editorial boards reveals numerous signals of mutual misunderstandings. The letter written in 1989 by Barbara Toruńczyk, the editor-in-chief of *Zeszyty Literackie*, to which Pollakówna proposed a draft on paintings by Stanisław Rodziński, does include a clear suggestion that the text should not be published, although it was written in a cordial tone. Reservations refer to some extent to the works of the artist who the editor describes as: "halfway «Grottger» halfway «Matejko» of the epoch of the Pope and Solidarity, which is of little appeal"³⁸. There are, however, more comments like that one:

Admittedly, it seems to me that your draft, precisely due to its high tones and character of iconography, is more in tune with the sensitivity of the Polish reader. Here, I am afraid, these two central notes sound dull and unconvincing, even for me. I would not like to go too far in disseminating this tonality. It prevails in the country and that is probably enough (...). To be frank, if our decision is positive, it is because of you. Both R.'s painting as well as his direction and all high tones, despite all my respect and recognition, and even some sentimental inclination towards sharing similar moods, are for me something that belongs to the opposite direction with regard to what we have chosen. I would even say that the journal exists so that 'other tones' may be heard. I am afraid that the most vivid features of your draft will not resonate as you have assumed (precisely because the factor of empathy completely ceases to work) and the whole rest, instead of showing R.'s painting, shows the local public its typicality being part of today's Polish sensitivity³⁹.

It seems that the draft does not correspond with the new aesthetic postulates and it fails to realise "other tones". In 1989, the need to break from the national and historical narrative becomes a priority and it gives rise to suspicion with regard to texts which resonate the excessively familiar, romantic note⁴⁰. Hence Pollakówna's essay is assessed (maybe more strictly than it

³⁷ J. Zieliński, *Wnętrze skorupki*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" 2002, no. 27, p. 10.

³⁸ A letter from Barbara Toruńczyk to Joanna Pollakówna – 13 July, 1989 – Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ This phenomenon attracted the attention of, for instance, Przemysław Czapliński and Piotr Śliwiński: "About the year 1986, both in prose and in poetry there was an increase in phenomena showing some exhaustion of the formula of engaged literature and growing willingness of writers (...) to speak in other languages than those which dominated the range of

deserves?) as hermetic, and even evoking associations with the hackneyed, excessively pompous Polish folklore.

Toruńczyk points to “the high tone” of the draft. Although it is difficult to refer to Pollakówna’s texts on painting as lofty or solemn, one really can hear in them seriousness necessary in these places where art meets with life and where, contrary to new aesthetics, beauty preserves its solemnity. The reader of *Weneckie tęsknoty* or *Gлина i światło* understands Toruńczyk’s comment even if they would not like to agree with her. Or perhaps the tonality of the draft on Rodziński differs from the tonality characteristic of the author that is present in her other texts? This will be difficult to ascertain.

Toruńczyk leaves the decision about the publication to Pollakówna. The draft is withdrawn. It is not known if the only text which the poet devotes to Rodziński (published a few years later in *Tygodnik Powszechny* on the occasion of the painter’s exhibition in the Kordegarda Gallery) uses in any way the essay not published in *Zeszyty Literackie*⁴¹. It is worth noticing, however, that Pollakówna remains an admirer of paintings of the author of *Krajobraz z chmurą* (*A Landscape with a Cloud*) and the title of the essay selected by her, *Mądrość wzruszenia* (*The Wisdom of Affection*), seems to defend this feature of Rodziński’s work which, according to Toruńczyk, evokes this slightly shameful “sentimental disposition” in the recipient.

It is worth noting one more comment of the editor of *Zeszyty Literackie*: the empathy of readers is a condition which enables to reveal the most vivid features of Pollakówna’s essay-writing. It is impossible to talk about understanding without the initial trust to the poet which enables one to share the assumptions that are part of her works. The effects of the lack of empathy can be catastrophic. This can be seen in the rough draft of the letter of the poet to one of editorial boards:

Dear Madam,

My work on the text dragged beyond measure due to an incredible number of reservations, derisive questions and, in particular, arbitrary far-reaching stylistic and lexical alterations introduced into my manuscript (...). Ms R. was absolutely right, complaining to you about the difficulty in understanding these fragments or other; now, having analyzed, one after another, all her comments/ironic exclamation marks signalled on 240 pages etc., I have no doubt that she just understands neither this book nor this type of essay writing. Well, we were both unlucky: she was struggling with a text so foreign to her and I was trying to save this manuscript, not so

patriotic and civil discourses in the first part of the decade. Or maybe this way: there was still no answer to the question «how in a different way», but the awareness that «it is no longer possible this way» continued to persist”. Cf. P. Czapliński, P. Śliwiński, *Literatura polska 1976-1998. Przewodnik po prozie i poezji*, Kraków 1999, p. 169.

⁴¹ Cf. J. Pollakówna, *Mądrość wzruszenia. O pejzażach Stanisława Rodzińskiego*, “*Tygodnik Powszechny*” 1995, no. 2, p. 13.

much edited as remade, with important sentences or even paragraphs being crossed out (...)⁴².

What may the “derisive questions” of the editor refer to? Perhaps she is annoyed by one-time words indicated by Zieliński, perhaps “ironic exclamation marks” appear next to newly invented lexemes or formula defining hues, such as “ethereal and misty shades of blue”, “the white broken by greyish half-turned yellow”? Perhaps some metaphors, poetic inversions, illogical convolutions of visual, auditory, and taste sensations seem incomprehensible? What is closed with a full stop, known because it was repeated, does not cause reservations. Pollakówna’s originality requires the reader’s agreement to follow the brand new, to yield to poetry: precisely to treat this poetry as seriously as possible.

Pollakówna’s reaction to a lack of understanding was withdrawal (this is the case with the draft on Rodziński). The author does not change her own perspective, does not yield to external pressure. She is capable of defending her “different point of view” efficiently and sarcastically. Her decisive tone reveals the certainty of the feeling and the certainty of the shape of the words. However, prior considerations indicate that this certainty conceals the awareness of not being conclusive. For Pollakówna, the defence of the seeing imagination is the defence of purblind imagination: of the thought reaching so far as to suggest its continuation which is unknown to the poet. The draft on Artur Nacht-Samborski finishes in this way, with the opening to the mystery:

And so this wonderful painting slowly reveals itself to us in its completed, precise whole: with its specific delicate yet strong architecture of the picture, with condensed imagination, closed in a poetic hieroglyph concealing lyrism, humour, sense of idiosyncrasy and some primordial yet universal content. (...). A long sequence of pictures moving in front of us offers us its sign to be read on and on, deeper and deeper, its signal sent by the face-mask, a hieroglyph of palm leaves against the cobalt background, a supple vegetal skeleton among rectangles of boldly balanced colour. An articulate voice not adding anything, speaking through the thicket of strange beauty of the painting matter. (p. 338)

Pollakówna’s interpretations, detailed and in-depth, emphatic and tender, reveal the longing for “a clear, ecstatic vision” and focus on the material detail which fosters imagination. They are persistent in looking for a human being in order to find a work of art. In this search, they remain reliable and “seeing”, ready to shift from the copious, in-depth comment to

⁴² A rough draft of Joanna Pollakówna’s letter from 16 October, 1999, Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw. The original spelling from Pollakówna’s manuscripts is preserved in all the quotations. The name of the publishing house and the editor are omitted. Giving the reasons for the misunderstanding, R. Pollakówna formulates an important definition in the correspondence with the editor: “So I stress again once this misunderstanding has taken place: the book *Gлина i światło* is a collection of essays, a sum of thoughts accumulated in the space of a few years on the subject of art and issues of human life seen through painting (...).”

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SUMMARY

The paper focuses on the essayistic output of Joanna Pollakówna, a poet and a historian of art, an author of several books of sketches devoted to European painting. It draws attention to the necessity of reading her poetry and essays – which are inseparable and illuminate one another – in a parallel way.

The first part of the article analyses the way of treating art typical of Pollakówna: the experience of reception which reveals the following of the illumination, the awareness of significance, and mystery. The paper shows that the poet's strategy towards the mystery of beauty consists in launching the empathic imagination capable of capturing the fleeting experience which seems to escape. The response to painting – which goes beyond the level of interpretation and chooses 'adding' rather than cataloguing meanings – is treated, after Didi-Huberman, as "capturing through the visible", which leads to "producing and transforming".

The second part of the article is devoted to selected essays which manifest the transition from the intuition of mystery to the in-depth and creative answer of imagination: imagination following not only the work of art, but also the artist, the interesting relationship between them. References are made, for instance, to the private archive of the poet and her notes from art galleries.

The reception of Pollakówna's work is discussed in the conclusion of the paper. Quoting the voices of critics and the private correspondence of the poet with editors (which remains unpublished), one may argue that the essayistic method of the poet has been both acclaimed and not comprehended.

Keywords

Joanna Pollakówna, *Zapatrzenie, Myśląc o obrazach, Weneckie tęsknoty, Gлина i światło*

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Constellations of Stains: The Matter of Experiencing and the Measure of Writing in the Essays by Józef Czapski and Marta Piwińska

1.

Two years after the Second World War, Kazimierz Wyka in the *Odrodzenie* magazine defended the essay: "The course of argumentation in the essay is like a recon during a war. (...) A recon often returns with nothing or with incorrect information or does not return at all."¹ Therefore, I am embarking on a reconnaissance of a strange and disturbed land, of the land of the essay about which one thing can be said for certain: its borders are constantly shifting. For the past two months, I once again have been browsing and reading essays by the authors to whom I owe probably the most. Yet the sheer amount of trouble I had to go through when choosing those favourite essayists... First, something forced me to stop trying to write about two unrivalled masters of the essay, i.e. Jerzy Stempowski and Iosif Brodsky. Why did I abandon them? It might have been my mistake, but I thought that tackling their works would lead me astray as I would either fall into the rut of vapid repetitions or I would become paralysed with the excellence of both masters.

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish.

When I finally came to terms with the realisation that it would be better to bow in silence to the author who used to write to Cassandra and to the author who wished to please a shadow, a thought popped to my mind to write about essays by authors from whom I had learnt much both as a researcher of Polish studies and as a regular reader. And, suddenly, two authors came to mind: Marta Piwińska and Józef Czapski. I have always drawn from Czapski's works great yet discrete and unimposing lessons on how to establish an intimate relationship with works being read or with paintings being viewed. More precisely: how to talk or write about experiences offered by reading and viewing. Furthermore, Czapski fulfilled in a sophisticated manner the important for him formula by Stanisław Brzozowski, according to whom something is either a biography or it does not exist altogether. Then, Piwińska is able to bind in an essayistic yet mentally orderly manner Romanticism with modern sensibility and link it to the gems of the literature of high modernism (the works by Mann, Proust, and Faulkner). Her essays and essayistic books have been a major model of intrepid unconventional analysis and interpretation of the masterpieces of Romanticism. I am particularly referring to texts which discussed the works by the mystic Słowacki as well as to European Romantics.

Before I write anything about the trademarks of the essays by Czapski and Piwińska, I would like to quote two literary fragments. I would not have thought of them in this spring/summertime if it had not been for my rereading of both authors. I would like them to resonate as I assigned them the role of my scouts; it is them who I am sending for the reconnaissance.

2.

First, please consider an excerpt from the sixth and seventh octaves in canto one of the first rhapsodies in Juliusz Słowacki's *Król-Duch*:

Orfeusz między ptaki muzykanty
Szedł umęczony i na sercu chory;
A jam pomyślał, że mu śpiewem
będzie
Składać i skrzydła rozszerzać
labędzie.
[...]
Niech wyniszczony pracą nie
rozpacza,
Że mu na ogniach braknie
i błyskaniach,
Ani też myśli, że jest upominek
Dla ducha większy jaki – nad
spoczynek...

Orpheus between bird musicians
Went tormented and ill at heart;
And I thought that song
Will fold and spread those swan
wings.
[...]
May he not grieve exhausted by
work,
That he will lose on fire and flashes,
Nor thoughts that the gift is
For the spirit greater some – than
rest...

And immediately after that, a few sentences from *Luizjana* by Zygmunt Haupt, which describe the return home for supper of the narrator together with his son from the grand and red Mississippi:

(...) w Luizjanie tory kolejowe wysypane są białymi kredowymi muszelkami morskimi i te muszle palą się w słońcu przeraźliwie biało, ale że aż oczy bolą od tego blasku. Jak gdyby „lasowały się” jak gaszone wapno i parzyły nam w oczy.

A jak losy nam sprzyjają, to akurat nadjeżdża pociąg. Już z daleka słychać bicie dzwonu i: czuu! czuu! lokomotyw. Alabama czuu! czuu! Dla pewności trzymamy się ręka w rękę – rączka mego syna spocona z przejęcia.

[(..) in Louisiana, railway tracks have a base of chalk-white seashells and those shells burn in the sun with terrible whiteness, so that eyes ache from that glare. As if they “were slaking” like slaked lime and burning our eyes.

And if fate favoured us, a train would come. Already from the distance you could here the bell and the choo! choo! of the locomotive. Alabama choo! choo! Just in case, we’re holding hands tightly – my son’s little hand sweaty with emotion.]

I was directed towards Słowacki by Piwińska’s essays; Haupt was put into my hands by Czapski. With the snippets of the two stanzas of *Król-Duch*, I somewhat concocted my own octave, which pulsates with the rhythm of changes heralding rest. The ecstatic poet/the prime mover of the entire nature finds respite in listening to the subtle music of swan wings. It offers everything of which I would like to write further, which I was able to extract during my recon work from the essays by Czapski and Piwińska. They resonate with deadly tiredness, excess, evisceration, but also with a promise of another life. Słowacki and Haupt opened a crack in the door for a moment so that I could taste the insight brought about not so much by the epiphanous flash of meaning, but, rather, a sense of solace and hope that finally I will be able to accept that which is. Then, everything will be clear – just as the flash of the white shells on the railway embankment and as the vitality-filled sound of a rushing steam engine are. Whenever I read those fragments, I have always experienced a deep breath as well as a strange yet unquestioned consent to that which was still to come – to work and to encounters with people. However, the unquestioned nature of that consent never assumes the form of a permanent disposition as it is always exposed to doubt, discouragement, and a lack of faith. The image of tiredness and some kind of evisceration in Słowacki’s octaves, and the experience of the flash, the almost unreal lightness in Haupt’s paragraphs offer, however, something more – a state of some purification, a washing off of desires which a single human cannot satisfy. It is important to realise one’s limitations and accept that which comes from the visions of the writers so dear to Czapski and Piwińska. A purification and the assuming of an attitude of surrender which has in it nothing of a failure or minimalism. On the contrary – it conveys yet another challenge...

Lostness and tiredness. The work of the mind, eyes, other senses, finally the work of the hands for a creation to be formed (in any form). Surprises and moments of clairvoyance. Encounters with others – someone close to

heart or simply someone we once met, including an artist (painter, writer). Such scraps of life and artistic struggles found, observed, deciphered, and recorded have been given to me in recent months by multiple readings of eight not extensive yet rich essays by Czapski, and two extensive literary studies by Piwińska. In the case of the author of *Na nieludzkiej ziemi*, I was fascinated with his remarks on painting (Cézanne and Corot), émigré literature (Bobkowski, Stempowski, and Haupt), and the remarks related to his long cruise. I extracted them from the well-known *Patrzac* (first edition: 1983) and *Czytając* (1990) collections, which gathered a significant portion of those Czapski's essays which he wrote between the 1920s and the 1980s. In the case of Piwińska, I chose the essay *W ogrodzie* from *Złe wychowanie* (first edition, with the subtitle *Fragmenty romantycznej biografii*, was published in 1981) and a multi-part text titled *W stronę Prousta, w stronę Dantego*, which is the cornerstone of *Notatki przy czytaniu "Króla-Ducha"*, included in a 1992 collection titled *Juliusz Słowacki od duchów*.

Further, I propose several notes which discuss the shapes of the foot-holds I managed to reach during my reading excursions to the areas which were the reconnaissance fields of both essayists.

3.

Lostness, a sense of loss, deadlock, void, darkness, being at the bottom, tiredness, insignificance. Finally: "morbid mood." The long list of the symptoms of existential and spiritual turmoil, despondency, or even inactivity and paralysis are most vivid in Czapski's autobiographical essays from the second half of the 1950s. Most notably, in *Tumult i widma* (1955), created as a journal from a sea cruise from Marseilles all the way to the equator, and in *Mój Londyn*, in which in 1959 the author returned to one of his life's and artistic turning points from twenty-three years prior. Many of those conditions had also happened to writers and painters in whom Czapski was interested, i.e. Cézanne, Bobkowski, Stempowski, and Haupt, but also to those whom the essayist knew personally, e.g. a Jewish tailor in Kraków, a 'white' Russian tossed after the Revolution to the suburbs of Marseilles, and many more. Interestingly enough, each of those negative experiences gives the impression of barely outlined, framed with only a few colours and lines, while in fact they are extremely suggestive and immediately included in the difficult yet continuously undertaken anew attempt to lift oneself and choose a direction in life which came to a dead end. However, this never happens at the price of simple consolations or self-illusions.

It was 1926 and Czapski, as a novice painter, experienced in Paris (where he was staying with his colleagues, the so-called *kapists*) a total dejection regarding his artistic calling and the meaning in his searches and achievements. Consider two fragments of *Mój Londyn*: "(..) I roamed the canvas with my brush with the incessant feeling of looking in from the side. That work in the darkness was, this is no exaggeration, a torment. That meant that I was not able to link my eye with my hand, that I was not even able to focus my sights, that I saw separate fragments of things, never the

whole." And, somewhat further: "It seems that it was that night I became a painter, because I understood that I would continue to try to break that wall of darkness even if I accepted the possibility that I would never break it because I could not break away from painting. I reached a bottom." To wander, not being able to notice, to settle on the bottom. Disintegration, because the hand won't cooperate, won't work with the eye, because everything you see is in pieces. Despite that, to make new attempts. With full awareness that it might end in a failure. And all this free of any exhibitionistic or excessively elegiac confessions. It rather resonates with a note of surrender, i.e. a realisation that it might be necessary to swallow unconditional defeat.

Something similar happened to Czapski during his sea cruise of 1955. The *Tumult i widma* essay took the form of an intimate journal recording consecutive days of the trip and the progressing feeling of personal powerlessness, which is usually expressed in his original comments on his attempts to develop current travel notes with "a pen and water colours." The author saw that he fell into a die and was repeating himself. He travelled near Gibraltar; he saw the African coast and... nothing ("I am surprised by my absolute indifference. Dolphins? Gibraltar? Oh well.") Drawings still empty, at the very most bearing "a shadow of a play and a graze of an experience, faint in fact." The following day, even that faint substance of experience was gone: "I am irritated by that incessant sense of repetition, *déjà vu* that reflects my «morbidity» mood, the non-existence of experience." The same indifference and breaking off from others was experienced by one Salomon, a Jewish tailor in Kraków who belonged to Czapski's squadron in the autumn of 1939. The soldiers engaged in a hopeless war (no heroism or fight, Czapski claimed) and Salomon's face emanated dispassion ("It seemed to me that I was reading in it: «Let them goyim fight – what else have they been doing for the past several thousand years, and what do we Jews care about that among them, we need to live and survive; I have a wife and small children, I need to have the strength to feed them during this war, who is going to take care of them? Poles?»") The tailor, a minor figure in the war, came to Czapski's mind when he was trying to solve the mystery of Haupt's prose works and his approach to the "matter of experiencing." At this point, it is also worth mentioning another seemingly redundant person or, actually, a whole bunch of people living at the absolute margin of anything which has a morsel of life and meaning. He was/They were the inhabitants of the "death island", i.e. one of the hills of Marseille which Czapski visited in 1925 or 1926 (i.e. more or less at the same time when he as a painter searching for fulfilment was struck by atrophy). He was, at that time, visiting that which remained of the Russian unit of 'white' soldiers, the survivors of the Revolution's shipwreck. He was shown around the streets of the old port "pulsating with the will to live and enjoy life" filled with piles of fruit by a Russian colonel. Slapdash huts, feeble plants, sadness, and a lack of will to live among the demobilised émigrés ("I still have in my eyes the sight of a Cossack with a huge crest, surrounded by many children, a cobbler or camp tailor.") So why did Czapski draw that image thirty years later while visiting, in the company of a French doctor, the shore of Dakar, the westernmost location of the African mainland? (He

arrived there due to a port stop of the cruise-liner aboard which he was travelling.)

Because three decades later he himself was such a castaway of history, like the inhabitants of the Marseilles huts... And as someone exactly like that – separate, marked by experiences which could not be conveyed to any of the participants of the May cruise of 1955, all occupied with the “will to live and to enjoy themselves” (the ship offered balls and entertainment; most passengers sought entertainment, many indulged in casual romance...), alien, and lost – he struggled with the “spectres” of his past. Those came in two forms: in his dreams or suggested by his insubordinate memory. On the one hand, they were a true nightmare as they visited the author in the least expected moments and usually cast melancholic or traumatic burdens upon him. The writer (and traveller) was completely helpless when facing them, yet he did not fight the undesired reminders. Some of his fellow travellers did quite the opposite. They suppressed or simply passed in silence the difficult things in their past lives, war-time experiences in particular. Yet Czapski did not judge them; he only recorded various attitudes. On the other hand, the recurrences of the past always taking the form of someone’s biography, to which the author referred as spectres, brought something like a point of reference for current events, and they constituted, despite everything, an antidote to the experience of morbid moods. This is the case, for example, in the conclusion of *Tumult i widma*, when the writer cannot join a cruise game at the equator and is not able to share the careless joy of a young Italian woman from Modena, the queen of the ball, completely engrossed in dance with a young Uruguayan. At that moment, another spectre from the past appears – a woman strikingly similar to the beautiful Italian:

Jej małżeństwo z wielkiej wzajemnej miłości, dzieci – nagła choroba umysła męża, to gwałtowna, to zaleczana, jej obecność przy nim nieustanna i niezbędna; wojna, wkroczenie bolszewików, ucieczka z piątką dzieci, on porwany, pierwsze rozstanie, wywieziony, okrutne słuchy, i głucha cisza, a potem jeszcze dwa lata Ravensbrück.

Dziś ona cichutka, w szpitalu na wspólnej Sali, suchoty; dwa lata nakazanej całkowitej nieruchomości. Od tamtej chwili rozstania nikt nie widział jej uśmiechu, nie słyszał słowa skargi.

Dogoniły mnie widma.

[Her marriage based on huge reciprocated love, children – sudden mental illness of the husband, sudden yet cured, her relentless and necessary presence by his side; war, a Bolshevik invasion, fleeing with five children, he being captured, the first separation, he being removed, cruel rumours, and deafening silence, and then two more years at Ravensbrück.

Today, she is very quiet, in a hospital in a shared Room, TB; two years of prescribed complete immobility. Since that moment of separation, no one had seen her smile or heard a word of complaint from her.

My spectres have caught up with me.]

Also, in that laconic highly condensed account about someone else's misery, no regret can be heard. It seems that the spectre and its appearances are described to gain distance both towards own lostness and to the jollity shared by the participants of the holiday sea trip. But the point is not to deprive them of anything or darken their frolics. No. Rather, the point is to have in mind someone once encountered, whose life – free of complaints – could be used as a measure of own existence and art.

The same affliction, the always unexpected but also inalienable descent of the demons of the past, troubled Słowacki in his final years when he wrote in a completely wild and compulsive manner, so to speak, new octaves of *Król-Duch*, adding new versions to those which had already existed, interlarding the pages of the narrative poem with smaller or bigger snippets of other works known as mystical or genesistic. Piwińska tried to tell the story of an artist and man convinced he experienced a revelation regarding the principles which govern the spiritual world in one of the links of *Notatki przy czytaniu "Króla-Ducha"*. More accurately, she tried to understand and read the line of thinking and creating of the author of the narrative poem in which the past (both the prehistoric past and the more recent one covering the fortunes of the first generation of Polish Romantics; because, according to Piwińska, both past periods unfold in *Król-Duch* in parallel, i.e. simultaneously) has the nature of a spectre: "The eeriness, the dread and the power of Romantic spectres which pounce at the living." The artist's inside shares in all that; Piwińska described his condition during the writing of the work with utter virtuosity and some particular form of (non)academic yet surely reader-driven empathy:

Król-Duch zaczyna się w głębi czasu, w głębi siebie. Jak głęboko trzeba było zejść w siebie, żeby wydobyć tak starannie ukrywany pod piękną żałobą ton: uczucie paralizujące, niechęć duszy i śmiertelne zmęczenie, które może ciągle, każdym wierszem musiał zwalczać, żeby w ogóle pisać. Dopiero teraz wyrzucił z siebie tego trupa, który był w nim cały czas i z latami stawał się coraz cięższy.

[*Król-Duch* begins deep in time, deep inside oneself. How deeply one needs to descend into oneself to extract the tone carefully hidden under the beautiful mourning: a paralysing emotion, an aversion of the soul, and deadly exhaustion which maybe constantly, through every poem has had to fight to be able to write at all. Only at that point did he throw out of him the corpse which has been inside him all that time and became ever so heavy throughout the years.]

A poet tormented with life? Indeed. Yet even more so overburdened or even smothered by Polishness and Polish history. Piwińska has often raised the issue of Słowacki's complex and ambivalent attitude to Poland's past and the current situation of his compatriots. He "loved [Poland] in a complex and difficult manner." He was not alone in it. This should be supplemented with a few words about other examples of Romantic struggles with that

which overburdens an individual, and which was framed in an extremely intriguing manner in an essay on the visits of Romantics to gardens designed and established by the proponents of the Age of Enlightenment and Sentimentalists. She referenced and acknowledged earlier major – though differently framed – essays on garden art by Ryszard Przybylski as well as Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz. Piwińska herself followed the paths of searches in which nuances become important, which emphasise all possible instances of ambivalence in Romantic authors travelling the paths of garden assumptions. At some point, he makes a deeply paradoxical yet intriguing claim that Romantic gardens do not believe in themselves, that they resemble the spectres of an order of matter:

Ogrody stają się nieco śmieszne, kiedy się nie wierzy w ład świata i doskonałość materii. Ale to jeszcze nie powód, żeby nie wywoływać ich wdzięcznych duchów. I harmonia, i materia to są rzeczy bardzo piękne. Romantyk temu nie przeczy. Ma tylko pewne wątpliwości natury ontologicznej.

[Gardens become somewhat ridiculous when one does not believe in a world order and the perfectness of matter. But that is no reason to refrain from evoking their graceful spirits. Harmony just like matter are extremely beautiful. Romantics do not oppose that. They only have doubts of an ontological nature.]

It is these doubts that I am most interested in at this point. Their sources are the experiences of passion and despair (the example of Werther, who first reads Homer in an old garden and then pushes through a dark forest filled with cliffs and rocks), dangers resulting from “shortcomings in the perfection” (Hrabina Respektowa [Countess Respective] in *Fantazy* complains about the flaws in an English garden: “Zawsze czegoś w nim brak: to się altana / Złamie, to z wzgórza krzyż umyślnie krzywy / Zwali... o mało co nie zabił pana” [I always miss something in it: either a gazebo / Breaks, or from a hill an intentionally crooked cross / Topples... it almost killed the master]), and desolation and sorrow (“Jakież to wszystko odludne i smutne!” [How all this is lonely and sad!], so confessed Gerard de Nerval who – before falling ill “and believing in dreams” [“i uwierzył w sny”] – visited a *par excellence* Enlightenment garden established by marquise de Girardin as per the guidelines of none other than Jean-Jacques Rousseau). Apart from Johann Wolfgang Goethe (who, of course, was not a Romantic, yet possessed an extensive intuition regarding the mentality and spiritual condition typical of Romantics), Słowacki, and Nerval, Piwińska also referenced Adam Mickiewicz and his subtle games with the Soplicowo gardens, and Seweryn Goszczyński, who confronted his protagonist with the night-time scenery of Zofiówka (*Noc w Zofiówce*). All of them could not have existed without gardens though in these spaces they did not experience any solace. They were not able to cope without entering into conflict with the authoritative verbal and terrain scenery of the seemingly harmonious world of nature.

4.

Before I examine Czapski and Piwińska's attempts at drawing their protagonists (and themselves) from the dire straits and spiritual and intellectual deadlocks, I would like to stress the originality and the cognitive potential of the personal experiences described by both essayists. I consider these passages in their discussions – which become something like micro-stories, elliptical and condensed biographical outlines – as extremely valuable and retaining their exploratory quality. In these, readers are offered specific figures of artists and people engaged in everyday hustle and bustle. Both these groups (artists and regular people) had experiences which I would refer to as cornerstone lessons in existence. They themselves learnt what the state of life or creative failure was (in Czapski and Piwińska's minds, one is tantamount to the other). They practised all the variants and shades of rambling, suspension, and a sense of emptiness or a lack of meaning. In the essays by Czapski and Piwińska, all those negative yet inalienable experiences bear the faces of the protagonists – the empirical ones, but also these related to literature or painting.

The already mentioned Wyka once said that “in the hierarchy of literary genres, the essay penetrates the field before heavier guns, and how many times it was able to seize and retain it itself. How many times its first revelations and questions said more than the path which it declared enemy-free.” Quiet revelations are shared by the heroes of those scribblings and their protagonists. Seemingly only the object of allusions, concise anecdotes, merely outlined events. In fact, they rise to the level of serious inquiries directed towards higher instances. Yet an inquiry does not need only to be an intriguing or even shocking snapshot of life or artistic experience. This requires intellectual and spiritual basis. Because the “line of thought,” as Wyka put it, “is not in the essay an irresponsible and intangible phenomenon. Many fall for that (seeming) effortlessness of the genre. That is because both discipline and the frame are in the essay deep and hidden shamefully, similarly concealed as, e.g. a seemingly careless step of a dancer conceals years of arduous training. That is why many keep turning yet only a few dance.”

My authors dance. Their seemingly light and casual arguments rest on reliable scaffolds and are kept in check of their own styles of thinking and writing. In the case of Czapski, these are the extremely insightful though often laconically phrased descriptions of the principles of the art of the painters and writers he was interested in, and the attempts at extracting the deepest rules of existence and creation which they followed. In Piwińska's texts, what is most important is the discipline of literary analysis and interpretation, in relation to which the essayistic element fulfils the function of a raising agent, one which attributes a text with the qualities of something not forced yet necessary. Only this way the essayist's Self might express itself, of an author highly focused on the intricacies of the Romantic style (of behaviour and writing).

Thus equipped, Czapski and Piwińska set off on their searches for unique phenomena in the works by artists they were interested in and which offered the individual an opportunity to escape a spiritual and creative deadlock, a zone of emptiness, and a state of permanent lostness.

The author of *Juliusz Słowacki od duchów* tried to locate and indicate these layers and moments in the grand and extremely complex narrative poem, in which the poet experienced “sudden instances of clairvoyance.” This is because she was convinced that *Król-Duch* was not an allegorical work in which Słowacki “coded content conferred from above.” Utterly not like that! Piwińska’s great achievement consisted of indicating, in a suggestive and convincing manner, how in the consecutive octaves and rhapsodies the author made every effort for the message to “emerge during the process of writing, when memory and own pain meet «the memory of the ages»” and “the moments of clairvoyance emerge suddenly from memory.” Piwińska emphasised that the poet did not confine himself to a description, but strived to achieve the effect of “some phenomenon to help readers also see it that way.” The point is for “the past to appear for a moment here and now” so that in “tatters, fragments, flashes” there would occur “momentary resurrections, partial materialisations of the past.” When talking about momentary resurrections of that which is past, one should think about the famous essay titled *Contre Saint-Beuve*, in which Marcel Proust offered a discussion of that return to life of those splinters of the past. This is why no one should be surprised by the anachronism used by Piwińska in assigning the author of *Król-Duch* “Proustian intent: to jump deep into history, built of that which destroys, to go up the current attentively listening until catching signals: that was, that is recurring, that means something.” Thus an oppressed individual copes with these spectres of a past time that I have already mentioned.

This does not exhaust Słowacki’s artistic and philosophical theory. Piwińska indicated that “Proustian intent” met a Dantist tendency, i.e. a fact that Słowacki’s final epic poem assumed the form of a “confession of the hell of Polishness.” Actually, not just the hell, because in the poet’s works it coexists along the purgatory and the paradise. This was because “Słowacki also wanted to create a summary, though his vision of the world was not subject the old «spatial» organisation.” This produces one more invaluable conclusion: “For Słowacki – for Romantics, but also for us – «that world» fits not an orderly space, but an eternally moving time. In the time of personal biography and in the time of collective history.” The history of the Self, the memory of the Self (while in Słowacki’s works the “references to own memory are, at the same time, literary allusions”) is placed for the readers of *Król-Duch* in front of their eyes as if it were happening right in this moment. Past moments and the present time, i.e. the moments which happened and continue to happen to the nation, the poet, and the readers, may, therefore, co-unfold. We stride along Słowacki, imitating Dante, in order to reach some centre, a core. Yet the Italian master was heading there to gain

“absolutely certain knowledge” (“love moves the sun and stars...”), while the Romantic, along with 20th-century authors (Marcel Proust, Stanisław Brzozowski, William Faulkner, Witold Gombrowicz) as well as us contemporarily – Piwińska’s extremely important remark applies to us all: that in the case of Słowacki and in our case “to find the centre means to cope with eternal motion, to master the principle of metamorphosis.”

Our – i.e. mine and yours – wandering is going to end in a failure if we do not learn from Słowacki (as well as from Piwińska) the discipline (refer back to Wyka’s remark that the essayistic line of thinking has to be taken into tight hands) – how visions work and how to describe them. Piwińska aptly noted that often in the carelessly organised artistic and intellectual project, i.e. the process of writing of *Król-Duch* over several years (and disappearing with piles of papers), the only point of support was the shape of the octave. The author made a beautiful assumption that maybe the illness-riddled poet’s already real threat of dying forced him to assign that sophisticated verse form “a cut which is excessively durable, excessively orderly.” Furthermore, the perception and recording (in Procrustean octave bed) of the spiritual and historical landscapes were maintained within the reins of the form demanded by Polishness (and it continues to demand it). Piwińska concluded that Słowacki, sculpting its shape, somewhat resembled Gombrowicz: “Not to imitate but to extract own form from oneself, that form which the dissolving, inauthentic and undefined despite all its pathos form of Sarmatia Poland did not possess.” Hence the forays of the author of *Król-Duch* to the very beginning, to the bottom of historical time, and even further – to the core of a word, which, like an atom, contains hidden energy.

It was to those tunnels and mysterious caves that Polish Romantics went. “This is why,” as Piwińska argued in the conclusion of the essay titled *W stronę Prousta, w stronę Dantego*, “it may be worthwhile to view from up close their spiritual arsenals, even if they are so strange.” This is why in the second essay (from *Złe wychowanie*) – this time with a Romantic-garden focus – the author discussed *Pan Tadeusz* in an interesting light. Not a single word about epic poetry, but a lot about Mickiewicz’ play with the existing garden/park assumptions, i.e. with aesthetic prospects and artistic projects by classicists and sentimentalists:

Pan Tadeusz tym, między innymi, różni się od *Zofiówki*, że opowiada o ogrodzie, do którego wejść nie można. Opowiada też nie o jednym ogrodzie, ale raczej o mnożących się w nieskończoność ogrodach, o ogrodowości świata. [...] Nigdzie na świecie nie było takiego ogrodu. Nie został opisany wedle żadnego wzoru zewnętrznego. Wzór był w pamięci, miłości, tęsknocie „ja” Mickiewicza. Jaka to poezja opisowa! To konkurencja rzeczywistości, lepsza niż rzeczywistość. Wizja, duch ogrodu.

[*Pan Tadeusz* differs from *Zofiówka* in that, among others, it does not describe a garden one cannot enter. Nor does it describe the one and only garden, but rather endlessly proliferating gardens, about the gardeness of the world. (...) Nowhere in the world was there such a garden. It was not

described according to any external pattern. The pattern was in Mickiewicz' memory, love, in the longing of his "I". What grand descriptive poetry that was! It is a true competition for the reality, better than the reality. A vision, the spirit of a garden.]

A garden made of words – this is the antidote to insufficiency, deficiency of the arrangements of nature developed in line with the Enlightenment assumptions (towards a utopia) and those of sentimentalists (a museum and a cemetery, "a mixture of a lumber room with a reliquary"). However, it is not possible to enter linguistic gardens without consequences or, rather, without thought. When entering these, one, in fact, enters a school of irony. Piwińska described two ironic transformations of gardens: the early-Romantic one by Ludwik Tieck (*Vittoria Accorombona*) and the already mentioned Mickiewicz' one. The latter one clearly indicated that "Lithuania may be a garden, but one cannot access that garden." This sounds definitive, yet the statement settled nothing. The charm and the deep breath of Piwińska's style of thinking are revealed in the following sentences: "Though, on the other hand, in some sense every reader of *Pan Tadeusz* lives in Lithuania. In some sense. That is both a victory and a failure." I am also deeply convinced by the conclusion of the essay titled *W ogrodzie* as it leaves the gates of reading and interpretation, the experience of reading, and attempts at expressing one's understanding – open. Recently, Wojciech Hamerski has used it in the context of *Pan Tadeusz* when, in his *Ironie romantyczne*, he wrote about Mickiewicz' epic poem that the poet hid in it "many inconspicuous small elements which deconstruct the utopia of the whole and which, at the same time, in a not imposing manner herald a catastrophe towards which the epic poem is leaning."

6.

"(...) For the first time in my life I experienced painting like that," wrote Czapski in *Mój Londyn*, referring to his visit in London's National Gallery and viewing a small painting by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (*Monsieur Pivot*). He was there, recovering from epidemic typhus. That occurred in that same 1926, i.e. when he was struck in Paris with the terrible artistic crisis. His illness, his stay at his uncle's, a professor, in London, the visit to the museum and before that the fact of discovering the great novel by Proust – that sequence of events produced a completely reborn man. He understood then – and thirty years later, when writing his essay, he re-emphasised the validity of his discovery at that time – that "a painter should have one thing in mind – to reach within himself a state in which experiences merge with his eye, with his hand, and, thus, with the canvas on which he paints. (...) All the difficulties one needs to overcome are paid in hundred-fold, not by some success which might be invigorating, pleasant or destructive, but by work as such." Hardships, experiences, sensations, and work – these are the words which became a discrete chorus of Czapski's essays which I discussed in this text. The writer's hardships and the struggles of the protagonists of his

essays have already been discussed extensively. One could be under the impression that both in himself and in others – whom he watched, read, or whose lives he witnessed – Czapski sought a moment of doubt and lostness in order to realise how big a role in their creation anew is played by something which in the essay about Haupt was called “the matter of giving names”, and something which could help harness this matter and enable one to translate it into a work of art.

In *Tumult i widma*, Czapski was not able to escape the pitfall of repeating himself as a painter and he felt threatened by the inrush of spectres from the past. In that situation, he heard from a new acquaintance, a German co-traveller, that this state did not mean anything else than “some kind of an end or a sign that it is necessary to start life anew, from a new side.” Yet the author was not quick to implement the recommendation. In the light of the words about a new beginning, new days of the cruise, changes in the landscapes, observing other passengers, talking to them and the incessant struggle with the inrush of spectres – all result a certain alteration of direction. The progression of records in the essay/journal offers snippets of self-diagnosis and self-therapy. Two examples associated with insistent attempts at recording using drawings – the first one of 11 May, 1955 (ship at open sea), the second one two days later (making port in Senegal, then visiting Dakar and Medina in a hurry, and the accompanying admiration of the view of the sea in the lemon light and the canary yellow of the sky):

A teraz rysunek (...) ześlijguje się w banał. Wtedy trzeba robić rysunki możliwie suche i tematycznie jak najobojętniejsze: garnek, framuga drzwi i tylko iść po linii podnoszenia uwagi, kontroli obiektywnej. Żadnej ucieczki nie tylko w fałszywą oryginalność. Ale również „w pedal”, żadnego wysiłenia na rysunek wyższy, syntetyczniejszy, odwrotnie – zaczynać od początku, jakby się jeszcze nigdy niczego nie rysowało.

Musi być też praca „z goryczą w oczach”, bo inaczej – to czekanie na natachnienie głupich malarzy (...). Próbuje rysować kobietę przy ladzie w niebieskim turbanie i białej sukni. (...) Degas w liście z Luizjany opisuje czarne kobiety z dziećmi na rękach, zachwyca się egzotyką i mówi, że trzeba wracać, wracać, piłować w swoim kącie. Nie daje się unieść zachwytnowi i wraca zawsze do tych samych, do śmierci motywów tancerek i każdy ruch całe swe długie życie studiuje. Ja tu próbuję notować ten świat tak dla mnie nowy, jakby dla mnie stworzony. Piękno tego życia jest zupełnie nieświadoma, na pewno nie urządzone i tym tak fascynująca, ale z moich rysunków nie wychodzi nic, prawie nic.

[And now drawing (...) falls into banality. Then you need to make drawings as dry as possible and as general in terms of the theme as they can be: a pot, a door frame, and only follow the line of indicating, objective verification. No escape not only into false originality. Neither “to the metal”, no forcing of a higher drawing, a more synthetic one; on the contrary – to start from the beginning, as if you have never drawn anything in your life.

There must also be work "with bitterness in your eyes" because otherwise that means waiting for inspiration from stupid painters (...) I am trying to paint a woman by a counter in a blue turban and a white gown. (...) Degas in a letter from Louisiana described black women holding children in their arms, he admired the exoticity, and said that one needed to return, return, keep sawing in their neck of the woods. He avoided being lifted by the admiration and always returned to the same things, to the death of the motifs of dancers and studied every motion throughout his life. I am trying to record here this world, so new for me, as if made for me. The beauty of the life is completely unrealised, certainly not organised and in that so fascinating, but nothing, almost nothing comes from my drawings.]

What was that self-therapeutic undertone of such remarks supposed to consist of? Of toilsome convincing oneself to cool repetitiveness, of unrelenting attempts to record the world, and of oneself using once selected tools and methods. This "once" is the already reconstructed London experience of viewing Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot's painting and the completely fundamental for Czapski encounter with Paul Cézanne's paintings.

Needless to say, the French master's paintings and the philosophy of art became for Czapski a base model and a measure of own painting from his early attempts to the final years of his life. I am, however, more interested in the extent and the outcomes of that markedness reflected in Czapski's approach to the main task of every artist: to translate their personal experiences into writing, into images, i.e. to achieve something basically impossible (this was at least the view of Guy de Maupassant, whom Czapski mentioned in the essay about Stempowski, to whom he owed learning about that observation). In the essays about Cézanne, the Polish painter and writer used three keywords from every possible facet: colour, asceticism, and work. "Cézanne's revolution" consists of a completely novel vision of nature, achieved by placing emphasis on the role of light and then shifting it onto colour. Czapski's master applied a basic correction to Zola's formula stating that "painting is a piece of nature viewed through temperament" – a correction, according to which that temperament should be seized within the tight hands of compositional and structural discipline. To organise own sensitivity – that is the highest maxim of the author of *Mont Sainte-Victoire*... The tireless and full of sacrifice (asceticism) work on oneself and an object from nature is put in the first position. The artistic disciplining of experiences became Czapski's true obsession, both in his painting and writing. The same principle also applies to experiencing Cézanne's art:

Malarz, który raz przeżył Cézanne'a, zachowuje niezatarte wspomnienie tej plamy barwnej, jej niedwuznacznego świadomego położenia, to wspomnienie pozostanie dla niego nieomylnym sprawdzianem własnej rzetelności malarstkiej, gorzkim wyrzutem w chwili pracy o osłabionej samokontroli (...)

[Any painter who has ever experienced Cézanne will retain an indelible memory of that colourful spot, its unambiguous and intentional location, that recollection shall remain for him an infallible test of own painter truthfulness, a bitter regret at the time of work under diminished self-control (...)]

Czapski also applied that credo to his literary projects, i.e. reading the art of writing through essays. For me, the most suggestive – yet piercing and offering many truly significant though not easily graspable experiences – manifestation of such an approach lies in the three texts of the early-1960s: about Bobkowski, Hostowiec (Stempowski), and Haupt. In each, two basic elements – i.e. specific existential events and the effort spent on trying to charm them into words – reappear, though each time in a different configuration and with another emotional tint and mental emphasis. In the case of the remarks about Bobkowski – to which Czapski tried to assign the form of an intimate letter to a recently deceased friend – the emphasis is placed on the readiness to undertake a risk of own choice, a risk of freedom. It seems extremely important that basically every work of literature by "Querido Bob" is a proof of work through noticing and the outcome of "testing" through life.

The essay titled *O Pawle Hostowcu* poses the task of concisely framing the phenomenon of the style of thinking and writing of someone who remains an unrivalled master of the art of the essay. Also in this case Czapski was fascinated by the manner in which the author of *Eseje dla Kassandry* was able to grasp the beauty of the elusive using writing. Czapski tried to reproduce the essence of that unique kind of writing by means of two devices: a "magic stop", and the erasing of traces and cyphering. The former one applied to an exceptional combination of the acts of the mind and writing: "the breath of a sentence, fluent and yet sparing (...) the very shape of thoughts, round and full." As for misleading and resorting to pseudonyms, this consisted of emphasising that "Hostowiec probably is as distant as one can be among all contemporary writers from trends and the need for confessions." This was because "everywhere where his thoughts seem to come close to personal confessions, pseudonyms, cyphers, allusions, we never know from which side, from which layer of thought or allusion to which age we will hear that which constitutes the core of a text."

And, finally, the essay about Haupt, in which Czapski was not afraid to discover his reader-driven emotions and agitation. At the same time, he kept the same (though achieved through other means) distance about which he wrote in the case of Stempowski. The reading of Haupt's *Pierścien z papieru* stimulated Czapski to conduct a kind of a self-revision of the assumptions he had made throughout the years of viewing other people's paintings and creating his own, and of reading various literary masters and describing over several hundred pages his impressions and thoughts on these. When trying to formulate his impressions and discoveries triggered by reading Haupt's works, he referred to the notion of surprise, which an experienced artist, an old hand at painting and essays, would no longer expect, and

which “somewhat forces him to start from scratch.” Therefore, he added the following conclusion: “We live for such moments.” Indeed! This spring and summer I came back after a long break to the essay titled *O Haupcie*, certain that it would be a revision of old news. It was the contrary. Czapski forced me to look anew at both the output of the author of *Dziwnie było bardzo, bo...*, and at my own art of writing literature. I engaged in something which the author of *Tumult i widma* phrased in a truly accurate manner:

I nagle olśnienie. Dotykamy w sobie światów wcale nie nowych, bo istniały w nas zawsze, jedynie my zatraciliśmy do nich drogę. Te światy są znowu przed nami otwarte: ani pracą, ani dobrą wolą czy wysiłkiem, choć są one konieczne, bo oczyszczające, do nich nie dotarliśmy, dał je nam szok z zewnątrz. Jeśli chodzi o przeżycie literackie, czy istnieje inny powód czytania, który by tu był wart wzmianki?

[And, suddenly, a revelation. We touch in ourselves worlds which are not new, as they have existed in us always; we have only lost our way to them. Those worlds become opened to us once more: we have not reached them either through work, or good will or effort, though they are necessary because they are cleansing; we received them through an external shock. If the point is to have a literary impression, is there another reason for reading which would be worth mentioning?]

Work and shock. Routine and revelation. Well-trodden paths and *terra incognita*. Distanced Haupt – thus reminding Czapski of the already mentioned Jewish tailor who indifferently observed the war-time turmoil – “sets readers free, cleanses them, gives them a new youth, the freshness of untouched experiences and that surprise awaited by everyone.” It was possible because he became proficient in always assuming an original – different in each of his stories – unique perspective on the past time. He acquired it through the art of words. By dint of it, “Haupt in his deepest layer, in the matter of experiencing, appeared to me just as separate and in his unique way commanding today among us as Salomon was in out platoon. I sensed the same distance in him.”

7.

In these two essays (about Stempowski and about Haupt), Czapski achieved, in my view, mastery. I believe that one of the secrets of his mode of writing (and thinking) is provided implicitly in his late essayistic miniature with the telling title *Smierć Cézanne'a* [*Cézanne's Death*]. The author suggested in it that the French artist “was not coy about leaving white spots.” This applied to the “whiteness of the canvas”, visible between colour spots. Thus, the colour of the paint was emphasised, which had greater significance than the message conveyed by a painted landscape or someone's portrait. Further on, Czapski discussed his paintings as “literally pointillistic”; in them, the strive to retain the separateness of the stains of individual colours led him to placing

individual points. I noticed a similar tendency in his essays about the masters of the Polish essay and the Polish short story. Consecutive paragraphs – as well as the quotations inserted between them and the (auto)biographic and recollective digressions – somewhat lead their own lives even though they always work for conveying an opened whole of a specific work. When reading Czapski, one can be under the impression that the essay was invented so that it could be a form of verbal expression for an artist of the brush.

I also noticed the constellation of emphatic and boldly placed stains in the essays by Piwińska. At the end of her visit to the garden of Romantic biography, to the strange place which does not exist, the author noted that such a biography could not be written as it “keeps falling apart.” What is left is “separate scenes, fragments, images, chapters, warnings and signposts.” However, for those who write and read essays, there is much benefit in studying the rules of the Romantic style – not to dot the ‘i’, so to say. I consider the statement closing Piwińska’s *Złe wychowanie* – i.e. “This topic breaks off but is not closed” – as a measure of writing which attempts to seize the matter of experiencing. There always remains something to be discovered, the door is still open. Through the crack, I can see Orpheus resting in a swan’s flight. Through the crack, there keeps peering – and pleasantly blinding – the flash of the white shells in the railway embankment in Louisiana.

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SUMMARY

This text is an attempt at repaying the author’s debt (both as an academic intellectual and as a regular reader) towards two inspiring essayists: Marta Piwińska and Józef Czapski. From the latter, the author of the article gained a lesson in establishing an intimate relationship with a work of literature he reads or a painting he views. From Piwińska he learnt the poetics of a mentally disciplined essay and

gained the ability to associate the readings of the literature of the Polish Romanticism with contemporary sensitivity and the grand works of high modernism of the 20th century. In this article, the author analysed the records of fragments of the life and artistic struggles included in eight essays by Czapski (from the *Patrząc* and *Czytając* collections) as well as extensive essays with a literary studies' focus by Piwińska (from books: *Złe wychowanie* and *Juliusz Słowacki od duchów*). The author focussed on the essayistic studies of the experiences of lostness and tiredness, the work of the mind, eyes and other senses, of spiritual and intellectual surprises, and even of moments of clairvoyance. He esteems the discussed essays particularly highly due to their exploratory value, which often takes the form of micro-stories, and elliptical and condensed biographical outlines. In these, readers are offered specific figures of artists and people engaged in everyday hustle and bustle. Both these groups encounter experiences which could be referred to as cornerstone lessons in existence.

Keywords

existential and spiritual crisis, Romantic model of biography, Romantic vision, 20th century paintings, historical experiences of the witnesses to the 19th and the 20th centuries

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READING
TRADITION



The Poem for the Opening of the Picador Café: History – Myth – Literature

In autumn 1918¹, as Antoni Słonimski recollected years later, on the memorable day of the twenty-ninth of November when Warsaw was abuzz and crowds were rambling round the city in hectic excitement – those days when the words “freedom”, “independence”, “Poland”, “communism”, “revolution” did not have any shade of grey ordinariness or even disappointment or discouragement – we were full of enthusiasm, strength, and hope. The whole elite of Warsaw gathered on the evening when the Picador Café was opened. That night the first roots of the literary tradition were put into the soil so as to grow into a tree of contemporary poetry. This soil did not lack fertilisation. The tree which grew had more blossom than fruit and, admittedly, some branches were bending to fall. With time the tree was turned into the tree of “News”, but the bunch of flowers which matured dried forever in our books, has many beautiful and permanent scents.

During the first evening, Jan Lechoń was reading his poem titled *Mochnacki*. A tall pale young man, in heavily worn-out jacket attire, reciting his poem in an emotional voice in a crowded café – this is one of more beautiful memories from those years of struggle and work².

And here is the famous poem for the opening of ‘Picador’:

¹ The quotation, after A. Makowiecki, gives year 1818 – possibly a typographical error.

² As cited in: A. Makowiecki, *Warszawskie kawiarnie literackie*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 81-82.

Jan Lechoń
Mochnacki

Wr. 1832 Maurycy Mochnacki koncertował w Metzu.

Mochnacki jak trup blady siadł przy klawikordzie
I z wolnatał próbować akord po akordzie.
Już ściany pełnej sali w żółtym toną blasku,
A tam w kąciet kirasjer w wyzłacanym kasku,
A tu bliżej woń perfum, dam strojonych sznury,
A wyżej, na galerii - milcz serce! - mundury.
Tylko jeden krok mały od sali go dzieli,
Krok jeden przez wglębienie dla miejskiej kapeli -
On wie, że okop hardy w tej przepaści rośnie,
Więc skrył się za okopem i zagra o wiośnie.

Rozpędził blade palce świergotem w wiolinie
I mały, smutny strumień spod ręki mu płynie.
Raz w raz rosa po białej pryska klawiaturze
I raz po raz w wiolinie kwitną polne róże.
Rosną. Większe, smutniejsze, pełniesze czerwienią,
Coraz niżej i niżej, uschną, w bas się zmienią!
Nie. Równo, równo rosną w jakiś smutny taniec,
Rozdrganą klawiaturę przebłagał wygnaniec

Jan Lechoń
Mochnacki

Maurycy Mochnacki gave a concert in Metz in 1832.

Pale as a corpse Mochnacki sat at the clavichord
And very slowly began to play chord after chord.
Walls of the full hall already sink in yellow glow,
In the corner a cuirassier in golden helmet,
Nearer scent of perfume, strings of elegant ladies,
High on the gallery - be quiet heart! - uniforms.
There is just only one step between him and the hall,
One step through the hollow for the city orchestra -
He is aware the trench of this chasm keeps on growing,
So he hid behind the trench and will play about spring.

He made his pale fingers chirp in the treble
And a tiny miserable stream flows from his hand.
Time and again dew splashes on the white keyboard
And time after time wild roses bloom in the treble.
They grow. Larger, sadder and fuller with redness,
Lower and lower, they will dry, turn into bass!
No. Steady, steady they grow into some sad dance,
The expatriate somehow begged the trembling keyboard,

I nagle się rozplakał po klawiszach
sztajer,
Aż poszedł szmer po sali, sali
biedermeier.
Głupio, sennie, bezmyślnie kręci się
i kręci.
Jakieś myśli chce straszne wyrzucić
z pamięci,
Do piersi jakąś białą przytulił piers
drżącą
I czuje tuż przy piersi nieznośne
gorąco,
I tysiąc świateł w oczach, w czyjejś
twarzys dolki,
I zapach białej sukni, ubranej
w fijołki.
Nagle złoty kirasjer poruszył się
w kącie.
Sto myśli, jak kanonier, stanęło przy
loncie,
Stu spojrzeń obcej sali przeszły go
miecze,
Wstyd idzie ku estradzie - czuje, jak
go piecze.
Więc do basu ucieka i tempo weń tłucze,
Po tym tańcu szalonym niech ręce
przepłucze,
Z tych czerwonych, duszących róż
otrząsa płatki,
Rozsypuje po sali w tysiączne
zagadki,
W sto znaków zapytania, sto szme-
rów niechęci,
Nie pyta. Już jest w basie. Już tam się
wyświetci.
Raz, dwa, trzy, cztery - wali. Niechaj
mu otworzą,
Niechaj wyjdą z chorągwią, wyjdą
z Matką Bożą,
Niech mu końskie kopyta przelećą po
twarzys
I niechaj go postawią gdziekolwiek
na straży:
Na ulicy stać będzie z karabinem
w dłoni...

And suddenly *sztajer* broke down on
the keyboard,
Till murmur went across the hall in
Biedermeier.
Silly, sleepily, thoughtlessly it spins
round and round.
Wishing to erase terrible thoughts
from memory,
He cuddled to his own chest some
white trembling chest
And in his chest he already feels
some horrid heat,
A hundred lights in the eyes, dimples
in someone's face
And the sweet smell of a white frock,
dressed in violets.
At once the golden cuirassier moved
in the corner.
A hundred thoughts like a cannoneer
stood at the fuse,
He was pierced by a hundred swords
of the foreign hall,
Shame approaches the stage - he
feels how it pricks him.
So he runs away to the bass and
bangs it bluntly.
After this frantic dance let him rinse
off his hands
He shakes off petals of those red
stifling roses,
He spills them round the hall in
a hundred of riddles,
In a hundred of question marks, mur-
murs of dislike,
He does not ask. He is at the bass. He
will play there.
One, two, three, four - he bangs. Let
them open him now,
Let them go out with the flag, with
Mother of God,
Let horse hooves run quickly over
his face
And let them place him in any place
on guard:
He will stand in the street with a rifle
in his hand...

...Styszy sala: ktoś idzie, ostrogami
dzwoni -

Ostrogą spiął melodyę,
a akompaniament
Szaleje, krzyczy w basie, rośnie
w straszny zamęt -
Ku sali bagnetami już mierzy, już
blisko -
I ton jeden uparcie wybija
- nazwisko!!!
Wciąż czyste, w rozszalałe wplątuje
się głosy
I wali, wali w basie murem Saragossy,
Oszalałych Hiszpanów wyciem, dar-
ciem, jękiem
I znów wraca ku górze załzawionym
dźwiękiem -
W mazurze - nie - w mazurku idą
wszystkie pary,
By całą klawiaturę owinąć
w sztandary.
Zatrzymali się wszyscy w srebrzy-
stych kontuszach,
A klawikord im ducha rozplomienia
w duszach
I wzdłuż długich szeregów przewija
pas lity,
Tysiąc głów podgolonych podnosi
w błękitny
I wszystkie karabele jedną ujął dłonią,
I uderzył w instrument tą piekielną
bronią,
Aż struna się ugięła, ta w górze,
płaczliwa.
I cisza jest w wiolinie. Cisza
przeraźliwa.

Po martwej, głupiej strunie, po fijoł-
ków woni,
Po czymś smutnych oczach, jakiejś
białej dłoni,
Jakimś światłach po nocy i szepcach
w komorze,

...The hall hears: someone is coming,
ringing with spurs -

He spurred the melody, and the
accompaniment
Rages, shouts in bass, plays a terrible
havoc -
Aims at the hall with bayonets,
already near -
And stubbornly strikes only one tone
- the name!!!
Still clear, it entangles in rampaging
voices
And bangs, bangs in the bass with
Saragossa's wall,
The distraught Spaniards with howl-
ing, tearing, groaning
And he comes back to the top with
the tearful sound -
All the couples begin to dance
mazurka.
So as to wrap tightly the keyboard in
the flag.
They all stopped in silvery split-
sleeve overcoats,
And the clavichord ignites a spirit in
their souls
And along extended arrays wraps
a solid belt,
A hundred of half-shaven heads rise
into the blue
And he held all the *karabelas* in one
hand,
And he struck the instrument with
this hellish weapon,
Until the string bent, the one at the
top, tearful.
And there is silence in the treble.
Dreadful silence.

Across the dead silly string, across
the violet scent,
Across somebody's sad eyes, some
white hand,
Across the lights of the night and
whispers in the box,

Po księżycu, po gwiazdach - mój
 Boże! mój Boże! -
 Gdzieś się gubi i zwija, przeciera pas
 lity,
 Po księżycu, po gwiazdach, po
 Rzeczpospolitej.
 Po sali idzie cisza przeraźliwa, blada
 I obok tękich boszów w pierwszym
 rzędzie siada.
 Wzrok wlepia martwy, ślepy, w jakiś
 punkt na ścianie
 I patrzy w Mochnackiego, kiedy grać
 przestanie.

 A on, blady jak ściany, płacze, zrywa
 tony
 I kolor spod klawiszy wypruwa
 - czerwony,
 Aż wreszcie wstał i z hukiem rzucił
 czarne wieko
 I spojrzał - taką straszną, otwartą
 powieką,
 Aż spazm ryknął, strach podły,
 i z miejsc się porwali:
 „Citoyens! Uciekać! Krew pachnie
 w tej sali!!!”.

Across the moon, the stars - My God!
 My God! -
 It gets lost somewhere and rolls up,
 wears through the belt,
 Across the moon, the stars, the Polish
 Republic.
 Terrible pale silence runs across the
 hall
 And sits down in the first row next to
 stout Germans.
 It sets its dead unseeing eye on some
 point on the wall
 And looks at Mochnacki to see when
 he'll stop playing.

 Pale as a wall he tangles and breaks
 the tones
 And he extracts a colour - red - from
 the keys,
 And finally he stood up and smashed
 the black lid
 And looked with such a terrible open
 eyelid,
 A spasm roared, mean fear, and off
 their places they rose:
 “Citoyens! Run! There is a smell of
 blood in this hall!!!”.

The dramatic, highly artistic work was declaimed by the author himself in a new literary café in Warsaw, opened only three weeks after Poland had regained independence. Commenting on Słonimski's memories on the circumstances of founding 'Pikador', Andrzej Makowiecki writes that after his return from Russia Tadeusz Raabe "spoke with enthusiasm about Moscow «cafés of poets»". He was particularly delighted with the café of futurists open from winter 1917 to April 1918 and managed by the artistic trio: Vladimir Mayakovsky, David Burliuk, and Wasilij Kamienski. Poetic texts were recited and musical pieces were played there (romances with the accompaniment of the guitar, etc.); artists were pulled onto stage and made to perform. As Makowiecki adds, "[the Moscow Café of Poets and the Picador Café in Warsaw] - both initiatives are a complete *novum* in the East of Europe and both put the European artistic revolution into practice³.

One may not fully agree with that last statement; similar places existed and enjoyed great success in Poland; perhaps not in an identical shape, but they were quite similar. Literary cafés were established as early as in the late

³ As cited in: A. Makowiecki, *Warszawskie kawiarnie literackie*, p. 84 [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

18th century in order for social and political life to be led, enriched with reflections on art. One hundred cafés were established in Warsaw at the beginning of the 19th century, including several of literary character. 'Kopciuszek' ('Cinderella') or famous 'Dziurka' ('A Small Hole') were frequented by poets, musicians, and painters – the broadly understood Bohemia – but also by regular people. There was not always a separate 'stage', a place for performances or plays, but there were heated philosophical and literary disputes; poems and improvisations were recited; songs were sung; and even theatrical plays were performed. They were visited by Chopin, Norwid, Goszczyński, Zaleski, and, surely, the Mochnacki brothers. In the first part of the 19th century, these places underwent particular development; after the defeat of the January Uprising, i.e. after 1864, literary cafés declined for some time, but not for long. The grand "literary career of coffee and the café will coincide with modernism", which is proven not only by historical facts but also character types from novels by Waclaw Berent or Stefan Żeromski⁴.

In the new Warsaw café at 57 Nowy Świat Street, the poet who inaugurated the café with his declamation was barely nineteen; his colleagues – the future Skamander poets – were only slightly older. They had just opened a cultural café with a belligerent name in Poland liberated after years of enslavement: it is worth reminding the dictionary meaning of the word 'picador' (from Spanish – an active participant of the *corrida*, an assistant of the *matador*, whose task is to prick the bull and provoke it to attack). This 'prick' perhaps, *toutes proportions gardées*, was supposed to be the aim of young and uncompromising authors who at last 'were in their own house' and could, also at last, abandon the national liberation topic prevalent for years for the benefit of the free choice of areas of artistic expression. They could abandon the so-called 'Polish duties' and deal with what they wanted, also remaining in the sphere of 'potentiality' rather than 'necessity'.

And yet... The teenage poet inaugurates the activity of a cultural café intended to be opinion-forming with a poem whose topic and form are traditional; ardently patriotic, extolling "the Romantic tribune of insurrectional Warsaw" (as Maurycy Mochnacki was commonly referred to); with a poem in the stylistics that gives way to the 'new', stylistics typical of Romanticism and the Young Poland, with a multitude of epithets, emotional hyperboles, and a liking for synesthesia.

What was the reason for choosing such a text in a nominally satirical *cabaret*, whose famous ironic and grotesque *Regulations* assumed abolishing monuments rather than erecting them?

Indeed, when Słonimski presented his idea of establishing a café of poets in the literary section of the artistic club whose members were writers

⁴ The historian of the phenomenon added: "The café gave an opportunity to talk both with a circle of friends as well as with a broader public, it fostered integration of different circles. It used to be a place of conspiracy meetings. Sometimes guitarists and singers gave performances there. It was a place where one could also compare opinions and judgments from newspapers or conversations on the current literary, theatrical, musical or political events". Importantly, the café also "catered for direct contact of authors with the public". Cf. R. Kanarek: 'kawiarnia literacka' [entry], in the volume: *Słownik literatury polskiej XIX wieku*, eds. J. Bachórz, A. Kowalczykowa, Wrocław 1991, pp. 405-407.

who were “terrific and not very prolific”, the survivors of the Young Poland, they mocked the idea of their younger colleague⁵. For traditionalists, it must have been too bold, too democratic (it assumed, for instance, the complete abolition of the line between creators and the audience), perhaps even too boorish. Fortunately, as Słonimski recalls, “slightly later the fate brought me together with a couple of «sensible blokes». I got to know Leszek Serafinowicz and Julian Tuwim. It was then that the triumvirate was established, this «dictatorship of poetariat» which we proclaimed to the public with our addresses.”⁶

One of such “addresses” was the ‘Pikador’ regulations created by the pure nonsense Słonimski-Tuwim⁷ duet that turned out to be longer lasting than the “triumvirate”. The ‘rules’ of these comic *Regulations and Price List for Guests* included, for instance:

§ 1

It is not allowed to bring dogs.

§ 2

Entrance fee for adults – 5 German marks. School youth aged 16-20 – 10 DM.

Children aged 8-16 – 15 DM, children aged 4-8 – 25 DM. Children under 4 – 35 DM.

Each adult person has the right to bring any number of breastfed children – with an extra charge of 50 DM per piece, regardless of the sex, confession and nationality.

§ 3

Haggling with the cashier about ticket prices is to no avail. We expect high additional charges. We refuse to accept any silly 10 or 15 DM of additional charge. We'll do without!

[...].

It is then followed by an enumeration of seven more extremely extended points of *Regulations*, which include: retail presentation of more and more expensive poetic “services”, such as: writing dedications at different price rates, or a handshake – also costing a small fortune; dates of accepting possible marriage proposals; and a list of unwanted guests which includes the unfortunate (and, luckily, non-existent) counsellor Józef Kuśmidrowicz, “a symbol of the pompous small-town aesthete”⁸.

The café-cabaret, where the regulations “forbade the guests to beat poets with chairs”, did not let in persons who are “too sober” as well as they particularly strictly banned “guessing the rhymes during declamation of poems”. The inauguration ceremony featured a poem which was solemnly patriotic, unambiguously serious, solemn, written in the language of

⁵ As cited in: A. Makowiecki, *Warszawskie kawiarnie literackie*, p. 81.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 81.

⁷ Between 1920 and 1936, they wrote together many satirical poems to be published in the Warsaw-based *Kurier Poranny*. The works were characterised by typical British humour, which one can see for oneself when reading those gathered in the volume titled *W oparach absurdu* (*In the Fumes of Absurd*), published after the war (Warsaw 1958).

⁸ As cited in: A. Makowiecki, *Warszawskie kawiarnie literackie*, pp. 92-93.

Romantic emotionally omnipotent hyperbole, at times bordering on kitsch, and maybe even epigonic. Why?

It is difficult to provide one unambiguous answer.

It is probably the conviction about the fully understandable temporary surge in patriotic, social, and liberation feelings that made the poets choose such a 'topos for the inauguration'. 'Poland had existed' for several days, and on the 29th of November – the day of the opening of 'Pikador' – was the eightieth anniversary of 'the November night'. The memory of such events and heroes was still very vivid in the society, especially in the capital, and Maurycy Mochnacki – a writer, a pianist, an imprisoned revolutionist, and, finally, an emigrant – was a model hero of the nineteenth-century archive of Poles' memory. Controversies around his attitude to tsarist authorities, doubts concerning his decisions and choices, and some flaws on his portrait only confirm his Romantic split and tragic trait which impressed his compatriots.

The clash between the extremely solemn beginning and the satirical continuation of the 'Pod Pikadorem' café can be explained by literary scholars with the discrepancy between the assumptions of manifestos and their subsequent executive (writing) practice, which often occurs in the history of literary creative groups.

Hence *Mochnacki* by Lechoń is not a rebellious or innovative poem on the level of poetics, stylistics, or versification. It is, nevertheless, 'revolutionary' in its ideological and emotional layer at the moment of the declamation; it is written with panache by "a precociously mature boy", brought up in a home full of historical memorabilia, books and tales concerning the insurrectional revolts of the 19th century. As Roman Loth writes, "His mother's tales on the history of Poland and his father's national radicalism directed the young poet towards Mochnacki"⁹.

Already in 1915, Leszek Serafinowicz wrote a one-act play titled *W noc jesienną* (*At Autumn Night*) about the role of Maury Mochnacki in the November Uprising. Fascinated by the figure of the Romantic writer and musician, three years later he made him the character of his poem.

There are many interpretations of *Mochnacki* depending on the time when they appeared, pointing to different aspects and ambiguous – and potentially possible – intentions of the author as well as ideas for the 'over-tone' of the work. There is agreement concerning the thematic 'point of departure': introducing the protagonist's lyrical situation and the theatricalisation of this situation, poetic visualisation of the poet's dramatic performance.

Maurycy Mochnacki, a historical figure, becomes a literary character and, in an emotional poetic transformation, not so much a pianist giving a concert for the French audience as a tragic emigrant in a foreign land, who gives an account of the tragic history of struggle for Poland's independence through a piano interpretation.

⁹ R. Loth, *Lechoń, Mochnacki, historia*, "Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. Adama Mickiewicza" 1988, no. 23, pp. 26-27.

Modelled on Mickiewicz's concert of Jankiel from the 12th book of *Pan Tadeusz* (Master Thaddeus) and, in all probability, also on *Koncert Chopina* (A Chopin Concert) by Artur Oppman, or Or-Ot, the poem is intended to be a description of an artistic event which was Mochnacki's performance in Metz. It may be assumed that it is "thematized music", a poetic presentation of a musical concert, a poem of descriptive character; yet music is not often mentioned in the text itself.

This is rather a description of playing music: ravishing, passionate, even dangerous at times; an inspired artist who *does not play notes*, but *improvises*; he does not try to provide the listeners with pleasure, but he attacks, provokes, surprises, teases, and even terrifies them.

These extra-musical elements of the clavichord improvisation are assembled in a sequence which is internally disturbed. They manifest the conflict of the conscience of the artist: Mochnacki plays either against himself or against the audience. The motifs why he tries to win the audience – double foreign, French and bourgeois – playing about "spring", about love, a waltz making "the hall of Biedermeier" murmur with recognition – is perceived by him as a betrayal of his own ideals, ideals of life and struggle [...]. A sudden turn takes place: using battle and sacrificial motifs, national and historical as well as revolutionary motifs in music. But this very approach makes him lose contact with the audience, now not understanding anything, cold and unwilling ("Citoyens! Run!"). [...] The dramatic gesture of the virtuoso at the end of the work cuts through this series of misunderstandings – it is not until now that it becomes clear the most important motif of Mochnacki's improvisation was the revolution. The panic-stricken reaction of the middle-class auditorium mirrors a not very remote echo of the July of 1830 in Paris.

For the artist it was supposed to be the echo of the past November days [...]

This way, Roman Loth, the poet's biographer, sums up his interpretation of the poem¹⁰.

For Mochnacki – a work of poetic imagination – the echo of November 1830; for Lechoń himself – the near echo and glow of November 1918, the November of freedom, the month of liberation which had been awaited for so long.

*

Apparently, the young poet was extremely fixated on eminent figures from both the distant and current history of Poland. Thinking of justified thematic parallels, Loth compares *Mochnacki* by Lechoń to other poems of the author, e.g. to *Pilsudski*, pointing to similar features of the author's imagination and his literary decisions.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Lechoń “ostentatiously ignores the generally accepted facts from public life”, “bends the historical truth to his vision and ideas”, builds a myth distanced from the reality and makes an apotheosis of his heroes. Mochnacki and Piłsudski close the volume from 1920, titled *Karmazynowy poemat* (A Crimson Poem); it opens with the famous *Herostrates* (*Herostratus*) and *Duch na seansie* (A Ghost on a Séance) (about protagonists whose activities have a negative impact).

As the researcher writes, “Piłsudski is a glorification of the eponymous protagonist of the poem, Mochnacki – is a glorification of the idea of Piłsudski, armed struggle for independence «despite everything»”.

“Lechoń sees in Mochnacki an apostle of the Romantic deed whose idea was covered by the ash of failure and despair in the consciousness of the nation, died under the burden of messianic concepts and martyrlogical brooding and which needed to be revived”¹¹.

The “conceptual programme” of *Mochnacki* can be explained in terms of an enthusiastic support of Lechoń himself and the circle of his friends for the attitude and current policy of the Marshal; Lechoń considered both the Romantic pianist and the Marshal contemporary to him – the co-creator of Polish independence – to be “patrons of Romantic realism”, which he continued to express long after Poland had regained independence and during the years of the war exile.

This is why the poet depicted the concert in Metz with such ardour and enthusiasm; why he did not spare pathos, paleness, roses, and redness of blood in it. The exaltation of the poem was his own exaltation, the emotion of the pianist and improviser was his own emotion.

*

“In reality, the course of events looked different”. As the historian of poetry and Lechoń’s works argues:

Involved in hopeless political disputes of Paris emigration, writing frantically at the time the history of *Powstanie narodu polskiego*, at the beginning of January 1832 Mochnacki left for Metz, where a cordial friend of his, Michał Podczaszyński, was staying. He lingered there for nearly three months. He had a busy social life there, winning immense popularity. He went to great lengths to write his work. On 20 January 1832 Podczaszyński wrote to Marycy’s mother, to Galicia:

“Nobody in whole Metz plays the piano like him. He gets applause everywhere. – Ladies have already made a project for him. They want him to give a concert for the poor”.

The concert, in which Mochnacki’s performance was only one of the points on the agenda, took place on 23 March 1832 in the hall of Société Philharmonique. Mochnacki played, accompanied by the orchestra, a concert

¹¹ Ibid., p. 33.

of Johann Nepomuk Hummel, achieving great success. Podczaszyński described both preparations for the concert and the concert itself to Mochnacki's parents in great detail and in a humorous manner. It is worth quoting this description [...]:

The day of the concert came. Maurycy had to choose a piano for himself, many ladies proposed to him with their instruments [...] and Maurycy had plenty of pianos to choose from but he was hesitating between only two of them, and the worst ones, as one belonged to Mrs B., and the other to Miss Klementyna S. The first one was incomparably better, all amateurs agreed with that, it was even brought to the theatre, but after hesitating for a long time Maurycy decided to send it back, and gave priority to Miss Klementyna's piano! Mr Solleral, the old major of sappers, a great eccentric, a man who learns politics from *Monitor*, conducted the orchestra. During the rehearsals when there was no instrument, he sang solo through the nose in his hoarse voice. Eventually, he waved his hands so much, he turned so much that the following day he got a cramp, his right hand trembled, his legs hurt, he had a headache, fever and indigestion. We thought that it was *cholera morbus*. A concert of symphonies, choirs, overtures began [...]. After singing, after the symphonies, after solos on the harp and clarinet Mr Solleral led our culprit onto stage. Thousands of applauses, thousands of opera glasses shone from everywhere in bright light, they greeted him with thousands of screams, and there were as many perspectives as there were loges. There was far more fear for Maurycy as compared to Grochów or Ostrołęka. But he did not get scared and played the Hummel concert. And he put on such elegant attire that you would hardly recognise him. [...] It came as no surprise that he played wonderfully, that he was greatly applauded after each solo, after each passage. He did everything well. Standing behind him, Mister Solleral almost hit the piano with his nose on a few occasions as he bent and turned so much, and he even once bounced Maurice in the head, drumming the beat in musical zeal, but luckily it passed rather unnoticed. Maurycy was the king of the day in Metz on 23 March; people did not talk about anyone else but him¹².

While reading Podczaszyński's letter, the following thought comes to mind: the description of the concert by Mochnacki, an elegant artist adored by ladies, playing for charity under the baton of a crazy conductor-amateur who smashes the soloist with the bow on the head because he conducts his orchestra so passionately – this concert, its description, seems far more appropriate as a 'piece' for the opening of a modern, cabaret stage of poets than Lechoń's mythicised "apotheosis of Romantic struggles for independence", adorned with the Romantic "corpse paleness" of the soloist; than "Lechoń's voice on contemporary times" dressed in historical attire (Loth). A voice, which eventually inaugurated the activity of 'Pikador'.

¹² Ibid., pp. 27-28.

But a story is a story, literature is literature, and a myth is a myth. Lechoń showed here his complete *désinteressement* for facts, and he was also the furthest from wishing to repeat the humorous tone of the private letter-testimony in his poem. He needed pathos to convey the lofty version of events inspired by the 'national spirit'.

Questions concerning the convergence or discrepancy of the historical and poetic accounts would not have been raised, since the poet has no duty to render a detailed description of past events in his poetry. In contrast, the consecrated right to his own vision and even creation of events 'based on' history has been obvious for both creators and recipients of literature since Homer's times. It was not in vein that Goethe placed his literary output between 'truth' and 'invention', writing of the inspiring *Wahrheit* and necessary *Dichtung*. The problem is that Lechoń's poem is accompanied at its very beginning by one modest informative statement, namely that "[in] 1832 Maurycy Mochnacki gave a concert in Metz", suggesting a strong relationship between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*, whereas the poem titled *Mochnacki* takes place somewhere between *Dichtung* and... *Dichtung*.

In his *Dziennik* (*Diary*), Lechoń mentions on a number of occasions that the last two poems of *Karmazynowy poemat* were written in a state of nerves, in a bad mental condition, among obsessions taking control of him:

I was writing then with despair and in despair, having written *Mochnacki* and *Piłsudski* I felt despair, some kind of disaster, I subscribed to hopeless sadness, I did not exist then – there was only the trembling medium, writing under a dictatorship of some secret, oppressive powers¹³.

The "trembling medium" through which a stream of poetry emanates with verses of the highest emotional intensity. Interpreters of the poem agree that the melody of the poem grips and fascinates the recipient every time similarly to how it could have gripped and fascinated the audience of the premiere as recited by Lechoń himself in the 'Pod Pikadorem' café on that memorable November day of 1918.

The poet "will lead the audience where he wishes", as Jerzy Kwiatkowski argued, adding rhetorically: "Who will resist the scream of terror of the bourgeois in Metz"¹⁴? Ireneusz Opacki, in turn, complemented the external profile of the emotional impact of Lechoń's poem with in-depth comments on the lyrical situation; according to him, the protagonist of the poem, the performer of the historical concert, Maurycy Mochnacki, is not (was not in the poetic vision) capable of gaining control over the hall; he is unable to seduce the audience with his zealous performance and passionate interpretation:

[...] it is not Mochnacki that takes control of the hall but it is the hall that takes control over Mochnacki. It is not the audience that reacts to the

¹³ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁴ J. Kwiatkowski, *Szkice do portretów*, Warszawa 1960, p. 16, 45.

concert but it is the pianist that reacts to the stimuli from the audience, its gestures, its looks, and the character of the concert changes under their influence¹⁵.

Barbara Czarnecka, who analyses the literary output of Lechoń with regard to his suppressed sexual orientation, sees in *Mochnacki* an expression of his artistic sublimation:

The source of sublimation is inexpressibility [...] In literature sublimation is not projected, it is not dictated by the tactics of simple change. To be in the role of the artist who 'sublimes' means to often seduce – as if 'instead' – only with what may be revealed, but to express at the same time the whole scale of passion. In *Karmazynowy poemat* we get to know the sublimation which is manifested through patriotic passion, observing Mochnacki play¹⁶.

And later:

Passion is manifested despite the will of the artist. It is manifested through hyperbolic, trans performance: its intensity of imaging, maximalism of scenes, ecstasy. [...] The response is 'appalling silence' which is contained on the part of the recipient. It expresses foreignness and cultural disapproval, it is a dead anticipation of silence, of the moment when the voice of passion dies down¹⁷.

Hence the poem about Mochnacki's concert would be an 'involuntary confession' and a tale on 'the torment of keeping silence'. In accordance with this approach, Lechoń would include his spiritual struggle concerning his sexual orientation in the 'homo-text' or, in reality, in homo-texts, since also other works referring to national martyrology and its heroes were to speak about his concealed yet real nature. By contrast, the entire *Karmazynowy poemat* would constitute a certain 'seductive sublimation', which already manifested in the magnetic recitation during the opening of the 'Pod Pikadorem' café¹⁸.

Mochnacki by Lechoń has several vivid artistic features which warrant the author's literary immortality. They include:

- prominently shaped rhetoric which ensured the author's first stage success¹⁹;
- the theatricalisation of the lyrical situation ("Lechoń's theatre was fascinating and impressive but [...] a smell of old decorations hovered over the stage of his poems"²⁰), often giving it an anachronic dimension;

¹⁵ J. Opacki, *Wokół 'Karmazynowego Poematu' Jana Lechonia*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 1966, vol. 4, p. 481.

¹⁶ B. Czarnecka, *Ruchomy na szali wagi. Lechoń homotekstualny*, Toruń 2013, p. 71.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Lechoń gained popularity straight away", as Roman Loth noted in his introduction to the edition of Lechń's poetry, *op. cit.*, p. LXXXVI.

¹⁹ J. Kisielowa, *Retoryczność i melancholia. O poezji Jana Lechonia*, Katowice 2001.

²⁰ M. Wyka, *Szkice z epoki powinności*, Kraków 1992, p. 91.

– blind admiration for Romantic models and even adding hyperboles to them (“Someone who will read *Karmazynowy poemat* by Lechoń for the first time may be somewhat disappointed: they were opening the book with a conviction that they would deal with someone «young», the so-called «futurist» – they come across topics so fusty, tones heard so long ago that despite will they start looking for the year of publication”²¹);

– a specific historiosophic approach to the selected fragment of Polish history of a universal character;

– ardent patriotism (“Each poem of *Karmazynowy poemat* awakes Poland in the psyche of the reader, enriches him with emotional substance which can be shaped according to the individual model of patriotism. Lechoń understood in this way always increases the temperature of this feeling”²²).

To sum up:

it is possible to say that Lechoń sensed, recognised the ‘collective energy’ very accurately, he knew how to be popular, he had a strong emotional impact, he became unique although he also caused controversy in the sphere of intellectualisation of this impact. His work evoked admiration and the feeling of dealing with a genius, on the one hand, and an intellectual dissonance, on the other²³.

Lechoń was interested only in “emotions of great intensity”, as well as “monumentalising history, celebrating Polishness, heroism of characters and dramatism of events”²⁴. *Mochnicki* is an excellent example of this and a proof of the real talent of the poet; a poet important in the literary life created anew in Reborn Poland, but was he a modern poet?...

A new chapter in the history of literature was just beginning. Many years later, Słonimski would confirm the strength of the impact of young poetry on recipients. “We introduced to poems”, as he writes with pride, “the concreteness of imagery, power and truth of the word [...]”; We we’re capable of sparking enthusiasm for poetry in this street café”, and “each new poem became an event at that time”²⁵.

Who knows whether this is not the greatest historical merit of Lechoń’s poem for Polish literature. In the combination already described many a time, and one that is perhaps non-describable – that of history, myth, and poetry – “the divine element” of these works remained, namely emotions. Emotions which were thought over by the poet and felt by that audience from ‘Pikador’. Due to different historical conditionings, it is impossible today to describe and reconstruct them. Or it is possible for another poem, which after years revived the atmosphere of the first literary café in the free Poland:

²¹ In the review of Wilam Horzyc, cf.: *Dzieje Konrada*, Warszawa 1935, p. 115.

²² Cf. J. Opacki, *Wokół ‘Karmazynowego Poematu’ Jana Lechonia*, “Pamiętnik Literacki” 1966, vol. 4, p. 481.

²³ Cf. J. Kwiatkowski, *Czerwone i czarne. O poezji Jana Lechonia*, “Życie Literackie” 1956, no. 39, p. 5.

²⁴ B. Czarnecka, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

²⁵ As cited in: A. Makowiecki, *Warszawskie kawiarnie literackie*, p. 82.

Na krakowskim w kawiarni zadymionej sali,	In Krakowskie Przemieście in the smoky room
Na estradzie niewielkiej, codziennie wieczorem	Of the café on a small stage, every evening
Jacyś młodzi poeci wiersze swe czytali	Some young poets recited aloud their poems
I uciszał się nagle tłum „Pod Pikadorem”.	And suddenly the crowd in “Pikador” died down.
I szumiały Muz skrzydła w małej kawiarence,	And the wings of Muses whirred in the small café,
Gdy Lechoń kartkę z wierszem w drżącej trzymał ręce...	When Lechoń kept his poem in his shaking hand...

The piece of paper with the poem on it is still shaking, not making it easy to read the author's handwriting completely and unambiguously. The questions about the shape of *Mochnacki* and the secret of inaugurating with this poem a Warsaw literary cabaret one hundred years ago will probably remain unanswered.

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SUMMARY

The founders of the first literary café in reborn Poland, namely ‘Pikador’ in Warsaw, chose a poem by Jan Lechoń for the inauguration ceremony in November 1918. In the poem, titled *Mochnacki*, the young poet recollects a historical concert of Maurycy Mochnacki, a Romantic tribune of the 19th-century Warsaw, a pianist and a writer. Different possibilities of interpretation of the work, which is heavily emotional

- ranging from patriotic poetry, through an almost social satire to an intimate confession encoded in the form of a description of a piano concert and reactions of the foreign audience to it - are not contradictory as they complement each other well.

Keywords

Romanticism, Reborn Poland, literary café, patriotic poetry, independence poetry

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A Tribute to *Barocco*: The Figurativeness of Maria Morska

It was the evening of 29th of November. The café was swarming with people. I came in very embarrassed, said hallo to Raab and I was trying to hide somewhere on the side but Serafinowicz took me out of my hiding place and made me take a seat at the general artistic table where, apart from other people who I had already known, there was also "Picador's only daughter", Ms Maria Morska¹.

Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz recalls the first meeting in the 'Pod Picadorem' café in this simple way, perhaps too simple, taking into account that what is just unfolding is the birth of Skamander and, in fact, of the whole new Polish poetry. It is extraordinary and meaningful that one of the few people that the memory of the author of *Oktostychy* connected with that moment is Maria Morska. Julian Tuwim recalls that on 29 November she recited the poem titled *Alles, alles über Deutschland* by Antoni Słonimski and – after the meeting in a quite relaxed atmosphere when the artists went to 'Turek' to have shish kebab and coffee, and Tadeusz Raabe was dancing a jig on the table – Morska was singing some beautiful French song².

And so she was with the Skamanders from the very beginning. After the poetic world reacted to the call: "Young Warsaw artists unite!!!", her declamation was the central point of the performance which took place every

¹ J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Książka moich wspomnień*, Kraków 1968, pp. 196 [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

² J. Tuwim, *Nasz pierwszy wieczór*, "Wiadomości Literackie" 1926, no. 51/52, p. 2. According to Iwaszkiewicz, the poem in question was performed by Słonimski himself.

day between 9 and 11 p.m., first in a café in Nowy Świat, and then in the basement of Hotel Europejski³. She assisted the poetry created with youthful energy: she was first to spontaneously present the works to the public; works which Tuwim will later call “juicy, muscular, with a kind of athletic (...) «straddle»”⁴. She was where young art was stomping, thundering, and smoking, where “poetic tents were put up”, and exactly where artists of the generations to come would derive boldness, rebellion, and authenticity from. Apart from poems by the Pikador poets, Morska recited Mickiewicz, Norwid, Leśmian⁵. Her likings and tastes were original, sometimes incomprehensible to her friends. Iwaszkiewicz writes:

This beautiful woman, so similar to an artificial flower, has always made me feel uneasy with the atmosphere she created around her, saturated with the oriental smell of cinnamon and myrrh, full of fanatical worship for poems which I did not think much about. It was Tuwim and I who showed her the fascinating beauty of *The Drunken Boat* by Rimbaud in the translation into Polish by Miriam. She preferred Leśmian and Théodore de Banville⁶.

She recited unnaturally, with exaggeration, in a high-pitched or even squeaky voice. In his review of a poetic evening with the participation of Morska, Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński calls her voice “strange”, “metallic”, “as if deliberately artificial”, “predatory”. It seems that the originality of her declamation causes him certain trouble. For a long time, the reviewer keeps looking for the justification of the pleasure derived from listening to the voice of the reciter. He saves the day using humour.

(...) I would be an unskilful flatterer if I praised Ms Morska for simplicity when she consciously avoids it. On the contrary, her aim is – it seems to me – to evoke a feeling of anxiety; rape the sensitivity of the audience with the constant *fortissimo* of her accent, her gesture, not to allow them to take a short nap on the pillow of easy decadence. There are works where it has an excellent effect: e.g. *Podróż (Journey)* by Słonimski, *Garbus (Hunchback)* by Tuwim or those pretty little poems by Maria Pawlikowska. In others, like in the poem “without a title” by Lechoń, this vivid instrumentation clashes with the text craving for simplicity. Anyway I long to hear Morska again, I would like to listen to that predatory voice. I did not use to be a decadent for nothing⁷.

Irena Krzywicka, a friend of Morska, recollects her recitation with the use of diminutives: “She declaimed a teeny bit artificially, but with her own idiosyncratic manner, drawling words with her little sweetened voice”⁸.

³ J. Stradecki, *W kręgu Skamandra*, Warszawa 1977, pp. 48-49.

⁴ J. Tuwim, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

⁵ J. Stradecki, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

⁶ J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Aleja przyjaciół*, Warszawa 1984, p. 77.

⁷ T. Boy-Żeleński, *Wieczór recytacyjny Marii Morskiej i Stefana Jaracza z udziałem poetów Skamandra*, [in:] idem, *Flirt z Melpomeneą*, *Pisma*, vol. XXII, pp. 586-587.

⁸ I. Krzywicka, *Wyznania gorszycielki*, Warszawa 1996, p. 108.

Iwaszkiewicz is rather critical when commenting on one of the artist's performances: "Morska created some kind of disagreeable mannerism, made an array of mistakes, such as illustrating the recited poem with gestures"⁹. Jerzy Liebert, perhaps the most resistant one to the artist's charm, looks at Morska in yet another way after several years after her triumphs in 'Pod Picadorem', and his characteristics includes expressions such as "lunatic", "hysterical woman", "exalted"¹⁰.

She was a muse of interwar poets, a friend and teacher of the greatest artists of the epoch, an erotic fascination for men and women. Readers encouraged by this popularity and wishing to follow Maria Morska (actually: Maria Frenkiel-Knasterowa) through historical documents will soon find out about the scarcity of biographical materials. The artist flitted through history like a ghost: there are hardly any original documents left that would allow for sequencing the knowledge about her education, time of getting married, artistic life. Morska is often elusive even in the photographs: she hides under the brim of a large hat or escapes into the shade of the frame. This 'elusion' and confusion can be also found in the sources. Problems with identification are also caused by the popularity of her assumed name in the theatrical environment of that time (Adolfina Morska, Janina Morska, Gabriela Morska-Popławska)¹¹. Kazimierz Wroczyński notes yet another surname of the artist: Strońska. This information is quoted after Wroczyński by Jadwiga Zacharska in *Skamander*, although she prefers the correct version¹².

In 2008, Hanna Faryna-Paszkiewicz devoted a decent monograph to the "Skamander's only daughter". Still, numerous and diversified sources which she quotes are fragments, excerpts. Paszkiewicz admits that her work is "a draft for the portrait of Maria Morska, an incomplete puzzle the details of which will be probably never found, consisting of few fragments of various importance and information"¹³.

Therefore, this is the only Morska that survived: remembered in a moment, in the meeting, in the detail. Seen in the moments of greatest delight, fascination – or, on the contrary, referred to incidentally, in the background. She is referred to in either euphoric or marginal, casual comments.

And this is practically all. Nevertheless – taking into account the traces of the artist in her friends' texts – letters and entries in diaries are merely part of documented memories. It is poetry that remains: an area which is the richest in meanings and at the same time the most difficult to verify. There is the book of poetry titled *Paryż (Paris)* by Pawlikowska – all dedicated to the "charming interpreter" as a "cordial gift" – and other poems of the author of *Pocałunki (Kisses)* as well as occasional works by the Skamander poets – e.g. Iwaszkiewicz – and, naturally, poems by Słonimski, whose

⁹ J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Książka moich wspomnień*, ibid., p. 197.

¹⁰ Liebert expresses his opinions in his letters written to Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and Anna Iwaszkiewicz in March 1926. Cf. J. Liebert, *Pisma zebrane*, vol. II, Warszawa 1976, p. 192, 400. After: H. Faryna-Paszkiewicz, *Opium życia. Niezwykła historia Marii Morskiej – muzy skamandrytów*, Warszawa 2008, pp. 29-30.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹² Cf. J. Zacharska, *Skamander*, Warszawa 1977, p. 14.

¹³ H. Faryna-Paszkiewicz, *op.cit.*, pp. 10-11.

muse and protagonist, undisclosed by name, was known to the artist's friends beyond any doubt.

Iwaszkiewicz recalls: "Antoni wrote beautiful poems for Maria"¹⁴ and there is not even an echo of hesitation to be heard, there is not a trace of methodological storms around "the error of intention". Krzywicka simply writes about the poet's love: "it was known". After many years, Julia Hartwig uses passive voice to that same end in her conversation with Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak: "It was not talked about but it was common knowledge that Morska was Antoni's great love (...). I think that it must have been painful for Janka"¹⁵. Słonimski's feeling and its impact on his works could not have been a secret for the society from the 'Pod Picadorem' café Anna Iwaszkiewicz, when relating her meeting with Morska to her husband, uses a quotation from the poem titled *Invokacja* (*Invocation*):

You would never have guessed who I met today in the tobacco shop where
I was buying postcards... Imagine it was the one whose eyes are "enormous,
ardent and pure" (...)¹⁶.

The specific, somewhat behind-the-scenes aura around the poet's fascination with Morska – due to either his consistent silence on that subject during his whole life, or surprising discretion of his friends (surely indiscreet in other matters) – makes it more difficult to understand what relationship Słonimski actually had with the artist. Impersonal forms such as "it was talked about, it was known" as well as avoiding authentication for speculations and rumours all foster mythisation and exotisation. In any case, the picture of the feeling preserved in letters and notes is surprisingly coherent with the impression which Morska made on the authors of memories. As a result, Słonimski's "great love", which the reader learns about today, no longer belongs only to the author of *Godzina poezji* (*The Hour of Poetry*), but it becomes solidly underpinned with the fascination experienced by the whole literary community of that day.

One more certain trace of the relationship between Słonimski and Morska can be found in *Dzienniki* (*Diaries*) by Anna Iwaszkiewicz. The record of a conversation – touching for both of them – is the only document on this subject in which the poet can be heard. In the account of Anna Iwaszkiewicz, Słonimski seems to be helpless in the face of the overwhelming, magnetic influence of Morska. At the same time, however, the authoress confirms the mutuality of their feeling.

He told me from the beginning about this unknown painful and wonderful story of love, love of two people being on such a level that they would not be able not to harm others to achieve happiness. He told me how they

¹⁴ J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Aleja przyjaciół*, op.cit., p. 80.

¹⁵ J. Kuciel-Frydryszak, *Słonimski. Heretyk na ambonie*, Warszawa 2012, p. 46.

¹⁶ A. Iwaszkiewicz, J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Listy 1922-1926*, eds. M. Bojanowska, E. Cieślak, Warszawa 1998, p. 354.

deluded themselves with the possibility of friendship, only friendship, what torment they suffered, feeling that they belong to each other for life¹⁷.

Even if there is some doubt concerning the equal strength of emotional involvement between Słonimski and Morska, this fascination was not one-sided.

*

Could one agree with Iwaszkiewicz that “Antoni wrote poems for Maria”? And even if this is adopted as a hypothesis, with a few reservations – securing oneself with the notions of “the author’s signature” or “weak subject” – could one learn something about a person when knowing only poetry which she inspired? The poems focused around the artist – those, for which she was both the magnet and the centre – provoke one to reconstruct at least the impression she made.

We enter here into the region of speculation and guesswork (almost “great heresy”). It is precisely on such margins of reading that the reception of poetry can become a real “thing of imagination”.

I will quote the aforementioned poem by Słonimski. It is known under two titles: *Invokacja* (*Invocation*), which appears in the volume titled *Godzina poezji* and is repeated by the London selection of the author’s poems from 1944¹⁸. The second version comes with the title *Do Wiktorii Colonna* (*To Vittoria Colonna*); this one seems to come from a later time. It appears, for instance, in the author’s *Wybór poezji* (*A Selection of Poetry*) from 1965.

Do Wiktorii Colonna

Jeśli Cię Michał Anioł porównał do słońca,
A siebie do blednącej upodobnił luny,
Jeśli Cię boski Ronsard wysławiał bez końca,
Niezmordowaną ręką w złote bijąc struny,

Jeśli Cię już nazwano słońcem, różą wonną,
Jeśli Cię porównano do dźwięczącej lutni,
Ja dla Ciebie, o Mario Wiktorio Colonna,
Sięgnę wyżej i nazwę Cię smutniej!

To Vittoria Colonna

If Michelangelo compared you to the sun,
And himself likened to a fading moon,
If divine Ronsard praised you with no end,
Striking gold strings with his tireless hand,

If you were called the sun, sweet-scented rose,
If you were compared to resonant lute,
For you I will, oh Maria Vittoria Colonna,
Reach higher and call you more sorrowful!

¹⁷ A. Iwaszkiewicz, *Dzienniki*, Warszawa 1993, p. 68.

¹⁸ Cf. A. Słonimski, *Godzina poezji*, Warszawa 1923; A. Słonimski, *Wybór poezji*, London 1944.

Tyś jest jak miasto wielkie, czarne
i krzykliwe,
Gdzie się stu czartów śmieje - pła-
cze stu aniołów.
Oczy Twe są ogromne, czyste
i żarliwe,
Jak dwie wieże podniebne strzeli-
stych kościołów.

You are like a city, big, black and
loud where
A hundred devils laugh - a hun-
dred angels cry.
Your eyes are enormous, ardent
and pure,
Like soaring towers of lofty
churches.

Nie obejmę Cię wielkiej, a jako cień
lotnej,
Choćby rozpięał ramiona i natężył
siły,
I pragnę - wciąż samotny, Ciebie -
wciąż samotnej.
Ciebie, lutni mej, róży, gwiazdy
i mogiły.

I will not embrace you, great and
ethereal,
Even if I stretch my arms and
strain my arms,
I - still lonely - want you - still
lonely.
You, my lute, my rose, my star and
grave.

Słonimski's silence about Morska is consistent: it includes not only discretion in conversations with his friends and the absence of the artist in his memories. The poet also hides his muse in poetry: in the example quoted above he gives her a pseudonym in the title of the work. Vittoria Colonna, a 16th-century poetess, a friend of Michelangelo, obviously remains beyond suspicion of inspiring the passionate feeling, being a "lute, rose, star, and tomb". At the same time, Słonimski's mysterious dedication seems to be easy to decipher: Colonna is similar to Morska with regard to her versatile education, intellectual independence, and inspiring creative friendship with the artist¹⁹.

The apostrophe at the end of the second stanza is rather characteristic: "Oh Maria Vittoria Colonna". Uttering the name of Morska in this poetic mystification may have brought Słonimski some relief. Both characters, named and unnamed, connect and assimilate with each other. The duplication is symmetrical: Colonna enriches Morska to the same extent as Morska enriches Colonna²⁰. The renaissance poetess is referred to as only "Vittoria" by Leopold Staff, the author of the first translations of Buonarotti's poetry published in 1922, so shortly before *Godzina poezji* Staff writes about the impact of Colonna on the author of *David*:

Michelangelo, who never allowed to take control of himself, yields with confidence and submissiveness to her hands like an inert material. It was

¹⁹ Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547), [in:] *Dawne płomienie. Mała antologia włoskiej poezji miłosnej*, translation and selection by A. Kuciak, introduction by P. Salwa, biograms and edition of the Italian part by A. Jankiewicz, Warszawa 2008, p. 76.

²⁰ In anthologies and textbooks, the 16th-century artist is presented only with the name Vittoria. Cf. J. Heistein, *Historia literatury włoskiej*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1987, p. 106; K. Żaboklicki, *Historia literatury włoskiej*, Warszawa 2008, p. 141.

unearthly love, love of spirits, undisturbed by any breath of the earth. Friendship and affection bound them with knots of Christian faith.²¹

Michelangelo sees a spiritual guide in his muse, the one who is capable of answering his religious anxieties, lifting from doubt. Morska is also Słonimski's guide, albeit not a religious one: she supplements shortcomings in his education, shapes his opinion on current events, sometimes summarises new books. As Krzywicka notes, "Niuta was a woman who was not only nice but also extremely good, immensely intelligent and well-read. She was a source of knowledge for somewhat ignorant Tolek who was, nevertheless, blessed with infallible taste and intuition"²². There is one more thing that the two women from the poem have in common: both are faithful to other men (Morska to her husband, while Colonna is a widow writing poems for her deceased husband, and also unites in spiritual bonds with Christ) as well as they are beyond the reach of their admirers. This is probably why the (real) addressee of the poem still escapes attempts to characterise her; she goes beyond magnifying, paradoxical formulas. She is neither the laughter of devils, nor the cry of angels. It is also impossible to embrace her with stretched arms and all the strength (this attempt seems to repeat the effort of Adam Mickiewicz's Konrad Wallenrod from the Great Improvisation fragment – "The moment of destiny has come today / I will strain the arms of my soul as I may"²³). This is why the superlative of admiration seems to be not adoration, but sorrow ("For you I will (...) / Reach higher and call you more sorrowful"). This is sorrow of elusiveness, unfulfilled desire, and the biggest paradox of unhappy feeling – shared loneliness.

In the period of the birth of 'Pikador', Słonimski – as Iwaszkiewicz said – "only existed, as if, in her [Morska's] shade, he moved in the orbit drawing an arc only around her, he was the echo of her sentences, tastes, sayings and convictions"²⁴. After one hundred years, the situation reverses: it is the poet's muse, mysterious today, who is just an echo of his poems. Interestingly, a similar role of a mere reference – a shadow – was given to Colonna in the paintings of Michelangelo. There is a hypothesis that the artist immortalised her in the Sistine Chapel. It is said that the female figure who Madonna from the fresco titled *The Last Judgment* is looking at has Colonna's face. This figure, hidden behind St. Lawrence, is barely perceptible, though²⁵.

*

How did other Skamander poets remember Morska? Another interesting trace is provided by a poem by Iwaszkiewicz.

²¹ L. Staff, *Michał Anioł i jego poezje*, Warszawa 1977, p. 108.

²² I. Krzywicka, *Wyznania gorszyckie*, p. 207.

²³ A. Mickiewicz, *Dziady*, part III, Kraków 2010, p. 158.

²⁴ J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Aleja przyjaciół*, p. 78.

²⁵ A. Cirocka, *Vittoria Colonna – muza i przyjaciółka Michała Anioła*, <https://niezlasztuka.net/o-sztuce/michal-anioł-i-jego-muza-vittoria-colonna/> (accessed: 20.02.2019).

Żegnałem heroinę w ukłonach
barokko,
Za tło uśmiechów mając wzgórzyste Marokko.

Odeszła – palmom równa na piasku obrusie,
Oddając igrom wiatru tren i pióro strusie.

Zwycięsko na pokoje wracający,
dumny –
Oglądam niewolnicę pod cieniem kolumny.

Murzynkę uśmiechniętą, co na Remingtonie,
przepisuje mój sonet o wyblakłym tonie.

I bade the heroine farewell in bows of barocco,
The background of smiles being the hills of Marocco.

She's gone – equal to palms on the tablecloth of sand,
Returning her train and ostrich feather to the wind.

I return to my chambers in victory, all proud –
I watch the slave under the shadow of the column.

A smiling African girl who on the Remington
Keeps on rewriting my sonnet of a faded tone.

The poem shows characteristic features of Iwaszkiewicz's early works, such as images revealing his fascination with the world of the Orient; elaborate, exotic rhymes; a juxtaposition of colourful and odorous exuberance with carefully staged artificiality. Tomasz Wroczyński notices that:

In Iwaszkiewicz's aesthetic inclinations from the Ukrainian period of *Oktostychy* it is possible to detect fascination with the works by Oscar Wilde, an English prose writer, representing extreme aestheticism. After Wilde Iwaszkiewicz postulates the superiority of art over life, culture over nature. The lexis of *Oktostychy* turns out to be unusually characteristic, making references to Bizantine ornamentation, imitating the wealth and splendour of iconographic images²⁶.

Iwaszkiewicz the aesthete puts on masks on the character's face, presents her in different roles. He dresses her up, arranges stunning scenery, tries different conventions. The meeting of Morocco – famous for aromatic spices and elaborate decorations – with a baroque bow is a quintessence of artificiality; an intriguingly decorative, though incoherent, image which is difficult to visualise: its uniqueness is stressed by the play of rhymes containing foreign sounds (Morocco, *barocco*). Perhaps the name of the African country also conceals the confirmation of the dedication: this lexeme does not need much to become an anagram of the surname of the addressee (the role of *Oktostychy* is known in disseminating assonance in Polish poetry).

²⁶ T. Wroczyński, *O twórczości Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza*, "Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego im. Adama Mickiewicza" 1994, no. 29, p. 90.

The quoted poem is a poetic definition of grotesque, in which the pathos of heroic farewell against the background of a hilly landscape clashes with the necessity to work on Remington, while the proud heroine, towering like a palm, is capable of transforming herself into a slave hidden in the shade of the column.

The creation of both women (although there is one heroine of the poem) harmonises with the memories of Iwaszkiewicz about Morska: the artist reminded him of an artificial flower, he associated her with the smell of cinnamon and myrrh.

Could *Groteska* [A Grotesque], written "to Maria Morska", be treated as a proof of recognition for her artistry? In the poem, apart from the humorous play on conventions and juggling with images, one can also notice respect for the fascinating ability to undergo metamorphosis, for Orientalised distinctness. If rewriting a sonnet "of a faded tone" can be compared to declamation, the smiling African woman certainly acquires new, exotic colours for the poem; colours which even the poet-aesthete would not be able to imagine.

*

The authors of the quoted poems associate Morska with travelling – in time and space. As if she was making them match her originality, invent poetic formula and strategies adequate to her charisma. It seems that she also inspires one to look for pseudonyms and roles which would be able to express the impression of changeability accompanying her; a sense of glimmer, being-different, never the same.

Depicted in poetry in this way, transmuted from the matter of life into the matter of art, she is similar to Morska preserved in memories. Thus Krzywicka's account seems to be rather typical.

I met her (...) on the stairs, she flew down from above and stood almost half way through the stairs, looking me straight in the eye with her sea gaze as if she had been expecting to see me there, and she sked me a question: Have you read the latest poem by Lilka? Morska was in the habit of not talking about trivial things, which was rare in women. Either she had something important to say and this was usually the case, or she was able to be beautifully silent. And then, without much further ado, she began to recite straight away.

Rudą nocą, pod mostem, w Sekwanie Płynie kotka przemokła i sina. Pod następnym mostem niespodziewanie Przyłączyła się do niej dziewczyna.	On red night, under the bridge, in the Seine A cat is swimming, all livid and soaked. Under the next bridge out of a sudden The cat is joined by a beautiful girl.
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We were deeply moved by the piercing beauty of this poem and its terrifying content. Standing on the stairs, we were silent for a long time²⁷.

²⁷ I. Krzywicka, *op.cit.*, pp. 235-236.

Wyznania gorszycielki (*The Confessions of a Scandalist*) is a work that seizes on the halo of clandestinity that accompanies the artist. It seems that in the impression which she made, her ability to instantly sublimate the ordinariness into figurativeness was of utmost importance; that moving on to poetic substance while excluding that which is merely a convention. This ability brings to mind the invention of performance art, in which the artist treats themselves (and their body) as a tool of art, whereas the recipient, knocked out of the formula of behaviour known to them – involved in a new stunning reality – has to face otherness.

Hence, perhaps, the intensity of “experiencing” Morska. The poetic records of the impression which she made resemble the reception of works of art. The literary image of the “Skamander’s only daughter” is a testimony to a moment of delight, an illumination, and – possibly most importantly – a spontaneous, artistic co-participation. Anna Iwaszkiewicz, being under the powerful spell of Morska, writes:

I have the impression that I saw her as if in some fog, like you see the audience playing on the stage of an amateur theatre; you only feel stage fright and such strange unconsciousness in which the words of the role come out, as if mechanically, of ourselves. When I left I thought that this charm was gone. I did not feel any emotion, I still had her in front of my eyes and again I kept seeing her eyes, her extraordinary, incredibly beautiful, terrifying eyes.²⁸

The accounts of the artists of the epoch are dominated by the impression that Morska’s declamation deteriorated with time. As Iwaszkiewicz recalls, “The reciter no longer enjoyed popularity in the following years. The scarcity of her performances in front of the public caused that stage fright hampered her inborn temperament.”²⁹ In the late 1920s, the artist gave up her stage career and from 1924 wrote columns to *Wiadomości Literackie* under the name of Mariusz Dawn. She returned her “train and ostrich feather” and appeared in a new role instead: that of a shrewd observer involved in political and social affairs.

It is worth finishing the search for Morska in poetry with a text which she often used to declaim: *Le Saut du tremplin* (*The Leap from the Springboard*) by Théodore de Banville in the translation by Miriam. Characteristically, Iwaszkiewicz remembered not its title but the incipit – as if, after years, he could still hear the artist’s voice. He mentions the wonderful clown rather than the leap from the springboard both in *Aleja przyjaciół* (*The Avenue of Friends*) as well as in *Książka moich wspomnień* (*The Book of My Memories*). Morska’s magic requires me to include at least a fragment of the work evoking the muse of the ‘Pikador’ poets, since the reciter’s artistic directness is the praise of poetry: a bold leap from the springboard “up to the unknown heights”, a flight among the stars.

²⁸ A. Iwaszkiewicz, *Dzienniki*, p. 81.

²⁹ J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Książka moich wspomnień*, p. 197.

(...)

“Wciąż w górą, w dal, pod niebios sklep!
Aż w te lazury, których step
Ruchomej turmy naszej dachem!
Aż po tych Wschodów krwawych próg,
Zkąd płomienisty wstaje bóg,
Szalony gniewem i przestrachem.

Wyżej, wciąż wyżej! jeszcze stąd
Giełdziarzy w złocie widzę rząd,
Krytyków, panny żądne sideł
I realistów świat napłask.
Powietrza! światła! w błękit!
 w blask! Ach, skrzydeł! skrzydeł!
 skrzydeł! skrzydeł!”

I z giętkiej deski swej, jak ptak,
Klown wzbił się w lot szalenie tak,
Że śród powietrznej przebił jazdy
– Przy wrzawie trąb – płocienny
 dach
I, w pragnień swych wciąż tonąc
 snach,
Potoczył się pomiędzy gwiazdy.

(...)

Higher still, up to the pure sky
To that lapis lazuli whose azure
Covers our moving prison!
To those rosy orients
Where blazing Gods walk about,
Mad with anger and fright.

Higher, higher still! from here
I see a row of stockjobbers in gold,
Critics, maids greedy of snares
And the world of realists all flat.
Higher! further! air! the blue!
Wings! wings! wings! wings!

And from his bendy springboard,
 like a bird,
The clown took off so madly that
In his aerial ride he punctured
– With din of trumpets – the canvas
 roof
And, still drowning in his dreams,
Bowled up among the stars.

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SUMMARY

The paper focuses on the figure of Maria Morska, a reciter dubbed "Skamander muse", who had a versatile and multifaceted impact on the literary circles of her day. I am conducting the quest for the artist (elusive today in the face of scarce biographical sources) through interpreting the poems for which she was a magnet and a centre (i.e. *Inwokacja* by Antoni Słonimski and *Groteska* by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz). The image of Morska emerging from them presents a very original figure: one that was admired and received intensely.

The poetic inscriptions of the impression which the Skamander muse made often bring to mind the reception of works of art. Morska refines commonness into a metaphor. Her literary image is a testimony to a moment of delight, dazzle, and – perhaps more importantly – spontaneous, artistic co-participation. She inspires one to look for pseudonyms and roles which would be capable of expressing the impression that accompanied her – one of changeability, glimmer, being different, never being the same.

Keywords

Maria Morska, Anna Iwaszkiewicz, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Antoni Słonimski, Skamander, Skamander's muse, poetry

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Panienka, Godzina Polski, 1916: Irena Tuwim's Literary Debut

To most of us, Irena Tuwim (1898-1987) is known predominantly (and, unfortunately, often only) as the younger sister of Julian Tuwim (1894-1953)¹. The siblings function as a tandem also in children's literature, which is confirmed by the recently published volume titled *Julian i Irena Tuwim dzieciom*² (*Julian and Irena Tuwim for Children*). Some know that if it had not been for Irena Tuwim, we would not have the masterly renditions of *Winnie the Pooh* or *Mary Poppins* as well as many other books for children, youth, and adults (Tuwimówna³ translated works from English, German, and Russian – several hundred titles in total). She received many prizes as a translator and she was recognisable as a sister of an outstanding poet, especially by the readers of the wonderful *Łódzkie pory roku* (*Łódź Seasons*) – these are memories, reprinted several times, from the childhood spent together with her brother Julian in Łódź. This does not mean that it is not necessary to take a closer look at this one-of-a-kind symbiosis of the Tuwim siblings, peruse carefully (and publish critically) their correspondence, a priceless document of communication between brother and sister also on issues of literature, art,

¹ Cf. A. Zawiszeńska, *Siostra Szekspira, czyli Irena Tuwim*, [in:] *Twórczość niepozorna. Szkice o literaturze*, eds. J. Grądziel-Wójcik, A. Kwiatkowska, L. Marzec, Kraków 2015, pp. 29-51.

² *Julian i Irena Tuwim dzieciom*, illustrated by A. Pekalski, Warszawa 2012. The selection includes the following works by Irena Tuwim: *Marek Wagarek*, *O pingwinie Kleofasku*, *Co okręt wiezie*, and *Pampilio*.

³ In Polish, the suffix '-ówna' – when added to a masculine surname – forms the surname of a daughter, i.e. it also indicates that a woman has not been married. [translator's note]

and world views⁴. Only during the war, when they were on different sides of the Atlantic, they wrote 170 letters to each other⁵.

Hence one reads Irena Tuwim as a source of knowledge on someone and something different than herself: on Julian Tuwim, on the Łódź of the early 20th century, her two husbands – Marek Eiger (Stefan Napierski⁶), an excellent bibliophile, essayist, critic and translator, but also a homosexual (which may be of importance to a heterosexual woman), whom she divorced; and Julian Stawiński⁷, a lawyer, diplomat, writer and translator, but also a compulsive alcoholic (which usually does not guarantee marital bliss either). Finally, the letters also concerned literatures in other languages. After all, Irena Tuwim is primarily a source of knowledge about herself; she is a poet of the female fate in the 20th century (as I will try to indicate shortly, starting with her debut poem); an outstanding poet associated with the Skamander group and appreciated as much as Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska or Kazimiera Ihłakowiczówna in the interwar period. Before 1939, Tuwimówna published three volumes of poetry in well-known publishing houses and they were very well received by (I shall add: heavily masculinised and paternalist) literary criticism of that time. These included: *24 wiersze* (24 Poems) (Tow. Wydawnicze, 1921), *Listy* (Letters) (W. Czarski, 1926), *Miłość szczęśliwa* (Happy Love) (F. Hoesick, 1930). After publishing the last of the said volumes, the author became a member of the PEN-Club. Though the contemporary eye sees it in the context of historical poetry – i.e. comparatively – Irena Tuwim, as a poet, was brave linguistically, consistent in her poetic imagery, also in erotic poems. If I wanted to use more old-fashioned terms, I would say that she was authentic. This is a truth about a dramatic existence (the childhood of the Tuwims was overshadowed by the ill-matched marriage of their parents and their mother's mental disease; an unhappy wife of a gay man writes about "happy love" and excellent children's poetry will be later written by a woman who lost her child) and, at the same time, about imagination that would stop at nothing.

Irena's baby did not survive; the beloved dog Kubuś, to whom Julian Tuwim wrote wonderful letters (from America to Great Britain), died very young⁸ (AA, 127-129). And, as Anna Augustyniak recalls in the title of the first Polish biography of the poet, "She did not die of love"⁹; she lived very long, working, writing for children, translating, commenting, reminding; in a word – being a kind of institution.

⁴ Cf. Letters of Julian Tuwim to his sister Irena Tuwim-Stawińska, from the collections of the National Library in Warsaw, vols. 1-2 [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

⁵ The information is cited after: Julian Tuwim, *Listy do przyjaciół pisarzy*, ed. T. Januszewski, Warszawa 1979, p. 7. The abbreviation LDPP is used later in the article, together with page number.

⁶ Irena Tuwim and Marek Eiger were married from 1922 to 1930.

⁷ After the divorce from Eiger, Irena Tuwim was married to Julian Stawiński from 1935.

⁸ A. Augustyniak, *Irena Tuwim. "Nie umarłam z miłości"*. Biografia, Warszawa 2016, pp. 127-129. Later in the paper referred to as AA, together with page number.

⁹ "I did not die of love" are the words of Irena Tuwim from the poem starting with the words "I'm lying on the bottom of water, on the bottom of the river" from the volume titled *Miłość szczęśliwa*, [54] – they are at the beginning of the second stanza of this short poem.

Upon returning from emigration caused by the war, Irena Tuwim publishes selections of her pre-war poems (re-issued, popular among readers, and invariably appreciated by experts), but she no longer writes, with occasional exceptions, new poems (mostly on the time of the war)¹⁰. It seems that some part of her creative powers died. Coming back today to her debut poem, one can find the poet anew, buried by our times under piles of remakes and (unfortunately) simplifications of *Winnie the Pooh*, reprints of *The Story of Ferdinand*, *Mary Poppins*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, books by Edith Nesbit, Edward Fenton or *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, and, finally, subsequent editions of *Co okręt wiezie (What the Ship Carries)*, *Marek-Wagarek*, *Pampilio*, or *O pingwinku Kleofasku (On Kleofasek the Penguin)*.

The author of Tuwimówna's monograph writes:

Irena made a debut in a Łódź and Warsaw evening newspaper, a Polish language daily titled *Godzina Polski* published by the Germans during World War I. The connection of the German occupier with the newspaper caused that Poles dubbed it "gadzina polska" (Polish viper) and hence the name *gadzinówka*¹¹. It was a social and political as well as literary daily newspaper. On Sunday, 11 June 1916, readers could see the poem *Panienna (A Maiden)* signed by Irena J. Tuwimówna on the twelfth page, in the middle of the column. This J., taken from the name Julek, was supposed to buoy her up and was her answer to a similar gesture of her brother. (AA, 57-59)

Irena Agnieszka¹² was born ("with a clear face, no birthmark") on 22 August, 1898 (one can often find the incorrect date of 1900 in library catalogues; the poet herself also used 1902 as the year of her birth, e.g. in her PEN-Club membership card) at 5 Szulc Passage, in the flat no. 13 in Łódź (AA, 28), as the second child of assimilated Jews Izidor Tuwim and Adela née Krukowska. Therefore, at the time of the publication of her debut poem, the student of Eliza Orzeszkowa Gymnasium for Girls at Spacerowa Street in Łódź¹³ was nearly eighteen years old. Her brother, a poet and Esperantist, exchanged correspondence with Leopold Staff from as early as 1911, and was in love with Stefania ("staffly in love" and "steffly in love", as he writes himself).

Before the poem of the talented gymnasium student is quoted, it is worth making a digression about the early origins of the word 'gadzinówka',

¹⁰ During the war and emigration years, Irena Tuwim published three poems and an article in *Wiadomości Polskie* in 1940, and subsequent ones in 1942: *Paryż (Paris)* and *Warszawa (Warsaw)* (26 IV 1942, no. 111) as well as *Powroty (Returns)* (10 V 1942, no. 113). The opinions of the siblings on the issue of publishing in Polish emigration newspapers were divided. In his letter to Antoni Słonimski of July 1942 (sent from White Plains), Julian Tuwim writes: "As for Mietek and his associates, I don't care much about this lot. But why does Lilka publish there? My Ira has been already told off for working for *Wiadomości*" (LDPP, 214)

¹¹ The derogatory word "gadzinówka" is the result of a pun: the word "godzina" (hour) in the name of the newspaper *Godzina Polska* (*The Polish Hour*) is substituted with a very similar word "gadzina", which in Polish denotes a viper, a small poisonous snake or, metaphorically, a very unpleasant person whom you cannot trust. [translator's note]

¹² Hence the later Polish name of Mary Poppins.

¹³ On the same street there was a free library for labourers and the Jewish Literary and Musical Association 'Hazomir' ['a nightingale' in Hebrew] (AA, 59).

which was typically associated with the press dependent on the oppressor at the time of the General Government during World War Two. In one of the interwar dictionaries of the Polish language one can read:

“*gadzinówka* = *gadzinowy* of (viper) newspaper, using *gadzinowy* (viper) funds”

“*gadzinowy* [adjective from *gadzina*] (viper); figuratively *gadzinowy* (viper) fund = e.g. used by the German government for fighting the Polish nationality; a fund for secret purposes”¹⁴.

Thus, the word was settled in the Polish language of the interwar period, which is no longer obvious today, and it is due to the Second World War oppressor that it was established in Polish for good. Coming back to the poet and her debut, here is the poem:

Wie o tem, że jest szara, brzydka
i nieśmiała,
Chodzi w długiej, „na wyrost”
uszytej sukience –
W szkole powodem śmiechów
i drwinek się stała
Przez zwykłą małomówność i czer-
wone ręce.

Życie jej jest jak senna nuda
jednolita,
Jak szara beznadzieja jesiennych
wieczorów...
Do szkoły chodzi, wraca, uczy się
i czyta
Długie, nudne powieści nieznanych
autorów.

Czasami wyjmie nuty z zapylonej
szafki,
Z pod palców jej popłynie melodya
fałszywa,
Lub na zjółkłych klawiszach tępę
bębną wprawki,
Nie wiedząc, że swą własną tragedię wygrywa.

She knows she is grey, ugly and shy,
She wears a long dress a size up –
At school she became the laughing
stock
Because of her reticence and red
hands.

Her life resembles constant
boredom,
Like grey despair of autumn
afternoons...
She goes to school, returns, learns
and reads
Long boring novels of unknown
authors.

Sometimes she takes notes from
a dusty shelf,
And a false melody flows from under
her fingers,
Or she patters dumb exercises on
the yellowed keys,
Not knowing that she is playing her
own tragedy.

¹⁴ M. Arct, *Słownik ilustrowany języka polskiego*, vol. I, 3rd edition [1928], p. 158, “*panienka*” [later referred to as MA, together with volume number (Roman numeral) and page number (Arabic numeral)].

The author of the biography of Irena Tuwim comments on her debut in the following manner:

She made her debut with a poem which made references to classical style and which depicted an image of a maiden from rather poor middle class. Did she write about herself? She is more likely to have created a complex portrait, but it was important that she showed a girl who was learning. It was the beginning of the new century and she, Irka Tuwimówna, could also get some education (...)¹⁵. (AA, 59)

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Perhaps there are more important things in this poem than the fact of it being a regular Polish alexandrine with a caesura after the seventh syllable, with regular ABAB rhyme scheme (alternate rhymes in the four-line stanza). This is precisely how a maiden would have written about herself (and this is how Irka wrote as a 13-year-old – AA, 53-55). The poem *Panienka* is, in fact, a paradigmatic portrait of a young female from a rather poor family, all internally contradictory. Both Young-Polish (with obligatory boredom which in the third stanza changes into a note, so it is so boring that it becomes voiceless¹⁶), and linguistically suggesting new lightness (“she will patter dumb exercises”); and slightly moralistic (which is a bit funny in an older teenager) and, at the same time, written with a real sense of humour (what is more fascinating to read than “Long, boring novels of unknown authors”?); full of sober observation (as indicated by the first stanza), and full of complexes (a long dress a size up, red hands), which is depicted in the same stanza. A similar situation is with the style of this poem. This is such a dress a size up. The same goes for the title (it seems to be accompanied by ironic quotation marks).

Who is, therefore, that “maiden” in 1916? It is easier to say who she is not: she is no longer a girl (who reads novels for girls; a maiden, as we know, “reads / Long, boring novels of unknown authors”), she still is not a woman (who would read romances). The following advertisement can be found on the pages of the issue 105/1916 of *Godzina Polski*:

A company office in Prussian Silesia
is looking for
a junior bookkeeper
to run the current account
(*Kontokorrente*)
and a MAIDEN
who can write on a Stoewer typewriter
and stenograph in Polish and German.
Necessary knowledge of Polish and German.
Applications only by Christian persons are considered¹⁷.

¹⁵ Earlier, i.e. as a 13-year-old, Tuwimówna wrote poems which her elder brother Julian would steal and rewrite (with malicious commentary) (AA, 54, image of 1911).

¹⁶ Another pun. In Polish, the voiced word “*nuda*” (boredom) changes into the voiceless “*nuta*” (a musical note). [translator’s note]

¹⁷ *Godzina Polski* 1916, no. 105, 13 April 1916.

(Irena Tuwimówna could not be the Maiden written in capital letters in the advertisement: admittedly, her surname indicates her single marital status¹⁸, but the candidate is 'disqualified' by her Jewishness.)

In the interwar period, the Polish 'panienka' (maiden) was, to quote a dictionary of the epoch again, a diminutive form of 'panna' (maid) (like it is today), but it also denoted "a young girl"; it was also observed that the vocative case "maid" was "a way of addressing a servant in a restaurant or an inn, etc." (MA, I, 498); maidens as well as maids are no longer to be found (as designates); they are only relicts in the language ("eligible maiden" or "maidenly", meaning 'virgin', 'innocent', 'unaware'). In the early 20th century, one hundred years ago, these meanings (due to the existence of living designates) were alive themselves. In turn, the author of the poem, Irena Tuwim, is more reminiscent (in the painting *Piosenkarz* by Roman Kramsztyk from 1924) of a *poëtesse*¹⁹ than a maid (AA, 25).

The word 'maiden' rarely returns in the subsequent poetic works of Tuwimówna. If it does, this is more in the context of the dramatic contrast between the fate of a married woman as compared to the freedom of a single woman (as in the poem *Zdarzenie*, [57]²⁰)

It seems that the author of the poem *Panienka* consciously (precisely un-maidenly) distances herself from the colloquial use of this word, and signing her debut with the maiden name "Tuwimówna" is not only a sign of respecting the social norm but also playing with it (hence her brother's initial as a symmetrical gesture with regard to his gesture). The poem is definitely not "maiden-like" (MA, I, 498) but un-maidenly (perhaps) due to the need to distinguish herself from her mother ("it was romantic, unhappy Mother writing in secret her «memoirs» disdained by the Father"²¹, and the daughter made her debut, revealed her thought in verse, in poetry). In *Kwiaty polskie* (*Polish Flowers*), Julian Tuwim writes about his mother visiting a summer resort in Inowłodz (this "provincial panopticon"²²) in 1912:

Bo księstwo o manierach
dworskich,
Rody Rotwandów i Przeworskich,
Poznańscy ani Natansony
Nie zaglądali w tamte strony.
Oni po Ritzach. Biarritzach,

As the duchy with their court
manners
Houses of Rotwand and
Przeworski,
The Poznańscis and the Natansons
Did not visit these regions at all.
They chose to go to Ritz or Biarritz,

¹⁸ See footnote 3.

¹⁹ Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz wrote about her in *Marginalia* in the following way: "She was very affected, stylised for a «poetess»" (cited after: AA, 62).

²⁰ All numbers given in square brackets refer to page numbers from Irena Tuwim's *Wiersze wybrane*, Warszawa 1958.

²¹ I. Tuwim, *Łódzkie pory roku*, Warszawa 1958, p. 10. Later referred to as LPR, together with page number.

²² J. Tuwim, *Kwiaty polskie*, 3rd edition, Warszawa 1954, p. 20. Later referred to as KP, together with page number.

Ostendach, badach, zagranicach,
A moi łódzcy Goldbergowie
I co lepszego w Tomaszowie -
Zjeżdżali tu. I tu, nieśmiała,
Panieńsko smutna i nerwowa,
Z Irą i Julkiem przyjeżdżała
Pani Adela Tuwimowa.
KP, 21, emphasis by KKK

Ostend, resorts and foreign
countries,
And the Łódź family of Goldberg
And the better ones in Tomaszów -
Arrived here. And it was here
where shy
Maidenly miserable and tense
Mrs Adela Tuwimowa
Arrived with Irena and Julek.

Irena Tuwim used to design herself starting with her first poem: unmaiden, un-miserable (dashes are used here on purpose). She got married, she got divorced, she wrote, created, lived. Not everything was successful, but this is a topic for another story. Only her-story. This story would contain both the translation of *Anna Karenina* (on which Irena Stawińska was working in Ostrowia in the 1930s) as well as a poem devoted to her, and the poem titled *Madame Bovary*, the poem titled *Marceline Desbordes-Valmore*, as well as translations (paraphrases) of this major French poet. In the 1930s, the author of *Panienna* translated the book titled *The End and the Beginning* by Hermynia zur Mühlen, an Austrian aristocrat and then a communist (AA, 111-112).

It is known that Irena Tuwim published other 'portraits' of men and women of those times in *Godzina Polska*. Agata Stawiszyńska writes about it in her draft titled "Życie literackie w Łodzi w czasie I wojny światowej" (*Literary life of Łódź during World War I*): In the years of World War I the younger sister of Julian Tuwim, Irena, made her debut as a poet (...). The first poems of the young poet appeared in *Godzina Polska* first in 1916. The sixteen-year-old Irena [the author of the drafts gives the incorrect date of 1900 as Irena Tuwim's year of birth, which is often repeated in the sources instead of 1898 - a note by KKK] tended to present the greyness of human life devoid of any hope for a better future. Characters of her poems included ordinary city dwellers who lived in an almost automatic way, not going beyond the roles which were assigned to them. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the young poet entitled this cycle of poems *Szarzy ludzie* (*Grey People*). The eponymous characters become part of the grey background of Łódź: dirty, crowded streets, gloomy dwellings of downtown tenement houses. (...) [Stawiszyńska quotes a fragment of *Panienna* here as the most paradigmatic poem - a note by KKK].

A similar atmosphere is depicted in the poems *Nauczycielka* (*A Teacher*) or *Szary człowiek* (*A Grey Man*) from the same collection. Apart from the monotony of life they show the gap and complete lack of understanding between a miserable man and a man free from worry. Another frequent motif includes passing people by in the street, which is a symbol of various fates and different aims. In her poems from the cycle *Miasto* (*A City*), Tuwimówna presented the sadness and greyness of the city nooks and crannies known to her from autopsy. Some of her works of that time also show the frozen bourgeois world of dusty living rooms in which

it is no use looking for life as in *Po staroświecku*²³ (*The Old-fashioned Way*),
W salonie (*In the Living Room*)²⁴.

It is worth quoting fragments of poems collected in early cycles as they are like a pendulum between the poetics of the picture to be found earlier in Polish poetry and the Skamander poetics coming into view on the horizon (Tuwimówna seems to already sense this modernity, the colloquial language of 'Pikador' authors, but still, like a chronicler assisting Bolesław Prus with verse, she notes what she can observe):

Nauczycielka (*A Teacher*) (*Godzina Polski*, 2 VIII 1916, no. 220, p. 6):

W bucikach wykrzywionych,
 brzydka i niemłoda
 Spieszny nauczycielka ze szkoły po
 blocie,
 Marzec. Deszcz pada chłodny.
 Z dachów kapie woda,
 Mokną brudne ulice w długiej,
 zimnej słońce.

In her bent shoes, ugly and no
 longer young
 The teacher is rushing in the mud
 from school,
 March. The rain is cool. It is drip-
 ping from roofs,
 Dirty streets get wet in long cold
 rainy weather.

Szary człowiek (*A Grey Man*) (*Godzina Polski*, 25 VII 1916, no. 215, p. 6):

Czasem tylko, gdy z wolna przez
 ulicę kroczy,
 Spojrzy się na przechodniów rozba-
 wione grona
 I jak gdyby zawinił, w dół opuszcza
 oczy,
 Wtuliwszy szarą głowę w chude
 swe ramiona.

Only sometimes as he strides
 through the street,
 He'll look at groups of amused
 passers-by
 And he looks down as if it was his
 fault,
 Having ducked his head into his
 thin arms.

W salonie (*In the living room*) (*Godzina Polski*, 15 XI 1916, no. 317, p. 8):

Przed oknem stoi pani w pół-ciem-
 nym salonie
 Na ulicy ostatni słychać świd-
 fabryk.
 Milknie miasto powoli, cichnie
 hałas dziki –
 Wszystko w zmierzchu liliowym,
 jak w śnie dzikim tonie.

There is a lady in a half-dark living
 room
 Whistle of factories dies down in
 the street.
 The city slowly gets quiet, wild
 noise fades –
 All sinks in lily twilight, like in
 wild dream.

²³ *Godzina Polski* 1916, no. 341, 8 XII 1916, p. 7.

²⁴ A. Stawiszyńska, *Życie literackie w Łodzi w czasie I wojny światowej*, "Acta Universitatis Lodzienensis. Folia Litteraria Polonica" 2012, no. 4(18), pp. 73-74.

In the last fragment it is already possible to hear as if obviously futuristic tones of Polish futurists (early Tuwim, early Iwaszkiewicz, Bruno Jasieński).

In the volumes of poems published in the interwar period, the poet does not lose her sense of observation, but she no longer uses the quasi-epic poetics of the picture, she does not write in the third person. The lyrical 'I' appears there, often full of real dramatism [*Tam (There)*, 18; *Jak umierałam (When I Was Dying)*, 20], and if they are portraits, they are extremely clear, like the three-part poem *Madame Bovary* [28-29] (from the volume *Listy*) or a miniature titled *Romans (A Love Affair)* [40] (from the volume *Miłość szczęśliwa*). Around 1930, Irena Tuwim writes poems which are more than bold, like the one with the incipit "Wypoczywamy z Bogiem" (We are resting with God) [48]. It is possible to find poetic prose in her last pre-war book: hence the author of *Panienna* becomes bolder, shaping the poetic matter in different ways (though not necessarily changing the topic: *Nuda za oknami (Boredom Behind the Window)*, [59]; *Miłość (Love)*, [66]).

During the Second World War, she clearly identifies with the poetic and ideological choices of her brother, Julian, when he writes his manifesto titled *My, Żydzi polscy (We, Polish Jews)*²⁵. Still on the other side of the ocean, Irena writes a poem titled *Moment (A Moment)*, starting with the words "Faces of young Jewish girls, my sisters led to genocide, / were not feminine or poetic. / Oh, no!" [93].

Interestingly, it is worth remembering that the poem titled *Miejsce (The Place)*, accompanied by a motto from her brother Julian: "I will not go", is the last poem in both Irena Tuwim's choices of her poetry (identical) of 1958 and of 1979. This is a declaration of some kind: included not only in the title and the motto (an obvious gesture of reference, similar to that in the initial in Irena J. Tuwimówna, with which the poet signed her debut, a compositional framing device), but also in the content and the form. This poem by Irena can be stylistically confused with the poem by Julian.

As Irena Tuwim confesses in *Łódzkie pory roku*, she becomes a poet under the mighty influence of her brother:

There is less and less space on the shelves: thick books of "Chimera" and "Sfinks" appear, navy blue and white ones from the "Sympozjon" publishing house, volumes of "Insel-Verlagu" in vivid, colourful covers, and poems, poems, poems! Zygmunt Różycki, Kazimierz Wroczyński, Jan Stanisław Mar, Dębicki, Tetmajer, Łochwicka, Zawistowska, and Savitri, and they are all overshadowed, like a blooming branch, by Staff.

There was a lot of melancholy, mists, tears and sadness everywhere. Under the influence of these books and the poetic atmosphere, which prevailed in our home, I began to write poems myself. They were, naturally, about melancholy as well as about anemones, agaves and arumas, even though I had no idea how they all looked like. (ŁPR, 103)

²⁵ And then, after the Kielce massacre in 1946, he said bitterly: "I dreamt of the Poland of Lublin but I found the Poland of Kielce" (AA, 153).

Thus, the primary poetic impulse was – in 1911 – auratic and typical of the Young Poland. In 1916, the year of her newspaper debut, things turn out to be slightly more complicated.

It is a topic for another paper that the siblings steal each other's poems (the 17-year-old, let me add, stole inept verse of his 13-year-old sister and supplied them with a malicious commentary) and that they steal each other's rhymes – it is known who stole from whom (one could make quite a big catalogue of their common consonances in their children's poems); that they are siblings who derive pleasure from making pastiches of each other. (In addition, it is all very vigorous, puerile, and characteristic of Skamander... I will not add that it is "of the spirit" as it is more "of the body").

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SUMMARY

The author of the article deals with the poetic newspaper debut of Irena Tuwim (1898-1987), an outstanding author and translator of children's literature, but also a poet who is forgotten or read only on the margin of the literary output of her brother, Julian Tuwim (1894-1953). The poem titled *Panienna* (A Maiden), published in *Godzina Polski* in 1916, is hereby subjected to a contextual analysis and referred to other poems by Irena Tuwim as well as confronted with her existence, also in the auto-emancipatory dimension.

Keywords

Irena Tuwim, Polish poetry, debut, fate, emancipation

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The Battle of the Skamander¹

“In the ‘Picador’ period and later in the Skamander period, we were terrible. Young, witty, cruel, and, to make things worse, with money. Simply disgusting”, as Antoni Słonimski reminisced on his youth². Sometimes, their wittiness – and certainly their cruelty – was equalled by that of Adolf Nowaczyński. Therefore, in this respect, though not only it, there must have been some rivalry between them.

The relationships between Skamandrites and the leading commentators of the nationalist camp were not easy. As Jan Lechoń indicated in *Dziennik*, Nowaczyński fascinated Mieczysław Grydzewski³. This was why until the end of the interwar period – despite some prior disputes, which I shall discuss later on – there was a space reserved for him in the *Wiadomości Literackie*, though Grydzewski printed only his historical texts. It was Kazimierz Wierzyński who was on a first-name basis with Nowaczyński (and he published the latter one’s texts in his Poznań-based *Kultura*). As for Słonimski, the situation was more complicated, which led to a duel of a kind that is worthy of a story.

The satirist and dramatist, one of the greatest writers of the second period of the Young Poland, met the nearly twenty years younger sketch artist (and secretly a poet) in Warsaw occupied by Kaiser’s forces, in the editorial

¹ The title was proposed in *Kronika Tygodniowa* in the “Wiadomości Literackie” journal, 1927, issue 25 of 19 June. It was Antoni Słonimski’s second ever “Chronicle”.

² A. Słonimski, *Załatwione odmownie. Seria druga*, Warsaw 1964, p. 91. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

³ In March 1921, Lechoń – still ill after an attempted suicide – was so focused on the visit of Nowaczyński and Helena Sulima, his sister-in-law, that he ignored a visit by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, which humiliated the latter greatly: “I have never and nowhere been welcomed worse”. Cf. J. Iwaszkiewicz, *Książka moich wspomnień*, Kraków 1983, p. 373.

office of the satirist *Sowizdrzał* weekly. "At that time, I ate at the Dakowski pastry shop in Napoleon Square. The pastry cook enabled us to eat for free once a week in return for publishing his announcement in the *Sowizdrzał*. He had the right to hold our editorial meetings there enjoying free yeast cakes and excellent coffee with cream", as Słonimski reminisced. "Even Wi-nawer, Nowaczyński, Rzymowski, and Lechoń, as well as the painters Romanowicz and Grabowski came in"⁴. The description of the rest of the week of the brotherhood was depicted by Nowaczyński himself, who, actually, at that time was someone like a deserter: "Terrible poverty and misery: rubber collars (literally), nettle coats (literally); the better clothes already sold. Eating: groats, flour, saccharin, dry vegetables, black bread from the noble Zyglarski in Bracka St., who supported the writer and journalist community and who was patient as Job. Black coffee made from peas or beans, pipe cigars made of oak leaves, methyl vodka, gooseberry wine"⁵. This brought them close.

When establishing the *Skamander* poetic monthly in the late 1919⁶, Mieczysław Grydzewski came up with a cunning idea to coax from a few writers of the older generation something akin to intellectual promissory notes, payable in the undefined future. Therefore, the talent of Skamandrites was vouched for to readers by Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, Wincenty Rzymowski, Adolf Nowaczyński, and Karol Irzykowski. The last one protested already after the first issue; he distanced himself from the young writers in his article *Programofobia*⁷ and viciously summarised their tactics in the polemic titled *Po gościnie u 'Skamandra'*⁸. Similar emotions must have pestered Nowaczyński, who paid for that visit with a somewhat heroic yet momentary damming of his anti-Semitism: "If independent Poland currently has 13% Hebrews, then Skamander's galleon has no more than 3%. (...) In Skamander's poetic arboretum, there freely grow all the flowers of sin and virtue, rapture and exaltation, and despite intensive sense of smell for that end, I could not pick up the scent of neither garlic or onion"⁹. Such an argumentation irritated Irzykowski and both "older gentlemen" had a serious falling out:

His polemic with Mr Pieńkowski regarding whether the Skamander group is Jewish or not is incomprehensible for those who are not familiar with the behind-the-scenes events of the *Rzeczpospolita* and the *Gazeta Warsz.* camps. In fact, Nowaczyński himself in his "Liberum Veto" saw Jews everywhere tracking them like some trained hound¹⁰ (...) Instead

⁴ A. Słonimski, *Władysław Nawrocki*, [in:] *Alfabet wspomnień*, Warsaw 1989, p. 162.

⁵ A. Nowaczyński, *W pierwszym pułku Pierwszej Brygady*, [in:] *Słowa, słowa, słowa...*, Warsaw 1938, p. 326.

⁶ The "Skamander" journal was presented for the first time during the evening meeting on 6 December, 1919, in the Hygienic Association at 31 Karowa Street.

⁷ K. Irzykowski, *Programofobia*, "Skamander" 1920, issue 2.

⁸ K. Irzykowski, *Po gościnie u 'Skamandra'*, "Skamander" 1921, issue 4.

⁹ A. Nowaczyński, *Skamander polska, wiślaną świetlący się falą*, [in:] *Góry z piasku. Szkice*, Warsaw 1922, pp. 158-159. Originally printed in: "Skamander" 1921, issue 7/9.

¹⁰ It applied to the second, Warsaw-based and 'nationalist' "Liberum Veto", which Nowaczyński circulated illegally in 1918-1919.

of completely mocking such an approach, that is for one's race or faith to decide about one's entitlement to literary citizenship, the impish Mr Nowaczyński noted in the case of Tuwim and Słonimski that... "they do not smell of garlic or onion," which he, Nowaczyński, the recognised specialist in scents, warranted. So Nowaczyński agreed with Pieńkowski completely about the onion criterion of poetry, and the entire war between the two augurs of anti-Semitism consisted only of one of them noticing onion in the poems, while other did not! That is one peculiar way of discussing and evaluating literature!¹¹

This aspect of the issue was approached with surprising tolerance by Skamandrites. One can only infer that they considered the aggressive anti-Semitism as a kind of guise of the commentator. Today, however, it is difficult not to feel the chills when reading the massacre visions in Nowaczyński's accounts from the broken off evening by Tuwim and Słonimski in Drohobych: "Oh, you frogs chortling in the swamps of the Jewish Ghetto! You will finally have your grand Drohobych! You will get it!"¹² Despite this, in unofficial relations they also turned a blind eye to the opinions by Kornel Makuszyński as well as subsequent practices of Kazimierz Grus and Jerzy Zaruba, the collaborators of *Wiadomości Literackie*, who posted rude anti-Semitic caricatures through other media.

However, in the first weeks of 1923, there also occurred a breaking off of their relations. The reason for that was not the poetry of Skamandrites but *Nowa Szopka Pikadora* [A New Play by Pikador], the second in turn (earlier premièring on 8 February), the text of which has sadly been almost entirely lost¹³. This was the play which Zaruba discussed:

I remember when one year a popular play by the *Cyrulik* was supposed to be staged in Belweder. That was organised by Wieniawa, a friend of the authors of the play. An army truck took the disassembled building, two baskets of dolls, myself, Leonhard, and the machine operator. When the play building was erected and the curtains were hung, we started refreshing some of the already somewhat tattered dolls. Leonhard was an excellent puppeteer and he enjoyed playing with them like a child.

When Witold was making corrections to the puppet of the marshal, suddenly the curtain moved and Piłsudski himself stepped in. Leonhard hid the puppet behind his back and said to Piłsudski:

"I am sorry. You can't look now - this won't seem funny."

Piłsudski moved his moustache and left. That was probably the only instance when someone dared to say to Piłsudski: "you mustn't!"¹⁴

¹¹ K. Irzykowski, *Kalamburda warszawski*, [in:] *Pisma rozproszone*, vol. 1, 1897-1922, Kraków 1998, p. 556. Originally printed in: "Trybuna" 1921, issue 27.

¹² A. Nowaczyński, *Na występach w Drohobyczu...*, "Myśl Narodowa" 1923, issue 49, p. 15.

¹³ Surviving snippets in: M. Hemar, J. Lechon, A. Słonimski, J. Tuwim, *Szopki 1922-1931 Pikadora i Cyrulika Warszawskiego*, ed. T. Januszewski, Warsaw 2013, pp. 77-80.

¹⁴ J. Zaruba, *Z pamiętników bywälca*, Warsaw 1968, p. 116.

The thing is that, according to the surviving list of characters, the Piłsudski puppet was the one which was not used in the play¹⁵. Quoting from Słonimski's recollections:

...to our sadness we learnt from the afternoon press that Marshal summoned for the same time a Council of Ministers at Belweder. We were sorry because we had been delighted about the visit with the play for several days now¹⁶. But before four, Wieniawa appeared at Astoria and took us because it turned out that the play was actually going to happen. Piłsudski did summon a Council of Ministers, and when the ministers arrived, he said: "Gentlemen, accompany me to a play."¹⁷

When driving in Piłsudski's black Packard (according to other sources, it was – which was actually true – a Cadillac), Tuwim supposedly called ecstatically: "Damn! What fun it would be to now run some acquaintance over!"

The events could be somewhat explained by the historical context. On 16 December of the previous year, Gabriel Narutowicz, the first president of the Second Polish Republic, was assassinated. Both poets, and both being the authors of shocking poems condemning the event, immediately afterwards took to writing a light-hearted play. Not just that. On 30 December, the trial of Eligiusz Niewiadomski, the assassin, began; on 10 January, the sentence was announced; and on 31 January, he was executed. It would seem that the authorities should have been deeply solemn or even in mourning. Yet, Władysław Sikorski's cabinet and the former Chief of State were enjoying themselves at a play.

With his typical logic, Nowaczyński considered the crime of the fanatic nationalist as a sign of the coming Jewish terror:

If we recall now with a clear mind the percentage of Jews living among us and if we realise the imperative tone with which they write today, after the assassination by the madman so fortunate for them, it becomes clear for us the whole terrible void which opened in front of us. (...) no longer centrists, or Esers, or NPs, or Mensheviks, or PPSers take to rule, but the cruel vindictive eastern Jews (!), plunging their hands in the warm Polish blood.¹⁸

Two weeks after the assassination, he expanded on his thought: "It is all about that one minority, that human demon, that Antichristic single minority, i.e. the Jewish plague, with the demonic powers of which Europe

¹⁵ M. Hemar, J. Lechoń, A. Słonimski, J. Tuwim, *Szopki 1922-1931 Pikadora i Cyrulika Warszawskiego...*

¹⁶ On Sunday 18 February, Tuwim notified his wife: "Piłsudski invited us on Thursday to the staff (with the play)." It was staged on 22 February, two weeks after the première. As in: M. Hemar, J. Lechoń, A. Słonimski, J. Tuwim, *Szopki 1922-1931 Pikadora i Cyrulika Warszawskiego...*, p. 329.

¹⁷ A. Słonimski, *Belweder*, [in:] *Alfabet wspomnień*, p. 17. Contrary to the recollections, Piłsudski, only the chief of the General Staff, did not have the right to summon government meetings.

¹⁸ A. Nowaczyński, *Po zamachu, "Myśl Narodowa"*, 1922, issue 51, pp. 2-6.

and the whole world is fighting to the death. (...) Poland is the hatchery of Semi microbes spreading through the world (...) That vampire sucks at our throat”¹⁹. The *Testament* exposed him to a short-term trial under the accusation of “glaring solidarity with the crime”. He was, however, acquitted.

Nowaczyński’s recent fear of his imagined revenge of “global Jewishness” was condensed in *Szopka*. “After the première, he came backstage and praised that «wonderful», that «ingenious», that «Zielony Balonik [the Green Balloon comedy group] popped»”, as Słonimski reported. “He kissed us yet from *Myśl Narodowa* we learnt the following morning that «donkey hooves» and «stinks of onion». I met him afterwards and asked: «What did you write there?» «Where?» he responded. «In *Myśl Narodowa*». «It wasn’t me», he said. «What do you mean? It was signed A. N. and you say it wasn’t you?» «I can’t remember». «So neither can I», I ended the conversation”²⁰. As I have already mentioned, the play with *Szopka* could have raised some moral reservations. However, it was not those that drew the attention of the pamphleteer. There was no way he would step outside his regular themes:

In the grand Jewish Aquarium, in “Żemjanska Kawiarnia” run by the ober-spiv Albrecht, there are held new stagings of this year’s *Szopka*, ganz kosher this time, written exclusively by ritually circumcised three. Since Lechoń is sick and other poets yield to the Jewish invasion and withdraw from literature (...) one can imagine the tendency of such a majufes (...) p-I-C-A-dors’ *Szopka* was written not in the jargon but in Polish so also those Polish scum who find themselves in that *mikveh* of kosher humour could understand how the capital of Poland is ridiculed by those last Mohicans still fighting against the complete Jewishing of Kikesaw and Poland.²¹

Yet the true sensation broke after the performance of *Szopka* at Belweder. The pamphlet, signed this time, covered a six-column editorial in *Myśl Narodowa*. While holding the *Szopka* authors in contempt, Nowaczyński had a goal to exact the most severe of mockery of the Marshal’s “intellectual level, taste, fancy, and disposition”:

Mr Piłsudski offered a fresh proof of his somewhat Russian world view and indicated how the ugly vengefulness and shallow meanness have grown in the soul of the eliminated too late Imposter. Two talented yet wildly overrated kike comedians, conjurers and epigones of Russian realms of Mayakovskism, Burliukism²², and Yeseninism wrote a new *Szopka*, a “Neues Kukiełkes”, in which taking revenge for knocking off that regent (who let half a million Russian Jews into Poland and led the country to ruin), with particular fury pounced at the periodical and the pens which

¹⁹ Idem., *Testament*, “Myśl Narodowa” 1923, issue 1, pp. 4-5.

²⁰ A. Słonimski, Nowaczyński Adolf, [in:] *Alfabet wspomnień*, p. 171. Truth be told, the note to which I am referring is not signed.

²¹ Nowa szopka Pikuśów, “Myśl Narodowa” 1923, issue 7. The title alluded to Józef Urstein ‘Pikuś’, the actor of Qui Pro Quo (1884-1923). On 7 October of that year, this pioneer of szmonces died a humourist death to a heart attack during the intermission of the *Będzie lepiej* play.

²² Surely a reference to futurist artists David and Nikolai Burliuk.

largely caused the toppling of the Marshal of marsheliks, i.e. on Professor Stroński and on Ms. Pannenkowa from the *Rzeczpospolita*. (...) For example, (...) the raging vipers of the Ghetto dared on billboards in Warsaw! in Poland's capital! to call Reymont "pissage polonaise"! (!)

It is those "Neues Kukielkes" from the Ziemiańska café that Pericles Piłsudski considered worthy of receiving at the General Staff where "the elite of the army gathered with no omission together with their families." The comedian sat in the middle on a stool leaning on a huge sword, while young Jankiels started playing on cimbalons their concert of concerts. (...)

And the "man of the East", or that one from the Kremlin, or this one from the Saski Square from all the Arts only recognises and has a taste for comedy... for Szopkas... for maybe even skilled yet impudent Jewish clowns smelling and pissing on the opposition's wall.

Bonaparte had at least Talma, this Malparte has... Slowim... from Mayakowskism...²³

This particular publication, in which – according to its author's intentions – the army quasi-genius and the dissolute quasi-artists disgraced each other, while both sides were supposed to be humiliated by the (not quoted here) erudite parallel to Napoleon's biography, proved the pit of offence for Skamandrites. That which they endured when it was directed at them, they could not stand when it was directed at Marshal Piłsudski. Not only did someone spoil their holiday, but they also struck at that which was sacred. The shock they experienced, or which Słonimski experienced, for whom Piłsudski was the crowning of his family legend²⁴, triggered the most vicious pamphlets in the history of Polish literature. It raised doubts even among the author's friends. Lechoń thus wrote to Grydzewski: "The ghastly Tolek! Painfully unjust, despicably libellous, foul and shameless, yet wildly and savagely comical". Anna Iwaszkiewicz, Słonimski's confidant, noted in *Dzienniki*: "It is, in its kind, a good pamphlet, (...) yet such a thing should have ever been published in *Skamander*"²⁵.

Since the *Rudy do budy!* pamphlet, historians have traced the common opinion of Słonimski as a hellishly formidable pamphleteer, which he maintained for nearly fifty years, i.e. till the end of his life. A close inspection of the text, which – apart from a few sentences – actually constituted its victim's curriculum vitae, would indicate the richness of the rhetorical devices applied in it; particularly those ironically recommended in the well-known treatise by Arthur Schopenhauer. Of course, Grydzewski was mistaken in stating that "the humour of that parody also consisted of the fact it included

²³ A. Nowaczyński, *L'ex-roi s'amuse, czyli 'Neues Kukielkes'*, "Myśl Narodowa" 1923, issue 9, pp. 1-6.

²⁴ As Słonimski described it, during a post-show evening meal the Marshal honoured him with a conversation. «Be you the doctor's son?» «Yes, sir», I responded. «I remember. Under six», «No, Marshal, under four». «That is not possible. First six, then four, 'cause you moved». He was right, of course (...) (A. Słonimski, *Bielweder*, [in:] *Alfabet wspomnień*, p. 18).

²⁵ As in: M.A. Supruniuk, *Mieczysław Grydzewski herbu Zerwikaptur, najpokorniejszy sługa literatury*, [in:] M. Grydzewski, *Silva rerum*, selection by J.B. Wójcik, M.A. Supruniuk, Warsaw 2014, p. 54.

not one accusation even remotely true”²⁶. In essence, the author presented a false mirror image of facts. A good example was the allusively Jewish pseudonym ‘Neuwert’, which Nowaczyński assumed in his youth in order to mark his breaking off with his family. As an offensive ‘Gneuwert’, it retained a visible reference to the original, but through the grotesque amplification it stressed the awkward association of the pamphleteer with the Jews, so much despised by him: “Gneuwert, a quasi-shabbos goy and really a sad old Jew, now writes only in Polish. Fortunately his grandma, Szyja Gneuwert from Podgórze, can’t understand Polish and doesn’t know what her grandson, the scoundrel Gneuwert, writes – she would disinherit him from three goats and the metal pot into which several generations of Gneuwerts released their temperament”²⁷. That was true; Nowaczyński was born in Podgórze, a satellite village of Kraków at that time. One could add that six months later in Drohobych, the fact of providing the ‘Jewish’ pseudonym of Nowaczyński by Tuwim and Słonimski, in which readers believed, protected them against being beaten up. In short, as stressed in the punchline of *Rudy do budy!*, that was how Nowaczyński would have written about himself as a Jew.

What was also accurate was the piece of information that *Skamander* paid out royalties, albeit modest ones. This is how the fact came from under Słonimski’s pen: “This comical figure calls now the Skamander a Jewish aquarium forgetting that he himself was caught for that aquarium following a meagre bait and for fifteen thousand marks revelled and kissed the bigger fishes of the *Skamander* under the tail. Fortunately, he was flushed together with the dirty water to the sink just in time, and now, disappointed due to his financial hopes, he bespits in helpless anger”. Within the reality of that whole range of those mocking insults, there also appeared a pretext for taking voice: “The red Galicia scrooge, ardent yet poorly paid stooge, is frothing at the mouth that Piłsudski watches *Szopka Pikadora*, because in his party even the very right/left tzaddik Stroński does not laugh at his charades”. An apt thought – that puzzling flaw has ever since constituted a tradition of the group. A particularly treacherous trick, then, was to place Nowaczyński’s ideological colleagues in a situation of the unacceptable choice between a silenced insinuation and one which was denied – a pseudology known from the trick question: “Do you still beat your wife?” This was how – among others – Makuszyński was ‘tricked’: “Aron Gneuwert, that hungry and swollen ghoul, with stomach bulging with barley, drunk like a pig prowls bars, toadies to waiters, and disgraces with his company the ashamed Kornel who called him his «precious friend», and being left alone he suggested that his clock was gone”.

In this context, the polemicist’s humanitarianism becomes clearly ironic: “I can promise one thing: if he ever gets hungry, I will give him, despite everything, one hundred marks. You shouldn’t overdo it; all in all,

²⁶ M. Grydzewski, *Proroctwa literatów*, [in:] *Silva rerum*, p. 601.

²⁷ Here and further: A. Słonimski, *Rudy do budy!*, “Skamander” 1923, issue 28, pp. 38-40. The text was included in Dorota Kozicka’s forthcoming anthology of the Polish pamphleteers. Cf. „Chamuly”, „gnidy”, „przemilczacze”... *antologia dwudziestowiecznego pamphletu literackiego*, selection, introduction and editing by D. Kozicka, Kraków 2010, pp. 213-218.

despite appearances, he is a person". One hundred marks at the exchange rate in the spring of 1923 amounted to slightly over one euro today. After giving alms, Słonimski exacted his *coup de grace*: "P.S. Dear Adolf! If my column includes some minor elements which might offend you in any way, forgive me as I wrote what you yourself would have written if you were paid well". That punchline modified one of *Nagroby Nowaczyńskiego* [Nowaczyński's Headstones], written down before the Great War under the auspices of Andrzej Niemojewski, but originally written by Wincenty Rzymowski:

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ELIZA KACKA

Księżom i panom dogryzał,
Gdzie napluł, potem wylizał.

He stung priests and gentlemen,
When he spat, there he licked.

When the fourth act of this story came to be, which I shall discuss in a moment, in *Skamander* there appeared a note, most certainly by Grydzewski, which was a fair and accurate review of *Rudy do budy!* The editor wrote:

Słonimski's pamphlet, which was actually immediately understood both by critics and readers, was only an act of turning an assailant's weapon against himself; a vicious mockery and derisive parody of his typical features of style, an intentional construct of truth and falseness, lies and insinuations, charades and paradox. It seemed a pedagogical experiment intended to indicate the possible outcome of a system of irresponsible insults and slander if the sabre of the assailant meets an equally sharp and keen hilt in the hand of a witty and blunt opponent. We do not need to add how much we detest such methods if used seriously.²⁸

The metaphor of a sword duel seemed a cute anachronism considering that to which the note applied:

Regarding the attempt by a group of academics to force the editorial board of the *Skamander* to retract the article *Rudy do budy!* published in the April issue, we published clear and emphatic announcements in the *Express Poranny*, the *Kurjer Polski* and the *Kurjer Poranny*. Today, we once again wish to categorically oppose any attempts which visibly leading to introducing terror into our literary life. The group of the quick-tempered academics has to realise that if they acted in defence of a person from one group, there would certainly emerge people from another group who would be able to oppose such attacks. If, however, they tried to react to inappropriate polemic methods, they should have begun with the one who triggered the above-mentioned article with his pamphlets.

Indeed, there occurred an intrusion into the editorial board of the 'poets' monthly', which could have triggered a revenge which would have been just as brutal. Thus, *Skamander* mistaken the intention to end the matter amicably

²⁸ Here and further: "Skamander" 1923, issue 29/30, p. 122.

for threats. Fortunately, the disturbance unravelled into a farce, which years later offered Grydzewski an opportunity for a vivid reminiscence:

One afternoon in May the editorial board of the *Wiadomości*²⁹ was visited (one would assume unwillingly and, possibly, through “being brought”) by the very aggrieved party in the company of several students of the university. The board at that time operated from the flat of the editor-in-chief’s mother, which, as many flats in that period of bandit invasions, included a hallway with a window with a deadbolt (...) The editor-in-chief (...) having noticed Nowaczyński, knew immediately what was going on and he requested the maid to tell them that he was out, and then he left the flat via another exit. Yet after a moment’s thought he realised that sooner or later the enemy will find him (...) In response to the second ring, he heroically opened the door himself. This time Nowaczyński was not there any more, while there still remained his entourage in white-and-amaranth hats, and many more spread through the staircase. (...)

One may assume that if the editorial board was located in a regular office suite, it would have been smashed, yet to smash an office is one thing but to do that to a flat occupied by women and children is another; yet it remains unclear what would have happened if it had not been for the third ring, which was a turning point of the later course of events.

Kazimierz Wierzyński came in, and he rarely came in as a rule, let alone at that time of the day. (...) Having heard the editor-in-chief’s account, he said that it was some misunderstanding which he would clarify with Nowaczyński. A telephone call was not possible as the young men cut the line. After overcoming technical difficulties, the telephone conversation ensued, and its friendly character made an impression on the students. There they came to settle accounts with the Jew who published an article by another Jew, one which was insulting for the leading writer of the nationalist camp, and meanwhile they found a Skamandrite who despite not being Jewish was a friend of Jews from the *Skamander*, and yet he was on a first name basis with Nowaczyński.³⁰

Somewhat disappointed, the ‘academics’ struck back at Grydzewski as they were leaving, saying that he was brave only because he had a revolver in his pocket. Grydzewski did in fact have a small-caliber Browning which he had bought from his barber at a good price, which actually would not have saved him if he had decided to use it. Yet, the trained eye of the radical youth immediately noticed the weapon.

As for Wierzyński, he was proud of his ‘deceitful mastery’: Nowaczyński allegedly laughed at the trick; and Grydzewski – while on his way to the editorial board of *Kurier Polski* with the purpose of composing a protest

²⁹ The *Wiadomości Literackie*, founded in 1924 (the first issue was dated 6 January) had apparently already existed in Grydzewski’s mind, which was why he thus referred to the *Skamander*’s editorial board (in fact, a private flat).

³⁰ M. Grydzewski, *Dalsze burzliwe dzieje pewnej przyjaźni. Odwrót*, [in:] *Silva rerum*, pp. 720-721.

- almost fell victim to a bomb planted on the staircase by unknown culprits. And since the periodical's door faced the door of the editorial board of the rightist *Rzeczpospolita*, it was impossible to ascertain the intentions of the culprits.

Judging by the further course of events which never unfolded (instead of his lieutenants, Nowaczyński only sent a complaint to the Writers Union, making a complete fool of himself), the antagonists reached an accord. Nowaczyński did not attack Słonimski personally ever again, while Słonimski never reprinted *Rudy do budy!* in any collection until his death. He might have been cruel, but he was loyal.

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SUMMARY

The article offers a reconstruction of the text-based fight between Adolf Nowaczyński and Antoni Słonimski. It was not, as it is argued here, only a contest of styles and temperaments – though this exchange proved one of the most impressive, powerful, and dramatic polemics of that time in terms of articulation. However, it stemmed from a long history of tumultuous contacts which offered an amplified view of the problems of identity (Jewishness), politics, and community. A comprehensive view of the combat between Nowaczyński and Słonimski requires both an analysis of the rhetorics of the texts and an investigation into the context and dynamics of publication.

Keywords

pamphlet, *Skamander*, szopka comedy play, polemic, nationalism

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Why Did Józef Czapski Change His View of the Skamandrites?

He was not a painter who wrote; he was a painter and a writer. An excellent essayist, diarist, and epistolographer. As a writer, and even as a reader, Józef Czapski matured very slowly. He gradually hatched from the world of school-set books. However, already in the 1920s and 1930s, he started developing rapidly: Józef Czapski became familiar with the vast expanses of Russian literature. He read Vasily Rozanov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Dmitry Merezhkovsky. He developed a particular fondness for Russian poets, they were closer to him than Polish authors, who, as he once stated, could not extract from within themselves a voice which would be the voice of a generation, his generation.

Polish futurists did not impress him, and sometimes they outraged him; possibly because he was familiar with the Russian Futurism. However, he harboured grievances against the Skamadrites (on a side note – as did Jerzy Stempowski).

To Czapski, Jan Lechoń seemed to be an epigone of Romantics; he “did not trust” his poems, even those recited in Stabilsk seemed “unbearable” to him¹. Interestingly enough, he only appreciated *Hierostrates*. He started viewing Lechoń differently only after the latter one had been painfully tested by the experience of emigration. His reading of *Dziennik* was dramatic, filled with compassion and discontent (towards egocentrism, partial – i.e. false – exhibitionism, as well as towards biased judgements about people and works).

¹ J. Czapski, *Lechoń i jego „Dziennik”*, [in:] id., *Czytając*, Kraków 1990, p. 438, originally printed: “Kultura” 1968, issue 5.

Antoni Słonimski must have intimidated him with his scathing jokes; he clearly was not a frequent guest on the second floor at Ziemiańska. Following his master Dmitry Filosofov, a Russian philosopher, he valued Słonimski's dramas and even his reportage from the USSR (*Moja podróż do Rosji*).

At the very beginning, he had a falling-out with Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz regarding homo-emotional issues.

Czapski was not interested in poetry with poignant images or colours – though he was a painter – nor musicality, even though he wanted to become a musician when he grew up. He was interested in the poetry of experience. From this point of view, he valued the poetry of Alexander Blok and of Zin-aida Gippius, as well as of his Russian peers or somewhat younger writers. His excellent knowledge of the major literary phenomena of the pre-war Russian emigration was proven by his passing remarks which he made in later years: “[Yuri] Felzen was a writer of the young generation of that time, surely one of the most interesting, along with [Gaito] Gazdanov and [Boris] Poplavsky. The rhythm of his sentences, his breath, the type of his analysis resembled those of [Marcel] Proust. However, Felzen's Proustism was free of any traces of fashion or snobbery; there was kinship”. Czapski even argued with a Russian critic regarding the description of Poplavsky's poetry; he also stressed the value of his poetry, which “had acuteness, depth and «music», enough modest sadness and brave resignation that readers immediately saw not only a writer of great stature but also an exceptional person”².

We know also, naturally, that Czapski found the poem by Hugo von Hofmannsthal – titled *Przy Sybillach królowych* – important; it was also symbolic, if one was to somewhat simplify things: fitting the philosophical stream of the poetry of the German language, from which he quoted Friedrich Hölderlin and Rainer Maria Rilke.

He was interested in apocalyptic symbolism (in Blok: “ingenious sense of the coming cataclysms”³) and existential symbolism (“I desire that which is not present in the world”⁴ – this is a quote from Gippius' poem).

In symbolism, he appreciated the challenge posed for the bourgeoisie, a perspective of escaping the boredom, pointlessness, and the banality of life. As well as the opportunity for self-expression. That was not all: it offered intuitive – even mystical – cognition. One must remember that Czapski, following Filosofov, understood the Decadent movement differently – not as a downfall but, rather, as a falling-off from the collective, the celebration of otherness.

In Russia, where he spent his period of maturation, symbolism was a broad rapid current since the 1890s or, basically, since the 1910s; later, there occurred its prolonged demise, during which it succeeded in fuelling its opposite, i.e. acmeism, and clashing with Futurism. The Skamandrites took

² J. Czapski, *Wspomnienia*, [in:] id., *Rozproszone. Teksty z lat 1925-1988*, collection and notes by P. Kądziera, Warsaw 2005, pp. 185-186, originally printed in “Kultura” 1953, issue 4.

³ J. Czapski, *Blok i swoboda tajemna*, “Kultura” 1948, issue 4.

⁴ This poem was quoted many times in articles by Dmitry Filosofov, and later in Józef Czapski's journals.

little from symbolism as it was basically absent from our poetry and they were not interested in it (or maybe it did exist only as form, without the philosophical background?) They were more interested in the intuitive combination of Parnassianism and Futurism.

One must add that Czapski did not accept symbolism as a whole and the paintings of symbolists were unknown to him. He appreciated the poets of the first wave of symbolism (mainly Gippius) and of the third wave (mainly Blok). He seems to have missed the second wave: Fyodor Sologub or Konstantin Balmont, whose presence in Poland was the strongest as they were often – and eagerly – translated by Julian Tuwim.

He knew the poems by Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam, yet those were not the poems to which he most often returned. He would always quote (from memory) Gippius, Blon, and Andrei Bely. They belonged to an earlier generation. Perhaps he too was older than his date of birth would have one think?

A separate and special place in Czapski's world was occupied by Cyprian Kamil Norwid, a poet and author of letters. In his works, he mainly sought thoughts about life, art, history, and Poland. Surely, the most important poem for Czapski was *Fatum*, and the two-volume edition of the poet's letters was probably the most annotated book in Czapski's library. The same Norwid that usually did not mean much to the Skamandrites.

It is interesting that as a painter toiling over form, discussing the matters of artistic craft, immersed in art history, and interested in its changes, Czapski practically ignored the aspect of form in poetry. This was indicated by his remarks about Miron Białoszewski's output⁵. He did not share the belief of Ludwik Hering, his friend, in the creative power of "gibberish" (one rooted in the national Polish language – that could have been the source of misunderstandings), and was cautious about "the games" in poetry, on which, according to him, the poetics of the author of *Obroty rzeczy* was based. Czapski's remarks, spread over several letters, concluded in a firm gesture of rejection of the "crossword puzzle approach to the poem" and that which he called "some astounding indifference – some *moral* non-existence"⁶.

This meant that his praising of Czesław Miłosz' poetry was not triggered only by the sense of his community in terms of their émigré fate.

He expected gravity of poetry, which was why he reacted violently when someone suggested Jerzy Harasymowicz' poems to him. Among all the domestic post-war poets, Czapski tolerated only Zbigniew Herbert. Initially – as a person, and later – as an artistic persona; at the end of his life, he wrote to the poet that his poems moved him, that they carried a mystery which he touched using "only a few words"⁷.

In 1942 in Tashkent, Czapski met Russian writers evacuated from Moscow and Leningrad. Those included Akhmatova, Lydia Chukovskaya,

⁵ *Listy z 1959 roku*. J. Czapski, L. Hering, *Listy 1939-1982*, collection by L. Murawska-Péju, D. Szczerba, J. Juryś, P. Kłoczowski, vol. 2, Gdańsk 2017. [Letters from 1959]

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31. Emphasis original

⁷ J. and M. Czapskis, K. and Z. Herberts, *Korespondencja*, analysis and notes by J. Strzałka, Warsaw 2017, p. 107. [English version translated from Polish]

and Aleksey Tolstoy. In the course of several meetings, he read to them and translated Polish war-time poems which reached him after he had emigrated, mainly those by Stanisław Baliński and Słonimski.

The Russians were incredibly moved. Tolstoy found in those poems a reflection of his own émigré experiences (he had wondered the world for some time already). Chukovskaya, a writer of an independent critical sense, said at that time (which Czapski recorded in his journal): "So you have found expression for that which you have experienced, we have found nothing yet"⁸.

At that time, an idea emerged for Czapski to develop the anthology titled *Polskie wiersze wojenne* [Polish War-Time Poems], which he prepared quickly, and the texts were translated. Akhmatova translated *Warszawska kolejka 1939* by Baliński and it was her first poetic translation ever. A blasphemous pietà poem about a mother and her son's suffering perfectly matched the writer's fortunes and the fortunes of her imprisoned son; a poem which perfectly aligned with her intensifying narrative poem *Requiem*. Until his last days, Czapski read and quoted Akhmatova; he was attached to her poems about the experience of old age⁹. He only disliked it when she experimented, which was why he did not accept her *Poem Without A Hero*.

Surely, the anthology of Polish war-time poems would have been printed if it had not been for the deteriorating Polish-Soviet political relations. Eventually, the typescript has been found and published¹⁰.

The anthology includes poems by Baliński, Słonimski, Kazimierz Wierzyński (those three with the largest presence), Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, and Lechoń, to name only the authors associated with the Skamander group. Would it be possible to reconstruct the criteria according to which Czapski organised the *Polskie wiersze wojenne* anthology? They are not clear, especially since we do not know what he rejected. What is certain is that he chose testimony poems, usually regardless of their forms; he did not seek beauty in them. This was because he considered the absence of beauty as a virtue, as was the case later when he returned to painting and when he quoted with contentment someone's statement that he would become recorded in history as the "master of dirty rags".

The war-time poems collected by Czapski were usually coarse; their struggles with the crisis of words were evident and this applied not only to domestic texts but also those written abroad. According to the anthology's reviewers, even the aesthetics-focused poems by Baliński included "failed" lines, uttered with a lump in the throat.

Strictly war-time poems were included in the anthology not only because they had to be included. One could assume that they were truly important for Czapski. At this point, one should mention Czapski's text about painting, written in 1944, in which he admitted that during the turmoil of

⁸ J. Czapski, *Dziennik*. Manuscript. Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie, sign. 1922.

⁹ In his journal, he returned several times to the poem *Ostatnia róża*.

¹⁰ *Polskie wiersze wojenne*, collected by J. Czapski, submitted for print by I. Biełow, P. Mitzner. Warsaw 2019.

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Polskie wiersze wojenne, collected by J. Czapski, submitted for print by I. Bielow, P. Mitzner. Warsaw 2019.

SUMMARY

The article applies to Józef Czapski's – a Polish painter and essayist – personal literary choices; ones that often were contrary to the tastes of his generation. In 1942, after leaving the Soviet bloc, Czapski developed the anthology *Polskie wiersze wojenne* for Russian readers, and the events of the war caused him to change his opinion about the modern poetry. Poems by the Skamandrites, whom he had disregarded for a long time, now became the core of his collection. Having been found a few years back, the anthology was published in 2019.

Keywords

Skamandrites, Józef Czapski, *Polskie wiersze wojenne*, Polish Army in the East, Anna Akhmatova, Lydia Chukovskaya

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¹¹ J. Czapski, *Czytając*. Kraków 1989, p. 55. Essay *Zagadnienia malarskie*, originally printed: "Orzeł Biały" 1944, issue 3.

Na progu. Doświadczenie religijne w tekstach Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza, 2003), as well as on war-time literature (*Biedny język*, 2011) and the Polish-Russian literary contacts (*Warszawski „Domek w Kołominie”*, 2014; *Warszawski krąg Dymitra Filosofowa*, 2015). He is the editor of texts by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Tadeusz Zieliński, Lew Gomolicki, Henryk Józefski, etc.
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Words and Herbs: Julian Tuwim and the Poetry of Mindfulness

“In their home it smells like thyme, clean, lavender
and language of yesteryear”¹

Jacques Brel, *Les Vieux*, transl. Konstancja Maleszyńska

“Poetry does not belong to whoever writes it, but to whoever needs it”
Il Postino, directed by Michael Radford

The poetry of mindfulness in poetry therapy

In *Füves könyv*, Sándor Márai declared that he wished to learn from it “from the signs of life, meaning from letters, from human heart, from grass”². Therefore, he considered literature, feelings, and nature as the main signs of life. Similar convictions were expressed by those who through poetry – written and being read, including in the educational process – teach how to meditate about the world and achieve internal peace. It is worth noting the

¹ As quoted in: J. Maleszyńska, *Apologia piosenki. Studia z historii gatunku*, Poznań 2013, p. 156. [Original version: “Chez eux ça sent le thym, le propre, la lavande et le verbe d’antan”; Polish translation: “W ich domach zapach ziół i zapach dawnych słów”; English translation posted at <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/les-vieux-old-people.html>]

² S. Márai, *Księga ziół*, transl. F. Netz, Warsaw 2003, p. 7. The English title would read: *The Book of Herbs*. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish]

original meaning of the word 'pokój' [peace]: "silence, solace, calmness", and that it collocated with the verbs 'koić' [to soothe] and the already obsolete 'po-koić' [to soothe – in the perfective form and meaning]³. Poetry is an undeniable ally of mindful activities in educational activities regarding the Polish language, literature, and culture⁴. In the article titled *Poetry Therapy: Using Words to Heal*, Barbara Trainin Blank noted that: "Biblio/poetry therapy, one of the creative arts therapies, consists in using the written word (although it may be read out loud) in order to bring healing and personal growth"⁵.

In this article, I shall focus on the lessons in mindfulness conducted among male and female primary schoolers with the use of poetic texts⁶. Such activities sometimes support and promote other methods of understanding poems and readers, while in other instances they become an autotelic form of work. The author devoted particular attention to poems by Julian Tuwim. They enable one to practise affirmations and share gratitude residing inside that which Joanna Niżyńska, a specialist in Miron Białoszewski's works, called "the kingdom of minorimportance"⁷. The analogues of these poems come in the form of herbs, as indicated in the title⁸.

³ Pokój (entry), [in:] A. Brückner, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego*, Warsaw 1970, pp. 243-244.

⁴ As Wiktor Czernianin identified, catharsis in poetry therapy focused on the therapeutic effect, on moral 'cleansing', on mystical experience, on purely aesthetic experiences, and on hedonistic satisfaction. W. Czernianin, *Catharsis in Poetry Therapy*, "Polish Journal of Applied Psychology" 2013, vol. 12(2), pp. 25-38.

⁵ B. Trainin Blank, *Poetry Therapy: Using Words to Heal*, https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/practice/Poetry_Therapy%3A_Using_Words_to_Heal/. Cf. *Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders*, ed. J.J. Leedy, New York 1969.

⁶ Ewa Paczoska wrote: "The path of mindfulness was followed by philosophers, as well as psychologists, who argued, like William James and Henri Bergson, that every sensation is a complex combination of memory, desire, will, expectation, and direct experience. Artists organise within their works the typical lessons of mindfulness which match this description. Painters (...) experiment with viewers' attention, they draw it to the method which breaks the perceptive habits shaped by contemporary culture and it demands mindfulness. For that same reason writers experiment, for example with a novel's time and space or change narrative strategies to put readers in the situation of cognitive uncertainty in the face of a dynamic set of sensations simulated by literature, and also in a situation of suspension of one's attention". E. Paczoska, *Lekcje uważności. Moderniści i realizm*, Warsaw 2018, p. 14.

⁷ J. Niżyńska, *Królestwo małoznaczości. Miron Białoszewski a trauma, codzienność i queer*, transl. A. Pokojska, Kraków 2018.

⁸ It is not my ambition to trace herbal motifs in literature or even in the Polish poetry; yet, considering the expectations of readers, I prepared a small overview. A herbarium was kept by Eliza Orzeszkowa – it can be viewed in the library of the Poznań Society for the Advancement of Arts and Sciences. Allegorical significance should be assigned to the herbs brought by Shakespeare's Ophelia (rosemary – symbol of memory, fennel – flattery, columbine – sensuality, rue – grief). Salvia and thymus can be found in the medicine store in *Pan Tadeusz*. The scent of herbs was taken in by the heroes of Franciszek Karpiński's pastoral poem titled *Do Justyny. Tęskność na wiosnę*. Czesław Miłosz thus concluded his narrative poem titled *Orpheus and Eurydice*, written after his wife died in 2002: "Only now everything cried to him: Euridice! / How will I live without you, my consoling one! / But there was a fragrant scent of herbs, the low humming of bees, / And he fell asleep with his cheek on the sun-warmed earth". Finally, I would like to refer readers to excerpts of poems by Tuwim's friends, members of the Skamander poetic group. "Oh, how I was tormented by the herb above other herbs, / Which nothing can resist" – wrote Jan Lechoń, while Kazimierz Wierzyński wrote in the poem titled *Zabawa dziecienna*: "Herbs and words, / And it will keep me, Because above everything, / Because above death / I sang them to you" (*Moje pieśni*). Another poem, from

A poem which follows the model of strong emphasis on not only the need to understand the text, but also to understand the readers through the text, often becomes the atrium of a conversation. The universal language of poetry teaches people patience, mindfulness, and viewing problems from various perspectives, and it enables one to establish a deeper relationship with the internal and external worlds. The healing power of words was already known to ancient shamans and herbalists, who used them when administering their potions. School meditation through/on poems can be accompanied by collective targeted reading or creating own texts, calligraphy of a poetic work, or visualising activities associated with inter-semiotic translation, i.e. searching for music which illustrates a work or children's translation of it into the language of images (illustrations, comic strips, impressions, the internal landscape after reading).

In the book titled '*Czarodziejski pyłek*', *czyli metafora i bajka we wspomaganiu rozwoju małego dziecka*, Agnieszak Jaszczysk and Beata Kochaniak include in the group of forms of work used at poetry lessons the methods of: the living word, personal experience, tasks to be performed, visualisations or relaxation techniques, as well as the autogenic training by Anna Polender⁹, or practising the Cook's position according to Dennison¹⁰. Poetry, both received and created, supports depression therapy; it helps to understand oneself and to reach harmony with the world, to read and experience one's own completeness, seeking peace; it gives comfort in mourning and it stimulates the process of healing and leaving post-traumatic stress. It can be used in the event of a conflict between children. Poetry serves as a catalyst for expressing emotions, lowering fear, escaping stupefaction; it enables one to add meaning to painful experiences in order to achieve a state of ontological and emotional security. If written by young adults, it elevates a sense of their own value and it enables them to feel agency, find strength in their own voices – particularly when its topic is weakness – and seek courage to bring forward suppressed thoughts and emotions.

Already in the late 19th century, Benjamin Rush used poetry as medicine at the psychiatric ward of a hospital in Pennsylvania. In 1969, the National Association for Poetry Therapy was established¹¹. In the 1970s, Deobrah Alma, a poet, established a mobile poetic emergency room (emergencypoet.com), which visits schools, festivals, conferences, and city squares. In a stylised ambulance, during free consultations, guests talk about their conditions and emotions, and ten minutes later they receive a poem as aid. After the appointment, patients describe it as an uplifting experience. By the end of the 1990s, Eli Griefer managed to start group poem therapy sessions as a volunteer at Creedmore State Hospital.

the *Korzeć maku* collection, includes the following lines: "Words dried out, herbs too, everything is past, / Sank into paper, it has no more meaning". [All lyrics translated from Polish to English for the purposes herein]

⁹ A relaxation technique in which adults become both the coaches and the participants; it consists of identifying with the protagonist and staging events from the story in order to feel the weight of parts of the body and come into contact with one's own body.

¹⁰ A. Jaszczysk, B. Kochaniak, „*Czarodziejski pyłek*”, *czyli metafora i bajka we wspomaganiu rozwoju małego dziecka*, Kraków 2006, p. 19.

¹¹ Cf. https://www.mateuszswiszniewski.eu/terapia_poezja_.html

Mindful poetry and thematic criticism

In an article devoted to thematic criticism, Alicja Baluchowa discussed the topic (understood as an “image-based element through which poets frame the world”¹²) in relation to the “writing-specific image groups which are recurring in specific writings and which can be treated as the central element of its world of imagination”¹³. Among thus perceived topics in the selected group of mindful poems, particular significance is attached to herbs and other medicinal elements which originate from the natural world and which dictate the images of poetic imagination. The young adults whom I studied indicated the following as the key words of mindful poetry: elements of nature, flora and fauna, body parts, a window, motifs of viewing and an encounter.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, an American professor of medicine and the originator of the stress reduction clinic and mindfulness centre, indicated in his *Mindfulness for Beginners* the following elements as the foundations of a mindful attitude: not judging, patience, beginner mind, and acceptance. He defined mindfulness as “a love affair – with life, with reality, and with imagination”¹⁴. At Polish schools, work with meditation (e.g. by Kabat-Zinn or Eline Snel¹⁵) is still a rare practice. Meanwhile, activities revolving around poetry were described – with regard to the process of turning school into a friendly place and of optimising learning conditions – by Kabat-Zinn¹⁶, Marzena Żylińska, and Timothy D. Walker. In the book titled *Teach Like Finland: 33 Simple Strategies for Joyful Classrooms*, the authors recommended that teachers should become mindful¹⁷, and mentioned both the practices of reading poetry for tuning down and “peace points” designed in Finnish schools¹⁸.

Herbs

Finally, let us peer into Julian Tuwim’s imagination:

For a time, I collected medicinal herbs, I brought mint, rue, thymus, and flannel leaf to the city from Inowlódz meadows, I dried them and put into a bag. No one used them to treat anything. So what for? Why? Possibly

¹² A. Baluchowa, *Krytyka tematyczna*, “Polonistyka” 1995, issue 2.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ J. Kabat-Zinn, *Praktyka uważności dla poczatkujacych*, transl. J.P. Listwan, Warsaw 2014, p. 10.

¹⁵ E. Snel, *Uwazosc i spokoj zabki*, transl. M. Falkiewicz, Warsaw 2015; E. Snel, *Daj przestrzen... i bайдz blisko. Mindfulness dla rodzicow i ich nastolatkow*, transl. M. Falkiewicz, Warsaw 2017.

¹⁶ E. Snel, *Uwazosc i spokoj...*, p. 238.

¹⁷ T.D. Walker, *Fińskie dzieci uczą się najlepiej. Co możemy zrobić, by nasze dzieci były szczęśliwe, wierzyły w siebie i lubiły szkołę?*, transl. M. Kisiel-Malecka, Kraków 2017, p. 64.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 28, 238. In order to learn more about the importance of rest, vide also: A.D. Pellegrini, *Recess: Its Role in Education and Development*, London 2005. In June 2018, Amanda Moreno argued in an interview for a Chicago magazine that in order for children to acquire complex skills which they will be required to possess by the job market, they need to be able to handle stress and control their emotions better, and this is ensured by mindfulness lessons at school. She postulated: “Start with the breath and really small things you can control better, then gradually work up”, <https://www.chicagomag.com/city-life/June-2018/Mindfulness-Matters-for-Kids-Too/>

because “it was green, it was May, and it was unnecessary” ... At the more or less same time, there was a cosmetics/fragrance frenzy. No longer would you buy sulphur or saltpetre at Mr Thorn’s, but now fragrant oils: from carnations, roses, jasmine, some aromatic vinegar in which you would boil lemon peel, vanilla and laurel leaf (vegetable! vegetable!), you would mix them, try and fail, spice, you would keep them in sealed bottles... What for? I do not know. I believe to become a poet one day.¹⁹

In this fragment, the author reminisced on his youth years, but picking herbs and storing them in his poems – binding words and fragrances and mixing them – became his poetic practice, hence the titular juxtaposition of the article devoted to the poems of the author of *Kwiaty polskie* and other mindfulness-profiled authors. To be more accurate, hence the ability to view them within the stream of mindfulness and using them in primary school Polish lessons²⁰, motivated by the path of education for peace (while focusing on the most specific extent of positive peace, i.e. internal harmony). Therefore, I am interested in the cooperation between the semantic fields associated with words and herbal (or, more broadly, therapeutic) props in Tuwim’s poetry, and its beneficial herbal adaptation in teaching and pedagogical processes.

Tuwim’s sensory description quoted at the beginning of this subsection was already reflected in a text published on 6 January, 1913, in *Kurier Warszawski*, i.e. in his début poem “Prośba”, in which he compared two categories: *vita activa* (war elements) and *vita contemplativa* (herbal, poetic elements).

Jedni niech będą rycerze	Let some be knights
Wojenne niech noszą szaty,	May they carry war livery,
Niech mają miecze, puklerze...	Let them have swords, shields...
...Inni niech będą jak kwiaty (...)	... And let others be like flowers (...)

In another poem, Tuwim wrote about peering into flasks: “Extracts from frail herbs, / seraphic balms, / Sorcerer’s tinctures, / Alchemist infusions”²¹. In the young adult book titled *Julek. Podróże do krain wyobraźni*

¹⁹ J. Tuwim, *Nauka szkolna i zainteresowania pozaszkolne*, [in:] *Pisma prozą*, ed. J. Stradecki, Warsaw 1964, pp. 51-52. Originally printed in: “Wiadomości Literackie” 1936, issue 9. Cf. J. Stradecki, *W kręgu Skamandra*, Warsaw 1977; R. Cudak, *Modele odbioru poezji Skamandra: Casus Wierzyńskiego*, Katowice 1986.

²⁰ Cf. J. Paszek, *Wiedza o literaturze na użytek szkoły*, “Teksty” 1975, issue 3, pp. 148-160; S. Burkot, B. Faron, Z. Uryga, *Wiedza o literaturze na użytek szkoły*, “Pamiętnik Literacki” 1975, collection 2, pp. 79-97; W. Łukszo, *Praca nad utworem poetyckim na lekcjach języka polskiego w klasie VIII*, Warsaw 1956; M. Inglot, *Nauczać dla literatury*, “Życie Literackie” 1976, issue 20; W. Okoń, *Wprowadzenie do dydaktyki ogólnej*, Warsaw 1987; Z. Uryga, *O badaniu recepcji utworów liryycznych w szkole*, *Z badań nad sprawnością recepcji wierszy liryycznych w klasie maturalnej*, [in:] *Nowoczesne tendencje w dydaktyce literatury i języka polskiego*, Rzeszów 1974; K. Wyka, *Polonistyka w świetle szkoły, uczelni i nauki*, “Ruch Literacki” 1961, issue 3; M. Des Loges, *Przeżycie a przedmiot w dziele literackim. Uwagi z pogranicza teorii dydaktyki i literatury*, “Polonista” 1936, collection 2-4; K. Wyka, *O czytaniu i rozumieniu współczesnej poezji*, “Polonistyka” 1958, issue 6.

²¹ J. Tuwim, *W Barwistanie*, [in:] *Wiersze wybrane*, ed. M. Główński, Wrocław 1973, p. 39.

Juliana Tuwima, Krystyna Ratajska devoted considerable space to Tuwim's fads and his alchemist and gatherer fascinations:

(...) He began with gathering into a wicker basket pebbles, flint, beads, and shells. He assigned them magical properties. During the holidays, he sought out various medicinal herbs in the meadows of Inowlódz. He gathered mint, rue, thymus, and flannel, he dried them, put them into bags, he created albums with them. Their scent filled the flat in Andrzeja St., offering a reminder of the last holidays²². He also collected scented oils, little flasks with colour liquid, charms supposed to ensure happiness (...).²³

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In the monograph titled *Twarz Tuwima*, Piotr Matywiecki emphasised Tuwim's vitalism²⁴ and noted: "Plants permeate (...) the world as his fifth element"²⁵. The Warsaw-based poet and philologist considered the following as Tuwim's main plant motifs: a seed, roots, branches, twigs, leaves, flowers, fruit²⁶. I shall supplement this list with herbs, recognising the spiced and medicinal influence of various poems by the author of *Colloquium niedzielne na ulicy*. This has already been done by other researchers, who used the plant realm to derive metaphorical descriptions of the contents or structures of the poems by the Łódź-based poet – e.g. Piotr Michalowski in the article titled "Bukiet, wiecheć, ikebana: uwagi o kompozycji 'Kwiatów polskich'"²⁷.

The alliance of poetry and mindfulness

In his monograph titled *Child's Mind. Mindfulness Practices to Help Our Children Be More Focused, Calm and Relaxed*, Christopher Willard, a psychologist, thus described his first meditation:

It was a gift from my father. I was around six back then. We rowed a pontoon on the lake (...) We watched as gigantic cumuluses changed their shapes. (...) Would like to see a magic trick? (...) I can make the cloud vanish with my mind. (...) Choose a cloud. Start with a small one. (...) Now all you have to do is focus on it and breathe. With each breath you will be able to see that the cloud is getting a bit smaller. (...) Of course, now I understand that clouds form and disperse regardless of my will, yet I still remember the sensation of that moment when my breath and mind seemed the greatest powers in the world. Right after my father.²⁸

²² K. Ratajska, *Julek. Podróże do krain wyobraźni Juliana Tuwima*, Łódź 2013, p. 42.

²³ Ibid., p. 43. Cf. A. Frączek, *Rany Julek. O tym, jak Julian Tuwim został poeta*, illustrated by J. Rusinek, Łódź 2017.

²⁴ P. Matywiecki, *Twarz Tuwima*, Warszawa 2007, p. 465.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 470.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 495.

²⁷ P. Michalowski, *Bukiet, wiecheć, ikebana: uwagi o kompozycji 'Kwiatów polskich'*, "Teksty Drugie" 1996, issue 6, pp. 113-131.

²⁸ Ch. Willard, *Child's Mind. Mindfulness Practices to Help Our Children Be More Focused, Calm and Relaxed*, Berkeley 2010; as quoted in: material for the *Forum mindfulness dla nauczycieli*, training session, 31 Aug 2008, SWPS in Warsaw, coach: Eryk Oltarzewski, p. 5.

Tuwim described a meditation of clouds similar to that of Willard in the poem titled “Dyzio Marzyciel”, printed in various fourth-grade Polish course books (he is, actually, the most commonly suggested poet at that stage – in the same grade, pupils discuss a poem devoted to a bird peripatetic, a late nightingale). The carefree boy, usually reduced during lessons to an idler and a glutton, watches the sky:

Położył się Dyzio na łące,
Przygląda się niebu błękitnemu
I marzy:
„Jaka szkoda, że te obłoczki płynące
Nie są z waniliowego kremu...
A te różowe –
Że to nie lody malinowe...
A te złociste, pierzaste –
Że to nie stosy ciastek...
I szkoda, że całe niebo
Nie jest z tortu czekoladowego (...)"

Dyzio lied down in the meadow,
Watched the blue sky
And dreamt:
“What a shame that these flowing
clouds
Are not made of vanilla cream...
And those pink ones –
They are not raspberry ice cream...
And those golden fluffy ones –
They are not a pile of biscuits...
And what a shame that the entire
sky
Is not made of chocolate cake (...)"

A poem that is key for the article herein – as it foregrounds the binding of words and herbs – is “Sitowie”. The common in Julian Tuwim’s poetry saturation of poems with sensory experiences associated with the perception of nature is already present in the first stanza, in which the world of nature is represented by fragrant mint and the thick riverine bush. That image, which the poet poetic persona remembered and recreated, is confronted with another temporal perspective, namely that herbs – through the powers of Tuwim’s spell – change into words. The magical ‘hocus pocus’ expression originated from – if one was to trust Friedrich Kluge, the author of a 1883 German etymological dictionary – the Latin ‘*hoc est corpus meum*’ expression. This line of thinking was close to Tuwim, who considered *O hokus-pokus! Hoc est corpus!* as a spell of gods and poets. It also gave the title for one of his poems, i.e. “Słowo i ciało”:

Słowo ciałem się stało
I mieszka między nami,
Karmię zgłodniałe ciało
Słowami jak owocami;
(...)

Słowo jest winem i miodem,
Słowo jest mięsem i chlebem (...).

The word became flesh
And dwelt among us,
I feed the hungry flesh
With words like with fruit;
(...)

The word is wine and honey,
The word is meat and bread (...).

In “Sitowie”, the poet found names for flowers, biblically calling them by their names, and the imagery acquires a texture with each new line:

Wonna mięta nad wodą pachniała,
kołysały się kępki sitowia,
brzask różował i woda wiała,
wiew sitowie i miętę owiały.

Nie wiedziałem wtedy, że te zioła
będą w wierszach słowami po
latach
i że kwiaty z daleka po imieniu
przywołam,
zamiast leżeć zwyczajnie nad wodą
na kwiatach.

Nie wiedziałem, że się będę tak
męczył,
słów szukając dla żywego świata,
nie wiedziałem, że gdy się tak nad
wodą klęczy,
to potem trzeba cierpieć długie lata.

Wiedziałem tylko, że w sitowiu
są przeźne, wiotkie i długie
włókienka,
że z nich splotę siatkę leciutką
i cienką,
która nic nie będę łowił.

Boże dobry moich lat chłopięcych,
moich jasnych świtów Boże święty!
Czy już w życiu nie będzie więcej
pachnącej nad stawem mięty?

Czy to już tak zawsze ze
wszystkiego
będę słowa wyrywał w rozpaczy,
i sitowia, sitowia zwyczajnego
nigdy już zwyczajnie nie zobaczę?

Fragrant scent of mint spread on
the water,
tufts of bulrush swayed,
the dawn became pink and the
water blew,
a gust wrapped the bulrush and
the mint.

I did not know then that those
herbs
will become words in poems years
later
and that I will call flowers from
afar by their names,
instead of simply lying on flowers
on the water.

I did not know that it will pain me
so much,
to find words for the living world,
I did not know that when you knee
on the water like that,
then you need to ache many years.

I only knew that in the bulrush
there are springy, frail and long
fibres,
that I would weave them into a light
and thin net,
with which I will catch nothing.

Good god of my boyhood years,
Holy God of my light dawns!
Will there in my life
be no more fragrant mint on the
pond?

Will I from now on always
tear out words from everything in
despair,
and bulrush, normal bulrush
I will never see again?

The Skamandrite emphasised the difference between the spontaneous spreading of sensations by nature on the one hand and words by a poet on the other; a poet, who notices, defines, picks, and transforms – sometimes with much effort, which also became the topic of the poem titled “Bagdad,

czyli o przyszłym poecie". He struggles to find an appropriate spell, to use words without attacking the living world, to enable readers to see the bulrush through the rhymed image, like spring can be seen in spring. In "Rzecz czarnoleska", he describes a rite of passage: "The word slowly changes in its sound, / It becomes the true one"²⁹. In "Moja rzecz", he overtly treats the poem as a product of alchemy:

Moja rzecz – przetwarzanie,
Fermentować w przemianie,
Żebym się spalał, w ogniu
wyzwałał,
Żebym się w kroplę światła
zespalał,
W umiłowanie.

My thing – transforming,
To ferment in transformation,
For me to burn, become free in the
flames,
For me to turn into a drop of light,
Into affection.

That fear of poetic text separating from the world – and of the separation of words and things – seems almost obsessive in Tuwim's poetry. Consider in this context the poem titled "Trawa", one that – in some versions – is dedicated to Irena Tuwim, the author's sister³⁰.

Trawo, trawo do kolan!
Podnieś mi się do czoła,
Żeby myślom nie było
Ani mnie, ani pola.

Żebym ja się uzielił,
Przekwiecił do rdzenia kości
I już się nie oddzielił
Słowami od twej świeżości.

Abym tobie i sobie
Jednym imieniem mówił:
Albo obojgu – trawa,
Albo obojgu – tuwim
(T II, p. 166)

O grass, knee-high grass!
Rise to my head,
So that thoughts could not see
neither me nor the field.

For me to become herbal,
Flowered to my bones' core
And never to separate
With words from your freshness.

So I could about you and I
call by one name:
Or both – grass,
Or both – tuwim

With each utterance of the word 'trawa' [grass], the poetic persona strives to match its changing nature. He begs it to touch his head, so it will reach the level of thoughts. First, he blends the words 'udzielić' [to provide] and 'zazicić' [to become/get herbal]; he desires to become like grass, he desires to become herbal, he dreams of synonymousness and coexistence of grass and Tuwim (the Greek *syn* means 'co', and *onoma* – 'name'). He also refers to the very sources of writing, as the notion of *mimesis* is defined as "creative imitation of nature". In his doctoral dissertation titled *Poetyka Tuwima a polska tradycja literacka*, Michał Główński thus wrote about Tuwim's use of words:

²⁹ Idem., *Wiersze wybrane*, p. 75.

³⁰ P. Michałowski, *Prywatna kolekcja w depozycie fikcji: 'Kwiaty polskie' Juliana Tuwima, "Teksty Drugie"* 2000, issue 3, pp. 179-195; and M. Urbanek, *Wyleknoniony bluźnierca*, Warsaw 2013.

“(..) they possess basically a somatic nature in his works. (...) Since words equal things, consequently users of words are subject to certain obligations”³¹. In the introduction to the collection of works published within the National Library series, the researcher also noted: “Tuwim is (...) a poet open to the world, in his energetic poems a discharge occurs only when within them there appears an element of the external reality; the tension between the *I* and the *not I* is a fundamental fact for their composition”³².

In the introduction to *Antologia poezji dziecięcej*, Jerzy Cieślikowski argued that poems convey “not only autonomous values important for one’s childhood, but also a vision which fulfils a person’s complete development. Art, as Herbert Read, an English poet and critic, argued, offers an opportunity to save man in the world of alienation, technocracy and consumption, in an era which in theory professes grand ideas yet in practice it applies cruelty”³³.

The place of mindful poetry in the educational experiment

As stated before, Jon Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as “a love affair – with life, with reality, and with imagination”³⁴. After providing guidelines on how to retain an image of a lake in the mind, he quoted H. D. Thoreau’s *Walden*³⁵, and after describing a mountain meditation, he quoted a poem by Li Po (“The birds have vanished into the sky, / and now the last cloud drains away. / We sit together, the mountain and me, / until only the mountain remains” – Li Po, KZ, 137), which enables one to intuitively read poetic texts (in fact, this is the nature of the fragment of the American writer’s prose) as the essence of meditation.

Czesław Miłosz, whom Jerzy Jarzębski called “the master of the sensory presentation of the world”³⁶, in the prose work within *Piesek przydrożny*

³¹ M. Głowiński, *Poetyka Tuwima a polska tradycja literacka*, Warsaw 1962, p. 225.

³² Idem., *Wstęp*, [in:] J. Tuwim, *Wiersze wybrane*, ed. M. Głowiński, Wrocław 1973, p. XLVI.

³³ *Antologia poezji dziecięcej*, selected and edited by J. Cieślikowski, additional commentary and verification by G. Frydrychowicz and P. Matuszewska, Wrocław–Warsaw–Kraków–Gdańsk 1981, p. XXIII.

³⁴ J. Kabat-Zinn, *Praktyka uważności dla poczatkujących*, p. 10. In *Gdziekolwiek jesteś, bądź. Przewodnik uważnego życia*, he indicated that the “harmony with oneself and the world” comes from “seeking who we are, from studying our own view on the world” (KZ, 19). Idem, *Gdziekolwiek jesteś, bądź. Przewodnik uważnego życia*, transl. H. Smagacz, Warsaw 2014, p. 19. Hereinafter when I quote the book, I shall use the KZ abbreviation with an indication of the page number. “Though the practice of mindfulness may be simple, it does not have to be easy” (KZ, 23). “You need to stop and be present” (KZ, 26). “Remaining aware is the best way of grasping the moment. Mindfulness means that we are awake” (KZ, 26). “If, even for a moment, you sit down to meditate, that will be a time of inaction. It is important not to confuse inaction with not doing anything. Those are two completely different things. This is about awareness and intent. Fundamentally, they are the key” (KZ, 47).

³⁵ “Possible on the surface of the Earth there is nothing as beautiful, as pure and as expansive as a lake. Heavenly water. (...) It is a mirror that no stone can break (...); a mirror in which all dirt sinks swept away by the foggy broom of the sun – a light cloth, which does not stop any breath, but sends its own to soar as the clouds high above it and reflect in its silent bosom” (Thoreau, KZ, 140).

³⁶ J. Jarzębski, *Być samym czystym patrzeniem bez nazwy*, [in:] *Poznawanie Miłosza 3, 1999–2010*, ed. A. Fiut, Kraków 2011, p. 235.

mentioned the notion of 'mindfulness' and explained it in terms of its popular translation, namely '*uważność*':

According to a book by a Buddhist monk, which I am currently reading, the very core of Buddhist consists of mindfulness. I believe it can be translated as '*uważność*' (a word which already existed in Mikolaj Rej's works) or '*bycie uważnym*'. That means to consider with care that which is now instead of turning towards that which was or that which will be. Beneficial for those tormented by their consciousnesses, those reliving their past palls, beneficial for the restless who imagine fear-riddled what will happen tomorrow. I hope my poems can help readers reside in now. And I hope I myself can be cured of the illnesses of memory.³⁷

One of the leading *mindful* innovations in British school (where – within a pilot programme initiated by the Ministry of Education – pupils from 370 schools learn relaxation and meditation techniques³⁸) was called *.b* and it was intended for children and young adults aged 11-18. The name of the educational project should be expanded as: stop, breathe, consciously *be*. Each lesson instructs how to acquire skills of mindful psychology. The programme – written by Richard Burnett, Chris Cullen, and Chris O'Neil³⁹, all of whom are teachers – helps pupils develop positive self-evaluations, practise concentration, enables them to affix them in a moment, transfer attention to 'here and now' in a careful and accepting manner, develop peaceful relations⁴⁰, and identify their own emotions and the emotions of others.

Explicitly referencing the above-mentioned programme, I called my original authorial experiment *.P.* (where P refers to poetry and peace). Within it, I am researching the influence of mindfulness-inclining poems on primary school female and male pupils as well as the influence of similar readings on understanding of poetry. I am interested in whether they returned to the texts on their own, whether they brought them closer to understanding themselves and to understanding poetry, and whether they had a favourite work, and if so, which one and why. The study is intended to reveal the following elements: what consequences such a 'thinking through poems' carries; whether pupils feel its therapeutic influence; whether they feel emotionally stronger; in what conditions similar poetic meditation helps them; whether there are situations when it interferes with their educational

³⁷ Cz. Miłosz, *Uważność*, [in:] *Piesek...*, p. 19. Cf. B. Śniecikowska, *Poezja uważności – Czesław Miłosz i haiku*, "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich" 2014, collection 1, pp. 9-26; J. Błoński, *Miłosz jak świat*, Kraków 1998; I. Kania, *Czesław Miłosz a buddyzm*, "Dekada Literacka" 2011, issue 1/2; W. Kudyba, 'Zostaw ten złudny umysł'. *Echa medytacji zen w poezji Czesława Miłosza*, [in:] *Medytacja. Postawa intelektualna, sposób poznania, gatunek dyskursu*, eds. T. Kostkiewiczowa, M. Saganiak, Warsaw 2010; Cz. Miłosz, *Przeciw poezji niezrozumiałej*, [in:] *Życie na wyspach*, Kraków 1997.

³⁸ D. Hinds, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6663903/Thousands-pupils-given-meditation-lessons-help-cope-pressure.html>

³⁹ <https://mindfulnessinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/what-is-dotb-2015.pdf>

⁴⁰ Cf. K. Hawkins, *Mindful Teacher, Mindful School: Improving Wellbeing in Teaching and Learning*, Los Angeles-London-New Delhi 2017.

plan; the source of what the poems they read are; what they trigger in them; which receptive strategies they imply; how reactions to poems translate into their experiencing of the extra-textual world, which perceptive modes they trigger; and how readers transition through the phases indicated by Kazimierz Wyka in the article titled "O czytaniu i rozumieniu współczesnej poezji", namely: understanding a text, personal experiencing of a work, and intellectual framing⁴¹.

Between September 2018 and June 2019, in a class of thirteen-year-olds, I conducted, among others, an exercise during which selected lessons began with sitting on the carpet or in a comfortable position on desks. The pupils are to calm down, close their eyes or look at their calming resting hands and – in this position – they listen to poems read in Polish. Only in the course of the following days did they carefully interpret selected poetic texts in the traditional manner. For the recurring readings, I selected the following texts: "Courage" by Anne Sexton, "Wiara" and "Miłość" by Czesław Miłosz, several poetic works from his anthology titled *Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych* (Carlos Drummond de Andrade's "In the Middle of the Road", "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver), Zbigniew Herbert's "Kamyk", Adam Zagajewski's "Spróbuj opiewać okaleczony świat", "On Children" by Khalil Gibran, several poems by Rumi and Rabindranath Tagore – mainly from *Pieśni ofiarne* ("***Spodo-bało ci się uczynić mnie bezkresnym", "***Na morskich wybrzeżach świ-tów spotykają się dzieci", "***Dlaczego lampa zgasła") – "From March 1979" by Tomas Tranströmer, "***Mogliśmy się dowiedzieć od ptaków" by Pentti Saarikoski, "***My Thoughts" by Charles Reznikoff, "Dart" by Alice Oswald, "Wyjaśnienia na marginesie" by Zuzanna Ginczanka, "This Morning, I Wanted Four Legs" by Jane Hirshfield, Wisława Szymborska's "Pod jedną gwiazdką", "Może być bez tytułu"⁴², "Chwila", "Do serca w niedzielę" and "Chmury"⁴³, as well as poems by Julian Tuwim, the author of "Sitowie" and "Trawa".

The possibility of including the texts by the author of "Ptasie radio" in the practice of poetic meditation and the practices of mindfulness is already foreshadowed in his surname, which – derived from poetic etymology – should be divided into 'tu-wiem' [here-I know], i.e. *whilst being here, I have a complete awareness of the place and my participation in it*⁴⁴. Tuwim wrote poems which crystallised everyday epiphanies and which were a testimony to a careful reading of the signs of existence; many of those were founded in the stream which today could be referred to as ecocriticism. Such a poem enables readers to develop their relations with themselves; it becomes a lesson in mindfulness; it helps practise focusing on details, seizing the moment, and becoming absorbed in it. This enables one to have a careful look around,

⁴¹ As quoted in: B. Chrząstowska, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁴² This poem was included in the anthology: *The Poetry of Impermanence, Mindfulness, and Joy*, ed. John Brehm, Somerville 2017 (*No Title Required*, transl. S. Barańczak, C. Cavanagh).

⁴³ Cf. A. Dauksza, 'Postułchaj, jak mi przedko bije twoje serce': Afektywony potencjał poezji Wisławy Szymborskiej, "Wielogloss" 2016, issue 3, pp. 55-74.

⁴⁴ As a context, allow me to quote Jon Kabat-Zinn: "However, we all far too often act as if we forgot that we are *here* and in *this* situation. In each moment we find ourselves at the crossroads of *here* and *now*" (KZ, 9).

get a sense of direction within the internal world, practise affirmation, and share gratitude. In her text titled *Terapeutyczne oddziaływanie literatury*, Maria Molicka notes that poetry like this can compensate – i.e. satisfy temporarily – major needs; that it constitutes a centre for relief⁴⁵ and causes some fears to become allayed⁴⁶.

The participants of the experiment thus wrote in the survey, referring, it would seem, mainly to the first stage of the auditory experiencing of mindful poetry and to their own pre-receptive experiences:

- 'This is a moment for myself. It enables me to compare the world from the poems to my life'.
- 'Thanks to poems I can find some peace and quiet'.
- 'Poems have a calming and relaxing effect on me'.
- 'Poetry is a medicine for calming, an ointment, and an album of memories'.

As revealed by the experiment, reading conducted within the described mode enables that which William James – one of the founders of pragmatism in literary theories – called a "fruitful relationship with reality"⁴⁷. Therefore, it cannot be underestimated in the process of literary education at the primary-school level; it helps develop knowledge in the history of literature and theory of literature, and it helps structure pupils' personalities⁴⁸. In the study titled *Teoria literatury w szkole. Z badań nad recepcją liryki*, Bożena Chrząstowska concluded: "Eventually, what is important is not what pupils know about a work of literature or how they interpret it, but to what extent the work influenced their personalities (...)"⁴⁹. One should note the rather intentional selections of *major poems* which were made by individual participants – for instance, thirteen-year-olds trying to overcome orthorexia and anorexia consistently selected "Courage" by Anne Sexton, a poem that is actually used in therapy with teenage girls suffering from these diseases.

Teaching longing. In conclusion

The indicated poems by Julian Tuwim are an invitation to the world; they thus consider the perception of reality as equally important to the perception of poetry. The fact of coming into contact with them in a world dominated by new technologies shall prove fruitful and stimulating.

⁴⁵ M. Molicka, *Terapeutyczne oddziaływanie literatury*, [in:] *Tabu w literaturze i sztuce dla dzieci*, eds. B. Sochańska, J. Czechowska, Poznań 2012, p. 14. Cf. A. Włodarczyk, *Styl terapeutyczny w pracy nauczyciela polonisty*, Kraków 2007.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ As quoted in: A. Burzyńska, M.P. Markowski, *Teorie literatury XX wieku. Podręcznik*, Kraków 2006, p. 479.

⁴⁸ Michał Paweł Markowski thus explained the notion of institution in the context of pragmatism, which is worth noting when studying primary-school Polish lessons: "An institution is a place where our experiences are being structured", p. 484.

⁴⁹ B. Chrząstowska, *Teoria literatury w szkole. Z badań nad recepcją liryki*, Wrocław–Warsaw–Kraków–Gdańsk 1979, p. 201.

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SUMMARY

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In this article, the author discusses the subject of pro-peace education with the use of poetry, and its influence on the mental well-being of children. She indicates Julian Tuwim as one of the Polish trailblazers of the 20th-century trend of mindfulness, which instructs how to establish a harmonious relationship with oneself and the environment. She discusses studies which focus on the methods used when working during school lessons of the Polish language; methods which employ mindful poetry. The author argues that there exists a relationship between internal equanimity and global peace.

Keywords

mindful poetry, mindfulness, Julian Tuwim

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“My Gaze as Sharp as a Pin / Penetrates the World”: The Colourful Dailiness in the Poetry of Zuzanna Ginczanka

Words connected with seeing, watching, and observing often appear in the poetry of the author of *Chińskie bajki o La-Licie* (*Chinese Fairy Tales of La-Lita*). “*My gaze as sharp as a pin penetrates the world*”¹, the poet writes as many as three times. The phrase appears for the first time in her manuscripts in her juvenile poem titled *Zmysty* (*Senses*)². Ginczanka did not include this work in her poetry book and decided not to make it public in any other way. She wrote a comment on the margin: “to be used elsewhere”. The cited fragment of the poem was used in the subsequent years in *Sea Hunt*³ and *Fizjologia* (*Physiology*)⁴.

It is of particular importance to see the second instance of using the quoted phrase. The female subject, talking with the sea in the poem, raises the topic of epistemology in simple words, speaking about her ways of getting to know the world; these ways are closely based on senses, particularly on sight, hearing and taste⁵. “The full bay of events / I’ll catch in a net

¹ Translation by Marek Kazmierski. Other quoted poems in the translation by Marek Kazmierski include: *Sea Hunt*, *Grammars*, *Purvview*, *This One Thing*, *Pride*, *Declaration*, *Of Centaurus*, *Process*, and *Seafaring*. The remaining quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish.

² Z. Ginczanka, *Zmysty*, [in:] id., *Wiersze zebrane*, ed. I. Kiec, Warszawa 2014, p. 200.

³ Id., *Sea Hunt*, [in:] ibid., p. 277.

⁴ Id., *Fizjologia*, [in:] ibid., p. 206.

⁵ Cf. I. Kiec, Oskarżona. *Zuzanna Ginczanka o poetach i poetkach*, [in:] *Ginczanka. Na stulecie Poetki*, eds. K. Kuczyńska-Koschany, K. Szymańska, Kraków 2018, pp. 15-18.

of senses", she says in order to later give the information about what she sees, hears, and tastes. The fisherwoman seems to be content with the extent to which she got to know the world through senses. "I know, what I know, I know", she repeats several times.

The phrase "my gaze as sharp as a pin penetrates the world"⁶ can be found at the beginning of the poem and this time, in contrast to the two other quoted examples, it was not divided into two lines after the word "pin". In the original, the stress falls on the last word and on the adjective "sharp" on the onset of the following line. The focus is placed on the activity of "penetrating the world", in which both the process of perception and the world explored with the sight play an equal role.

This phrase also shows a possibility of becoming rooted in the reality owing to visual perception. Pinning to the world seems to suggest the willingness to integrate with the world, to become its part. A similar message is conveyed by the poem titled *Panteistyczne (Pantheistic)*⁷, suggesting that the whole world is constructed in a similar way. Nature is composed of the same elements as a human being is. Also the God turns out to be part of nature:

Jakże trudno wytrwać
w równowadze
plącąc nogi po drodze
o cuda
i nie oprzeć się pewnie o
boga,
który wiatru mi natrzasł
i ptaków –
wpłynął we mnie życiodajny bóg
krwią czerwoną,
co płynie bez trudu,
choć nie zjawił mi się żaden
głos
w gorejącym
i ognistym
krzaku.

How difficult to persist in balance
floundering legs on the way
on miracles
and not lean firmly on
god,
who shook me wind
and birds –
the life-giving god flowed into me
with red blood
which runs with no effort
although there was no
voice
in the burning
and fiery
bush.

I am interested in the sources of favouring the sense of sight in Ginczanka's poetry. This text is aimed at preliminary research concerning this issue. The layer of sound is also important in her works, yet, as opposed to poetry by Charles Baudelaire⁸, with whom Ginczanka shares the inclination to use synesthesia, all the other senses in her poetry are, to my mind, subdued to

⁶ The original in Polish reads: "Oczami jak agrafkami / ostro wpięłam się w świat". In his translation, Marek Kazmierski additionally uses alliteration to achieve this effect of sharpness. [translator's note]

⁷ Z. Ginczanka, *Panteistyczne*, [in:] id., *op. cit.*, pp. 180-183.

⁸ Cf. I. Kiec, *Oskarżona...* (pp. 27-28) for an interesting reference to the works by Baudelaire in Ginczanka's poetry.

sight. The poet seems, for all that, to be aware of the insufficiency of human senses. The lyrical subject in her poems tries to get to know and understand the world even though it does not always turn out to be fully possible. The most dramatic statement on the imperfection of human cognition may be found in the poem titled *Sea Hunt*. It is all the more powerful as it is uttered by the sea, having a dialogue with the fisherwoman and questioning human capabilities⁹:

on the shore you speak of nets
bind senses with bindweed,
you might as well try to fish for fowl or for any other birds –
how does the cold moon seem?
and do smell the depths of me?
How in senses, as thin as dreams
will you catch
the angels
herds?¹⁰

Disbelief in the perfection of senses does not exclude, however, one of them. It comes as a surprise that it is sight that is favoured, as it is traditionally regarded as 'masculine', intellectual – as opposed to 'feminine' senses, i.e. focused more around the touch. This recognition turns out to be important, especially in the context of the increasingly popular custom of reading the works of the poet of Rivne from the perspective of feminist criticism¹¹. To my mind, in this case the category of 'feminine' writing does not exclude the domination of the sense connected with seeing the world¹². I suppose that it is possible to point to at least three hypotheses that justify the reasons for the "sight-centrism"¹³ of Ginczanka's poetry.

The first one would be associated with the poet's ironic gesture towards the world surrounding her. Gincburżanka, as she was called, had to fend off oppressive peeking many times; therefore, in her poetry she somewhat 'defiantly' favours the sense which placed her under constant scrutiny. This technique allows one to transform a weakness into a strength, reverse the roles and make a transition from being the object of observation to becoming a subject observing the world.

⁹ In the aforementioned study, Kiec interprets the conversation with the fisherwoman with the sea as a clash of the androcentric world of literature (the sea) with the convention of 'feminine' writing (the fisherwoman). To my mind, however, the sense of the conversation of the fisherwoman with the sea may be also interpreted in another way, namely as a dialogue concerning the capabilities of human cognition.

¹⁰ Z. Ginczanka, *Sea Hunt*, [in:] *id.*, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

¹¹ Cf. A. Araszkiewicz, 'Wypowiadam wam moje życie'. *Melancholia Zuzanny Ginczanki*, Warszawa 2001.

¹² What is more, one of the researchers defines Ginczanka's poetry as "sensual-somatic-intellectual understanding of the world". Cf. L. Marzec, *Młoda na zawsze*, [in:] *Ginczanka, Na stulecie Poetki...*, p. 107.

¹³ Cf. M. Jay, *Kryzys tradycyjnej władzy wzroku. Od impresjonistów do Bergsona*, transl. J. Przeźmiński, [in:] *Odkrywanie modernizmu. Przekłady i komentarze*, ed. R. Nycz, Kraków 1998, pp. 295-330.

She was beautiful, but it was tainted beauty. "Queen of Wrong Looks". First in the 1930s passers-by turned their heads with admiration when they saw her in the street. Then during the occupation and the black 1940s she tried not to leave her hiding places but if she had to go out, she hid her beauty beneath a wide hat brim. Extraordinary, phenomenal face, broken, tragic biography; magnetic, underrated poetry¹⁴.

The words of Agata Araszkiewicz, describing the figure of the poet, sum up in an excellent way one of the problems which Ginczanka had to face. Her Semitic facial features made her pay attention to her appearance so that it is not too conspicuous, particularly at the time of the worst wave of anti-Semitism. It was difficult for the poet to avoid glances and comments, which were often inappropriate, but also hostile. There are anecdotes showing Eryk Lipiński and Józef Wittlin teasingly suggesting the staging of rape from the painting titled *Susanna and the Elders*, in which the role of the eponymous female would be performed by Ginczanka¹⁵.

Ginczanka's corporeality also attracted the attention of Witold Gombrowicz, whose words are cited by Maria Stauber:

[...] from now on I call you Gina. You are an ideal woman to me, incarnation of femininity, the queen of our table. This is why I give you a very feminine name Gina and here is the crown I put on your head¹⁶.

Despite the fact that she was beautiful, Ginczanka must have been dreading her Semitic appearance. One solution allowing her to run away from the current problems consists in turning to memories in her works. With regard to her youthful years spent in Volhynian Rivne, the greatest emphasis in Ginczanka's poetry is put on the landscapes she remembered¹⁷.

Evoking the nature of Rivne is probably connected with her escape to the world of youth, which could have been a safe haven for her. Sexuality may not have been aroused at that time and the poet did not have fear the looks of men surveying her feminine figure¹⁸.

In her youth, Ginczanka did not know the fear resulting from her Jewish origins. Returning to the landscapes of her childhood may create an illusion of the feeling of safety, which the poet lacked in the reality full of anti-Semitic attacks¹⁹.

¹⁴ A. Araszkiewicz, *Tajemnica Ginczanki. Wykluczające centrum języka polskiego*, "Czas Kultury" 2014, no. 1, pp. 98-99.

¹⁵ M. Stauber, *Musisz tam wrócić. Historia przyjaźni Lusi Gelmont i Zuzanny Ginczanki*, Warszawa 2018, p. 88.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁷ It could be quite interesting to see the effects of comparing this poetry with that of Kazimiera Ihłakowiczówna, particularly with the works included in her collection of poems titled *Słowik litewski* (A Lithuanian Nightingale) from 1936. Such an analysis, however, would exceed the volume of this draft.

¹⁸ In my considerations, I follow the trail indicated by Lucyna Marzec, who writes about the youthfulness and girlishness of Ginczanka's poetry as well as her constant fear of awakening sexuality. Cf. L. Marzec, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-118.

¹⁹ It is symptomatic that there are poems in Ginczanka's output which refer to her Semitic origins. Apart from figures of Jews evoked directly, for instance the poems *Kulistość*

Those attempts to take refuge might also have a creative aspect, since sinking into words could give a sense of authorship, which is not provided by the poet's here and now. This is my third hypothesis concerning the reasons for favouring the sense of sight in Ginczanka's poetry. It is possible that the exposure of perception processes that are characteristic of her poetry results from the special inclination of the poet towards the Polish language, which – as Jarosław Przeźmiński said²⁰ – carries a trace of sight-centrism as one of the Slavic languages.

There is a possibility that Ginczanka, immensely fascinated with the Polish language, instinctively senses some mechanisms inherent in the language. Works devoted to the author of *Of Centaurus* often stress Ginczanka's choice to be a Polish poet. Not a Jewish poet or a poet writing in Russian. As Maria Stauber writes, "Ginczanka spoke Polish, wrote in Polish and felt, above all, a Polish poet, she wanted to create Polish culture"²¹. Izolda Kiec stresses, in turn, her conscious choice of a Polish gymnasium specifically: "Zuzanna herself decides to learn Polish. Out of four gymnasiums in Rivne – Jewish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish, Zuzanna chooses the last one"²².

In her poems the poet observes individual words. In an important autothematic work titled *Grammars*²³, she writes:

(– and to relish words is such joy,
to cherish, to sip them like wine –
to hold, to lift them up, to view in a light divine).

The multitude of evoked colours is an interesting value of the world depicted by the poet. Names of colours are interwoven into metaphors. The subject speaks of a "grey plate of earth"²⁴, a "golden pumpkin of the sun", or "beautiful apples of red days". Izolda Kiec made a very accurate observation, saying that it is synthesis that dominates in Ginczanka's poetry²⁵.

(*Sphericity*) and *Ballada o Żydziaku* (A Ballad About Abbie) contain occasional references to the Biblical history of the Chosen People. One of more interesting examples of such a reference is the poem titled *Egzotyka miłości* (Love Exoticism):

Whether on the desert of the prophets – Biblical,
whether on the desert of the Sahara – African,
whether on the desert of longing – of spring,
whether on the desert of despair – nobody's,
– I wandered with looseness and emptiness,
yellow sand and days without caress
in the silence of muffled acoustics
forty days and forty nights.

Cf. Z. Ginczanka, *Egzotyka miłości*, [in:] id., *op. cit.*, pp. 198-199; Id., *Kulistość*, ibid, pp. 139-140; Id., *Ballada o Żydziaku*, ibid., pp. 95-97.

²⁰ J. Przeźmiński, *Z perspektywy Martina Jaya, czyli o tym jak 'przymknąć' oko*, [in:] *Odkrywanie modernizmu...*, p. 333.

²¹ M. Stauber, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

²² I. Kiec, *Ginczanka. Życie i twórczość*, Poznań 1994, p. 36.

²³ Z. Ginczanka, *Grammars*, [in:] id., *op. cit.*, p. 263.

²⁴ Id., *Uczta wakacyjna*, ibid., p. 44.

²⁵ I. Kiec, *Ginczanka. Życie i twórczość...*, p. 98.

Colour is often hinted through synesthesia. Individual senses melt into a poetic metaphor, bringing unusually interesting vivid images. One of such metaphors can be found in a fragment of the poem titled *Purview*: "Boiling blood bursts a song of anguish clear²⁶". This phrase, apart from containing the information about transmitting the message through the song, conveys an extraordinarily sensual image in which the dominating hue is bloody red. The corporeality of this poem is additionally stressed by associating writing with suffering.

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An excerpt from a poem titled *This One Thing* is the most interesting fragment of Ginczanka's poetry, pointing to her sight-centrism and stressing the role of painting techniques, types of paints, their thickness or dilution:

Oh watercolour mornings, thick oil painted noons,
dreamy pastel evenings and nights etched with coals!²⁷

In a way, the world turns out to be similar to a painting. It appears as a landscape, which is not – to my mind – without significance. A painting or a picture has an impact primarily on the sight, and Ginczanka's poetry turns out to be a creation of such landscapes, this time with words.

The important role of colour can also be indicated by the frequency analysis of individual words or whole phrases concerning hues. I analysed the book of verse titled *Of Centaurus* with regard to indications of concrete colours. In seventeen poems, there are as many as fifty-six expressions connected with shades of colours. The analysis includes both individual words describing hues, often forming epithets (e.g. "blue eyes", "black night", "grey old winters" – from the poem titled *Pride*²⁸) as well as metaphorical expressions that bring to mind justified associations with the given shades (e.g. the expression in which the day "turned black" – from the same poem; or the metaphor from *Grammars*: "Cats' eyes that spring forth lakes, emerald pools deep enough to drown"²⁹).

It seems necessary to stress that the results of the frequency analysis were largely affected by the unequal number of expressions concerning colours in individual poems. In some works, such as *Sea Hunt*, I counted as many as eight expressions which were of interest to me, while in the case of poems such as *Declaration*, it is difficult to find expressions which would connote associations with hues. These poems which are connected with concrete poetic images abound in the phrases in question. However, they are not present in more abstract works, i.e. those that reflect on the presence of man in the world:

I know the calling of hips,
the boundless silence of peace,
which I caress with my lips

²⁶ Z. Ginczanka, *Purview*, [in:] id., *op. cit.*, p. 258.

²⁷ Id., *This One Thing*, *ibid.*, p. 268.

²⁸ Id., *Pride*, pp. 253-254.

²⁹ Id., *Grammars*, p. 263.

while still warm
from waking.

I'm not any other thing than a wise kind of beast,
not any other thing than a human care taking³⁰.

It is worth analysing whether the colours present in Ginczanka's poems changed after she had moved from Volhynian Rivne to Warsaw. The cities differed radically in the 1930s. Ginczanka's focus on the sensations of sight could suggest a hypothesis that moving to Warsaw and changing the surroundings will result in changes in the hues dominating in poetic images. This assumption turns out to be incorrect. It may be due to the fact that the author of *Of Centaurus* does not devote a lot of attention to the city. Her subsequent poems are still full of descriptions of landscapes. The colours are dominated – which is equally characteristic – by hues of nature: shades of red, azure, yellow, and white. These colours are a recurring theme in all the poet's works, from juvenile poems printed in *Echa szkolne* (*School Echos*), manuscripts from the 1932-1934 period, the collection of poems titled *Of centaurus*, to her last poems, i.e. those written in 1942.

Despite her constant contact with the Skamander group, the poet remained faithful to her penchant for nature and she steered clear of setting her poems in the urban space³¹. If it does appear in Ginczanka's poem, urbanistic landscape seems to be a digression. The poem titled *Process*³² is an excellent example of not yielding to the aura of delight with the city, which was characteristic of the Skamander group and Kraków Avant-Garde. The poem comes from the *Of Centaurus* volume and so it was published during the poet's stay in Warsaw. The work describes the eponymous process of the formation of the world. The last stage of genesis is, according to the lyrical subject, a process opposite to that of Biblical creation. The poet writes that "flesh / in the end / became word", as if suggesting a continuation of the process of genesis in the human use of speech.

The world surrounding the human being, the space changed by them, is depicted in this poem only in the last strophe. The earlier energy of the world seems to be depleting. In the previous fragments, nature was capable of creating new spaces. Water was separating from "the earth of birches and ferns". The creative power of nature accumulated in the picture of an erupting volcano:

Cretaceous,
Jurassic,
Triassic
soil layered along certain rings –

³⁰ Id., *Declaration*, p. 274.

³¹ I skip satires and epigrams in my analysis due to their separateness from other poems of the poet as well as their frequently journalistic character. It is worth mentioning, nevertheless, the fact of publishing poems in the Warsaw-based *Szpilki* magazine, and the acquaintance of Ginczanka with the writers of the interwar period.

³² Z. Ginczanka, *Process*, pp. 251-252.

Miocene assaults in majesty sure of beating all-comers and kings.
 And there is a tear between water
 and the earth of birches and ferns
 - and god can see it is good even when his back becomes turned.
 Azote is boiling in lava,
 lava is cooling like wax,
 mountains
 are climbing
 mountains,
 a thunderous, lumbering attack,
 carbon enriches the earth with black battles 'tween coal and tar –
 – and it sees that it's working out fine
 for damp reptiles and dizzy stars³³.

The contrast between the past and the present becomes visible the moment the human being is mentioned in the poem:

Once beneath redolent cherubs a proud rhododendron did rise,
 tall horsetails did tower and climb as grand as any New York.

In my opinion, the word “once” is of great importance here, suggesting the passage of time, a painful change, a loss.

In Równo, Brest and Konin
 married ladies
 in the nights do sigh
 as policemen
 do dirty work
 committing
 passionate
 crimes.

The image of wilting daisies³⁴ contrasts dramatically with the earlier fragments of the poem, which dealt with the creation of the world. The lyrical subject seems to show that together with the advent of human beings and their settling in towns, *Homo sapiens* stops and destroys the free life of nature. The aforementioned image of wilting daisies contrasts with the vision of huge horsetails which “once” existed. It should be stressed here that in her poem Ginczanka gives names of only small or medium-sized towns, skipping the modern world of Warsaw. It would be hard to delight in a big-city landscape even if one sees the restriction of the creative powers of nature in small-town scenery (“squares” are essential here: *ordo artificialis* versus *ordo naturalis*). On the other hand, the mention of committing passionate crimes

³³ Ibid., p. 251.

³⁴ The image of the daisies is lost in translation. The same happens with “squares”. Cf. The Polish original: “W Koninie, Brześciu i Równym / na skwerach / stokrotki więdną / i policjanci / po nocach / ślubne / małżonki / milują”. [translator’s note]

may suggest the participation of a human being in the process of ongoing changes. Two human beings are capable of giving a new life. This interpretation of the poem points to a certain paradox: a human being destroys nature, but at the same time is part of it and takes part – like the nature itself – in the process of genesis.

As I mentioned above, the colours in the poems from later periods remain similar to that from the 'Rivne period'. The way of presenting colours changes, though. In place of epithets pointing directly to a given colour (examples from Ginczanka's early works could include, for instance, "azure cristal"³⁵ or "grey hours"³⁶), it is also possible to encounter phrases such as "arc sealed with tar"³⁷, or one about cats' eyes that are "emerald pools"³⁸, i.e. phrases that suggest colour only.

The permanency of poetic images and colours in Ginczanka's work, despite the fact that the poet moved to Warsaw, inspires reflection on the issue of the affiliation of Ginczanka with the Skamander group. The minimal presence of urban landscapes definitely makes her stand out from among other authors who gathered in Mała Ziemiańska, a coffeehouse in Warsaw. The researcher is faced with two solutions to this dilemma: either the poet's literary output is separate, or the ideas about the Skamander group should be reformulated and Ginczanka should be included in this group. I suppose that the first option is more justified, but I would like to leave this issue open and provide the readers with some substance for reflection.

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³⁵ Id., *Mysli przez błękity kryształ*, p. 71.

³⁶ Id., *Spleen*, p. 99.

³⁷ Id., *Seafaring*, p. 260.

³⁸ Id., *Grammars*, p. 263.

SUMMARY

The aim of the paper is to present preliminary research results on the sight-centrism of the poetry written by Zuzanna Ginczanka. The author of the article draws attention to a paradox: it is the sight that is favoured in Ginczanka's poems, and sight is traditionally perceived as 'masculine', intellectual, as opposed to 'feminine' senses that are more focused on touch. One of the more important features of sight-centrism in Ginczanka's works is the observation of hues which may be found in the world. The paper investigates whether colours in this poetry change after the author of *Of Centaurus* moves to Warsaw. The consistency of poetic imagery placing the human being in natural landscapes rather than the urban space forces the researcher to reflect on the affiliation of Ginczanka with the Skamander group.

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Keywords

Ginczanka, poetry, sight, colours, Skamander, nature, city

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'And to be malicious and belligerent / And not to lose feminine features'¹: Zuzanna Ginczanka's Satirical World

"Zuzanna Ginczanka belongs to a large group of authors of the interwar period who were underrated both during their life and after death"². These words of Maria Janion from 1999 make it possible to realise how, luckily for us, the thinking of the "beautiful Jewess"³ is changing. In recent years, there have been more and more texts and monographs concerning Ginczanka's literary output, and beside the fundamental works by Izolda Kiec and research conducted by Agata Araszkiewicz one may find a freshly published post-conference volume edited by Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany and Katarzyna Szymańska, titled *Ginczanka. Na stulecie Poetki*⁴ (A *Ginczanka Centennial*).

In my paper, I would like to focus on how Ginczanka (dubbed 'Tuwim in a dress' by Adam Ważyk) felt in the Warsaw world of the 'Skamander Group', in the circle of 'Pikador' – in the world full of men, male dominance,

¹ Z. Ginczanka, *Damskie kłopoty*, [in:] id., *Wiersze zebrane*, ed. I. Kiec, Sejny 2014, p. 291 [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

² M. Janion, 'Przepisać los Ginczanki', [in:] A. Araszkiewicz, *Wypowiadam wam moje życie. Melancholia Zuzanny Ginczanki*, Warszawa 2001, p. 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cf. I. Kiec, *Zuzanna Ginczanka. Życie i twórczość*, Poznań 1994; A. Araszkiewicz, "Wypowiadam wam moje życie". *Melancholia Zuzanny Ginczanki*, Warszawa 2001; *Ginczanka. Na stulecie Poetki*, eds. K. Kuczyńska-Koschany, K. Szymańska, Kraków 2018.

and masculine creative power. As a woman-poet, was she finding her way in the literary, cabaret garden of Tuwim, Lechoń or Słonimski?

Trying to answer the above questions, I will take a closer look at two poems, namely *Pochwała snobów* (*In Praise of Snobs*) and *Damskie kłopoty* (*Feminine Trouble*), trying to depict the satirical nature as a specific feature of their poetics, and reconstruct the picture of the woman and poet present in Ginczanka's works. Satirical works seem to be particularly important among the numerous poems of the poet. As Izolda Kiec writes, "Satirical works are an area which allows to manifest participation in the events of the contemporary world. And this is precisely the field that Zuzanna Ginczanka is trying her hand at"⁵. Agata Araszkiewicz notices, in turn, particular otherness, separateness of the poet, stressing that "[in] Szpilki Ginczanka is the only woman in the company of many men"⁶. Does Ginczanka construct a female perspective that is different to male perspectives in the satirical world of *Szpilki*? Does she try to develop her own way of writing, and new satirical forms?

As it is known, Ginczanka was born in a Jewish family in Kiev in 1917. Her Semitic origins and extraordinary beauty will contribute to her death twenty seven years later, and the charismatic appearance will make a lasting impact on the life of the poet, who will continue to live in constant fear during the war years, the years of her adult life.

Ginczanka's poetic debut opened her door to the grand Warsaw world of literary men. "Her poem *Grammars* distinguished in the Young Poets' Tournament was published in *Wiadomości Literackie* in 1934 [...]. From that time the poet began to publish in the monthly magazine *Skamander*, in *Szpilki* and precisely and in *Wiadomości Literackie*"⁷. Back then, Ginczanka already knew Julian Tuwim, her future mentor, her Master, so to speak, who she sent her poems to and who personally encouraged her to take part in the competition of *Wiadomości Literackie*.

The poem titled *Pochwała snobów* was published in the 50th issue of *Szpilki* in 1936. This is a very perverse, ironic work mocking certain behaviours and realities of the 1930s. But is that all? Does not the poem also show how Ginczanka was finding her way in a new, still unexplored yet very enticing world? Perhaps she observes the newly explored reality from the distance and looks with reservation at what is happening in this hermetic world? This reservation provoked criticism and allowed her to adopt a satirical attitude to the reality being described.

It is worth recognising the circumstances in which the poem was written and which also shed some light to its interpretation. *Pochwała snobów* is a reaction to anti-Semitic works by Józef Gałuszka, a poet from Kraków, columnist, participant of World War One and the Polish-Soviet War. The Writers' Association Award, which was presented to Gałuszka, aroused lot of controversy in literary circles. Araszkiewicz comments this in the following way:

⁵ I. Kiec, *Zuzanna Ginczanka...*, p. 107.

⁶ A. Araszkiewicz, *Wypowiadam...*, p. 135.

⁷ A. Kosterska, *Wybrane problemy recepcji poezji Zuzanny Ginczanki*, [in:] *Dwudziestolecie mniejszyn. O kobietach piszących w latach 1918-1939*, eds. E. Graczyk, M. Graban-Pomirska, K. Cierzan, P. Biczkowska, Kraków 2011, p. 71.

In 1932 Gałuszka, an ant-Semitic poet, who earlier became infamous for his attack on Tuwim, received an award of the jury of the Writers' Association in Kraków. [...] *Myśl Narodowa* [...] decided to defend the "poet-soldier", seeing in the dispute "many people dependent on jews" [original spelling - K.O.] from *Wiadomości Literackie*. [...] the [aforementioned] poem may be considered to be a commentary by Ginczanka who belonged to these circles and dealt with the literary life of the 1930s when anti-Semitic attacks were commonplace⁸.

Indeed, the name of the poet appeared in Ginczanka's work on a number of occasions:

(...)	(...)
grafomięta i tłuste snobiątka, robią brzydkie rzeczy w pieluszki i słuchają wierszyków Gałuszki	scribblers and fat snobs do ugly things in their nappy and listen to poems by Gałuszka
(...)	(...)
Im po nocach nie śni się wróżka, lecz sam znany powszechnie Gałuszka ,	They don't dream of fairies at night but of the well-known Gałuszka
lub, że wróżki przynoszą pieluszki od samego wielkiego Gałuszki -	or that fairies bring them nappies from the grand Gałuszka
(...)	(...)

Earlier Gałuszka included Tuwim in his article titled "O sparszywieniu obyczajów" (*On Manginess of Manners*), which may have been an additional incentive for Ginczanka to make an attempt at mocking the anti-Semitic poet. Her mentor was publicly derided. She could not leave this without a comment. At the same time she protested against bullying the eminent poet, her friend and master, but also against wicked anti-Semitic attitude with the consciousness that what is personal is, in fact, political. At the same time it is worth mentioning that the poet herself became an object of press attacks because of her origins. Anti-Semitic moods led to the publication of a text titled "Koleżanko Gincburzanko! Nie bądźcie Ginczanką" ("Colleague Gincburzanka! Do Not Be Ginczanka") in the Warsaw tabloid titled *Wiem wszystko* (*I Know Everything*). This is a lampoon full of cynicism which offends the poet, undermining her also as a woman and reducing her to the role of an uneducated "chick": "The young Sarmatian chick undertook a risky function of pulling ... chestnuts from the fire with her little hands".

Michał Głowiński drew attention to the fact that in Ginczanka's work "one may observe a split [...] into personal poetry and **militant anti-fascist satire** [emphasis mine - K. O.]"⁹. *Pochwała snobów* is not the only example pointing to the poet's criticism of anti-Semitic attitudes. In 1937, the work titled "Bez komentarzy. (O zwyczajach panów dziennikarzy)" ["No Comments.

⁸ A. Araszkiewicz, *Wypowiadam...*, p. 149.

⁹ M. Głowiński, *O liryce i satyrze Zuzanny Ginczanki*, "Twórczość" 1955, no. 8, p. 118.

(On Male Journalists' Manners")] is published in *Szpilki*. The poet hides people of Jewish origin under the guise of dogs. This comparison of people to animals – their behaviours to non-conforming social norms – depicts how unwanted Jews were in Warsaw circles:

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(...)
że „Pies rasy nieznanej bliżej
honorowi miasta ubliża,
zalatwiając psie swoje „sprawy”
na terenie miasta Warszawy.
(...)

(...)
that a dog of breed unknown
insults the city's honour
doing the dog's 'things'
on the area of the city of Warsaw.
(...)

Ginczanka refuses to accept this. The attack is directed at journalists who, instead of digging deep into stories and realities and trying to change something, only give incomplete information full of "muck" in order to leave it "without commentary" later, but at the same time they lead very inappropriate life themselves:

w międzyczasie (wiemy niezbicie)
ma prywatne **pokątnie** życie.

in the meantime (we know it for sure)
he has his private **shady** life.

In her satires, the poet looks very soberly at social life and the policy of Warsaw, as well as the whole country, in the 1930s. This distance and objectivity allows her to notice things which others are unable to see. Is it the fear of what is happening and what may happen in the world that makes it possible for her to observe certain situations so thoroughly and draw conclusions from them? Ginczanka's vitality is no longer, after all, simple Skamadrite joy, a reaction to regaining independence, but, rather, a conscious choice of a heroic stance, an attitude to live at the time of dominant catastrophism and apocalypse in view. This is a conscious decision resulting from mature observation of the reality and existential as well as ideological reflections.

Here, a question arises about who in reality is mocked by the lyrical subject in *Pochwała snobów*. Is it the critics who often approach certain things thoughtlessly and when they vent their spleen, they "buy the *Skamander* magazine" to cheer themselves up, and later show off with their (pseudo)-erudition and intelligence in front of their acquaintances or the society reading their scribble willingly? Or does the text present the miserable world "which in the interwar period swarmed not only with a gut of words, but also an incredible number of poets [...] and poetesses"¹⁰? Ginczanka speaks directly about female scribblers who are "nice in touch"¹¹ and male scribblers who "sell poetry like any good yard goods"¹². It seems to me that it is

¹⁰ A. Fac-Biedziuk, 'Rozgryźć słowo – jak migdał – w cierpki smak'. O poznaniu w poezji Zuzanny Ginczanki, [in:] *Dwudziestolecie mniej znane...*, p. 84.

¹¹ Z. Ginczanka, *Pochwała snobów*, p. 299.

¹² As cited in: A. Fac-Biedziuk, 'Rozgryźć słowo...', p. 84.

difficult to find an unambiguous answer to this question. The poem touches both critics and mediocre artists. The lyrical subject remains in opposition to the attitudes presented in the poem, being tired of hypocrisy, mendacity, hierarchy in the world of literary men which must sanction the position of the writer. The status of the author remains unstable and changeable, it does not always depend on the quality of artistic work. Ginczanka depicts this with regard to Tadeusz Wittlin's situation:

Popychają Wittlina w kawiarni,
przepraszają zbyt uniżeni,
do najbliższej biegą księgarni
i kupują sobie *Sól ziemi* –
pokazują znajomym *Sól ziemi*
od rokroszy głusi i niemi,
ochłonąwszy zaś cedzą ze spleenem:
"Rozmawiałem właśnie z Wittlinem".

They push Wittlin in the café,
say sorry being all too humble,
they run to the nearest bookshop
and buy a copy of *Sól ziemi* –
they show their friends *Sól ziemi*
deaf and mute from delight,
more composed they drawl with
spleen

"I have just talked to Wittlin"

This stanza excellently shows the aforementioned hypocrisy. The readers are presented here in a caricatural way: the characters of the poem neither notice the poet nor read his works, they just buy what is fashionable, they show off with the book they bought, confabulate in order to gain approval and admiration of others. Ginczanka hates situations in which everything is done for effect, snooty and artificial. Those pseudo-connoisseurs, posturing to be seen as specialists in a given field, torment poets and they also torment the lyrical hero of the poem. Ginczanka wants to separate herself from that world, she understands the rules which govern it all too well. At the same time, she is aware that even good poets are dependent on both literary critics and snobbish pseudo-readers as they in a way decide about their position, shape good or bad opinion about their works, ensure them fame and social acclaim. This is why the final lines of this piece are as follows:

przeto właśnie dlatego aby
nie wymarły na świecie snoby!

hence this is why therefore
may snobs never die in this world!

Another work which I would like to acknowledge is a satire from 1936 titled *Damskie kłopoty*. In this poem, the lyrical subject makes it very clear that certain social conventions, norms, and roles are very up-to-date, and an attempt to go beyond them might result in pleasant consequences:

bezkarnie sypniesz rym sobie
sprośny,
– a niech ja powiem rzecz
nieprzystojną,
każdy wypomni ustęp odnośny.

you trot out lewd rhyme with
impunity,
– and if I say an indecorous thing,
I'll be rebuked for the words I said.

The existence of double standards, different for authors and different for authoresses, is beyond any doubt. As a woman, Ginczanka must be careful what she is writing about. She cannot afford to do what men do. "«The lewd rhyme», as Agata Araszkiewicz notices, probably refers to mocking female sexuality. Its comicality is achieved at the cost of the object that it concerns. [...] The woman, presented as a «drawback» embodied in the sex, disturbs the woman-writer in writing satires"¹³. In this world, her gender is an obstacle for a woman. The female poet struggles with stereotypes and social roles. Simply with the oppressiveness of culture. She is constantly being adored because of her outstanding beauty both in the society of the Skamander Group and outside it. This beauty is a burden for her. Same as her sex, which culturally forbids her to behave and write in a way different from the one that is socially accepted and sanctioned. The poet is aware of the difficulty resulting from both attempts to preserve these frames and go beyond them:

Niełatwo pisać rzecz satyryczną
z ostrym posmakiem aktualności
i być złośliwą i napastliwą
i nie zatracić cech kobiecości.

It is not easy to write a satire
with a sharp flavour of current affairs
and to be malicious and belligerent
and not to lose feminine features.

In addition, the lyrical 'I' points to what she cannot write about as she has neither experience nor knowledge which she could refer to. This is as if the woman-poet, woman-satirist could not fully take advantage of the world, the current history, since, euphemistically speaking, she is not as refined and enlightened as a man is: "Writing satires in a magazine whose tone was set by men alone [...] is therefore, a very risky job for a «lady». Current affairs of political life seem alien to her, the woman is allowed to use different strategies of joking than «gentlemen»"¹⁴. Yet the whole ironicalness of the lyrical subject is depicted in the witty point:

a pisać trzeba, a pisać warto,
wielka i szczytna rzecz honorarium.

and you have to write, it is good to
write
it is grand and noble to earn a fee.

The lyrical subject departs from lofty expressions and grand things, showing that (s)he also has to earn a living. To live. Like every other poet(ess). This auto-irony liberates, it is a tool which makes gender differences disappear, they are meaningless as money does not distinguish between women and non-women.

Ginczanka excellently fits into a certain pattern of satire set forth by members of the Skamander Group. One of very visible features in her satirical works is the affirmation of activism. She wants to act socially and economically. This activity is visible in her works. There is no stagnation, she keeps moving forward, ahead, although she is not free of fear and anxiety of what

¹³ A. Araszkiewicz, *Wypowiadam...*, p. 136.

¹⁴ A. Araszkiewicz, *Wypowiadam...*, p. 135.

may come. Other features of this type of writing include participation in the life of the state, and Ginczanka's works are also characterised by liberation from stereotypes and old patterns of thinking. Nonetheless: "the closer the war, the less liberating her irony was and the more apprehensive it grew"¹⁵.

This is not the only feature that brings the poet closer to the Skamander group. If one compares, for example, *Pochwała snobów* with *The Ball at the Opera* by Tuwim, one will notice many similar ways of constructing the world. Both works have a lot in common as they grew out of the same climate, but also they were written within a short space of time¹⁶. Tuwim presented the political elite of the world of his time: generals, chamberlains, well-to-do people who should (due to their functions and manners) represent certain typical features of behaviour. Unfortunately, the reality turns out to be completely different and these figures are ironically mocked as they are incapable of behaving at the table, they are ruthless: they kill animals only to satisfy their hunger. They have no inhibitions, they are profligate:

At the sideboard stands a toper,
Nipper, tipper, gourmand, guzzler,
Youthful Bourbon, Rastakowski,
Slices up the snakelike tripe;
On the plate of Donna Diana
Lies a howling murdered steer,
Prince of Georgia Dzhavachadzut,
Sinks his teeth into a pork butt¹⁷
(...)

Commonplace double-dealing and hypocrisy of socially respected people is beyond comprehension. Journalists who manipulate their audiences, who lie and whitewash the reality, are a standard here:

One can see a scrap of newsprint:
With the letters IDEOLO...
(...)
Journalists hastily scribble:
- ideolo - ideolo - ideolo¹⁸
(...)

¹⁵ A. Araszkiewicz, *Wypowiadam...*, p. 136.

¹⁶ *Pochwała snobów* was written in 1936. It was published in the 50th issue of *Szpilki*. However, as A. Polonsky writes: "The controversy around the narrative poem [*The Ball at the Opera*] is also confirmed by its editorial history. Written in the summer of 1936 it could not be published in the full version due to its heavily anti-government and probably blasphemous overtone". Before the war, several less provocative fragments were published (most of Part I and the whole Part III in the Christmas issue of *Robotnik* and *Naprzód*, the whole Part VI in *Skamander* from 1937, no. 87-89, and the first half of Part VIII in the *Dziennik Ludowy* yearly from 1938). Cf. A. Polonsky, *Bal w operze. Żydowska apokalipsa według Juliana Tuwima*, "Roczniki Humanistyczne" 2016, vol. LXIV, no. 1, p. 11.

¹⁷ J. Tuwim, *The Ball at the Opera*, Warszawa 1982, pp. 18-20. In translation by Madeline G. Levine and Steven I. Levine.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 29, 32.

All around, normal life continues in accordance with the rhythms of ordinary people. The poem shows what is happening in the country and what is so far away from the events at the ball as well as after it:

Working people have arisen
They load guns with ammunition,
Deal in cattle demolition,
Run their business with precision
Drive their rivals into prison
Smash their skulls, destroy their vision
Crucify them as their mission
And impale them with derision
Make of profits their religion
And print banknotes on commission¹⁹
(...)

Tuwim excellently portrays the lies of the world. He sees attitudes which are in contrast with the responsibilities and postulates that are presented and publicly announced. He is very inquisitive and observant. "A satire on gumshoes"²⁰ – this is how Izolda Kiec wrote about the work of the poet.

The same features may be found in Ginczanka's poetry. She also does not understand hypocrisy, falseness, appearances. "She presents cultural and social stereotypes using irony as an obstacle in building an honest relation with another person"²¹. This is clearly manifested in *Pochwała snobów*. It seems that this openness – observability – in depicting hypocrisy is another feature which connects the poet not only with Tuwim, but also with the whole Skamander group, members of which insist that the poet should be also an active participant in the life of the country. Yet the poet does not focus on another thing that the Skamander Group demands: the ordinary, average normal man who also lives in this world and who is often underrated and ignored.

It is possible that Ginczanka's works were also influenced by Witold Gombrowicz. The author of *Ferdydurke* never joined any group, nevertheless Ginczanka had good relations with him and "usually [...] sat [...] in the group of people surrounding [...] Gombrowicz"²². *Ferdydurke* was published shortly after *Pochwała snobów* and *The Ball at the Opera*²³ had been written. This is another work, albeit written in prose, which uncovers myths and stereotypes. Gombrowicz, like Ginczanka and Tuwim, is an excellent observer of the reality. Unmasking the Młodziaks or the manor of the Hurlekkis is only one of his numerous attempts at showing the hypocritical reality and the clash of life with the form. *Trans-Atlantyk*, which is

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁰ I. Kiec, *Zuzanna Ginczanka...*, p. 113.

²¹ A. Kwiatkowska, *Miedzy tradycja a nowoczesnością. O polskiej liryce kobiet w XX wieku*, [in:] *Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX: procesy i gatunki, sytuacje i tematy*, eds. E. Kraskowska, B. Kaniewska, Poznań 2015, p. 143.

²² I. Kiec, *Zuzanna Ginczanka...*, p. 94.

²³ The complete book was not published until 1982.

a continuation of the satirical ironic way, was published fifteen years later. Regrettably, Ginczanka never managed to get to know this work.

Is it possible, therefore, to venture a thesis that Ginczanka is a flesh and blood Skamandrite? Is her satirical world typical of this poetic group? Not exactly. As Izolda Kiec wrote, "Ginczanka was more connected with the Skamander Group through the table in the coffeehouse than the poetic attitude"²⁴. Even though it is possible to find features connecting her poetics with that of Skamander, Ginczanka is much more rooted in the language, she is afraid to depart from it. "Her words are compact and focused, loaded; as if she literally «clung» to the language in order not to «fall out» of it"²⁵. The language is for her a language of senses and "lyric poetry of the poet expresses the crisis of confidence to words with simultaneous fascination with them"²⁶. This is not to be found in Tuwim. His words are light, they flow, they are not afraid to come to the world. Ginczanka selects words carefully, she is cautious, heedful:

Tobie to dobrze, satyrotwórco, łatwe masz życie, satyry klejąc, przyprawiasz mówkę nieskromnym słówkiem i już dowcipne i już się śmieją.	You are lucky, you satire-maker You have easy life, sticking satires, You spice your speech with indecent words, And it's funny, and everyone's laughing.
--	--

The poet "shows the personal 'I', breaking the order with irony in such a way that the parodic vision of the world is mixed with the grotesque of her private nightmare"²⁷. Ginczanka is soaked with fear, which is visible in her works. Intimacy emanating from her poems and satires is very interesting. It is precisely in *Damskie kłopoty* that the political and social character of certain principles which govern the rights of authors – male writers – mixes with her privacy, separateness, femininity. This is not to be found in the Skamander group: the satire "craves publicity as it propagates certain ideas to which it wishes to convince as many people as possible"²⁸.

Therefore did Ginczanka find her way in the Skamander group? Was she not different, strange? How did she feel in this men's world as a woman, a woman-poet? Was she capable of freeing herself from the curse of her beauty and being just a writing woman (which was already a huge challenge), and not only the beautiful "star of Zion"?²⁹ Maria Staubert wrote that:

Zuza has now an air of anger. She has to constantly reject the advances of her colleagues – penmen. Susanna and the Elders – this is how it is summed up on the mezzanine by Tuwim, twenty years her elder, who

²⁴ A. Fac-Biedziuk, 'Rozgryźć słowo...', p. 81.

²⁵ A. Araszkiewicz, *Wypowiadam...*, p. 140.

²⁶ A. Fac-Biedziuk, 'Rozgryźć słowo...', p. 79.

²⁷ A. Araszkiewicz, *Wypowiadam...*, p. 140.

²⁸ *Satyra prawdę mówi 1918-1939*, eds. Z. Mitzner, L. Pasternak, Warszawa 1963, p. 10.

²⁹ As cited in: I. Kiec, *Zuzanna Ginczanka...*, p. 94.

always takes her into his solely fatherly care, albeit he is also suspected of flirting with her. [...] In reality, Ginczanka had enough of this constant adoration of men of different ages in the grip of some sexual obsession. She was afraid of stupid questions, such as: "Are you still a virgin?", those vulgar jokes, like putting a match to her lips and checking if it burns³⁰.

This and many other indecent behaviours towards the poet were described in the book titled *Musisz tam wrócić. Historia przyjaźni Lusi Gelmont i Zuzanny Ginczanki* (*You Must Come Back There: A History of Friendship of Lusia Gelmont and Zuzanna Ginczanka*)³¹. It shows a picture of Ginczanka, who was notoriously assaulted with words (but not only) by fellow poets and writers. Men surrounding her were incapable of containing their lust. Indeed, they could appreciate her literary artistry, but did they treat her seriously? The poet was aware of her qualities and her immaculate beauty. Yet, dealing with constant and not always pleasant comments must have had an impact on her self-esteem and certainly affected her work, not only in the *Szpileki* satirical magazine:

For some time she was courted by Leon Pasternak. It looked quite funny. Short, stocky, a foot shorter than her [...] he had no chance whatsoever. Besides that Sana did not like his poems. He took a revenge in a very nasty manner, namely he published a lampoon in *Szpileki* [...]. Pasternak will be Pasternak – that is clear, but why did the editorial board of *Szpileki* publish this poem? I had only one logical answer: they all, one after another, were turned down by the beautiful lady. Hence the collective revenge³².

Ginczanka, as the only woman in that environment (here I am not mentioning Lola Szereszewska³³), did not have an easy life. Assessed through the prism of her beauty and origins, she could have had some problems with finding herself, her identity and affiliation; with discovering what really was important to her.

Ginczanka had to become a woman who constantly kept proving that she has something more than just her beauty; that she can write equally well, if not better, than a man. In a different way but equally valuable, equally interesting and equally important. That as a woman she presents some new perspective, perhaps hitherto unseen and unnoticed. That it is possible to write in a sensual way at the same time, because the world may be experienced through senses and the world itself demands so. Her reality is extremely tumid, ready to explode, and the world has pulsating blood and a warm body within itself. It is very vitalistic. Partly Skamander. Partly heroic. And it belongs only to her.

³⁰ M. Stauber, *Musisz tam wrócić. Historia przyjaźni Lusi Gelmont i Zuzanny Ginczanki*, Warszawa 2018, p. 88.

³¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-92.

³² J. Łobodowski, *Pamięci Sulamity*, Toronto 1987, pp. 10-11.

³³ Cf. I. Kiec, Oskarżona. *Zuzanna Ginczanka o poetach i poetkach*, [in:] *Ginczanka. Na stulecie Poetki...*, pp. 14-15.

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SUMMARY

The paper reflects on how Zuzanna Ginczanka, dubbed 'Tuwim in a dress' by Adam Ważyk, was finding her way – both as a woman and, above, as a poet – in the literary, cabaret world of Julian Tuwim, Jan Lechoń, or Antoni Słonimski. The paper focuses on the satirical output of the poet, which is why the author chose two works – namely *Pochwała snobów* (*In Praise of Snobs*) and *Damskie kłopoty* (*Feminine Trouble*) – as the basis for the analysis.

Keywords

Zuzanna Ginczanka, Polish poetry, Polish poetry written by women, 20th century, Skamander

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READING FROM
A PERSPECTIVE



Selected 19th-Century Poetic Paeans Celebrating Stanisław Moniuszko

In celebration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of the author of *Straszny dwór*, the Sejm of the Republic of Poland decreed 2019 as Stanisław Moniuszko's Year. This article was developed as a result of the inspiration drawn from that celebration, though it refers specifically not to the composer's date of birth – i.e. 5 May, 1819 – but the date of his death, i.e. 4 June, 1872.

The celebratory funeral, which was held in Warsaw on Friday the 7th of June around 11 a.m., attracted crowds. According to eyewitnesses, the cortège from the Holy Cross Church all the way to the Powązki cemetery gathered, despite terrible heat¹, approximately 80,000 people². This was because the event was generally viewed as, to quote the words of a columnist of *Kłosy*, "a heavenly bolt"³. The Legnica orchestra managed by Benjamin Bilse played Chopin's funeral march and fragments of the melody from *Halka*⁴. The eulogy was delivered by Jan Chęciński, Moniuszko's friend, a well-known actor and director at that time⁵. People emphasised the "never before seen in Warsaw" "grandness"⁶ of the entire ceremony,

¹ [a.a.], *Ślady życia*, "Opiekun Domowy" 1872, issue 24, p. 185.

² That was the reference indicated in an account by "Biblioteka Warszawska" 1872, vol. 3, p. 160; A. Walicki spoke about as many as 100,000 participants (vide ibid., *Stanisław Moniuszko [z portretem i dodatkiem kartki nut]*, Warsaw 1873, p. 80).

³ E. Lubowski, *Pokłosie*, "Kłosy" 1872, issue 363, p. 406. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

⁴ Vide the detailed description of Moniuszko's funeral in "Kłosy" 1872, issue 364, p. 415.

⁵ Vide "Opiekun Domowy" 1872, issue 24, pp. 185-186.

⁶ A. Walicki, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

which was followed by collections for the financial support of the composer's surviving wife and children. In fact, Moniuszko's first monographer wrote: "How big the eagerness to add to the collections for the family was and how that enthusiasm cooled down after a few weeks, that is not for me to discuss"⁷. I began with indicating those well-known facts from various sources as it were the funeral celebrations that could be considered as the symbolic moment of the emergence of the myth of the creator of national opera, a myth of an artist who, as Zdzisław Jachimecki put it, was "a through and through Pole"⁸. Who, mind you, was rather consistently hailed in the 19th century as the next poet/prophet, like Adam Mickiewicz had been before him⁹. The universally experienced "mourning" should also be considered as the trigger of the creation of a group of poems devoted to the composer and his works¹⁰. They spurred me into a search for other 19th-century poetic pieces devoted to this subject. However, it turned out that there were not many of those and those that were written were, let me be frank, not of the highest quality. Nonetheless, I believe that it is a good idea to discuss them in order to indicate how authors interpreted the ideological expressions of Moniuszko's music, its sources, and the functions it fulfilled.

This catalogue of Moniuszko-related poems should begin with the poem titled *Do Majora Wilkowskiego*, which has already been recognised by Witold Rudziński. It was a rather unique poem as it was written by the composer himself. Moniuszko wrote the text very early on in his career (he added the note: *W Berlinie S.M. [In Berlin S.M.]* and dated it 1838), and it was first published in Vilnius in vol. 7 of *Wizerunki i Roztrząsania Naukowo-Literackie* of 1839. The short poem was intended for an old sweat and raconteur, the local piano tuner, a common guest of many manors of Vilnius suburbs, but – when considered more broadly – it simply constituted a praise for the "artist state". It echoed the notes of both Kochanowski's Epicurean songs and the traditions of Burschenschaft songs¹¹.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Z. Jachimecki, *Moniuszko*, foreword and notes by W. Rudziński, Kraków 1961, p. 17.

⁹ Vide A. Topolska, *Mit wieszczą. Stanisław Moniuszko w piśmiennictwie lat 1858-1989*, Poznań 2014.

¹⁰ The website <https://pnamc.ehum.psnc.pl/> proved very helpful in my study (*Poezja na marginesie cywilizacji. Degradacja i odrodzenie twórczości poetyckiej w latach 1864-1894*. [Podstawa bibliograficzno-materialowa]. A study project fulfilled under grant NPRH 11H11013880). (accessed: 9.08.2019).

¹¹ S. Moniuszko, *Do Majora Wilkowskiego*, "Wizerunki i Roztrząsania Naukowo-Literackie" 1839, vol. 7, p. 138. Quotations from this work that are provided later in the article come from this edition, with modernised spelling. Reprint in: "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1873, issue 271, p. 128. There are slight stylistic discrepancies between the spelling in both journals. In "Tygodnik Ilustrowany", apart from spelling being changed, several phrases have been altered: "Nam zaś, fortuna choć bryka, / Życie ubiega wesoło / Zawsze nam w głowie muzyka / Choć chłodno, boso i goło / I przyszłość, choć niepojęta, / Lecz młodość, to nie przelewki! / Wiwat! (...)!" [For us, though fortune prances, / Life passes merrily / Music is always in our heads / Though cold, barefoot and unclad / And the future, though unknown, / Yet youth, that's no joke! / Rejoice!]. Rudziński cites this poetic 'drollery' after Henryk Opieński (*Stanisław Moniuszko*, Lwów-Petersburg 1924, p. 66), *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 467-468.

Jestże szczęśliwszy kto w świecie
 Jak my w artystowskim stanie?
 Ty szczypiąc na arfinecie,
 Ja klepiąc po forte-pianie?
 Myśl w dobrą chwilę poczęta
 Nigdy nie spali z panewki.
 Wiwat! Niech żyją talenta
 Ja, ty, arfinet i śpiewki!

Is there anyone happier in the world
 Than we are in the artistic state?
 You pinching at the arfinet,
 I pounding at the piano?
 A thought conceived at the right moment
 Will never go in vain.
 Rejoice! Long live talents
 I, you, the arfinet and song!

For the composer's colleagues who played the arfinet¹² and the piano, it was proof of the highest creative skills, which also guaranteed the highest pleasures in life. Talent had a practical dimension in this case: it ensured success with women, it gave satisfaction, and it protected against the dangers of the external world. The poetic persona pronounces the superiority of playing music over the uncertain and slavish army, court or church service, or even the euphoria of gambling. It may not guarantee wealth, but it does fill life with joy, constituting a kind of therapy in the face of the unpredictability and frailty of fate.

Nam zaś fortuna choć bryka,
 Zawsze wszelakoż wesoło,
 Zawsze nam w głowie muzyka,
 Choć często boso i goło;
 Kolej losów niepojęta,
 Lecz wesołość - nie przelewki...

For us fortune though prances,
 Always merrily,
 Music is always in our heads,
 Though often barefoot and unclad;
 Fortunes unknown,
 Yet jollity - no joke...

Moniuszko concluded each stanza with a humorous yet enthusiastic refrain/calling:

Wiwat!... niech żyją talenta,
 Ja, ty, arfinet i śpiewki!...

Rejoice!... Long live talents,
 I, you, arfinet and song!...

Clearly this rhymed – even somewhat coarse – joke should only be noted to indicate the musician's other words: "I was not one of those children hailed as wonderful, yet from my earliest years I felt an overwhelming inclination towards music, in which my calling revealed very early on"¹³. When explaining the origins of the poem, Korotyński added this statement about the composer: "He himself, at least in adulthood, did not write poetry. Being a grand poet in music he did not wish to be a mediocre poet in

¹² Officially, it was a side harp constructed in Poland. As Wincenty Korotyński (signed L. Borzywojowicz) mentioned in the article titled *Moniuszko-poeta*, the arfinet was related to Slavic instruments such as the husle or the gusle. "The arfinet had several dozen metal strings; its tone was extremely resonant; the instrument looked like large cimbalon but it was played by touching the strings with one's fingers, like a harp" ("Kurier Warszawski" 1917, issue 155, pp. 3-4). According to Korotyński, major Wilkowski sang and played with much skill utilising many local songs, *inter alia* carols.

¹³ Z. Jachimecki, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

writing"¹⁴. However, in the case of Moniuszko, the music-poetry relationship fascinated his audience, which I shall discuss further in this article.

In the late 1830s and in the early 1840s, the press began to notice Moniuszko's merit in terms of song, which by one critic was termed "the most beautiful child of music and poetry"¹⁵, and journalists reported on the works the composer wrote during his education in Berlin. In the already mentioned *Wizerunki i Roztrząsania Naukowo-Literackie* of 1839, an anonymous author wrote about, e.g., Moniuszko's "uncommon talent", adding after Antoni Woykowski of the Poznań-based *Tygodnik Literacki* the following diagnosis of Polish song:

(...) a few songs by Kurpiński, Lipiński, Chopin and some by J. Nowakowski, that is the entire musical literature of song. Therefore, one should rejoice that Mr Moniuszko, as we believe, has devoted his time solely to this kind of compositions. His *Trzy śpiewy* proves his talent, musical education and fantasy – enough merit for an author to become grand one day if he maintains his diligence and continues his education.¹⁶

In the same Vilnius-based periodical, the issues of the musicality of the city and its surroundings were often discussed. In the 1841 article titled "Muzyka w Wilnie, tudzież kilka słów o Lipińskim i Oll-Bull'u", Oskar Milewski (supported by the editorial board) was rather critical of that domain of the local artistic life.

Vilnius does not possess own music; it does not possess any national melodies. No domestic artist has tried to use the themes of Lithuanian communal song to compose musical art; we do have higher music which is commonly known, European music, but not the one which, like in other places, being an impression of former customs, a translator of communal legends, or a hieroglyphic of long-past historical events. This remark is a response to those non-understanding people who demand from our local composers national motifs and ideas different from all other.¹⁷

Only two names, i.e. Wiktor Każyński and Moniuszko, were considered by Milewski as worthy of appreciation and promising anything for the future. Of course, one should add that many of the positive remarks about Moniuszko's diligence and musical knowledge published there were written by his friend, the author of the libretto to the comical opera titled *Ideał*, which has long been considered as lost¹⁸, and of the libretto the operetta staged in Vilnius in 1840, namely *Karmaniol czyli Francuzi lubią żartować*.

¹⁴ W. Korotyński, *Moniuszko-poeta...*, p. 3.

¹⁵ [a.a], *Rozmaitości*, "Wizerunki i Roztrząsania Naukowo-Literackie" 1839, vol. 11, p. 148.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 149. Vide also: A. Woykowski, *Doniesienia muzyczne*, "Tygodnik Literacki" 1839, vol. 1, issue 48, p. 384.

¹⁷ O. Milewski, *Muzyka w Wilnie, tudzież kilka słów o Lipińskim i Oll-Bull'u*, "Wizerunki i Roztrząsania Naukowo-Literackie" 1841, vol. 19, p. 117.

¹⁸ Milewski's authorship and his acquaintance with Moniuszko was confirmed by W. Rudziński (*Stanisław Moniuszko. Studia i materiały*, part I, Kraków 1955, p. 121). In this article, I will omit references to articles on Moniuszko's music from that period; I refer those

We owe Moniuszko's Vilnius friend also one of the earliest or maybe even the first poem devoted to the composer. This is the poem dated 18 December, 1849, and titled *W imionniku Stanisława Moniuszki* by Władysław Syrokomla. Leszek Kondratowicz and Moniuszko knew each other well and were close for a long time, though one should also note periods of minor disputes and strife between them¹⁹. When Moniuszko left for Warsaw, Syrokomla sent letters to the capital, recommending him to his friends. For example, he inquired Paulina Wilkońska:

Is our Moniuszko known to You? Is he still in Warsaw and how successful is he? I bade farewell to him as he was leaving Vilnius sincerely wishing him a good roaming and had no doubt that Warsaw, willing to provide compassion to everything that is native, will welcome him with an open heart. Was is like that?²⁰

When Syrokomla died in 1862, Moniuszko wrote the song titled *Wieczny pokój lirnikowi*, referring with the title to a well-known work by Kondratowicz, titled *Lirnik wioskowy*²¹. The poem *W imionniku Stanisława Moniuszki* captures that deeply personal and emotional trait of their relationship²².

Gdy widzę promienne, natchnione twe oko,
Gdy słyszę twą piosnkę natchnioną, –
Łaskawą Opatrzność uwielbiam głęboko,
Że iskrę skrzeszała w twe łono,
Że pamięć o Litwie w Niebiosach się mieści,
Że piewcę pomiędzy nas budzi,
Że twoim imieniem i blaskiem twej części
Powieksza cześć naszą u ludzi.

Lecz jeszcze nie tutaj twa wielkość się znaczy,
Tu pełni Opatrzność swe plany.

When I see your eye radiant and inspired,
When I hear your inspired song, –
I cherish deeply Kind Providence,
That it struck the spark into your chest,
That the memory of Lithuania fits in the Heavens,
That it awakes the bard among us,
That through your name and the shine of your
[esteem
Increases our part among people.

But not yet here your grandness is marked,
Here, Providence fulfills its plans.

interested in this to the already quoted works by W. Rudziński and A. Topolska, as well as to J. Prosnak, W. Rudziński, *Almanach Moniuszkowski 1872-1952*, Warsaw 1952.

¹⁹ W. Rudziński, *op. cit.*, p. 322. One conflict was triggered by Syrokomla's affair with Adam Kirkor's wife, which Moniuszko, a very religious and faithful husband and father, could not accept.

²⁰ P. Wilkońska, *Moje wspomnienia o życiu towarzyskim w Warszawie*, collected and edited by Z. Lewinówna, J. Gomulicki, Warsaw 1959, p. 267.

²¹ S. Moniuszko, *Pamięci Władysława Syrokomli. Wieczny pokój lirnikowi: słowa Seweryny z Żochowskich Pruszakowej*, printed notes, G 392 W, Warsaw 1863.

²² L. Kondratowicz, *Poezje*, vol. V, Mikołów-Warszawa 1908, p. 57. Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish. Każyński, whom Milewski mentioned earlier, wrote in *Notatki z podróży muzycznej w Niemczech* (Petersburg 1845): "Mr Moniuszko has today in Vilnius no artistic existence, no food for the ear; this man buried in our musicless Vilnius seems a diamond tossed in the field into weeds, which hide his brilliance from passers-by."

Bóg natchnął ci twórczość, wlał ogień
[śpiewaczy,
Ty śpiewasz, boś na to zesłany.
Serdeczniej podziwiać i kochać cię będziem,
Żeś Litwie poświęcił się cały,
Żeś stanął, jak Orfej z muzycznym
[narzędziem,
Rozmiękczać kamienie i skały.

God infused you with creativity, poured the
[singer's flame
You sing because you were exiled for that.
We shall admire and love you more cordially,
Because you devoted yourself whole to
[Lithuania,
Because you stood like Orpheus with the
[musical tool,
To soften stone and rock.

Widziałem po świecie, jak pieśni twojej siłą
Zawrzały kamienne umysły,
Jak oko, co dotąd bezmyślnie świeciło,
Poczuło, że łzy mu wytrysły.
Słyszałem, jak napiew, przez ciebie
[schwycony
Na polu, lub w chacie rolnika,
Napawa urokiem litewskie salony
I swojskim uczuciem przenika

I saw in the world how with the power of
[your song
Stone minds boiled,
How eyes which had shone a mindless light,
Felt that tears streamed out.
I heard like first seized by you
In the field or in a farmer's hut,
Delighted with charm Lithuanian parlours
And permeates with familiar emotion.

Moniuszko's "inspired eye" and "inspired song" were, in the image developed by Syrokomla, mainly a gift from God to Lithuanians. Similarly, in fact, as a divine spark, the poet framed the sources of his own talent, e.g. in the poem *Nie ja śpiewam, lecz duch Boży*. Moniuszko's merit was, according to Kondratowicz, not as much the development of his musical skills but, rather, directing them towards the service for the "little homeland". The songs deserved admiration and paeans as, first of all, they strengthened Lithuanians' dignity and ensured their being famous among foreign nations, and, secondly, because they helped "soften" the hearts and move the "stone minds" in order to enable extensive democratic processes among the inhabitants of Vilnius. Syrokomla praised Moniuszko's works, but in doing so he demanded of him certain moral and social responsibilities. He designed tasks for his friend which he could raise in the chant he heard in a peasant hut or a *szlachta* manor.

Cześć tobie, pieśniarzu! harmonie śpiewacze
Rozniosą braterstwo — jak cudem:
O! kto raz przy piosnce ludowej zapłacze,
Przestanie się pastwić nad ludem!
Litwini ulegną pieśniowej potędze,
Zbliżą się z rodzinną szczerotą,
I Litwin we złocie, i Litwin w siermiędzce
W braterskich uściskach się spleta.

Hail to you, oh bard! singer harmonies
Shall spread brotherhood — like in a miracle:
Alas! whoever cries on hearing a folk song,
Will never again torment the peoples!
Lithuanians shall yield to the song might,
They will come near with familial honesty,
A Lithuanian in gold and a Lithuanian in sukmana
They will brace in brotherly embrace.

Moniuszko's letters to his friends in Vilnius prove that such a perspective was not alien to him; that he sought inspiration in authentic folk works yet he was fully aware that it should not be reduced to ethnographic repetitions. In a letter to Adam Kirkor, in which he described his fascinating meeting with folk singers, he stated that it would be under Syrokomla's hand that his "peasant songs" could become alive in the best possible way; that he would "treat" and "polish" them so that they would constitute a "purely Lithuanian chant"²³. Therefore, he assumed that the folk character which he drew from was a material which required treatment. The understanding of such a form of folk character in music – which in turn would become acceptable for various social groups – is visible in the third stanza of the quoted paean by Syrokomla²⁴.

Probably also in 1849, Kondratowicz wrote another text: *Do Stanisława Moniuszki (Kantata w dzień imienin, do muzyki J. Z.)*²⁵. It had an even more casual and personal character than the one discussed earlier. The celebration of name day imposed on it the form of a simple song with recurring sections resembling a refrain. The simple content indicates motifs of common amusement, brotherly accord, and homely moving of hearts. Among the elements of musical description that are of interest from the perspective of this article, I can only indicate the distinct thread of emotional and religious influence of Moniuszko's song on the audience and the fact of referring to the musician as a busker. 'Songster', 'busker', 'lirnyk' were, according to Topolska, significant terms in the process of the gradual formalisation of the myth of Moniuszko the prophet²⁶.

Kiedy serce się rozmacha,	When the heart swings,
Czyż je skryć pod lawę?	Should you hide under the table?
Święto grajka, święto Stacha	Holiday of a busker, holiday of Stach
Obchodzim w oktawę:	We celebrate in an octave:
Górą Stachu, grajku nasz,	Hail Stach, our busker,
Co na sercach naszych grasz! (Ty na sercu [naszym grasz])	Who plays our hearts! (You play our [heart])

²³ As quoted in: W. Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko. Studia i materiały*, part II, Kraków 1962, pp. 166-167.

²⁴ A. Topolska, *Mit wieszcza...*, pp. 140-144, 155, 162, 172. The researcher often returned to the thesis that Moniuszko did not so much create music which adopted the folk idiom directly, but, rather, he subjected the folk character to various adaptations and transformations, sometimes using its form which had long been adopted by the culture of minor *szlachta* manors or the Romantic literature. She claimed that this aspect had often been omitted in the reception of Moniuszko's works. Vide also *Prospekt* by Moniuszko for *Śpiewnik domowy*, "Tygodnik Petersburski" 1842, issue 72, s. 493-494.

²⁵ W. Syrokomla, *Pisma epiczne i dramatyczne*, vol. 9, Poznań, 1868, pp. 46-47. A copy of the poem drawn up by an unknown hand can be found in the collections of Warszawskie Towarzystwo Muzyczne (the so-called miscellaneous folder). The record has an affixed note by Moniuszko, which erroneously defines the location of the poem in the volumes of Syrokomla's Poetry (recorded: "vol. VI, p. 317"). Wincenty Korotyński marked on the copy with an X one stanza omitted from the print. Vide also W. Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko...*, part II, p. 383. I added the stanza to the work marking it in bold. In bold in the parentheses I also included a version of the text found in a copy in WTM.

²⁶ A. Topolska, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47. Moniuszko the lirnik was discussed by, e.g., J.M. Kamiński, *Nad grobem Stanisława Moniuszki*, "Opiekun Domowy" 1872, issue 24, pp. 185-186.

Dźwięk, co z taktów twych (**pieśni twej**) się
[leje,
W piersiach nam (**sercach nam**) zasnutym:
Człek się modli (**kocha**), płacze, śmieje
Wedle twojej nuty:
Bo ty, Stachu, grajek nasz, (**Góra Stachu**
[**grajku nasz,**])
Ty na sercu naszem grasz!

The sound which from your strokes (**of your**
[song] pours,
In our chests (**our hearts**) is wrapped:
Man prays (**loves**), cries, laughs
According to your notes:
Because you, Stach, our busker, (**Grand**
[Stach busker of ours,)
You play our heart!

Czy na świętą Litanię
Idziem (**Idą**) ludzie grzeszni,
Aż w niebiosa dusza bije modlitwa w niebo bije
Na skrzydłach twej pieśni:
Bo ty, Stachu, grajek nasz, (**brak refrenu**
[**w odpisie**])
Ty na sercu naszem grasz!

Do to the holy Litany
We go (**they go**) sinful people,
Up to the sky the soul strikes the prayers strike
[in the heavens
On the wings of your song:
Because you, Stach, our busker,
[**(no refrain in description)**
You play our heart!

Czy cios jaki z ręki Państkiej (**Pana**)
Spadnie nam na głowy, (**Ugodzi nam**
[**w głowy,**])
Nucim z tobą śpiew cygański (**pieśń Cygana**)
Albo szal Maćkowy;
Bo ty, Stachu, grajek nasz, (**brak refrenu**
[**w odpisie**])
Ty na sercu naszem grasz!

Whether the strike from the Lord's hand (**Lord's**)
Shall fall onto our heads, (**Shall strike our**
[**heads,**])
We chant with you the gypsy song (**the**
[**Gypsy's song**])
Or Maciek's madness;
Because you, Stach, our busker,
[**(no refrain in description)**
You play our heart!

Czy wesoło nam w gospodzie, (**My i doma,**
[**i w gospodzie**])
Z namiś ty, śpiewacie! (**Znamy cię,**
[**śpiewacie,**])
Przy twym tanku jak po miodzie (**Przy**
[**piosence, jak przy miodzie,**])
Aż nam dusza serce skacze:
Bo ty, Stachu, grajek nasz, (**brak refrenu**
[**w odpisie**])
Ty na sercu naszem grasz!

Are we merry in the inn, (**We and home, and**
[**in the inn**])
With us you are, singer! (**We know you,**
[**singer,**])
With your tank like for mead (**With song like**
[**with mead,**])
So that our heart's soul hops:
Because you, Stach, our busker,
[**(no refrain in description)**
You play our heart!

Graj nam szczęśliw nieprzerwanie,
Grajku ulubiony!
Splataj naszych serc pukanie
W twe czarowne tony:
Bo ty, Stachu, grajek nasz,
Ty na sercu naszem grasz! (**Co na sercach**
[**naszych grasz.**])

Play to us, happy endlessly,
Our favourite busker!
Embrace our hearts' beating
Into your enchanting tones:
Because you, Stach, our busker,
You play our heart! (**Who plays our**
[**hearts.**])

Przyjdzie może czas już krótki,
Gdy zagrzmisz ochoczo!
Brząkniesz tylko jedną nutkę
Aż kamienie skoczą.

Hej chłopaki! Pieśń niech dzwoni, (Niech
[zaszumi pieśń i tanek])
Hukniem setne lata!
Piękny wianek z bratnich skroni (Z dloni
[bratnych piękny wianek])
Grajka niech opłata: (Niech grajka opłata.)
Wiwat, Stachu, grajku nasz
Co na sercach naszych grasz!

There might once come the short time,
When you will blare readily!
You will just strike one note
And stones will jump.

Hey, lads! May the song resonate, (May the
[song and tank buzz])
We shall peal hundred years!
Beautiful wreath from brotherly brows (From
[brotherly hands a beautiful wreath])
May embrace the busker: (May embrace the
[busker])
Cheers, Stach, our busker,
Who plays our hearts!

What is interesting is that also in this case Syrokomla attributed Moniuszko's music with the ability to "soften stone", i.e. to transform human thinking.

Eight years later, another paean in celebration of the composer was created. It was a direct outcome of a visit at the Warsaw parlour from Nina and Waclaw Łuszczewskis on 19 July, 1857. Researchers have indicated that already in 1849 or 1850 during one of the Monday meetings at the Łuszczewskis, a fragment of *Witolorauda* with Moniuszko's music was performed, presumably the *Milda* cantata, which refers to the initial part of Kraszewski's epic poem²⁷. It must have made an impression on Deotyma, since in 1857 – in a poem prepared in celebration of the musician's visit – it became a major element of the description of his output. The work titled *Do Stanisława Moniuszki* was first read publicly by Józef Korzeniowski and later it was published in *Ruch Muzyczny*²⁸. In line with the rules of her improvisations, the poet began with the most general remarks about music, which she collected in two couplet sets, interpreting the art as a "primary speech" which combined people and which therefore corresponded the most with the visions of paradise. In fact, music was – as it was typical of Romantics – perceived as a reflection of divine harmony on Earth.

Muzyka! święte, dziwnie święte miano
Co z drzewa życia sępie troski płoszy...

Music! the sacred, strangely sacred name
Which from the tree of life scares the preying
[concerns...]

I w życiu wiecznym nam ją obiecano
Jako najwyższą z anielskich rozkoszy.

And in eternal life it was promised to us
As the highest of angelic delights.

²⁷ P. Wilkońska, *op. cit.*, p. 44. The *Milda* cantata was first performed in Vilnius on 18 December, 1848.

²⁸ Deotyma [Jadwiga Łuszczewska], *Do Stanisława Moniuszki*, "Ruch Muzyczny" 1857, issue 17, p. 131. Reprint with recollections of the meeting: *Moniuszko i Deotyma*, "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1896, issue 19, p. 373.

Further stanzas, this time quatrains, are focussed on the image of music changing under the influence of a new inspiration. Deotyma introduced the protagonist of her paean and indicated two major directions of his musical pursuits.

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Śpiewak, co szuka nowych strun zapalu,
Którego polysk czycznych dźwięków nie mami,
Musi żyć z ludem albo z niebianami;
Tu raj prostoty – tam raj ideału.

Singer, who seeks new strings of fervour,
Whose shine is free of futile sounds,
Must live with the people or with
[the heavenly beings;
Here the paradise of simplicity – there,
[the paradise of perfection.

Symbolically, then, the poet placed Moniuszko's output within the areas of two streams represented by *Halka*, a musical story of a peasant girl, and *Milda*, a mythical cantata exploring the world of old-Lithuanian beliefs, respectively. She also added:

Ty więc co zlałeś pieśń wiejskich poddaszy
Z pieśnią nadziemian, zwij się
[w państwach ducha
Książęciem muzyki naszej.

You, then, who merged the song of
[peasant attics
With the song of heavenly beings, may you
[be called in the states of the spirit
As the prince of our music.

Thus, she perceived the significant value of Moniuszko's music through the prism of two main, in her view, sources of aesthetic inspiration: folklore and faith. That framing differed from Syrokomla's perceptions; it had a more general expression, Romantic even when one considers the longing for the spiritual sphere which should express art, and a less regional or democratic expression in the sense of the practices of social life, which was dear to Kondratowicz.

The fact of Deotyma's reference to the cantata directs the reader to a poetic apology by Edward Chłopicki²⁹, Moniuszko's countryman from the Polish Borderlands and the author of the first version of the lyrics to both *Milda* and *Krumine*. The poem titled *Do Stanisława Moniuszki, na jego odjazd z Wilna do Warszawy* was published in *Kaliszanin* as late as in 1872³⁰, but it had been written already in 1858. Allow me to quote both its variants. The first one, on the left-hand side, is the press version while the other one, on the right-hand side, reflects the version which survived in Moniuszko's letters at Warszawskie Towarzystwo Muzyczne (vol. IX, letter 75); the latter one might have been the original one³¹.

²⁹ Edward Chłopicki (1830-1894) – a traveller, explorer, writer, translator, author of, e.g.: *Notatki z różnociasowych wędrówek po kraju (Inflanty, Żmudź, Litwa, Pobereże)* (1863), *Wędrówki po guberni kijowskiej* (1881), and the novel *Dzieje jedynaka* (1872). Chłopicki prepared the first version of the text to *Milda*; after 1859, Kraszewski reworked it upon request by Moniuszko (W. Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko...*, part I, p. 195).

³⁰ "Kaliszanin" 1872, issue 47, pp. 187-188.

³¹ In this version it was reprinted in W. Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko...*, part II, pp. 72-73.

Na Litwie gajów już kalinowych
Niemen swym szumem nie pieści:
Anioł harmonii w chmurach perłowych
Nadleciał smutny, i z rzeką w parze,
Slawni tutejszych łanów gęślarze,
Obaj zmilknęli z bolesci!...

Skrzydła Ariela lekkie, powiewne
Smętnie opadły ku ziemi;
Łeżki sieroc twa - kropliste, rzewne -
Ścięły się w oku, a gęśl z marmuru,
Nie słysząc pieśni mistrzowskiej wtóry,
W mdłych palcach anioła drzemie!...

O mistrzu, strugę domowej rzeki
I gęśl tę Litwy domową
Odzieś kirem - gdzieś w brzeg daleki
Odbiegłszy; jeno twej duszy echo
Pod oniemialą chronimy strzechą
Z gałatką sławy laurową!...

Lecz nie płacz „Litwo” w ziemi Lechitów
Jest skarbiec sztuki czarowny,
Co z dolin Wisły i z Karpat szczytów,
Z Niemna wybrzeży i smugów Wilii,
Zgarnia, jak rosę - bujny kwiat liliii,
Zbiór wiecznych natchnień szacowny.

Tam pod zamknięciem skarbca wiekowym,
Gdzie wszechplemienne brzmią pieśni,
I my swą nutę w stroju godowym
Odnajdziem - gęśl ta przedwieczna Litwy
Zabrzeczy dawne obrzędy, bitwy
W tonach raj znikły odeśni!...

Świerkowym borem, na Litwy krańce
Wyjdziem słuchać je gromadę!
Pieśni te - bożych krain wysłańce -
Wdowie nam serca wesprą pociechą,
Wznośniejszych poczuć nadeszłą echo,
W pierś iskr plomiennych nakładą!...

Na Litwie gajów już kalinowych
Niemen swym szumem nie pieści:
Anioł harmonii w chmurach perłowych
Nadleciał smutny i - z rzeką w parze -
Slawni tutejszych łanów gęślarze,
Obaj zmilknęli z bolesci!...

Skrzydła anioła lekkie, powiewne
Smętnie opadły ku ziemi;
Łeżki sieroc twa - kropliste, rzęsiste
Ścięły się w oku - a gęśl z marmuru,
Nie słysząc pieśni mistrzowskiej wtóry,
W mdłych palcach anioła drzemie!...

O Mistrzu, strugę domowej rzeki
I gęśl tę Litwy domową
Odzieś kirem - gdzieś w brzeg daleki
Odbiegłszy; jeno twej duszy echo
Pod oniemialą chronimy strzechą
Z gałatką sławy laurową!...

Lecz nie płacz **Litwo w ziemi Lichitów**
Jest **skarb u ludu** czarowny,
Co z dolin Wisły i z Karpat szczytów,
Duchową hostią braci obdziela
I gdzie niemnowy łan się rozściela,
Unii tej śle dar szacowny!

Tam pod zamknięciem **skarbu** wiekowym,
Gdzie **wszechnarodu** brzmią pieśni,
I my swą nutę w **kraju rodowym**
Odnajdziem - gęśl **przedźwieczna** Litwy
Zabrzeczy dawne gody i bitwy
W tonach raj znikły odeśni!...

Świerkowym borem, na Litwy krańce
Wyjdziem słuchać je gromadę!
Pieśni te - bożych krain wysłańce -
Wdowie nam serca wesprą pociechą,
Wznośniejszych poczuć nadeszłą echo,
W pierś iskr plomiennych nakładą!...

In Lithuania, kalina forests
Are no longer caressed by the Niemen's murmur:
The angel of harmony in pearl clouds
Came sad, and with a river with him,
The famous local guslers,
Both went silent with pain!...

Ariel's wings light, ethereal
Dolefully fell to the ground;
The tears of orphans – dropping, sorrowful –
Solidified in the eye, and the gusle of marble,
Not hearing the song of the master song,
Sleeps in the dim fingers of the angel!...

Oh, master, the stream of homely river
And this gusle of homely Lithuania
You clad in shroud – somewhere into the
[distant shore
You ran; only your soul's echo
We protect under the bewildered thatch
With the laurel twig of fame!...

But do not, "Lithuania", in the land of Lechites
There is a magical vault of art,
Which from the valleys of the Vistula and
[the Carpathian mountain tops,
From the shores of the Niemen and the streams
[of the Wilia,
Collects, like dew – the lush bloom of lilies,
A harvest of eternal venerable inspirations.

There, under the old lock of the vault,
Where all-tribal song resonates,
And we our note in the mating outfit
Shall find – that primeval gusle of Lithuania
Shall hum old rites, battles
Shall dream back the lost paradise in its tones!...

Through a spruce forest, at Lithuania's edge
A crowd shall come out to listen to it!
Those songs – the emissaries of divine lands –
Shall aid our widow hearts with solace,
Shall send the echoes of loftier feelings,
Shall put fiery sparks into our hearts!...

In Lithuania, kalina forests
Are no longer caressed by the Niemen's murmur:
The angel of harmony in pearl **little clouds**
Came sad and – with a river with him –
The famous local guslers,
Both went silent with pain!...

Angel's wings light, ethereal
Dolefully fell to the ground;
The tears of orphans – dropping, **profuse**
Solidified in the eye – and the gusle of marble,
Not hearing the song of the master song,
Sleeps in the dim fingers of the angel!...

Oh, **Master**, the stream of homely river
And this gusle of homely Lithuania
You clad in shroud – somewhere into the
[distant shore
You ran; only your soul's echo
We protect under the bewildered thatch
With the laurel twig of fame!...

But do not cry Lithuania in the land of Lechites
There is enchanting **treasure with peoples**,
Which from the valleys of the Vistula and the
[Carpathian mountain tops,
Gives out spiritual Host to brothers
And when the Niemen's fief spreads,
Sends that union venerable gift!

There, under the old lock of **the treasure**,
Where the song of **all-nation** resonates,
And we our note in **home country**
Shall find – **primeval** gusle of Lithuania
Shall hum old matings and battles
Shall dream back the lost paradise in its tones!...

Through a spruce forest, at Lithuania's edge
A crowd shall come out to listen to it!
Those songs – the emissaries of divine lands –
Shall aid our widow hearts with solace,
Shall send the echoes of loftier feelings,
Shall put fiery sparks into our hearts!...

The poem, certainly of mediocre artistic value, nonetheless consists of several interesting compositional arrangements. It opens with an extensive image of emptiness and quiet which surrounded Lithuanian nature as the musician was leaving his family areas. That impression, deepened with the symbolic vision of Ariel losing his ability to create, displays a sense of a “totality” of the state of mourning. It seems that all sources of music were stopped at once. The rather mundane fact of the composer leaving for Warsaw became a tragedy. However, the grievance towards Moniuszko who “clads the homely gusle in shroud” is coupled with words of consolation for Lithuania. What is supposed to be comforting is the thought of the inseparability of the cultural output of Poles and Lithuanians. The artist added to the common Vilnius vault his local tones, which shall forever forth be present in the Polish music. There, even the orphaned Lithuanians would be able to find a part of themselves. What is intriguing is the concept of rich, multi-tribe, “all-national” art which is also the “ark of the covenant”. The final image has a prophetic form – it heralds restoration and consolation for the entire community which had lost its talented member. Such a distinct poetic hyperbolisation of grief upon the departure of Moniuszko inclines one to consider to what extent it was intended by the author as something serious, and to what extent the poem was a kind of an affectionate joke, a cordial and somewhat exaggerated farewell. Considering similar celebratory texts by the Vilnius community at that time, I am prone to accept the latter perception of Chłopicki’s poem.

A collection by Antoni Pietkiewicz, titled *Głos z Litwy* and published in Minsk in 1859, included a poem with the conventional title *Do Stanisława Moniuszki*. The poem included in the section *Album moich przyjaciół* is striking considering its cordial and personal tone. From the very first line, Moniuszko is treated as a “countryman”. The “sincere busker” is at the same time “ours”, Lithuanian, local, belonging to the circle of friends, positively provincial creators³². The situation of being far from home, in which the poetic persona finds himself, triggers him to extract from Moniuszko’s music mainly notes close to his heart, associated with the folklore of the Vilnius area, as if born to respond to the moods of the “Lithuanian soul”³³.

Grajku serdeczny, grajku nasz jedyny!
Wiesz-że ty, jakim twe cudowne pieśnie
Szczęściem mi były, gdym tęsknił bolesnie,
Niby wygnaniec, z dala od rodziny?

Sincere busker, our only busker!
Do you know what your wonderful songs
Happiness were to me, when I ached in longing,
As if an exile, away from family?

³² Antoni Pietkiewicz [*nom de plume* Adam Plug] (1823-1903) – teacher, writer, journalist, and translator; affiliated with various editorial boards in Vilnius and Warsaw, e.g. *Kłosy*. Author of poetry (e.g. *Zagon rodzinny*, 1854), epic poems, and novels (e.g. *Duch i krew. Kilka zarysów z życia towarzyskiego*, vol. 2, 1897).

³³ [A. Plug], *Głos z Litwy przez Autora ‘Kłosów z rodzinnej niwy’*, Mińsk 1859, pp. 159-161.

Rajska ptaszyna moja złotoskrzydła,
Anielską ręką tklwie wykarmiona,
Jak mi bywało pocznie kwilić ona,
To wnet mnie dziwne otoczą mamiidła;

The paradise bird of golden wings,
Fed sorrowfully with angel's hand,
As I used to, when it starts to whimper,
Then immediately strange apparitions
[surround me;

I z wolna, z wolna ból srogi zadrzemie,
I myśl się troskom wykradnie na chwilę,
I rozwiniawszy skrzydełka motyle,
Kwieciem pomyka na rodziną ziemię.

And slowly, slowly, severe pain will fall asleep,
And the mind shall escape troubles for
[a moment,
And having spread its butterfly wings,
Shall skip over flowers onto the family land.

Moniuszko's songs evoke "sorrowful" emotions in the listener: dreaminess, tenderness, and happiness. Emphasis is placed on the compensation-therapeutic role of the music, but also on its identity functions, i.e. by restoring the memories of former idyll and treating current political wounds, it defines the recipient in relation to the world, and it gives them strength to face further hardships of his life. Therefore, Moniuszko's music in Pietkiewicz' vision is not part of higher culture but, rather, a component of the minor-szlachta culture bound with nature. This can be the source of the religious contexts present in its reception. A listener enters the role of a debtor assigning the musician the role of a benefactor, the provider of immaterial values, "a rich with the spirit of the light land". The words of worship utilised by the poetic persona can only be a widow's mite, a proof of admiration for the songster. Moniuszko's music - in Pietkiewicz' view referring to simplicity and the purity of heart - requires recipients to assume a sharing attitude. The duality of the gift is the idea which builds that poetic praise. The musician receives a treasure in the form of gratitude, while recipients receive a treasure... in their hearts.

Czemże ci splać rajskie te rozkosze?
Tyś bogacz w ducha świetlanej krainie,
Jam ubożuchny i nieznany w gminie,
Cały skarb tylko w sercu tklivym noszę.

With what can I pay you for those heavenly
[delights?
You are a rich with the spirit of the light land,
I am poor and unknown in this commune,
The whole treasure I just carry in my sorrowful
[heart.

Many years afterwards, Adam Pług described the meeting which resulted in the paean. He first met the composer in Minsk in 1856, at Wincenty Dunin Marcinkiewicz' house at a feast organised by the host in celebration of Moniuszko and Apolinary Kątski. He offered the following account of his impressions:

You want me to say what impression he made on me, what gratitude and admiration he evoked in my soul?! I already said at the beginning that not having known him personally I admired him fanatically, for his priceless song books, and allow me to add that I felt great warmth towards him, not just as a composer but also as a human being about whom I had heard

so much, thanks to Syrokomla, I knew, among other, also that I was not unknown or neutral to him as the author of *Zagon rodzinny*. So now he won me completely, for the rest of my life.³⁴

In the collection titled *Głos z Litwy*, Pietkiewicz also included a text titled *Do Apolinarego Kątskiego*³⁵ and a translation of a poem by Waclaw Dunin Marcinkiewicz titled *Do Apol. Kątskiego, Moniuszki i Hermana (przetłumaczony z białoruskiego dialekту)*³⁶, in which the musicians were referred to as “the three falcons of the Lithuanian field”, “the three duda players”, who evoke admiration in angels, “our Slavs”. According to Plug’s recollections, Marcinkiewicz’ praise was originally directed only towards Kątski and Moniuszko, who at the feast received bouquets, laurel wreaths, and unknown poems by Adam Pieńkiewicz (the publisher of *Wybór poezji z pisarzy polskich*). It began as follows³⁷:

Zajaśniały dwie gwiazdki w porę nam
[szczęśliwą,
Bujają dwa sokoly ponad naszą niwą;
Ejże świecą nam, świecą, nie gwiazdki
[niebieskie,
Ej szybują, szybują nie sokoły rześkie:
Przybyli dwaj dudarze, co uroczym pieniem
Nawet Boże anioły przejmują zdumieniem.

Two stars lit up on this happy time,
Two falcons glide over our field;
Oh, there shine, there shine, not heavenly stars,
Oh, there glide, there glide not fresh falcons:
Two duda players have arrived, who with
[charming song
Have astounded even God’s angels.

In the version included in *Głos z Litwy*, there were three “falcons” already (Adam Herman, a cellist, was added). The musicians shared their place of origin and the emotional character of their art, which, according to the author, was a result of the familial quality of their musical inspirations. Marcinkiewicz’ poem was yet another example proving that in the common reception the value of music was mainly evaluated based on the intensity of reactions it triggered. The most desired manifestations in listeners were sweet tears, fire in the soul, euphoria, or at least tenderness³⁸.

Trzeci jak ci zadźwięczy piosenki swojacje,
Wszystkiej biedy zapomnisz, serce ci zaskacze,
Jak kleszczami za duszę chwytą pieśnią
[rzewną,
Gdyby w ogień iść kazał, szedłbyś chętny
[pewno.

The third one when he plays you familiar song,
You will forget all your sorrows, your heart
[will leap,
Grasps the soul as if with tongs with
[a sorrowful song,
If he told you to go into flame, you would go
[willingly.

³⁴ A. Plug, *Moniuszko w Mińsku*, “Tygodnik Ilustrowany” 1896, issue 19, p. 374. The feast also entailed a concert by Kątski and Adam Herman, with the piano accompaniment by Trester and Grüner. The time of citizenry rallies was used to organise the celebration described by Plug.

³⁵ [A. Plug], *Głos z Litwy...*, p. 162.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 179-181.

³⁷ A. Plug, *Moniuszko w Mińsku...*

³⁸ Id., *Głos z Litwy...*, p. 180.

The largest number of poems devoted to Moniuszko was written directly after his death as part of the nationwide farewell to the Master. *Biblioteka Warszawska* published the poem titled *Pamięci Stanisława Moniuszki*, signed by Kazimierz L. (with a note: *I wrote in Bratoszewice, in the m. of June of the y 1872*)³⁹. Though it is no literary masterpiece – nor is it linguistically correct – it did document the concept present in many similar celebratory works namely using allusions to well-known works associated with a person. In this case, its author's inspiration came from Jontek's aria in *Halka*. The poem begins with the line: "Firs hum at the mountain tops / Oh, how sadly they hum", which constitutes the starting point for the description of the mourning for Moniuszko, which concerned people and nature alike. River waves, eagles, rain clouds, forests – all they carry the "hymn of grief". This is a typical lament after the loss of a "beloved singer", one that tries to frame the mournful content into the rhythm of the musical original. Though the outcome was rather piteous in artistic terms, one should note a certain logic with which the author built the suggestion of the multitude of sounds, through which nature expressed its sorrow: the rustle of trees, the hum of meadows, the Vistula, a girl cries, the birds wailing. This indicated the extent of the national mourning.

The second fragment of the poem seems quite convincing. It consists of rhetorical questions; the poetic persona indicates to the readers the irreversible consequences of Moniuszko's death for national culture.

Któryż z grajków tak rozumiał,
Podsłuchał tajniki,
Co las szumiał, co lud dumał
Przelał w dźwięk muzyki?
I kóż sercem tak się wsłucha
W pieśni te i dumy,
Kto zrozumie duchem ducha,
Nadtatrzańskie szumy?
Kto tak wdzięcznie je wyśpiewa?
Wypłacze na lutni?

Which other busker understood so well,
Listened to the secrets,
What the forest rustles about, what the people
[thought
Poured into the sounds of music?
And who else so full of heart listened
To those songs and pride,
Who will understand a spirit with his spirit,
The Tatras murmurs?
Who else will sing them so gracefully?
Cry on the lute?

Only in the conclusion does the author proceed to the typical paean-prophetic part, which includes a promise of eternal influence of the music of the author of *Halka* as – which was completely absent in the previous lines – art expressing the needs of the poor. This is where conventionality and unoriginality of the rhymed praise is visible the most.

³⁹ Kazimierz L., *Pamięci Stanisława Moniuszki*, "Biblioteka Warszawska" 1872, vol. 3, p. 159. I was not able to find more information about the author of the poem.

Cześć ci grajku! Cześć i dzięki,
 Grajku ty serdeczny!
 Twoje pieśni i piosenki
 Jak promień słoneczny
 Wiecznie będą nas ogrzewać,
 A choć miną wieki,
 Będą twoje pieśni śpiewać
 Nasze góry, rzeki
 Jodły wiecznie będą szumieć,
 Cześć twą na góra szczycie,
 Boś potrafił je zrozumieć,
 Pojąć biednych życie.

Praise to you, busker! Praise and thanks,
 Oh, you dearest busker!
 Your song and melodies
 As the ray of sun
 Will give us warmth forever,
 And even if centuries pass,
 Your songs will be sung
 By our mountains, rivers
 Firs will hum forever,
 Your praise at the mountain top,
 Cause you knew how to understand,
 Grasp the lives of the poor.

After Moniuszko's death, several authors – with whom he cooperated during his lifetime – picked up their pens. Among them, there was Aleksander Michaux (*nom de plume* Miron), the author of the songs titled *Pod okienkiem*, *Dziewczę i ptak* and *Złote sny*⁴⁰.

Wieczny pokój pieśniarzowi
 I pamięci jego cześć,
 Wieczny pokój człowiekowi,
 Który umiał krzyż swój nieść.
 Śpij spokojnie w świętej ziemi,
 Duch twój żyje – pieśni brzmią;
 Brzmią tonami natchnionymi
 Nad mogiłą cichą Twą.
 Wieczny pokój pieśniarzowi
 Który cierpiał, śpiewał, żył! –
 I podzięka dziś ludowi:
 Że go kochał – że go czcił.

Eternal peace to the songster
 And praise to his memory,
 Eternal peace to the man,
 Who knew how to bear his cross.
 Sleep calmly in the sacred land,
 Your spirit lives – songs resonate;
 They resonate inspired tones
 Over Your silent grave.
 Eternal peace to the songster
 Who suffered, sang, and lived! –
 And thanks to the peoples:
 That they loved him – that they venerated him.

The short poem titled *Wieczny pokój pieśniarzowi* was included in the *Korespondencje 'Dziennika Poznańskiego'*⁴¹ section, with several reflections on the significance of Moniuszko's music for Poles, and expressions of sorrow for "orphaning the harp". The work itself does not stand out for anything original. It is a typical celebratory poem, which combines the properties of an ode celebrating a deceased with a poem of an address to the reader. Emphasis was placed on the Christian dimension of the composer's life. In this perspective, the songs were a testimony to the exceptional personality of the artist as well as a guarantee of his memory after his death.

⁴⁰ W. Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko...*, part II, p. 567. Aleksander Michaux (1839-1895) – author of *Poezje* (1884), the single volume published during his lifetime; a tragic figure who was quickly marginalised within the research into the latter half of the 19th c. Vide, e.g. J. Komar, *Miron*, [in:] *Obraz literatury polskiej XIX i XX wieku*, series 4: *Literatura polska w okresie realizmu i naturalizmu*, eds. J. Kulczycka-Salon, H. Markiewicz, Z. Żabicki, vol. 1, Warsaw, 1965, pp. 268-280.

⁴¹ "Dziennik Poznański" 1872, issue 129, p. 2.

Then, in issue 133 from the same year, *Korespondencje 'Dziennika Poznańskiego'* reported on a staging of *Halka* being prepared at the Lviv National Theatre, the profit from which was intended as aid for the composer's family. Lustre to the spectacle was supposed to come in the form of an added glorification "of the crowning of the monument to Moniuszko" as well as a performance by the theatre's director reading the poem by Platon Kostecki titled *Pamięci Stanisława Moniuszki*. The journal printed the work in its entirety⁴². It was actually a rhymed speech, stylistically non-homogeneous, with an irregular structure, which opened with a panoramic image:

Z strażnicy polskiej dzwon popłochu bije,
Wzdłuż i wszerz Polski wieś posępna bieży:
Moniuszko nie żyje!
Nie wątpi ucho, lecz serce nie wierzy...
Moniuszko nie żyje?...
Bo jako ufa rolnik o zachodzie
Że słońce znowu zaświeci zagodzie,
W syny i wnuki - tak i my wierzyli,
Że głośić będzie mistrz dla drogiej ziemi,
Co śpiewa w duchu z chóry anielskiemi,
W lata dalekie! Wszak wiara nie myli!

From the Polish watchtower the bell hastily tolls,
A grim message spreads through Poland:
Moniuszko is dead!
The ear does not doubt, yet the heart cannot
[believe...
Moniuszko is dead?...
Because like a farmer trust at dusk
That the sun will rise again,
In son and grandson - so did we believe,
That the master shall preach for his cherish land,
What he sings in spirit with divine choirs,
Into years long to come! Belief cannot be wrong!

Fragments of particularly turgid paeans combine with a lament – nearly a vision of a catastrophe occurring at the moment of the composer's death. Moniuszko appears to be a hero, the "soldier" uniting the Polish community from various parts, not only someone who protects its identity, but also lifting it from its knees. Thus, in Kostecki's imagination, the royal bell tolls for Moniuszko, and the news of the loss quickly runs across Poland.

Z świątyni polskiej dzwon żałobny bije,
Jak cień zachodu żal po Polsce bieży:
Moniuszko nie żyje!

From the Polish temple the bell hastily tolls,
As if a shadow of dusk grief spreads through
[Poland:
Moniuszko is dead!

Basically, the poem offers a vision of an orphaned nation terrified with the unexpected death, which is reflected by the sections of the almost plasmic wailing: "Oh Lord, Lord, why did you need / Our master to Your band?", which is followed by a call to the Polish music lifted through Moniuszko's works to artistic heights⁴³. Kostecki did not doubt the objective

⁴² "Dziennik Poznański" 1872, issue 133, p. 1. Platon Kostecki (1832-1908) was a Lviv Rutherfordian descendant who nonetheless considered himself Polish. He worked as a journalist; for nearly forty years he was affiliated with *Gazeta Narodowa*.

⁴³ At this point it is worth mentioning that also poems devoted to Fryderyk Chopin included terms such as: lirnyk, songster, prophet. There were also some mentions of "orphaning" the nation and bells tolling after the artist's death, and even of his knightly mission

value of that “Polish note”, but in his mind it took the talent of the author of *Śpiewnik domowy*, who managed to make it heard for the nation as well as for other nations.

Ol polska nuto, kraśna popiełuszko,
Gdy twe siostry jak pyszne królowe
Swym wdziękiem świata podbily połowę,
Ty niemniej z rodu i ducha królewna,
Niemniej uroczka, piękna i powiewna,
Zaledwieś była nianią albo drużką
Pod wiejską strzechą, w kościele, obozie,
Tuląc lub bawiąc o głodzie i mrozie.

Na scenie polskiej drobną byłaś służką!
I przyszedł rycerz z litewskiej krainy
Jak wtóry Adam. Ducha swego czarem
Ciebie wyzwolił jako Adam słowo,
Tron twój nad Polskę wzniósł pod strop
[niebieski,
Już w kole siostrzyc tyś także królową –
I dąży naród pod twoim sztandarem
Z otuchą, wytrwale
Ku sile i chwale.

Słysząc te pieśni – zwiątpiali i niemy
Rodak odetchnał: My przecie żyjemy!
Słysząc te pieśni – nienawistne żmije
Syknęły gniewnie: Więc ten naród żyje?
Bo jeszcze naród nie pod klątwą bożą,
Którego syny wieczne dzieła tworzą.
A zwał się ten rycerz: Moniuszko!

Oh! Polish note, beautiful popiełuszka,
When your sisters like proud queens
With their charms conquered half the world,
You also from your line and spirit a princess,
Not less charming, beautiful and ethereal,
You were a mere nanny or maid
Under the rural thatch, in church, camp,
Bracing or amusing in hunger and cold.

On the Polish stage you were a small maid!
And came a knight from the Lithuanian land
As once Adam did. With the charm of his spirit
He set you free as Adam freed words,
You throne over Poland he elevated under the
[heavenly ceiling,
Now, in the circle of your sisters you are too
[a queen –
And your nation paces under your banner
With hope, steadfastly
Towards strength and glory.

On hearing those songs – the doubtful and mute
Compatriot sighed with relief: We are alive!
On hearing those songs – hateful vipers
Hissed angrily: So this nation lives?
Because the nation is not yet under god's curse,
Whose sons create eternal works.
And the knight was called: Moniuszko!

Of course, the glorification of music included in the poem is justified mainly within the patriotic dimension; art recognised in the world is proof that a nation persists, proof of its vital powers, and an element of the fight against the enemy. Moniuszko was treated by Kostecki as equal to Adam Mickiewicz. He assigned the composer the role of an artist/saviour, the liberator of the nation, a new Adamite, sanctified with the will of God. The hyperbolisation of his national mission meant that Moniuszko became in

(e.g. Włodzimierz Wolski, *Fryderyk Szopen. Fantazja*). In the poems by Maria Konopnicka or Teofil Lenartowicz, people's mournful emotions echoed the elegiac images of nature, while poetic forms referred to the folk sources of inspiration in Chopin's music. The analysis of these works proves a considerable conventionality applied by the apologists of mourning themes. The same occurred in the case of Moniuszko. Vide the extensive study by K. Maciąg, ‘Naczelnym u nas jest artystą’. *O legendzie Fryderyka Chopina w literaturze polskiej*, Rzeszów 2010 (part II).

Kostecki's vision the Jupiter worthy of a bronze altar, a "star in the sky". However, in the final fragments of the speech, the author's thoughts returned to Earth; he demanded that the nation should help Moniuszko's family. The presentation concluded with a call to the composer; it included a reassurance about the future of his loved ones, a promise of remembrance, and, finally, a request for intercession for Poles.

(...) spuszczaj jasne dlonie
Na swych następców w zachwytu godzinie,
Niechaj pieśń polska jak ocean płynie,
Czystego piękna siej w ich serca zaród,
Niech jak ty będą prości, jaśni, dzielni,
Choćby nie jak Ty – wielcy, nieśmiertelni!

(...) put your light hands
On your successors in the hour of admiration,
May Polish song flow as the ocean,
Sow the seed of pure beauty into their hearts,
May they be like you simple, light, brave,
Even if not like You – grand, immortal!

By drawing this vision of the sacred demigod/patriot, Kostecki proved to be a very faithful, yet unoriginal, follower of Romanticists.

The funeral celebration was also an inspiration for Franciszek Maria Ejsmont⁴⁴. His rhymed "Myśl przy wieści o śmierci St. Moniuszki" was published in *Tygodnik Mód i Powieści*⁴⁵. It is a considerably more interesting attempt at commemorating the deceased than the previous one was.

Skonał śpiewak. Ostatnie harmonii tony
Ścichły w ustach minstrela. Struna życia pękła,
Praca... wieniec... mogiła... Jękły głuchu dzwony,—
U słuchacza rozdarta w bólu dusza jękła,—
A słuchaczem był – naród!!... Na jego
[pogrzebie
Pieśni jego ton płynie:...
Pochód... podróz ostatnia... Odpoczynek
[w ziemi...
–„Dokąd śpieszysz, dziewczko z oczki
[splakaniem?”
–Ja? na pogrzeb Moniuszki – „Któz to, moje
[dziecię?”
–Czy pan nie wiesz? Nasz śpiewak: jego
[„Szumią jodły”
„Trzy prząśniczki” mnie mama uczyła... On
[w świecie
Bardzo wielki. „Po cóz idziesz?” Wznieść za
[duszę modły

Songster perished. The final tones of harmony
Went silent on the minstrel's lips. The string of
[life snapped,
Work... wreath... tomb... Bells gave a muffled wail,—
A listener's soul torn with pain wailed,—
And the listener – it was the nation!!... At his
[funeral
The tone of his song flows:...
Procession... the final journey... Rest in earth...
–“Where do you hurry, little girl with teary
[eyes?”
–Me? to Moniuszko's funeral – “Who may that
[be, my child?”
–Don't you know? Our songster: his “Firs hum”
“Three weavers” my mama taught me... He in
[the world
Very grand. “Why do you go?” To pray for soul

⁴⁴ In 1872, Franciszek Maria Ejsmont (1848-1910) was a law student and débuted as a man of letters. A few of his short stories were included in the anthology titled *Co Bóg dał*. Vide T. Budrewicz, 'Poseł do rodnych kru i słowiańskiej braci' (F.M. Eysmonta), "Przegląd Humanistyczny" 1982, issue 1-2, pp. 27-44.

⁴⁵ F.M. Ejsmont, *Myśl przy wieści o śmierci St. Moniuszki*, "Tygodnik Mód i Powieści" 1872, issue 32, p. 3.

Poszło sobie. Łza czysta w mym oka zabłysła:
 Skonal śpiewak. Glos z jego słowiczego lona
 W tysiąc lat się rozpływnie, odgłosem odbije,
 W milion serc się rozprysnie i nigdy nie skona;
 Tylko człowiek śmiertelny, lecz pieśń wielka
 [żyje.

Ha! więc ludzie znać cenią prawdziwą
 [zasługę...
 Mają serca, są dobrzy... Za cóżem oddychał
 Myślą czarną?... zwątpienia czemum wzniósł
 [maczuge?...
 Świat nazywał hieną, ludzkość w przepaść
 [spychał?...
 Zimny, dziki sceptyczym Hejnego, Byrona,
 Lukrecjusza truciznę wysysał łakomie?
 Nowe światło zabłysło. Dusza rozjaśniona
 Wierzy, kocha, śni znowu. Przekleństwo
 [Sodomie,
 Przekleństwo! szepczą usta; jam zgrzeszył, jam
 [winny, –
 Dziś odzylem... Moniuszko! laurem pamięć
 [twoją
 Dziś wieńczymy; w miłości dla młodzieży słynny, We celebrate; famous for your love for the youth,
 Tobie niosę młodzieńczą część i wdzięczność For you I carry youthful hail and my
 [moją.

She went. Pure tear glistened in my eye:
 Songster perished. Voice from his
 [nightingale's breast
 Shall disperse within a thousand years, echo
 [throughout,
 Into a million hearts it will burst, and it will
 [never die;
 Only the mortal man, but the grand song lives.

Ha! so people appreciate true merit...
 They have hearts, they are good... For what
 [have I breathed
 My dark thought?... Why did I raise my
 [doubtful mace?...
 I call the world a hyena, I pushed humanity
 [into the precipice?
 Cold, wild scepticism of Hejne, Byron,
 Sucked greedily Lucretius' poison?
 New light shines. Lighted soul
 Believes, loves, dreams once more. Cursed be
 [Sodom,
 Cursed! the lips whisper; I am sinful, I am
 [guilty, –
 Today I live again... Moniuszko! with laurel the
 [memory of you
 We celebrate; famous for your love for the youth,
 For you I carry youthful hail and my
 [gratefulness.

Though the repeated expression “Songster perished”⁴⁶ indicates Moniuszko as the focus of the poem, the readers’ attention is drawn more to the mourners. Initially, the poetic persona comes to the foreground as he perceived the death of the composer as a dramatic event. He describes it with the use of lofty yet fairly unoriginal metaphors, elliptical syntactic structures, enumerations, and enjambments. Further on, a short dialogue section is introduced, the point of which is to give voice to a peasant girl. The deep respect for the composer expressed by the simple rural girl or maid restores the poetic persona’s apparently long-lost – through various life’s experiences – belief in the justness of fate. He can once again proclaim the persistence of art after death as it stems from the need to serve people. The attributes used by Ejsmont, i.e. “minstrel” and “songster”, make Moniuszko a continuator of the Romantic tradition of being a people’s guide. Therefore, the final declaration of esteem has a double justification: a social one and a very personal one.

⁴⁶ In a very similar manner, Seweryn Kapliński bade farewell in 1849 to Fryderyk Chopin when he began his equally turgid poem with the words: *Chopin died!* (Na śmierć Chopina, “Biblioteka Warszawska” 1849, vol. 4, p. 560. Quoted after K. Maciąg, ‘Naczelnym u nas jest artystą...’, p. 205).

A bit earlier, that same *Tygodnik Mód i Powieści* had published a poem by Maksymilian Przedecki⁴⁷ titled *Na skon Moniuszki*, which opens with a dramatic exclamation: "Oh! great sorrow, painful permeates our life!..."⁴⁸, preceded by a short quote from Jontek's aria functioning as a motto. The entire text, consistently being a poetic call to the readers, is divided into four fragments. The first two stanzas, both of which consist of five Polish alexandrine lines, were based on actual images. First, the musician's quenched life is compared to fading sun, but – unlike in the case of stars rising and setting – death is an irreversible event. In the second stanza, the silence which was experienced by the nation after Moniuszko's death is juxtaposed with a suggestion of singing being continued in front of God. Further, there are two eight-line stanzas which clearly imitate the rhythm of a sorrowful song or a dumka. Afterwards, there returns a longer Polish alexandrine stanza, which emphasises the religious nature of Moniuszko's music, combining it with Romantic – Mickiewicz's, to be precise – perception of the world. Finally, the author returns to octosyllabic verse to express the words of "praise and glory" and the wishes of "eternal harmony". Everything appears to be very exalted, and yet stereotypical, which is why one should appreciate the aptness of Witold Rudziński's remark when he considered Przedecki's poetic farewell as a talentless work, and summarised its form condescendingly as a "half poem, half lyrical prose"⁴⁹.

Próźno cię Mistrzu echa wzywają narodu, Grobowa zewsząd cisza, – zasnaleś na wieki!...	In vain, the nation's echoes call upon you, The overwhelming dead silence, – you fell [asleep for ever!...]
Anioł śmierci zgasles przywarł ci powieki, I próźno serce ziomka twej lutni przyzywa, Już nie nam ale Stwórcy duch twój hymny [śpiewa...]	The angel of death closed your lightless eyes, And in vain your countrymen's hearts call upon [your lute, It is no longer to us but to the Creator that your spirit sings hymns...]
(...)	(...)
Ach! to odgłos pieśni twojej Jeszcze żywo brzmi.... W sercach naszych cuda roi I zachwytu łzy...	Alas! it is the sound of your song Still resonating vividly... Creates miracles in our hearts And the tears of admiration...
! niech szumią górne jary Z nad Wiślanych fal... Niech roznoszą smutne gwary Nasz serdeczny żal!...	Oh! may top ravines hum From over the Vistula's waves... May they spread the sad noise Our heart-felt grief!...

⁴⁷ In Rudziński's view, Przedecki was, similarly to Ejsmont, a law student (idem, *Stanisław Moniuszko...*, part II, p. 846).

⁴⁸ M. Przedecki, *Na skon Moniuszki*, "Tygodnik Mód i Powieści" 1872, issue 25, p. 1.

⁴⁹ W. Rudziński, *Stanisław Moniuszko...*, part II, p. 847.

(...)

Tyś nam Niebo otwierał Mistrzu nasz kochany!
Twa muzyka od kolysk niosła nas w błękitny –
Byłeś silny i rzewny, teskny naprzemiany,
I skarby uczuć swoich stroiles w zachwyty.
Czyś z Adamem po stepach Akermanu chodził,
Czyś z Krymskich górr wierzchołka uwielbiał
[przyrodę,
Czyś hymny po świątyniach wspaniale
[zawodził –
Twe dźwięki zawsze cudne, zawsze świeże,
[mlode!

(...)

You opened the Heaven to us, our beloved
[Master!
Your music carried us from cradles into
[heavens –
You were strong and sorrowful, wistful
[alternately,
And the treasures of your feelings you tunes in
[admiration.
Whether you strolled the steppe of Akerman
[with Adam,
Or cherished nature from Crimea's mountain
[tops,
Or sang wonderful hymns through temples –
Your sounds always wonderful, always fresh,
[young!

A poem by Jerzy Laskarys, another of Moniuszko's acquaintances from Vilnius, deserves particular attention. "Siostrzyce" was published in *Opiekun Domowy*⁵⁰ only four months prior to the composer's death. The text begins in an almost fairy-tale-like, fantastic way: "I once dreamt that I was on a distant voyage". It has a fundamental epic nature. It is a story of a night storm at sea and a ship which cannot make port due to high waves. Meanwhile, people are gathering on the shore, eager to help the quarrelling sailors uncertain of their fate. They are led by an old man "similar to Jehova / Who called worlds to being". However, even his good will, wisdom, and knowledge cannot resolve the dramatic situation. Help will eventually be offered by mysterious young women.

Wtem z nagła, – ujrzałem po starca prawicy
Dwie ciche dziewczęce postacie,
Jak objaw widomy anielskiej teskniczy
Po duszy strzeżonej utracie;
Powieune ich szaty, na chmurnym tle nieba
Mignęły mi gwiazdą przewodnią,
A u stóp ich czarna skalista ta gleba
Błyskała jutrzenką pogodną.

Suddenly, – I saw to the right of the old man
Two quiet womanly figures,
As a visible symptom of angelic longing
After the loss of a protected soul;
Their airy garments, on the cloudy backdrop
[of the sky
Flickered a leading star,
And at their feet black rocky soil
Flashed a fair-weather daybreak.

Of course, this lengthy detail-filled story, built of a series of literary clichés, seems mainly an attempt at indicating the role in the life of the nation (the

⁵⁰ J. Laskarys, *Siostrzyce* (wiersz poświęcony S. Moniuszce), "Opiekun Domowy" 1872, issue 12, pp. 91-92. Jerzy Laskarys (1828-1888) – poet, prose writer and journalist, author of, e.g., *Kartki z życia* (1856), satirical *Rarogi salonowe* (1860) and *Rarogi obywawelskie* (1861), and *Pamiątki starego szlachcica* (1883). He left for Paris after participating in the January Uprising. He returned to Poland in 1870.

motif of the storm is the first clear metaphor of captivity and struggle) that two arts related within the Romantic and post-Romantic thought have to fulfil. They, i.e. poetry and music – as the titular sisters – accompany the struggles of the sailors. One of the figures, black-haired, is playing the harp. She is courageous and rebellious; she challenges the storm, responds with madness to madness. She is like a determined Romantic protagonist, a *wajdelote* [a pagan prophet, lower priest, gusler, songster, seer and bard], ready to argue with God. She eventually loses.

I harfa zabrzmiła akordem szalonym
Jak groźba rzucona naturze.
Jak wyzew posłany i rzeczom stworzonym
I temu co stwarza te burze;
I głosem donośnym, głuszącym szum morza
Śpiewała to dumę bolesći,
To piosnkę nadziei przejrzystą jak zorza –
A lubą jak uśmiech niewieści,
To przeszłość olbrzymią trącała tonami
Pod nieba czarnego sklepienie,
Lecz niebo wtórzyło głuchymi gromami
Nieczułe jak twarde sumienie.
Snać zakląć tę burzę śpiewaczka pragnęła,
Ukoić nam dusze znękane,
Wtem z głośnym rozjękiem, acz harfa nie
[drgnęła,
Prysnęły jej struny zerwane;
Dziewica w obłędzie swe piersi obwiąła
Rękami nad sercem co boli
I martwe wejrzenie w obłoki utkwila
Jak posąg nadmiernej niedoli.

And the harp sounded in a mad chord
As if a threat cast to nature.
As an accusation sent to things created
And that who creates the storms;
And in a loud voice, deafening the hum of the sea
She sang the painful duma,
Or a song of hope clear as the aurora –
And dear as a young girl's smile,
Then she touched upon great past with tones
Under the black vault of the sky,
But the sky chimed with deafening thunder
Heartless as harsh conscience.
The singer wanted to charm the storm,
Sooth our troubled souls,
Suddenly, in a loud moan, but the harp did not
[move,
Its broken strings snapped;
The maiden in her madness enclosed her chest
In her arms over her heart that ached
And affixed a dead stare into the clouds
As if a statue of excessive despair.

The other sister, light-haired and mild, draws inspiration from her defeated sister, but she represents a different approach to the force – one which is mild, sorrowful, strong, yet soothing. Moreover, this girl's angelic sweetness has its source in prayer, in spiritual experience. It is not difficult to find in this vision a reflection of the sisters from *Lilla Weneda* by Juliusz Słowacki.

Lecz cały hymn pełen bezbrzeżnej miłości,
Pokory, nadziei i wiary;
I pieśń ta bez słowa, jak uczuć wszechzgoda,
Niesiona na burzy powiewie
Płynęła pod niebo – a za nią pogoda
Szła w świętym zrodzona posiewie;
I pieśnią dziewczęcia konala wśród ciszy,
I burza konala z jej tonem –

But the whole hymn full of endless love,
Humility, hope and faith;
And this song without a word, like the
[all-agreement of feelings,
Carried on the gust of the storm
Flew under the sky – and fair weather with it
Went born in the sacred sowing;
And it died with the girl's song in quiet,
And the storm died with its tone –

The conclusion of the poem explains accurately what significance the readers should assign to the figures of the sisters; it thus imposes the allegorical key. If it had not been for the subtitle, the relations with the creator of *Halka* would have been difficult to grasp. The dedication ensures that the readers see in the description of the younger sister an interpretation of Moniuszko's music: its relations with religion, its harmony of tones, the natural melody combining the moods of joyfulness and sorrow, and the utilisation of folk and manor traditions.

Despite the shortcomings of its form, Laskarys' poem is worth remembering also as a voice in the rise and fall of the debate in the periodicals of that time on the role of music, its place in the life of the Polish society, and the principles of art correspondence. Laskarys often returned to the musical issues within that period. Also, in 1872, *Tygodnik Mód i Powieści* published the poems titled *Muzyka* and *Do grajka*⁵¹. In fact, the latter one may have also referred indirectly to Moniuszko, suggesting that the music the purpose of which was to be a "balm for the soul" shall not find a place for itself within the world of the so-called progress and stunted hearts. Considering the fact that the poem was published soon after the funeral, it may include some kind of disappointment resulting from a reflection on the composer's fortunes. In *Muzyka*, printed early that year, Laskarys wrote about the exceptional ability of the titular art to express the simplest and yet deepest of emotions, which bring a human being close to God, and which are understandable to everyone.

Ton, melodia, pieśń, uczucie,
W jednym silnym serca rzucie,
Więcej powie
Niżli w słowie
Zawrzeć może duch.
[...]

Więcej melodia w swej czystości,
To odwieczny jęk ludzkości,
Wieczna skarga
Co się targi
Aż do Boga stóp.

Tone, melody, song, emotion,
In one strong act of the heart,
Will say more
Than in words
The spirit may include.
[...]

So melody in its purity,
Is an eternal moan of humanity,
An eternal complaint
Which hustles
Up to God's feet.

The notion of the relationship between poetry and music was discussed in various reviews of Moniuszko's works and, later, in recollections about him. An outline about the composer – published in *Kronika Rodzinna* on 15 June, 1872 – was also preceded by a similarly themed poetic fragment⁵²:

⁵¹ J. Laskarys, *Muzyka*, "Tygodnik Mód i Powieści" 1872, issue 5, p. 1; idem., *Do grajka*, "Tygodnik Mód i Powieści" 1872, issue 29, p. 1.

⁵² [a.a], Stanisław Moniuszko, „Kronika Rodzinna" 1872, no. 18, p. 273.

Śpiew i poezja, owo rówieinnice
Natchnień niebieskich – i gdzie siostry bliźnie
Stają po duchu jak wierne siostrzyce,
Tam Bóg przebywa z człowiekiem.

Song and poetry, those equals
Of divine inspiration – and where twin sisters
Stand after the spirit like trusting sisters,
There God resides with man.

Wszechmocna słowa nad sercem potęga,
Lecz gdy śpiew serca skrzydła mu przyprawi,
To powódź tonów nieba już dosięga,
A duch się ludzki w tej powodzi pławi.

The all-powerful force of words over the heart,
But when the song of the heart gives it wings,
The flood of tones reaches the heaven,
And human spirit bathes in this flood.

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MARIA BERKAN-JABŁONSKA

The previously mentioned Wincenty Korotyński entitled his article about the author of *Hrabina* in the telling manner: *Moniuszko the poet*. He did not do so only to indicate the composer's writing skill, but, rather, to prove that in musical forms artists have to possess sensitivity in both domains: "Music and poetry; two sisters. A poet (of the old school, not a decadent) cannot form melodious stanzas if he himself cannot play an instrument or, at least, does not have a «musical ear». A composer will not be able to apply tones to words if he does not know the structures of stanzas, rhythms and rhymes"⁵³.

Finally, allow me reference two short poems by Władysław Karoli, published in 1887 under one title, namely *Stanisławowi Moniuszce*⁵⁴. The first one begins with the words: "Oh Poet, the prophet of tones". Moniuszko the prophet is depicted as God's chosen one, endowed with a gold-string lute and an almost inhuman gift of reaching the secrets of human hearts and transforming them through music. Clearly, such traits were explained in an extremely Romantic manner – with the love for the people and the homeland. However, the influence of music also depends on the sensitivity of listeners, which, according to Karoli, is spiritual rather than aesthetic.

Kto przyjął w serce tony – dośpiewał wyrazy,
Kto pieśni nie zrozumiał – serce miał lodowe...
Whoever accepted the tones in his heart – shall
[add the words,
Who did not understand the song – had a heart
[of ice...]

The second fragment assumes the shape of a poem of a call to the readers. It can be interpreted twofold. Firstly, one might place emphasis on the intimacy of the lyrical situation. Then, the direct recipient of the poet's words would be the mother deep in despair after losing her son as she still

⁵³ W. Korotyński, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁵⁴ W. Karoli, *Stanisławowi Moniuszce*, "Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne" 1887, issue 218, p. 565. Karoli (1869-1913) – a man of letters, journalist, collaborator of many Warsaw-based newspapers, e.g. *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, *Biesiada Literacka*, and *Wędrowiec*, but, first and foremost, a photographer acknowledged with many awards for his works and the promotion of the art of photography through *Kalendarz Fotograficzny*, which he established.

does not realise that music is stronger than death and it will ensure the artist's life after death.

Nad mogilą płacz, jęk dzwonu
Placziesz matko miła,
Bóg powołał go do tronu,
Tyś dźwięki straciła...
Tam gdzie złożył swoja głowę,
Wśród cmentarnej ciszy,
Z dali dźwięki kurantowe,
Biegnę... on je słyszy...
Obudził się zegar stary,
Bije z całej siły,
Matko piękny ton fanfary,
Słyszy syn z mogily!

Cry on the tomb, the wail of the bell
You cry, oh dear mother,
God has called him to his throne,
You have lost the sounds...
There where he laid his head,
Among the cemetery silence,
Carillon sounds from afar,
I run... he hears them...
The old clock awoke,
It chimes with all its strength,
Oh mother, the beautiful tone of the fanfare,
Your son hears from the grave!

Such a reading enables one to appreciate the originality of the description of individual experiences and the condensing of emotions, which positively distinguished Karoli's poem and assigned a more modern taint to it. If, however, one realises that Elżbieta, Moniuszko's mother, died in 1850, the allegorical meanings of the poem appear more accurate. The mother is simply a personification of Poland, while the chiming clock indicates the patriotic meanings assigned to the *Straszny dwór* opera. Either way, neither of the interpretations adds anything new to the descriptions of Moniuszko's music in the 19th-century poetry.

One has to admit that Moniuszko was unlucky in terms of the authors who attempted to celebrate him with their poetic creations. He was not commemorated with a work even close to Norwid's *Fortepian Szopena*⁵⁵. What is left is several celebratory paeans, the collection of which could most probably be expanded with a few more works in the course of further studies. Do they offer a basis for any summation? I believe that this outline enables me to identify at least three issues. First of all, the mode of writing about Moniuszko was changing. In the 1850s and 1860s, he was mainly treated as a "countryman", a "compatriot"; authors emphasised the sources

⁵⁵ It would be difficult to fully refer in this article to the poems written in celebration of Chopin even though they surely constitute an extremely interesting plain for comparison. There are quite a few of these even if one limited the collection to 19th-century poetry only. Allow me to list a few examples: *Fryderyk Szopen. Fantazja* by Włodzimierz Wolski; *Niemcewicz, Słowacki, Szopen. Piosenka* by Teofil Lenartowicz; *W rocznicę śmierci Szopena* by Maria Konopnicka; *Cień Chopina* by Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer. Most of these poems have already been discussed in excellent academic studies. Vide the already referenced K. Maciąg, 'Naczelnym u nas jest artystą...', pp. 193-224, as well as: O.M. Żukowski, *Fryderyk Chopin w świetle poezji polskiej*, Lviv 1910; *Fryderyk Chopin natchnieniem poetów. Antologia poetycka. W setną rocznicę śmierci*, ed. K. Kobyńska, Warsaw 1949; *Wiersze o Chopinie. Antologia i bibliografia*, collected and edited by E. Śluszkiewicz, foreword by J. Przyboś, Kraków 1968.

which were the inspiration for his music, and his particular talent, but they also focused on the kind of the cultural and social mission fulfilled for the benefit of the community – first, of the “little homeland” of Lithuania, and, later, more broadly, of Poles. In time, the celebratory portrait of Moniuszko was setting in bronze. There were appearing more and more hackneyed idioms and designations which expressed the authors’ convictions of the spiritual and national functions of his output. The composer was termed a minstrel and a defender of the people, a lirnyk and a prince of music⁵⁶. In the most recent of the discussed works, Karoli called him a prophet and a poet.

Secondly, it is clear that from the very beginning the authors focused on trying to convey in their poetry the reactions of the common recipients as these constituted the basic criteria which determined the importance assigned to Moniuszko’s music. As Irena Poniatowska pointed out in the article titled *Chopin – czwarty wieszcz*⁵⁷, the conviction about the grandness of art was rather intuitive in the criticism of the 19th-century. Authors were often discussed in metaphors and those writing about them were not going into any detailed musicological analyses. The researcher noted:

Romantic criticism quite often featured a view that the category of form did not actually apply to music. The notion of an ideal, in the sense of an expression of experiences, was only poetic or visual. That was also how music was discussed.⁵⁸

No wonder, then, that the audience was not trained for receiving music, of which Moniuszko was aware, as was Józef Ignacy Kraszewski when reviewing his *Śpiewnik domowy*:

We would only like to ask the esteemed composer to, considering the future and the desired popularity of his songs, to make them, as much as possible, accessible to the general public which has little experience and is unwilling to cope with even the mildest difficulty. (...) so that he comes down to the notion of the general public and made [his music] simple.⁵⁹

It seems that Moniuszko would not hold against the authors of the poems the fact that in their paeans they emphasised the (common for him) moving of the heart, sorrowful nature, and simplicity; that they indicated the possibility of an internal transformation of the listeners and the deepening of family and patriotic feelings; that they mainly noticed the Polish

⁵⁶ This process of setting in bronze, i.e. transforming the truth about the composer into a myth which stemmed from the Romantic and post-Romantic traditions, were already convincingly discussed by A. Topolska, who used the examples of reviews and critical writings in the domain of music.

⁵⁷ I. Poniatowska, *Chopin – czwarty wieszcz*, [in:] *Topos narodowy w muzyce polskiej pierwszej połowy XIX wieku*, ed. W. Nowik, Warsaw 2006, p. 262.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “*Tygodnik Petersburski*” 1842, issue 73. As quoted in: J. Leończuk, *Słowo w pieśniach Stanisława Moniuszki*, [in:] *Książę muzyki naszej. Twórczość Stanisława Moniuszki jako dziedzictwo kultury polskiej i europejskiej. Studia*, ed. T. Baranowski, Warsaw 2008, p. 68.

musical traits based on the relationships with the literary propositions of Romanticism. Mieczysław Tomaszewski, a contemporary researcher, once concluded that Moniuszko “(...) just like Schubert, to a larger extent created works for his listeners than he expressed himself – as it was done by, e.g. Schumann or later by Chopin (...)”⁶⁰.

This conclusion entails the third issue: what is absent from this poetic summary? What was omitted? One would have to admit that there were very few references to Moniuszko’s technical mastery, his education, the diversity of his musical forms, or the intellectual foundation of many of his works. In terms of the titles of works referenced, those were dominated by cantos, *Halka*, and *Straszny dwór*. No one mentioned, let us say, *Paria* or *Jawnuta*, whose exotic staffage was generally not understood or not appreciated⁶¹. They also made relatively few references to the issues of religion, which would have stepped outside the emotional clichés. The author of “Echa warszawskie”, a section of *Przegląd Tygodniowy Życia Społecznego, Literatury i Sztuk Pięknych*, in a farewell obituary thus wrote about the roles which Moniuszko had fulfilled: “He only gave himself to us, he lived and created for us. He did not stride to foreign nations (...) It was in him that the vital lyrical genius of the nation gathered the strongest”. He combined “all the elements of our society”⁶². It would be difficult to avoid the impression that this was a very particular truth about Moniuszko – one which his contemporary audience needed and for which they were prepared.

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⁶⁰ M. Tomaszewski, *O muzyce polskiej w perspektywie intertekstualnej. Studia i szkice*, Kraków 2005, p. 68.

⁶¹ A. Topolska, *Mit wieszczą...*, pp. 132-139.

⁶² [a.a.], *Echa warszawskie*, “Przegląd Tygodniowy Życia Społecznego, Literatury i Sztuk Pięknych” 1872, year VII, issue 23, p. 178.

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SUMMARY

This article has a nature of a record. It was inspired by the 200th anniversary of the birth of Stanisław Moniuszko, and its main goal is to reference selected celebratory poems created in the 19th century in order to commemorate the composer. The author of this article indicated how different authors interpreted the ideological expressions of Moniuszko's music, its sources, and the functions it fulfilled. She also discussed the directions of the evolution regarding how the composer was depicted in poetry, as he was initially perceived as a "native busker", a Vilnius lyrnik, and a compatriot, and he gradually gained the rank of a folk minstrel and a prophet able to reproduce the "lyrical genius of the nation".

Keywords

Stanisław Moniuszko, celebratory poetry, poetic paeans, myth of prophet/lyrnik

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Herstory in Young Adult Fiction by Joanna Rudniańska Based on the Examples of *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy*

The wonderful life
in that ancient rich town
was no longer for me.
Marked with crazy pain
I was alien
among the sisters and mothers.

Joanna Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, p. 73.

(...) Helena studies that space
with that new sense of hers:
the sight/hearing/smell.
That cannot be expressed in words.
Helena the calico sits on a windowsill
and thinks with non-words and non-images.
With something which has no name.
No person could understand that.

Joanna Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, pp. 146-147.

Introduction

“Cultural conditionings have resulted in focusing a historical narrative (at least within European historiography) on masculinity.”¹ This has been brought about by a patriarchal division of social spheres into a private sphere – to which women have been assigned – and a public one, in which men participated in the past and, in most cases, continue to participate today. It is the latter that has been arbitrarily considered as worthy of presentation, while that which is “privately feminine” has been subdued or even forgotten.² The experiences of women have been perceived as meaningless and not worth recording; especially from their personal perspectives.³ What mattered in the public opinion were only the narratives of men, hence the descriptions of past ages could be referred to as “his-torical”, a term I understand – after Ewa Domańska – as a seemingly neutral androcentric narrative, which disqualifies herstories, or narratives developed by women.⁴ A need to include herstorical narratives, that is narratives exclusively female, in public discourses and to add value to women’s personal experiences within the social space was indicated by feminist movements of the 1960s.⁵

Considering a multitude and diversity of herstories, I want to note that in this paper I will predominantly focus on 21st-century fiction herstories intended for young adults, perceived as personal girl/woman stories which offer essentialism, sensuality, intimacy, and personalised interpretation of the world. The foundations for herstory understood in such a way were offered by Adele Aldridge, who, in the 1970s, proposed to deconstruct the English word ‘history’.⁶ According to the author, the term had a strongly androcentric undertone, which becomes visible if it is broken into the noun ‘story’ and the possessive pronoun ‘his’.⁷ By using a pun, it becomes clear that ‘his-story’ is a narrative shaped by the experiences of man; or, simply “his stories”.⁸ In contrast to androcentric narratives, Aldridge proposed the term ‘herstory’, which she devised in order to cover the scientific relations in the age-long story of women and their heritage, the fiction-based attempts at reproducing the specifically feminine experiences, and the literature of personal testimony, or using a lens through which it is possible to view women’s feelings, emotions, and experiences, and define a feminine mode of perceiving the world.⁹

¹ K. Witczak, *Herstory. Od historii do literatury*, “Sensus Historiae” 2016, issue 4, p. 63. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish].

² Vide P. Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, Massachusetts 1993, p. 25.

³ Vide P. Bourdieu, *Męska dominacja*, transl. L. Kopciewicz, Warszawa 2004, p. 95.

⁴ Vide E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach*, Poznań 1999, p. 204.

⁵ Vide R. Putnam Tong, *Mysł feministyczna. Wprowadzenie*, transl. J. Mikos, B. Umińska, Warszawa 2002, p. 264.

⁶ Vide E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach*, p. 90.

⁷ Vide L. Marzec, *Herstoria żywa, nie tylko jedna, nie zawsze prawdziwa*, “Czas Kultury” 2010, issue 5, pp. 34-43.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Vide E. Kraskowska, *Czy jest możliwa (i potrzebna) herstoria literatury polskiej?*, [in:] *Widnokręgi literatury – wielogłosy krytyki. Prace ofiarowane profesor Teresie Walas*, eds. A. Łebkowska, R. Nycz, M. Popiel, T. Kunz, Kraków 2015, p. 24.

Herstories are increasingly becoming a point of focus of those female researchers in social sciences and humanities, who study long-forgotten or unknown women and their cultural heritage. Herstories are also interesting for female writers, who use them to present exclusively female experiences. In Poland, considerable popularity has been won by studies with a feminist and gender focus on local female writing, as well as herstories and herstorical novels. The herstorical novel has most intensely developed in the English-speaking countries since the 1960s, where it is an object of in-depth interdisciplinary analyses. It should be noted that an area of interest of Polish researchers regarding modern women's writing is the output of those female writers whose works have been intended for adult readers, whereas texts written for children and young adults, and herstories noticeably present in them, have remained on the fringes of literary studies.¹⁰ Consider a statement by Bogumiła Kaniewska, who thus commented on little interest of local researchers in feminist or gender issues in Polish children's and young adult literature written by women:

(...) Less often children's literature (in Poland) was the focus of studies based on the selected methodologies, though the situation has undergone a radical shift in recent years: as various new readings of children's fiction also include a gender perspective. "Femininity" as a category has appeared in the reflections on children's literature in two ways: as an element which structures narratives and the internal world, and as a genealogical category enabling identification and description of the so-called novels for teenage girls. With a rather extensive representation in Western literary studies the first circle is just in its infancy in Poland. (...) Reflection on the novel for teenage girls is more common, though the category of femininity has rarely been studied directly in those texts as it has been subordinated to genealogical or literary history analyses. (...) Interestingly enough, even though in the discussions focused on women's writings for adults a question of authorship (and personality) is commonly raised, the issue is almost completely disregarded in the discussions about children's literature. The "group of female writers for children" is not as predominant as the "group of female writers" in highly artistic literature, while the issue of personality or autobiographism is of little interest for researchers of texts for children.¹¹

In this paper, I am not developing a synthetic image of herstories in modern Polish women's writings for non-adults, since this research area deserves a monograph that would discuss herstories in children's and young adult literatures as a topic to some degree separate in relation to women's

¹⁰ Vide G. Leszczyński, *Bunt czytelników. Proza inicjacyjna netgeneracji*, Warszawa 2010; M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Czytająca dziewczyna. O przemianach współczesnej powieści dla dziewcząt*, [in:] *Literatura dla dzieci i młodzieży (po roku 1980)*, ed. K. Heska-Kwaśniewicz, vol. 1, Katowice 2008, pp. 158-179.

¹¹ B. Kaniewska, *Kobieca twórczość dla dzieci*, [in:] *Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX. Procesy i gatunki, sytuacje i tematy*, eds. B. Kaniewska, E. Kraskowska, Poznań 2015, p. 249.

writings intended for adults. Therefore, I am using an option of developing interpretative case studies, which I perceive as works which chart new routes for subsequent comprehensive studies of the topic. Ewa Kraskowska referred to such singular activities as "bore-holes,"¹² which "reach deep into that bedrock,"¹³ which women's literary works basically are. The "bore-hole" I propose includes young adult fiction by Joanna Rudniańska, whose works are examples of a nonconformist coming-of-age novel marked by experiences specific to teenage girls and women. It has been developing in Poland since the 1990s, featuring an emphasis on the personalities of teenage girls and women, presenting herstories of them especially focusing on a highly individualised process of growing up, as well as the intentional development of their identities.¹⁴

Rudniańska's output consists of nine works, five of which are intended for non-adult readers: *Mój tata z obcej planety* (a novel first published in Japan in 2000, and later in Poland in 2008), *Rok Smoka* (2003), *Kotka Brygidy* (2007), as well as an illustrated book titled *XY* (2012) and a picture book titled *Bajka o wojnie* (2015). Her works for adults include *Miejsca* (1999), *Okno na skrzyżowanie. Baśnie święteczne dla dorosłych* (2007), *Sny o Hiroszimie* (2018), and *RuRuRudniańska* (2019). I must be noted that Rudniańska's exceptionally ambitious works for young readers may be placed at an intersection of highly artistic young adult fiction and adult fiction. The writer is known for raising existential, fringe, coming-of-age, ontological, psychological, and psychedelic topics. She displays a predilection for issues such as: individuality, otherness, rejection, deviation, trauma, the ambivalence of a human nature, a negative impact of life experiences, damaged biographies, and catastrophic events; she has also devoted much space to the terror of war, especially that of the Holocaust. She presents realities deconstructed by war – inscribed within the stories of young girls, teenage girls, and women – with a clear tendency for exposing their points of view, included in emphatic herstories and presented by means of convention that is phantasmatic, metaphorised, embellished with difficult symbols intended for personal interpretation.¹⁵ In modern interdisciplinary studies into the Holocaust-related experiences of children and women, it is stressed that until recently those were marginalised and strictly separated and contained within zones of silence or non-expression.¹⁶ These facts are raised in post-humanistic discourses with

¹² E. Kraskowska, *Z dziejów badań nad polskim pisarstwem kobiet*, [in:] *Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX...*, p. 12.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Vide M. Bednarek, *Powieść o kobiecym dojrzewaniu*, [in:] *Polskie pisarstwo kobiet w wieku XX...*, pp. 67-70.

¹⁵ As Maciej Wróblewski wrote, "Rudniańska raises in her works major existential, psychological, and socio-political problems. She is very consistent in her choices and approaches the selected issues, for example, growing up, generational conflicts, seeking own identity (Jewish, Polish), alcoholism, war, and violence, with sincerity". Idem, *Miedzy baśnią a parabolą – małe formy Joanny Rudniańskiej*, [in:] "Stare" i "Nowe" w literaturze dla dzieci i młodzieży: małe formy narracyjne, eds. B. Olszewska, O. Pajączkowski, Opole 2017, p. 77.

¹⁶ Vide A. Ubertowska, 'Niewidzialne świadectwa'. *Perspektywa feministyczna w badaniach nad literaturą Holokaustu*, "Teksty Drugie" 2009, issue 4; eadem, 'Pisałam sercem i krwią'. *Poetyka kobiecych autobiografii Holokaustowych*, "Ruch Literacki" 2008, issue 6.

a non-anthropocentric or non-androcentric focus.¹⁷ Rudniańska's fiction includes micro-narratives by children and women, as well as by animals, and in that is why it must be emphasised that in the post-modern Polish young adult fiction she has been one of the first writers who has opened herself to those excluded voices.¹⁸

Smoczyca [Dragoness] and Kotka [She-Cat] as the metamorphic symbols of (de)construction

This paper analyses *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy*, or the works in which herstories are deeply rooted. They are visible in the narrowing of narrative perspectives to personal, subjective, and sensual experiences of their protagonists. Those experiences are presented by means of phantasmatic and metamorphic images, symbols, and metaphors, through which interpretations of epiphanic, as well as borderline experiences inscribed in the coming-of-age of teenage girls become multi-layered and 'own', as they are branded by personal sensations of the readers of these novels. Rudniańska's herstorical novels are elliptical and sensory, containing fluctuating meanings, as they are composed of intimate, traumatic, and sensual experiences, tabooed and subdued in the public space, since they rarely uttered, yet identifiable for women as traces, marks, and, scars belonging to their private genealogies. The main topic of both works is the (de)construction of a fluid individuality of teenage girls and women as a creative act aimed at further defining themselves, gaining deeper knowledge of themselves, reaching that which is suppressed, ousted, or thrust into stereotypes regarding femininity and women's responsibilities, which herstories are supposed to mock, lynch, and even erase.

The central themes of both *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy* are the coming-of-age attempts of the protagonists at defining themselves; reaching

¹⁷ Vide A. Nikliborc, *Uwięzione w KL Auschwitz-Birkenau. Traumatyczne doświadczenia kobiet odzwierciedlone w dokumentach osobistych*, Kraków 2010; E. Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne. Refleksja o przeszłości w nowej humanistyce*, Poznań 2006.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that the fact of adding significance to personal narratives is a result of noticeable biographical and autobiographical contexts in both novels, which Anna Pekaniec addressed writing: "A plot of the novel is quite thick, saturated with details, yet Rudniańska maintains perfect control over it, while Helena, the protagonist, is an exceptionally bright and sensitive teenage girl. At the same time, a biographical background of *Kotka Brygidy* must be considered, and then it becomes obvious that the story is not focused on war only, but also on growing up (so it is also a coming-of-age novel), loneliness, gaining knowledge about the world wandering in the dark, great longing, helplessness in the face of evil the consequences of which cannot be fixed within a global perspective, they can only be minimised within oneself". The researcher added that "*Kotka Brygidy* is a story of endless longing for a time when everything fit everything else, and people were able to be themselves – or at least that was what Helena thought. It is a story of an enduring grief over those lost in the war-time Armageddon and in the Shoah, which deprived the world of its sensitivity". Eadem, *Dwie opowieści o wojnie, Holokauście i nie tylko. Kotka Brygidy Joanny Rudniańskiej i Rutka Joanny Fabickiej*, "Czy/tam/tu. Literatura dziecięca i jej konteksty" 2017, issue 1, pp. 15, 25. Maciej Wróblewski argued that in Rudniańska's works, the selection of topics was dictated by the biography of a mother who had lived through the experience of a concentration camp. Idem, *Miedzy baśnią a parabolą...*, p. 78. Vide also an interview with the author at <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/do-dziecka-mozna-tylko-podskoczyca-17992> (accessed: 11.07.2018).

memories defined by the family experiences of women; herstorically depicting special bonds with their closest relatives; finding unuttered or even tabooed traces, marks, and signs associated with the depictions of the major women characters in their families; and listening carefully to voices from the past and the desire to understand the ambivalent identities of their fathers. The herstories in Rudniańska's works fluctuate around damaged and distorted relations, which the author has enabled to resonate without enclosing them in any rigid framework of a happy ending, as if the growing up of the protagonists was a never-ending process or constituted a continuum in her writings. Therefore, it seems that the novels depict coming of age based on (de)construction which, on the one hand, enables the protagonists to unearth family secrets, understand the created identities of family members, and penetrate their thoughts and plans, and, on the other, it enables them to understand their and others' need to avoid painful truths, but also to come to terms with mental fission, a sense of alienation, and being excluded from specific systems, norms, or values; being mentally nomadic, constantly on the road, always searching for something.

Both *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy* are dominated by 'contaminated worlds': the first one depicts a breakup of the family, while in the latter one shows a decomposition of the world destroyed by World War II. Sylwia (the protagonist of *Rok Smoka*) and Helena (the protagonist of *Kotka Brygidy*) furtively observe micro-spaces in which they live. They peep into them or they see mysterious things, or those which they had not noticed before. The essentialism of those observations, or the fact of noticing specific details in the behaviour of their relatives, is the reason why they are no longer single-dimension figures, as they sometimes become disturbing. Sylwia's and Helena's strong personalities influence considerably how they perceive themselves and the world. The protagonists struggle with decoding behaviour, words, and gestures of their loved ones, which enables them to notice many crises, breakdowns, depression, fears, and the metamorphoses of family members. Through their inherent gentleness, tenderness, and an understanding for difficult biographies, they record in their memories the symbolic portraits of their loved ones, which despite their flaws, or perhaps because of them, they try to root in themselves, finding a place for them in their own herstories.

As she grows up, the protagonist of *Rok Smoka* notices changes in the behaviour of her beloved father, who suffers from depression, separates himself from the family, and eventually leaves. The story's breakthrough moment is the time of a critical metamorphosis: from a withdrawn, silent, yet sensitive father, who loved his daughter, he suddenly, as she perceives him, changes into a stranger, someone mysterious, and dark. Sylwia describes his transformation as a change into a dragon and she associates it with press reports about people disappearing under unexplained circumstances. The girl discovers her father's secret life; under a new form, he dances in an abandoned theatre. Fascinated and disturbed by a dark image of her father, she watches him covertly and recalls how quite recently he used to dance with her and sing to her: "This was my daddy's song,

my daddy's dance, this was my daddy! I felt that with every drop of my blood, which was his blood. He was so strong and large! And how beautiful, all covered in scales shimmering like the inside of a seashell, with a rainbow tail and ruby eyes. Now, he would surely be strong enough to dance, lifting me up even though I was so big."¹⁹ Sylwia does not clarify what problems troubled her father; as herstory, tightly covered with symbols, only enables readers to intuitively read phantasmatic images. Her father's dragon image constitutes a dissonance in reference to how a loving friend he used to be when she was a child. In her memories, he appears as an empathetic sensitive person, capable of perceiving sadness, pain, suffering, sometimes even a death wish in all living creatures. The protagonist intuitively understands that the negative transformation of the beloved member of her family is impacted by her coming of age, which entails a loss of closeness and a shared sense of loneliness.

When the father withdraws or disappears from home for extended periods, Sylwia learns about the history of her grandmother Krystyna, in whose company other women in the family feel insecure and ugly, especially Sylwia, who takes much after her father, whom Krystyna has always discredited and disliked:

My grandmother never smiled, which she did only when she was reading something. She was a tall slender woman of an excellent silhouette and fabulous ash-grey hair. Mum was somewhat similar to her, but if they stood side by side, no one paid attention to her, only grandma was the one who counted. Then me, I failed through and through. Black African curls, chubby and rather short, that was unforgivable, and my grandma often reproached me for that, yet the real culprit, my daddy, has never been accused directly. The realisation of his guilt ensured looks directed at him and seemingly unimportant gestures, many occasions for which were offered by the fact that we all lived together.²⁰

Sylwia is watching her grandmother reading a book and she says: "She devoured books and magazines like a dragon, sitting by the table straight, at the edge of her chair, and storms rumbled through her face. She cried, she smiled, and she giggled like a little girl. I watched her in awe and I imagined I was a character in a book: Alice, Ophelia, Clara from *The Nutcracker*".²¹ The protagonist describes the ritual of brushing her grandmother's knee-long hair; she talks about bombastic monologues describing the rituals rooted in the matrilineal line of their family. Sylwia does not identify herself with the grandmother; she sees the traits she shares with her father and feels being discredited by the doyenne of the family. Krystyna rebukes the defects in her appearance, she constantly depreciates the girl's attachment to her father, and she actively interferes with the relationships of not only her daughter and her daughter's husband, but also her granddaughter and

¹⁹ J. Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, Warszawa 2003, p. 18.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

²¹ Ibid., p. 8.

her father with whom the girl has a very strong bond, which remains in contrast with the formal relationships with the women in the family. As Sylwia grows up, she gradually discovers even darker secrets of her father's personality, she feels the need to get to know him deeply or, rather, diagnose the reasons for his destructive melancholy, or depression. Similarly, she analyses the complicated personalities of the women close to her and their tragic biographies.

A major role in the protagonist's life is played by Krystyna's first cousin Agnes, a disquieting relative from America. The extravagant and direct aunt sees people's auras; around Sylwia she sees an aura inscribed within the matrilineal line of their family. When the girl sees Agnes off to the airport on her return to the US, they are accompanied by the father, whose problems Agnes seems to understand perfectly. Her last words before boarding intrigue Sylwia and make her view him differently: "I would like to take you with me, but I don't think I'm the right company for small girls, and also this brown bear would have died without you because you are *sweet, sweet*, I had a brown bear just like that one once, but they burnt him (...)"²². The protagonist sees emotion in her dad's face, yet we do not know whether she completely understands what her aunt is saying, since she is talking about the experience of a death camp, where her family was gassed, and probably about similar experiences of Sylwia's father. They both notice in the girl's behaviour and appearance the auras of their loved ones, ruthlessly killed during World War Two. After the aunt's death, the protagonist meets Ludwiczek, a lover of her distant relative, who tells strange stories about Agnes' life which are the outcome not only her non-conformism, but also stemmed from her time in a death camp. What Sylwia remembers in particular is her aunt's grotesque and rebellious acts:

Not only did she have the silhouette of a young girl, but even her walk was exciting. At times a man would follow her in the street. She would then walk in an even more exciting fashion only to suddenly stop under some pretence. When the man came very close, she would turn around and make a wry face. She never used make-up; she never went to a beauty parlour. She was obsessive about her face. When the man would flee, she laughed like crazy. She considered that a great practical joke.²³

I don't know what kind of hair Agnes had. Ever since I've known her, she was bald as a coot. She left the camp without a single hair on her scalp. She had never told me how it happened. She wore a wig. She had enough money to have such fabulous natural hair. It was very exciting when she took her wig off. She had a beautiful head, an absolutely perfect shape, Nefertiti might have had similar. She would sometimes put make-up on it, that was the only place she would wear it, I'm not sure I should be telling you this.²⁴

²² Ibid., p. 30.

²³ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

Sylwia learns from none other than Agnes about the uniqueness of the matrilineal line in her family, in which women every other generation possess huge powers, the power of clairvoyance, longevity, and the power to cast spells. The herstorical, and fantastic tale includes surprising and almost fairy-tale events in the lives of Krystyna and Agnes, such as the fact that when they were young, they survived a plague spread by rats. Agnes reminisces about herself when she was young. She also talks about Krystyna's past talents, as she was supposed to take up studies at the Sorbonne but, after her parents' death, was unceremoniously married off by her callous brothers. Sylwia understands that women are treated as objects in the patriarchal culture and she is critical of men's decision-making. She herself wants to decide about her mind and body, to search on her own for paths of her development. Meanwhile, Agnes talks overtly about the further tragic fortunes of her first cousin, not considering even for a moment how that might influence the adolescent girl:

They didn't want to have any problems with the eccentric maiden so they married her off with Robert. He came from a good family, but was old, spoiled, and stupid. He impregnated Krystyna child after child, they were all boys, they all died, and he himself gambled away his wealth. (...) One time Robert beat Krystyna hard, he got mad because she laughed reading *Alice in Wonderland*. He could not understand, the poor fellow, how you can laugh while reading a book. He himself could barely write his name. So, Krystyna went mad, completely losing her mind. In the past, she wrote wonderful translations of French poems, in fact Robert burnt them all. She wrote a treatise in mathematics; she had an outstanding sense of humour.²⁵

The last message from Agnes, given to Sylwia after her aunt's death, says about an evil spell of transformation that Krystyna supposedly cast on the protagonist's father, presumably because she despised him (or because she despised men in general, as it was those closest to her who had hurt her the most) and because of the complete and unrelenting control over Sylwia which Krystyna mistook for caring. Rudniańska incorporates into the plot descriptions of expanded, symbolic, and feminine rituals which support bonds among women being based on their ability to engage in subliminal communication, as well as on mysterious rites inscribed in a girl's coming of age. A visible fable-like *topos* of a journey which Sylwia must complete to lift the spell off her father acquires an emphatically feminising undertone in the novel. The path of coming of age is devised by Old Women, namely the already dead Agnes and the dying Krystyna. It is owing to them that the protagonist is supposed to experience her initiation. Interestingly enough, the girl demanded from her grandmother help by exerting violence, both symbolic and physical, forcing her to return to her suppressed memories, painfully pulling on her long hair. Thus, Sylwia assumes in the matrilineal line of the family the role of the strong, yet cruel leader disregarding her

²⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

grandmother's old age and remaining indifferent to her mother, who was a washed-out and completely unexciting character, a person almost invisible within the genealogical map drawn by the daughter.

This forced act of sisterhood resembles fairy tale or mythical initiation scenarios when a maturing protagonist discovers within the structure of female relations mechanisms of violence imposed on young women by the old ones, which she must completely reject in order to define her own femininity and to feel free.²⁶ Sylwia receives from her witch grandmother a feminine attribute necessary for the initiation journey to be successful: a thin wristband twisted into a braid of the hair of the doyenne of the family, as well as a piece of advice as to where she should go and what she should remember:

You will climb stairs to a desert. You will find a city upon a hill. There, you will see the Dragon Pond. You must step into it, but before you do that you will tie this braid tightly around your left wrist. It will be your talisman, I believe. Then you will know what to do. But you cannot be sluggish, or proud. And avoid pleasure, remember that.²⁷

The young girl begins the journey in time and space at night. Blind and forced to rely only on her own instinct, she claims the stairs to a land of Arcadia where she regains her sight and reaches a pond where dragons swim around:

Those were female dragons, dragonesses. One of them took her young to her swollen breast. Young dragonesses, full of charm and grace, splashed and frolicked, while the old ones, like moss-covered logs, lurked like crocodiles. (...) "Approach them," her heart suggested. "They will accept you like a sister because that's what you are."²⁸

An act of entering the pond is a metaphysical and a transformative experience for the protagonist. Swimming in it in ecstasy, she experiences lightness and transforms into a dragoness, like the mothers and sisters. That transformative motion is meaningful since Sylwia as a dragoness experiences a genealogical birth for the community of her great-grandmothers who were pacifistic and lived in a paradise-like archetypal land. This echoes Luce Irigaray's feminist psychoanalysis; in her essay titled *Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother*, where she says that "the first body we as women had to relate to was a woman's body and our first love is love of the mother, women always have an ancient and primary relationship to what is called homosexuality."²⁹ The celebration of sisterhood is visible through the scene

²⁶ Vide G. Lasoń-Kochańska, *Córki Penelopy. Kobiety wobec baśni i mitu*, "Ślupskie Prace Filologiczne" 2004, pp. 173-182.

²⁷ J. Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, p. 55.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 70-72.

²⁹ L. Irigaray, *Ciało-w-ciało z matką*, transl. A. Araszkiewicz, Kraków 2000, p. 20. English version: L. Irigaray (1993), *Sexes and Genealogies*, New York: Columbia University Press.

of a ceremony of the regeneration of Sylwia's body, in which all dragonesses participate: "(...) they, my sisters and mothers (...). They said that I am beautiful, and I felt beautiful. I played with my peers and I gave into cuddles by the older ones; I listened to legends and songs."³⁰ The transformation triggers in Sylwia apathy and a desire to be constantly warmed by the warmth of motherly bodies; a desire to remain an element of the feminine universe, without the need to separate from them.

At the moment of her ordeal, placed within a symbolic frame of a fight with a male dragon, or her own father, Sylwia the Dragoness feels dazed. She does not know whether the fight that awaits her will be for her or for her father, off whom she is supposed to lift the spell. She notices a dissonance between the sisterly covenant of dragonesses, that is the land of milk and honey where there are no wars, and the demonic form of her father who brings in anger and despair which, as she senses, will destroy the harmonious ancient harbour, the sisterly centre of legends, myths, and tales, where you can remain endlessly in a state of bliss, satisfaction, close to the warm bodies of sisters and mothers. However, the protagonist's task is to reject the matrilineal kingdom, engage in the struggle for her own identity, and face both her emerging femininity and her father, no longer a neutral daddy, but a man. Beata Mytych-Forajter has argued that the transformative experience constitutes a prelude to an increase of the protagonist's life and somatic strength; it is the trigger of her imminent act of non-conformism and of activities saturated with emancipation and freedom.³¹

When Sylwia returns to the paradise-like sisterly land, she puts on her wrist the bracelet made with her grandmother's hair, which painfully cuts into her dragoness arm. No longer in a semi-lucid state, she notices a clear intertwining of various space-time continuums: the archetypal place which belongs to the original mothers and sisters, the Holocaust biography of Agnes and the tragic story of Krystyna, and her own, contemporary herstory. The palimpsest nature of the space-time continuum, the overlapping fortunes of related women, and the vision of eternal stagnation in the Arcadia of the dragonesses without a single trace of her father's story are all emotional signs for Sylwia, which help her make a difficult decision: "The wonderful life in that ancient rich town was no longer for me. Marked with crazy pain I was alien among the sisters and mothers."³² The process of growing up is presented in an archetypal manner as a confrontation with a beast. Sylwia finds a dragon, or a dark version of her father, and fights with it viciously, eventually becoming victorious. At that point, the Arcadian town has already fallen into decay and the original mothers are no longer there. After the painful coming of age, Sylwia leaves the dream-like land and the fallen den of the dragonesses in her memory.

³⁰ J. Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, p. 73.

³¹ Vide B. Mytych-Forajter, *Energia metamorfozy w prozie Joanny Rudniańskiej*, [in:] B. Mytych-Forajter, I. Gralewicz-Wolny, *Uwolnić Pippi! Twórczość dla dzieci wobec przemian kultury*, Katowice 2013, p. 98.

³² J. Rudniańska, *Rok Smoka*, p. 73.

The girl decides to trace the patrilineal line unknown to her; she intends to get to know her father anew and find a place for him in herstory. Through a herstoric depiction, the dad's figure becomes 'visible' and 'audible'. Sylwia fills the identity 'cracks' in his biography and discovers the reasons for his vexing melancholy, which, among others, are related to his Jewish descent. The filling of those 'cracks' as a symptom of a new stage in the protagonist's life is reflected by her mother's tapestries presenting the journey of the daughter to the land of the original mothers and her symbolic fight for herself. In that instance, Rudniańska initiated the feminist metaphor of weaving, which Karen E. Rowe discussed when analysing the concept of weaving/spinning stories by women, which she took from tales and myths, and which is a metaphor of women's personal herstories.³³ Despite that clear gesture of solidarity with her daughter, the mother's bond with Sylwia wanes and vanishes altogether. The girl perhaps thinks that the motherly support has come too late, or perhaps she wants her mother to stop being afraid of the shadows of already dead cousins, and finally start living on her own terms instead to weave her own herstory. The protagonist decides the travel to America and to take her father with her. Zofia Beszczyńska argues that the fact of leaving her childhood means for the protagonist a gradual farewell to the world of tales and subsequent maturation into individual femininity; learning how to differentiate her own feelings from the feelings of others, making life decisions, and bearing their consequences.³⁴

The novel's ending is symbolic: the transformative principle, which is a unique trademark of Rudniańska's text, is finally complete when the father and the daughter take the form of a dragon and dragoness on the plane. In a euphoric dance, they fall towards the Atlantic. The ending should be referred to the above thesis according to which coming of age in Rudniańska's novels is based on (de)construction. On the one hand, it carries the message of freedom, liberation, and growth into mature decisions, in that respect being constructive initiation, but, on the other, the fact that both the daughter and father leave home, breaking of the relation with the mother, the fact of leaving the country, and a shared dragon flight and fall into the Atlantic all suggest a subversive nature of the plot of initiation. According to Alicja Baluch, this subversiveness consists of personality and identity fissures in the daughter and the father, both anxious about the unrelenting sense of non-fulfilment, the internal split, and the inability to free themselves from past events and their internalisation. All this amounts to a kind of a mental enslavement to the past.³⁵ Baluch adds that the writer uses sophisticated symbolism and creates a multi-layered message:

³³ Vide K.E. Rowe, *The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tales*, [in:] *The Classic Fairy Tales*, ed. M. Tatar, New York 1999, pp. 299-300.

³⁴ Vide <http://www.ebib.pl/2005/64/beszczyńska.php> (accessed: 11.07.2018).

³⁵ Vide A. Baluch, *Siedem pająków mojego taty, czyli mitologiemy we współczesnej fantastyce*, [in:] eadem, *Od ludus do agora. Rozważania o książkach dla dzieci i młodzieży i o sposobach lektury, które wiodą od zabawy do poważnej rozmowy o literaturze*, Kraków 2003, p. 93.

She builds meanings and references both “superficial” (which is visible in the final scene where the air journey to America ends in an explosion, a catastrophe and the death of the protagonist?) and “deep” ones with the discovery of mysteries of the subconscious (that same final scene could be understood as the necessary departure from the family home, a flight to another world, and a passing of tests which end in “initiation death,” or the birth of a new person).³⁶

Beata Mytych-Forajter continues Baluch’s thought, noting that:

[Rudniańska’s works – K. S.], despite their different stories and characters, share a surprisingly steady tendency to present the world at the moment of metamorphosis, during the act of transformation. Such transformation entails, of course, an effect of fluidity, the original blurriness of the worlds or people being described, who may change into a dragon, cat, or, at least, a god. Every now and then, you can hear between the lines doubts regarding that which is invented and dreamt up vs. that which actually happens. Such question may not be directly answered with complete certainty as the goal is to remain in the land of the non-obvious, or in constant balancing among words, forms, and shapes.³⁷

The researcher argues that rooted in coming-of-age mythical and fable scenarios, Rudniańska’s prose reinterprets them considerably by associating the motif of transformation with the broadly understood issues of alienation, otherness, and exclusion, with a clear predilection to the topic of the Holocaust, or a topic which is introduced by *Rok Smoka* and expanded upon by *Kotka Brygidy*.³⁸

The metamorphic principle derived from archetypal stories is used in the latter work to emphasise the issue of otherness, broken identity, and the subject of the Holocaust, yet with appropriate interpretation it does not constitute a universal narrative concerning problems of large communities at their historic moments. What is noteworthy is, again, essentialism of the herstorical narrative, as a result of which the story can be viewed as Helena’s personal herstory, and it is hard to find in it any objective indications of the war-time world.

We meet Helena as a young girl carefully observing the micro-world in which she lives; she notices the nuances over which she ponders and which she remembers. As an adult woman, she will return to many of those, seeking fluctuations in their meanings. Her herstory enables the reader to see the characters and events through her eyes, narrow down a big to a micro scale in order to analyse matters which are important in herself and for herself. Helena’s reflexivity is emphasised already at the beginning of the novel when, as a six-year-old, she watches the world from the top of a mulberry which grows in the yard. The tree fulfils the central function within

³⁶ Ibid., p. 92.

³⁷ B. Mytych-Forajter, *Energia metamorfozy w prozie Joanny Rudniańskiej*, p. 87.

³⁸ Vide Ibid., p. 88.

the microcosm of the protagonist's childhood, which she later mythologises as the safe "pre-warness". The mulberry constitutes the classical axis of the world (*axis mundi*) – to use Mircea Eliade's concept – or a central point in which that which is earthly combines with the land of gods (up) and the land of death (down).³⁹ The real world is found between *sacrum* and *profanum*, while in Helena's case it is a microcosm, not only because she is a child, but also because, as a result of the war, the space in which she lives shrinks and becomes surrounded by an actual zone of chaos; the war-time town with the terrifying place, or the ghetto:

In Helena's yard, there was only one tree. It was a mulberry. Its fruit resembling gooseberries, but light, white-and-green, were very soft and sweet. Helena liked mulberries. She liked to climb the huge tree and find them under leaves. And the tree liked Helena. It hid her from Stańcia and other children in the yard. (...) From the top of the mulberry, Helena could see three temples. A different God lived in each, and it was to those three Gods, the Holy Trinity that she complained about Stańcia. That was what Helena thought looking from above on a small round synagogue, greenish copulas of the orthodox church, and the brick tower of St. Florian's church. It's a good thing that three Gods live here. Nothing bad can happen. Ever.⁴⁰

In the mulberry's crown, Helena not only prays to Gods, but she also meets a calico female cat with whom she shares her secrets and problems. And even though Helena does not agree to the she-cat being domesticated, she is taken in by Mr Kamil, her father's associate, who promises to give the cat a home, particularly because that is what his little sister Brygida wants.

When the Second World War breaks out, Helena's microcosm changes dramatically: her aunt Róża, who is of Jewish descent, loses her home; her uncle Eryk, the "chocolate man", becomes an SS-man, and the chocolates, though tempting, become perceived intuitively by Helena as a source of sin, which is why she puts them aside until the war ends. The Jews close to her family start wearing armbands with the Star of David. Helena's friend Tomek lets her try the band on and that is when she learns the magnitude of the ostracism which Jews who wear it must face. Mr Kamil, also a Jew, explains the significance of the armband to Helena.⁴¹ Adult Helena recalls the conversation with Kamil, but she mostly remembers talking to Tomek. This is because the boy jokingly gave her the band instead of a wedding ring. Though considered as quite childish by the protagonist, that event will forever evoke in her remorse as her first unfulfilled emotion – forever tainted with the Shoah and the retained

³⁹ Vide M. Eliade, *Święty obszar i sakralizacja świata*, [in:] idem, *Sacrum, mit, historia. Wybór esejów*, trans. by A. Tatarkiewicz, Warszawa 1993, pp. 66, 68-70.

⁴⁰ J. Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, Żabia Wola, p. 11.

⁴¹ The issue of anti-Semitism and its various faces and shades in *Kotka Brygidy* was discussed in: M. Skowera, *Polacy i Żydzi, dzieci i dorośli. Kto jest kim w 'Kotce Brygidy'* Joanny Rudniańskiej i 'Bezsenności Jutki' Doroty Combrzyńskiej-Nogali, "Konteksty Kultury" 2014, collection 1, pp. 57-72.

final memory about the boy, filled with ugliness, fear, and sadness, i.e. features inscribed into the space of the ghetto.

The novel's herstory is transferred through the introduction of a nameless female cat known as Brygida's She-Cat. That symbolic character allows interpreting the text as a herstory based on monologues and internal dialogues, and sensory and intuitive uncovering of the world. A special bond forms between Helena and the calico cat as the animal ends up in the protagonist's house. The girl's father brings the cat along with the news of the establishment of the ghetto: "Kamil brought her. This is Brygida's female cat (...). They have to move to the other side of the Vistula River, to the ghetto. They will have only one room there. They won't be able to keep a cat. Brygida asked if she could stay with us for a little while".⁴² The moment the cat appears in Helena's house, the protagonist begins to realise the impending Shoah. She will forever retain in her memory the image of Jews walking into the ghetto, which will be treated as an unexpressed farewell.

Helena saw Jews walking from the Praga district to the ghetto, to the other side of the Vistula River. She was standing in the pavement and holding Stańcia's hand tightly and Jews walked down the street. There were so many of them, adults and children. They were carrying suitcases and other things. There were carts and carriages, but they were moving very slowly, at a walking pace. It was very quiet, almost no one was talking. You could only hear the clapping of heels and the slow rattle of wheels. Jews were walking endlessly. Helena and Stańcia followed them and stopped only when they reached the bridge. Jews went onto the bridge encased in steel bars as if into a long low and narrow cage. There Helena lost sight of them, but new people entered the bridge, those who were walking behind them. That day the sky was overcast and heavy, it hung over the Vistula River so low that it seemed as if it was soon going to drop into the waters. "Why aren't you saying anything?" Helena asked Stańcia. "What's there to say. They are going on and on. There were so many of them here," said Stańcia and waved her hand in front of her face as if she was waving off a mosquito or some persistent thought. "What about Tomek? Is he also going to the ghetto?" "Why wouldn't he? A Jew's a Jew," Stańcia said. I didn't even give him flowers, Helena mused. And she felt sadness greater than she had ever felt before. "But they will return to Praga, right?" "Yeah, right," Stańcia said and again waved her hand. "Why wouldn't they?" Helena asked. "Why would they? They are not going there only to return." Jews were still walking, they entered the long low cage and they went on, to the other side of the river, who knows where to.⁴³

For Helena, the Holocaust becomes a very personal event. The story's leading tracks are the fortunes of the female cat and the fortunes of Brygida, whom the protagonist has never met in person; and the facts from the lives of

⁴² J. Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, p. 48.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 52-53.

individual Jewish friends and nameless persons rescued by Helena's father. Rudniańska focused on the micro elements of the Holocaust, those which are not present in universal androcentric narratives.⁴⁴ Helena's personal/own perception of the world – first as a girl and later as a mature woman – does not match a typical Holocaust narrative.⁴⁵ Therefore, this herstory means the inclusion of the personal voice of a child (and, later, a woman) in the universal story of the Holocaust; a voice which can function aside or in contrast to it; thus, it is, to quote Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, "a triumph of personal memory over cultural memory or post-memory".⁴⁶ In *Kotka Brygidy*, the individuality and essentialism of the story is topped with a finale with an emphatically accentuated motif of reincarnation, which changes the collective memory of the Holocaust into personal memory with a stigma of one's own trauma that is hard to understand for others.

Brygida's She-Cat is her mental guide – through the sphere of premonitions, intuition, that which is private, hidden in speculation, or in more or less realised fears, and absent from the official space. The physical and ontological status of the cat can be interpreted as a phantasmatic element binding the storyline, a subliminal signature thus described by Anita Jarzyna:

[There are – K. S.] major doubts regarding the nature of the titular she-cat, basically nameless, a character somewhat fantastic and super-conscious, which is indicated the most by the conversations she has with Helena, the protagonist, which, however, may be only a figment of the girl's imagination, who is very lonely among adults preoccupied with the war.⁴⁷

Mytych-Forajter considered the calico cat within the pantheistic perspective as a deity, which seems significant as the cat appears for the first time in the mulberry from which Helena watches three Gods. The researcher also saw the calico as a symbolic equivalent of Helena's psyche, possibly as a super-conscious and subliminal figure:

The feline perception utilising completely sensory experiences unknown to humans transcends the capabilities of human language. It would be difficult even to imagine a cat's image of the world, especially if the cat is Helena. Synesthetically mixed experiences enable to have a different view of reality, a global view of which seems fuller thanks to that, limited only to that which dominates the human perception of the world, that is the eye.

⁴⁴ Vide N. Żórawska, *Dziedzictwo (nie)pamięci. Holokaustowe doświadczenia pisarek drugiego pokolenia*, Katowice 2018.

⁴⁵ Vide B. Engelking, *Zagłada i pamięć. Doświadczenie Holokaustu i jego konsekwencje opisane na podstawie relacji autobiograficznych*, Warszawa 1994; M. Wójcik-Dudek, *W(y)czytać Zagładę. Praktyki postpamięci w polskiej literaturze XXI wieku dla dzieci i młodzieży*, Katowice 2016; J. Kowalska-Leder, *Doświadczenie Zagłady z perspektywy dziecka w polskiej literaturze dokumentu osobistego*, Wrocław 2009.

⁴⁶ M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Transfery Zagłady. Przypadek 'Kotki Brygidy' Joanny Rudniańskiej, "Biblioteka Postscriptum Polonistycznego"* 2015, issue 5, p. 355.

⁴⁷ A. Jarzyna, *Szlemiele. Zwierzęta wobec Zagłady w literaturze dla dzieci, "Narracje o Zagładzie"* 2016, issue 2, p. 235.

Brygida's She-Cat plays a major role in the story as she silently crosses the borders set up by humans, suddenly appearing in places and situations which require her presence. (...) [The she-cat – K. S.] verges on the intuition of some divine protection, which seems absent from the war-ridden world.⁴⁸

It is owing to her that Helena learns about her father's secrets, she sees things that are at first glance unnoticeable, hidden under the cloak of night, which includes him rescuing and hiding Jews. The father's role in the life of the protagonist is just as important as in *Rok Smoka*. However, in *Rok Smoka*, the father is a character overwhelmed by the genealogy of women, whereas in *Kotka Brygidy* he is a clearly dominant figure. Helena is going to struggle throughout her life with his mandate to remember about the Holocaust and his ethically ambivalent attitude, considered many years later. The father sensitises Helena to the tragic situation of Jews and to the trauma of war. He accompanies her on two tram rides through the ghetto. Wójcik-Dudek wrote that he was

[a] truly uncompromising Holocaust educator. (...) The father not only offered his daughter stories from the ghetto, but also took her on the other side of the ghetto wall, just like Virgil showing Dante around the circles of hell, he wanted Helena to know the truth about the closed district. The tram ride through the ghetto proved an almost borderline experience for the girl making a major mark on her adult life.⁴⁹

The researcher added that the father was responsible for the canonical narrative about the cruelty of war; he ordered Helena to interpret dramatic events and remember them.⁵⁰ "The protagonist collects Holocaust images, though probably it would be better for her mental balance to suppress them. Yet, the authoritative mandate of her father requires her to struggle throughout her adult life with unremembering the past".⁵¹ That collective experience of the trauma of the Holocaust is, however, subject to gradual condensing. During both tram trips through the ghetto, Helena has Brygida's She-Cat hiding in her backpack. The second trip becomes the central point in the map of the protagonist's borderline experiences; in its course Helena sees a traumatising emptiness of that dark part of space, while the cat, having bid farewell to her, disappears in the dead empty streets in search of Brygida. The protagonist can only hope that: "(...) they will surely meet one day: Helena, Brygida, and the calico".⁵² Brygida's She-Cat abandons the Arian side, and since she is a super-conscious being that emphasises the herstory, also Helena completes a passage into the space of the ghetto, mentally forced to search for and commemorate the enigmatic unknown Brygida.

⁴⁸ B. Mytych-Forajter, *Energia metamorfozy w prozie Joanny Rudniańskiej*, pp. 95-97.

⁴⁹ M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Elementarz Zagłady w polskiej najnowszej literaturze dla dzieci*, [in:] *Śmierć w literaturze dziecięcej i młodzieżowej*, ed. by K. Slany, Warszawa 2018, pp. 290-291.

⁵⁰ Vide ibid., p. 292.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 293.

⁵² J. Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, p. 101.

Helena as an adult woman dwells on the past and composes the her-story anew; she considers the attitudes of both her mother and father as ethically controversial. Her mother leaves her family after World War Two and goes to Munich, where she marries uncle Eryk, the Nazi. She starts to suspect her father of rescuing Jews only to maintain the family's good situation. Hidden twice, though visible to the interlocutors, that is her father and Mr Kamil, she witnesses their confrontations. First time, right after the war, she hears her father distance himself from Kamil, whom he hid throughout the war in the cellar: "You see, Kamil, I told them you came here with the army, the Russians. But, anyway you can't stay here. I don't want them to figure out that I was hiding a Jew. Why give them a reason to say that I made money on Jews? I don't need that. (...) No one should know that you stayed all that time here under the floor. Do you understand?"⁵³ The second time, Helena watches the meeting between her father and Kamil many years later, after her high school graduation, when they already lost their money and after the mother left:

She wanted to run up to Mr Kamil and say *hi* to him. But she didn't do that, she was stopped by her father's reserved attitude. She came closer and stood behind the mulberry. "It's been a while.." said Mr Kamil, but the father interrupted him. "Indeed. And it should've stayed that way. Why did you come, Kamil?" he asked shrilly. "I would like to do something for you. I would have it written down. How you saved me. Not just me, I know that (...)" "Me? Saved you? That was just good business, you know that. And I told you once it should stay between us. I don't want anyone to know that I was hiding a Jew here," he pointed to the workshop. "In fact, that's no longer mine. (...) "I know that. And I also know that Dzidzia left and you and Helena are alone," Kamil said (...) "How do you know that, Kamil?" "I helped her to get a passport," Kamil replied. "That's great. You're a good boy, Kamil, you know how to return a favour. So, leave now, Kamil. It would be better if you weren't here when Helena comes back from school."⁵⁴

After her father's death, Helena discovers several dozen unopened wooden cigar boxes that her mother had sent him from Germany. She was disgusted by them, just like by the chocolates from uncle Eryk. Honour and ethos instilled in her by her father trigger in her reluctance to benefactors or to luxury items which she perceives as objects tainted with betrayal, trauma, and the Holocaust. That unwritten ethos was also a reason she never went to visit her mother in Munich and "(...) the letter exchange stopped, just like that, as streams sometimes dry out"⁵⁵ Adult Helena is very careful when building relations with people. Sections depicting the protagonist's old age are emphatic; they are void of any euphemisms. They portray her obsessive attachment to the incomplete figure of Brygida.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 119.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 128.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 130.

(...) Helena is old. She is tall and thick. She has diabetes and needs to take shots every day. Her knees hurt. She lives with seven cats on the last floor in a tenement house built after the war in Nowolipki. Recently, she has been thinking more and more about that girl she once was, about Helena who had a mum, a father, and Stańcia, and who lived in Praga. Sometimes it seems to her that that girl is right beside her, in the same room, standing behind her or sitting on the bed. She turns around quickly, but the girl is not there. She looks into the mirror and only sees an old face, grey tangled hair and big arms. There is no girl, there is no Helena. There is an old, ugly, strange woman. Helena loves her she-cats and he-cats, but neither of them is like Brygida's calico was. She is not able to talk to any of them, though she does not exclude a possibility that those discussions were only a figment of her child imagination.⁵⁶

Herstorical interpretation requires considering the uniqueness of the finale: Helena, whose family consists of cats, finds in the mulberry a piece of information about a calico, identical to Brygida's She-Cat, whom a woman wants to give away to a good home because she is leaving for Israel. She turns out to be Brygida and the female cat is that very Brygida's She-Cat. Interestingly enough, Brygida's flat is a reflection of Helena's flat; even more so: they are neighbours, but on opposite sides. Helena lives in a tenement house at Nowolipki Street, while Brygida at Nowolipia Street. A strange similarity of the locations, the reverse opposites of the flats, a supplement to the fates of Kamil, Brygida's brother, the cat, and Brygida herself – who was led out of the ghetto during the uprising by the calico – could constitute, according to the rules of fantastic narratives, symbolic returns to the borderline points of Helena's childhood; particularly to the second tram trip through the ghetto and the moment when the cat left the girl to search for Brygida.

As already indicated that this was the moment of the transfer of the super-conscious figure of "Helena the She-Cat" into the space of the ghetto as a symbol of mental and identity-based attempt by Helena to identify with the unknown Brygida. Therefore, an argument may be presented that the dialogue with Brygida constitutes an element of a child-related fantasy recurring along a sinusoidal pattern. Even more so, considering that Brygida talks about being led out of the ghetto by the calico, as if the narrative was subordinate to Helena's desire (when she was a child) to meet Brygida, which enables the old woman to add meaning to her emotions, to anchor them within the space of experiences of the projected friend, and to construct an emotional parallel for their common stories. A herstorical reading of the novel allows interpreting its ending as Helena's obsessive search for the conclusion of herstory. Wójcik-Dudek has argued that it is melancholy that prevented the protagonist from abandoning the projected figure of Brygida, accept the possibility that she had died, "and thus there occurs

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 131.

a «literaturisation» of the character of Brygida, who, in Helena's imagination, becomes a seemingly real image, a near *simulacrum*⁵⁷.

The return of Brygida's She-Cat, her ability to reincarnate, enables a phantasmatic interpretation of the finale, similar to that in *Rok Smoka*. The metamorphic motif of reincarnation manifests itself through the transformation of Helena into an animal, while the herstorical story line emphasises the reference to the cat's memories, similar to the reference to Helena's memories – a collection of the most personal and borderline events associated with the war – understood as being experienced personally, which is indicated by the reference to the vision of the fall of the three Gods and Helena's nagging question about the ethics of her father's attitude. She confesses her worries to Brygida, as if only she could properly evaluate his actions. Interestingly enough, Brygida's comments include the father's words processed in Helena's subjective memory, which she overheard in his discussions with Kamil. Therefore, it seems that the protagonist attempts to convince herself that her beloved member of her family acted absolutely fairly. She once again takes the calico from Brygida, as she did in her childhood. A year later, we see Helena in a terrible condition: she lives in utter poverty, she may soon be evicted, and her talks with the cat assume a schizophrenic nature. Abandoned by everyone, lonely, unmarried, and childless, she resembles the archetypal figure of a rebel madwoman derived from the feminist discourses of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar,⁵⁸ whose fate Rudniańska concludes in a schizoid metamorphosis: on the night of the turn of the century the protagonist decides to leave her old body and become Brygida's She-Cat. Helena and Brygida, two strangers during the war, become present in the form an immortal calico cat, this time Helena. Brygida's She-Cat.

(...) Now Helena sees everything differently. She can see not only with her eyes, but also her ears. And her nose, too. So, she sees much more. Scents and sounds, and images form one multidimensional space. Helena studies that space with that new sense of hers: the sight/hearing/smell. That cannot be expressed in words. Helena the calico sits on a windowsill and thinks with non-words and non-images. With something which has no name. No person could understand that.⁵⁹

In this form, she leads her cats out of a burning house, like the calico once led Brygida from the burning ghetto. The herstorical pact allows using here a phantasmatic key and notice the underlying oneiric reminiscence of the burning ghetto firmly etched in Helena's memory, which continues to update itself in the sphere of her imagination, giving the protagonist an opportunity to euphemise her traumatic recollections, expand them in her own way, weave personal narratives about people and events which ruthlessly tattered her personality and forced to live through the past. They

⁵⁷ M. Wójcik-Dudek, *Transfery Zagładys...*, p. 354.

⁵⁸ Vide S. Gilbert, S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven-London 1979.

⁵⁹ J. Rudniańska, *Kotka Brygidy*, pp. 146-147.

turned her into a woman who is separate, excluded from the present, and inscribed mentally into her war-time childhood. From the flat in Nowolipki, in which Helena dies/transforms, we transition to Jerusalem, where – within the sphere of a projection – a meeting between Brygida and Helena the She-Cat takes place. It resembles the first meeting between Helena and the calico, but it is Brygida who directly speaks. The oneiric scene is a transformed recollection of Helena's internal discussions in her childhood and it constitutes an imagined crowning of the herstory covering an identity completion of Helena's phantasmatic figure of Brygida. Thus, young readers can feel some fulfilment as in the imagination plan there occurs a long-expected meeting of the two girls/women destined for each other and their listening to each other. However, in a broader perspective, the ending appears closer to endings that are characteristic of prose texts by female writers who write novels for adults, in which herstories do not conclude in an actual "finding of a satisfactory place within the social and metaphysical order."⁶⁰ Moreover, this might entail a conscious choice to be alienated, marginalised, and not rooted in the social order considered by the general public as normative.⁶¹ If *Kotka Brygidy* were to be treated as a novel closer to the prose texts written by female writers for adult readers, what would primarily be of importance would be the psychologically complex protagonist, the dimension of the herstory focused on settling accounts; in Kraskowska's terminology – a regressive character, a focus on "analysing the past in the centre of which there is the specifically feminine negative experience".⁶²

Conclusion

Maciej Wróblewski stated that:

In combination with the consistently constructed reality 'broken in two', or the one which consists of an area of lightness and an area of darkness, of culture and nature, of life and death, of immaturity/childishness and maturity / childishness, of good and evil, of consciousness and dream, and of reality and fantasy [the] simplicity of the means of artistic expression used by Rudniańska forms a text, dense with meaning which demands exceptional intellectual efforts from readers.⁶³

Ryszard Waksmund has noted that the fable-like poetic and dark characters of the stories amplify their messages and make them more universal.⁶⁴ Thus, in terms of how they combine the fantastic, phantasmatic, oneiric, and realistic conventions with personal herstories, they prove extremely original when compared to other modern example of young adult

⁶⁰ M. Bednarek, *Powieść o kobiecym dojrzewaniu*, p. 74.

⁶¹ Vide *Ibid.*

⁶² E. Kraskowska, *Świat według Boguszewskiej i po kobiecemu*, [in:] eadem, *Piórem niewieścim. Z problemów prozy kobiecej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, Poznań 2003, p. 92.

⁶³ M. Wróblewski, *Między baśnią a parabolą...*, p. 79.

⁶⁴ Vide R. Waksmund, *Zrozumienie przez utożsamianie. Wokół Roku Smoka Joanny Rudniańskiej, "Orbis Linguaum"* 1997, vol. 6, p. 55.

fiction. Due to an austere construction of the presented world, the selection of difficult topics, and the avoidance of euphemising them, Rudniańska enables readers to face various emanations of evil, which “constitute the core of the world she creates”.⁶⁵ “The resultant perspective of the world”, as Wróblewski argues, “being a modernised version of Manichæism, softened by the presence of child characters, enabled the writer to uncover not only universal matters (the fable nature), but also diagnose the modern condition of a human being: children and, indirectly, adults”.⁶⁶

The factors indicated by Wróblewski and Waksmund are the reasons why – despite the fact that in both novels a major role is played by classical coming-of-age elements – readers do not have complete knowledge about their realistic layer. Therefore, they need to interpret them individually, especially so, since Rudniańska used the poetics of fantasies, visions, and metaphors which – due to the fluctuations of meaning – allow perceiving the discussed herstories in an ambivalent manner: they lack any final resolution concerning Sylwia’s success in identifying with her father, or Helena’s conviction about her father’s absolute fairness. Furthermore, the protagonists’ abandoning of their uncomfortable living space to try and find their own paths does not conclude in their finding what they are looking for. In the analysed works, bonds with mothers break and the metamorphoses of Sylwia and Helena within the fantasy perspectives of the novels constitute a metaphor of escapism from social enslavement towards a happy ending. The coming-of-age journey inside oneself does not ensure happiness and fulfilment for the protagonists.

The heroines remain relentlessly in a metaphorical movement, awaiting a change, a rise, a fall, or a journey to places of remembrance associated with their childhood and youth, which bring them back to them. In their identity maps, these are painful locations which resemble festering wounds which, constantly touched, cannot be healed. Sylwia and Helena, encapsulated in the “chambers of remembrance”, return to the beginnings of their herstories; they supplement forgotten/suppressed events, they fantasise about the past, break into primary elements the psychological portraits of their loved ones, seeking explanations and answers, yet they constantly need to rely on intuition. Even though they wish to distance themselves from ambivalent relatives thus leaving them in order to achieve catharsis and develop their independent lives, they cannot do that as they continue to be entangled in the past, and doomed to be recalling it. An argument might be presented that it is a kind of a herstory that offers no indications of how to overcome life’s problems or treat traumatic events, though such simple fictional solutions have already been proposed by many other modern writers of young adult fiction. Rudniańska herself thinks in a post-modern manner. She considers her works to be open, pointing to a multitude of interpretations and a personalised mode of selecting them. She notices the fact that both *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy* are to be re-read. She wishes to leave in her readers

⁶⁵ M. Wróblewski, *Miedzy baśnią a parabolą...*, p. 78.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

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SUMMARY

The paper discusses young adult fiction by Joanna Rudniańska, whose works belong to the stream of non-conformist coming-of-age novels marked by experiences of exclusively teenage girls/women, developing in Poland since the 1990s. Both *Rok Smoka* and *Kotka Brygidy* emphasise the personal quality of teenage girls and women, and present their fates with a particular consideration of their fairly individualised processes of maturation and intentional development of their identities. The author of this paper employs feminist methodologies to emphasise the ambivalent, borderline, and negative female experiences in the analysed texts. She offers a detailed interpretation of how the protagonists of the above-mentioned novels experience the world; she applies a metaphorical and fantastic perspective of telling herstories, while searching for matrilineal traces, the phenomenon of sisterhood, drastic rituals inscribed in the feminine domain, and the special kind of coming-of-age which constitutes the starting point for personal and subjective herstories.

Keywords

Joanna Rudniańska, herstory, young adult fiction, feminism, coming-of-age, phantasmatic

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Césure et sublime¹

1. Après tant d'années, j'ai relu le premier roman de Kundera, „La Plaisanterie” et j'ai été frappé par la force de son expression, et par, je dirais, son volume, sa masse romanesque. J'entends la densité des phrases, leur énergie; la multitude des situations décrites; la quantité même des mots – en comptant en général et par page – sans beaucoup d'alinéas, „La Plaisanterie” étant le plus long des romans kunderiens, plus long que „L'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être” et „L'Immortalité”, si on prenait en considération le nombre de signes. C'est aussi le roman kunderien le plus apprécié par le public intello dans mon pays; ou que je parle à l'université de Kundera, on l'évoque en premier lieu – bien que le roman qui s'était le mieux vendu auprès du grand public fût „L'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être”.

Bien évidemment, répondre à la question journalistique „quel est pour vous le meilleur livre de Kundera” - et en tant que son traducteur, j'entends souvent me la poser - n'a aucun sens.

J'ai été impresionné par la relecture de „La Plaisanterie”, mais pour une autre raison que la qualité littéraire - évidente et absolument époustouflante - du roman. J'ai vu un plus clairement le chemin esthétique emprunté par Kundera le romancier et qui l'a conduit du premier à son dernier roman, „la Fête de l'insignifiance”.

Un des clichés qui accompagne la réflexion critique sur l'oeuvre de Kunder est „la césure” qui séparerait celle-ci en deux parties. Dans la plupart des cas, on oppose la période tchèque à la période française, les romans écrits en tchèque aux romans écrits en français, éventuellement les romans dont l'action se déroule en Tchécoslovaquie (ou en Tchéquie) aux romans ancrés dans la réalité occidentale, française en l'occurrence.

¹ Pierowdruk: „Atelier du roman” mars 2020, no 100.

On peut facilement dessiner de telles lignes de partage, c'est clair, mais à mon sens elles n'ont pas de grande valeur sauf statistique. À la place je proposerais une autre approche de l'évolution de l'oeuvre de Kundera. Je situerais la césure, s'il y en a une, très tôt, notamment après „La Plaisanterie”. Non seulement le premier roman de Kundera mais aussi le seul où il n'y a aucune narration extérieure, où la narration est constituée des monologues des protagonistes; la seule où le narrateur est totalement absent, n'intervient pas, n'existe pas comme dans les autres romans, y serait-il invisible ou ostentatoirement présent. Dans „La Plaisanterie”, il n'est même pas un deus absconditus; il n'est pas invité dans ce roman, ses fonctions ayant été cédées aux personnages romanesques.

Le procédé se révélera unique. C'est un procédé formel, il faut dire, puissant et efficace, si l'on sait s'y mettre. Assez rarement utilisé, moins souvent que son cousin dans l'histoire du roman: échange des lettres dans le roman dit épistolaire. Mais il ne faut pas oublier qu'il a un aïeul important: „Le Décameron”. Le dernier exemple le plus réussi de cette démarche, qui me vient à la tête, est le chef d'oeuvre de Roberto Bolaño „Les détectives sauvages” (1998).

Le danger de ce procédé où le narrateur, cédant la parole aux personnages, se lave les mains, tel Pilate, consiste à en faire trop: comme chaque personnage „devient” responsable de son histoire à raconter, on risque d'entendre plus qu'il ne faudrait; les propos s'allongent, le contrôle qu'aurait exercé le narrateur (invisible ou présent) se perd, les mots passent plus facilement. Chez Bolaño il y en a vraiment beaucoup; une telle prolixité serait impensable chez Kundera. Cependant, cette manière de construire le roman rend moins visible, et par moments carrément élimine la figure de style qui en même temps constitue chez Kundera le moyen de connaissance romanesque et qui sera ensuite sa spécialité de la maison: l'ellipse.

Dans les romans suivants les personnages ne remplacent donc plus le narrateur et ne font plus de longs monologues à la première personne; la présence du narrateur se fait sentir de plus en plus jusqu'à faire de lui un personnage à part entière, présent dans le livre charnellement (comme dans „l'Immortalité” ou „La Lenteur”) ou par défaut (comme le Maître dans la „Fête de l'insignifiance”). En même temps la densité et la longueur des propos proférés par les protagonistes se raréfient; nous passons à un autre registre du romanesque. „La Plaisanterie” cédera place aux romans plus dépouillés d'abord, et presque ascètes ensuite, construits sur d'autres principes qui seront plus fidèles à l'art du roman tel que Kundera conçoit au fur et à mesure que son oeuvre progresse.

Il y a tout au long de l'oeuvre kundérienne comme un mouvement qui part de ce qui est massif, lourd (au sens du poids physique: quantité de mots), vers ce qui est allégé, transparent. Le dernier livre, „La Fête de l'insignifiance”, le roman le plus court, le plus désincarné, pour ainsi dire, clora ce processus; le corps du roman se retrécira jusqu'au minimum, et une pensée libre, sans emploi, sans explication, sans racines, bref une pensée indéterminée s'en dégagera. C'est pourquoi je conçois la voie de cette création comme un passage interne (chaque artiste dessine sa propre voie, un trajet

pour son oeuvre qui est souvent mal compris ou invisible de l'extérieur) du plein au vide.

Ce vide que j'appelle la pensée indéterminée et libre a quelque chose de la gnosis; une pensée s'échappe à la fin de la forme romanesque, de la matière romanesque, du corps du roman (faut-il y voir aussi comme un écho de l'enfantophobie qui touche plus d'un des personnages romanesques kunderiens?). Le processus, s'il en est un, serait parallèle à la voie parcourue par ceux parmi les personnages kunderiens qui semblent les plus intelligents, les plus avertis, les plus lucides: aussi bien Agnès que Sabine (et d'autres encore) se libèrent dans la mesure du possible du poids de leur existence pour en arriver à l'état où entre leur âme et le monde tel qu'il est il y aurait le moins d'attaches possible.

On ne peut pas s'empêcher de penser au dernier roman de Flaubert, „Bouvard et Pécuchet”. Et plus exactement à son deuxième volume, jamais terminé, connu sous le titre „Copie” (tandis que le premier volume avait pour le titre provisoire „Le Roman”). Il allait être rempli presque exclusivement des citations copiées par les deux „bonhommes” des différents livres. Il en resulterait - on serait enclin à croire - une démistification complète de la langue, y compris du langage romanesque pratiqué par Flaubert. Kundera rêvant depuis longtemps au „roman où aucun mot ne serait sérieux” refait à sa manière le geste flaubertien: se détacher de sa propre création, déjouer ses propres mécanismes, faire un roman qui n'en serait pas un et qui pourtant serait considéré comme tel, écrire un roman „bête” au sens flaubertien, c'est-à-dire un roman qui serait conscient de sa propre „bêtise”.

J'ai toujours devant mes yeux la scène d'une très ancienne émission télévisée (encore en blanc et noir) où Kundera, le quadragénaire au regard d'un ange pervers, parlant de son premier roman dans un français approximatif et se balançant dans un fauteuil idiot - mou, en forme de ballon - répète: „La plaisanterie est une catégorie fondamentale pour saisir notre être”. Plus de quarante ans après, il dit à peu près la même chose dans son dernier roman: l'insignifiance est une catégorie fondamentale...etc. Le cercle de la spirale revient au point de départ, la boucle semble bouclée. Sauf que la plaisanterie d'autrefois révélait la vérité de l'existence soumise directement aux pressions (et à l'oppression) de l'Histoire, tandis que l'insignifiance serait aussi une catégorie esthétique qui déterminerait la création artistique au bout du chemin parcouru par le romancier. Elle enlèverait au roman le sérieux de sa vocation (que Kundera, dans la lignée de Broch, a toujours défendu). Elle mettrait entre les parenthèses le dessein épistémologique du roman, et elle changerait le livre en une fête ou aucune précision, aucune exigence formelle et éthique (tout ce qui appartient à l'éthique, au devoir du roman) ne sont plus requises.

2. L'insignifiance est aussi une forme de sublime. Je l'ai compris tardivement, justement à la lumière de la relecture de „La Plaisanterie”.

En décrivant la dette française envers Kundera Alain Finkielkraut dit dans une interview que celui-ci a délivré le lecteur (et l'écrivain) français de l'avant-garde; „ou plus exactement il a délivré la modernité de sa captation

par l'avant-garde". Pour le lecteur centre-européen l'essentiel de l'apport kunderien était l'esthétisation (et par conséquent, "existentialisation") de notre rapport envers l'Histoire. Nous dire en 1984 que notre ennemi n'était pas le communisme (comme l'émanation actuelle de l'Histoire), mais le kitsch, était un défi révolutionnaire, difficilement acceptable quand on voyait des chars militaires dans le rues. Aujourd'hui on ne peut que voir encore mieux le bien-fondé de cette approche: si Kundera nous a très bien parlé de notre actualité politique de l'époque, il a encore mieux parlé de notre futur qui allait advenir après la chute du communisme et ouvrir la voie à une autre émanation de l'Histoire que sera le libéralisme postcommuniste, et plus tard le nationalisme postcommuniste, toutes ces émanations étant de puissantes usines du kitch.

Les différences entre la lecture „occidentale” et la lecture „centre-européenne” s'estompent cependant ou passent au deuxième plan, quand on admet qu'il y a une catégorie supérieure commune pour les deux lectures: celle, mentionnée à l'instant, du sublime.

Si les premiers romans de Kundera, de „La Plaisanterie” jusqu'à „L'Insoutenable légèreté de l'être” ont eu le plus de retentissement et ont provoqué le plus d'enthousiasme, c'est aussi parce que ces romans recelaient plus directement - et je dirais, plus facilement - le sentiment de sublime. Ce sublime résulte de la rencontre - si typiquement kunderienne - entre la grande Histoire et l'histoire individuelle des protagonistes. Les protagonistes kunderiens menaient leurs existence intime, découvraient ses différentes formes face à la grande Histoire, en l'occurrence l'oppression communiste qui faisait sentir sa présence sans répit, tous les jours. Une fois plus, d'autres fois moins fort, mais toujours elle planait en l'air, était quelque part là. Cette Histoire était une grandeur inconcevable, incompréhensible, hors de la portée des individus. Dans la définition kantienne du sublime elle jouerait justement le rôle de la puissance auquel l'homme n'a pas d'accès, ce qui provoque chez lui le sentiment de crainte, et par conséquent aussi du sublime: le sublime naît là où une réalité énorme nous dépasse, devient insaisissable et nous restons devant elle comme prosternés. Mais en même temps le sublime apporte un certain goût à l'existence, une tension énergisante, une exaltation qui confère au quotidien comme une sorte de fièvre; comme dit Kant, "nous y prenons plaisir mêlé d'effroi". Le lecteur occidental, même si certaines côtés et nuances de la vie quotidienne sous le communisme lui échappaient, ressentait ce sublime d'autant qu'il faisait défaut dans les romans occidentaux et dans la réalité dans laquelle il vivait. Et le sublime ressenti dans la littérature est peut-être quelque chose d'absolument fondamental - et si rarement présent dans la création romanesque d'aujourd'hui.

Avec „L'Immortalité” le sublime devenait beaucoup moins palpable. La grande Histoire était bien là, mais sous la forme de l'imagologie et non pas sous la forme de répression, de menaces, des choses pour ainsi dire définitives, plus violentes, moins floues. Et cette forme-là, j'entends imagologie (aujourd'hui nous dirions aussi le turbo-capitalisme ou le néolibéralisme), n'étant pas alors une force suffisamment puissante, suffisamment obscure, suffisamment étrangère, le lecteur occidental n'arrivait pas à reprendre la

même lecture que celle des romans précédants. Et cependant les événements des dernières années ont démontré que cette force-là s'est nettement affermie et est devenue aussi puissante et aussi menacante que ne l'était l'Histoire tissée par les idéologies et leur régimes policiers.

Dans le dernier roman de Kundera avec "l'insignifiance" on découvre encore une autre dimension de cette „grandeur” du monde à laquelle nous devons nous affronter, en face de laquelle nous devons nous identifier. L'insignifiance se situe en dehors de l'histoire totalitaire opressive, en dehors du marché libre monothéiste oppressif ou plutôt tout en les englobant elle les dépasse; elle est comme une réalité encore plus „profonde” et plus large, plus étendue, elle constitue le fond de toile complet, cette "mer" infinie du fameux tableau de Friedrich devant laquelle l'homme sent sa nullité et en même temps un frisson d'être.

Face à cette insignifiance universelle, il ne nous reste probablement que la bonne humeur. Un état chez Kundera non pas psychologique mais métaphysique: frisson de sens dans le monde insignifiant.

SUMMARY

Having written *The Joke*, Kundera changed the *modus vivendi* of the novel's narrator who, with time, became a separate protagonist. This is connected with the appearance of the ellipsis as the main plot device, which is not yet present in *The Joke*. This change in the way of narrating represents another and, perhaps, a deeper dividing line in Kundera's writing than switching to another language (from Czech to French), the change of the setting (from Czechoslovakia to Western countries) and the change of the political system (from communist to 'imagological') as an instrument of oppression.

Keywords

Kundera, novel, narrator, sublimeness, story, ellipsis

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READING
ŁÓDŹ

The Controversy Surrounding Rev. Włodzimierz Kirchner's Brochure [*Challenging Poverty in Bałuty*]

There are few people today who remember about Rev. Włodzimierz Kirchner¹, but in the interwar period he was a well-known, if not controversial, figure, i.e. a photographer/portraitist appreciated by the political and cultural establishments. He caused a scandal with his act of apostasy. He was certainly an exceptional dynamic person with a strong sense of independence.

He knew (...) seven languages, he was always studying something (...), experimented with something, was learning something. He was certainly an artistic soul focussed on himself and his art. He preserved inside him something of the Young Polish bohème, which, of course, consisted of his peers, (...) I knew since I was very little that he was an outstanding person, (...) refined.²

¹ W. Kirchner, born in 1875 in Krasiniec (Krasne parish), son of Ludwik and Izabella née Kowalewski, vide *Krasne Birth Marriage and Death Register*, Roman-Catholic Parish, [in:] State Archive in Warsaw, Mława Branch, act no. 152 from 1875, col. 76. He died in 1970 in Zyrardów. For more detailed genealogical and biographical information, vide D. Samborska-Kukuć, *O księdzu Włodzimierzu Kirchnerze*, [in:] id., *Dziewiętnastowieczne pryncypia i marginalia literackie* (forthcoming).

² H. Kirchner, *O Ojcu, "Fotografia"* 1985, issue 2. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish]

This is how he was depicted by Hanna Kirchner, his daughter. An artist and a restless spirit, aesthete, lover of the fairer sex, hard to domesticate. Kirchner was also a major social activist and a theoretician of philanthropy, and this was also an area of his activities which caused controversy, since in his texts he expressed his bold and assertive views.

This article is mainly devoted to Kirchner's intervention brochure titled *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach* [*Challenging Poverty in Bałuty*], though one should bear in mind that he authored several other works on philanthropy which he published prior to his leaving priesthood. He wrote "Prywatne miłosierdzie" ["Personal Mercy"] for the Łódź-based *Rozwój* periodical, which was also published in Warsaw in 1901, and texts on the theory of philanthropy published in *Kurier Warszawski* and *Słowa*, the major of which were: "Rozbitki"³ ["Castaways"], "Własność i jałmużna"⁴ ["Property and Alms"], "Dobroczynność"⁵ ["Charity"], "Miłosierdzie, dobroczynność i opieka"⁶ ["Mercy, Charity, and Care"], "Psychologia włóczęgi"⁷ ["The Psychology of Vagabond"]. Early in his writing career, he wrote the religious text titled *Marya jako matka niebieska naszego życia pobożnego* ["Mary as the Heavenly Mother of Our Reverent Life"], published in Warsaw in 1902. He also wrote articles about art, e.g. "Muzyka i odczyty muzyczne"⁸ ["Music and Musical Readings"], and "Lepla", devoted to Anastazy Lepla⁹. Kirchner's views on philanthropy were of a special character. They constituted a consistently radical attitude towards economic poverty and the related moral poverty. This was because the author was an outright opponent of uncontrolled *ad hoc* material aid and spontaneous charitable reflexes, an attitude which was repudiated by various groups, both the proponents of the right and the so-called 'progressive' groups. It was not the very thought but, rather, the form of the priest's commentary – stark and bureaucratic on the one hand and ironic and irate on the other – that was controversial; there was actually nothing appalling in the opposition to merciful free distribution as the principle matched the declarations of all charitable associations whose aim was to eradicate beggary, and to prevent support with alms and support "those truly unfortunate who deserve it"¹⁰. One should add that despite the suggestions of some of the commentators of Kirchner's works, he was not the only adamant opponent of free distribution; suffice to mention the articles published in *Kurier Warszawski* by Rev. Zygmunt Chełmicki¹¹ on beggary and alms¹², which, perhaps unknowingly, the author of *Walka*

³ "Kurier Warszawski" 1903, issue 176, pp. 2-4.

⁴ "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1903, issue 16, pp. 302-303; issue 17, pp. 322-323.

⁵ "Bluszcz" 1902/1903, issue 1, p. 3.

⁶ "Bluszcz" 1903, issue 26, p. 306.

⁷ "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1904, issue 2, pp. 22-23; issue 3, pp. 42-43.

⁸ "Echo Muzyczne, Teatralne i Artystyczne" 1902 issue 3, pp. 31-32; issue 4, pp. 41-42.

⁹ "Wędrowiec" 1905, vol. 1, issue 9, pp. 143-144.

¹⁰ E. Mazur, *Dobroczynność w Warszawie XIX wieku*, Warsaw 1999, p. 20.

¹¹ Z. Chełmicki (1851-1922) – Catholic priest, social activist, commentator. He was discussed in more detail in A. Skala, *Ksiądz Zygmunt Chełmicki – przyjaciel pisarzy, społecznik, skandalista. Niekonwencjonalny wizerunek kapłana*, "Ruch Literacki" 2015, collection 6, pp. 571-586.

¹² For example, the three-part series *Żebracy i domy zarobkowe*, "Kurier Warszawski" 1897, issues 68-73.

z nędzą na Bałutach matched. What is striking in Kirchner's texts, though, is the aesthetic criterion which he used to measure and evaluate the reality. This aspect also seems controversial and dissonance-evoking in the context of the topic of philanthropy.

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For Kirchner as a member of the Christian Charity Association¹³, the fact of serving as priest in the oldest Łódź parish of the Ascension of Virgin Mary was a good opportunity to learn about the reality of the life in the borough of Bałuty, comparable to London's Whitechapel, i.e. a borough of crime, disease, and poverty¹⁴. Until 1915, Bałuty was an area located outside Łódź's city limits and – from the very beginning of its existence, i.e. the turn of the 1860s – it was inhabited by the poorest: labourers, servants, the unemployed, and those who came into conflict with the law¹⁵. Surely it was a well-known area as it appeared in the first novel about Łódź, i.e. *Wśród kąkolu* (published in *Biesiada Literacka* in 1890), written by Waleria Marrené Morzkowska, a Warsaw-based writer. "People are like wolves there (...) you must be very careful as you do not know what can happen next"¹⁶ – a Jewish woman familiar with the situation tried to persuade the novel's protagonist against an evening visit in Bałuty. Through the protagonist's eyes, readers saw repulsive scenes:

(...) We found ourselves surrounded by low wooden houses sunken in the dirt, similar to abandoned huts, stretched along a damp street frozen over with puddles. One could forget that a few dozen steps further the factory city was bustling with fervent motion. Here the motion was of a different kind: in front of the houses, benefiting from the pale autumn sun, there wriggled a mass of beings marked by poverty. Those were feeding mothers, wax-yellow new-borns, consumption-ridden children, and men of repelling exteriors. Among teams of Knight Hospitallers without aid, without a roof, without bread, clearly afflicted by disease, among those who carried on their faces marks of disability, debauchery, crime, or idiocy, there were also talented labour folk whose hands were idle as they either could not find jobs or did not want to. So, in their faces you could read all possible calamities, from grim despair all the way to artificial stimulation and complete indifference. There were also those who were still fighting with utter misery, when others submitted to it without a trace of opposition, they did not even try to stay on the surface and they sank to the bottom like dead bodies devoid of the ability to defend themselves.¹⁷

¹³ The institution was established in 1877; it was the first such an institution in the Łódź district.

¹⁴ S. Górska, *Łódź współczesna*, Łódź 2004, p. 14.

¹⁵ J. Fijalek, *Instytucje pomocy materialno-zdrowotnej w Łodzi i okręgu łódzkim. (Wiek XIX do roku 1870)*, Łódź 1962, p. 34.

¹⁶ W. Marrené Morzkowska, *Wśród kąkolu*, Łódź 2008, p. 109.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 111-112.

Kirchner's observations from his visits to such locations became the empirical material that he discussed in the 1901 brochure titled *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach*, which he wrote with the intention to draw the attention of the public to the growing problem of extreme poverty of lumpenproletariat in the slums surrounding Łódź, which usually included newcomers from the countryside who sought Łódź's famed promise land. Interestingly enough, those paupers were natively Polish exclusively, not people of Jewish descent. The many Jews who lived in Bałuty appear in the brochure rarely and only as people coping with poverty owing to their resourcefulness, i.e. usurers¹⁸. Before in the final few pages of the fifty-page-long booklet the author proposed the so-called "earning houses" – modelled after those in Warsaw (which, in turn, were modelled after those in Western Europe), which today are understood as employment agencies, though more efficient as they were compulsory – he had offered an overview and an analysis of the spreading phenomenon of poverty. This was done by providing specific examples taken from personal observations from when he was working for the philanthropic mission of Rev. Karol Szmidel¹⁹, and from the accounts by "acquaintances and reliable people"²⁰; the purpose was to warn against alms and free distribution as a carrier of social demoralisation. Surely, then, Kirchner's brochure was aligned with Rev. Szmidel and doctor Bronisław Knichowiecki's initiative; in March 1901, they pitched to the chairman of the Łódź Charity Association a project of earning houses, which were established after the founding of the Anti-Beggary Committee²¹.

Walka z nędzą na Bałutach offers excellent material for a historian as it includes specific and quite extensively discussed examples. It is of equal merit for a sociologist, since Kirchner delved into the difficult and complex notions of social pathology in the poorest degenerated area near Łódź, indicating the causes and suggesting remedies²². Yet, the attractiveness of Kirchner's book also consists of its interesting though controversial overtly expressed worldview of the author, articulated in a language which is so

¹⁸ That element of Kirchner's brochure was noticed by F. Guesnet, *Społeczność Żydów łódzkich w XIX wieku i jej kontakty z innymi środowiskami kulturowymi – oddziaływanie społecznego rozwarcstwienia*, [in:] *Wspólnoty lokalne i środowiskowe w miastach i miasteczkach ziem polskich pod zaborami i po odzyskaniu niepodległości*, ed. M. Bogucka, Toruń 1998, p. 181.

¹⁹ Rev. K. Szmidel, born in 1846 in Łyszkowice (Pszczonów parish), son of landowners: Filip Szmidel and Katarzyna née Juga, died in Łódź on 24 December 1920, vide Łódź Birth Marriage and Death Register, Holy Cross Parish, [in:] State Archive in Łódź, act no. 1394 from 1920. He was the parish priest in the oldest Łódź parish of the Ascension of Virgin Mary, later at the Exaltation of the Holy Cross Parish. He was a specialist in religious art and church construction. He was an activist of the Łódź Christian Charity Association; being well-known and respected in Łódź, he often spoke during major Church events and he delivered eulogies at the funerals of the city's major figures. In the recollections by H. Bitner (*W fabryce Szajblera*, [in:] *1905 w literaturze polskiej*, ed. S. Klonowski, Warsaw 1955, pp. 86-87), he was presented as a priest who aided factory owners who were exploiting labourers (the famous case of the strikes in December 1904 at the Karol Scheibler's factory).

²⁰ W. Kirchner, *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach*, przedmieściu Łodzi, Łódź 1901, p. 2.

²¹ J. Sosnowska, *Działalność socjalna i opiekuńczo-wychowawcza Łódzkiego Chrześcijańskiego Towarzystwa Dobroczynności (1885-1940)*, Łódź 2011, p. 135.

²² An extensive bibliography of these issues was used in a monograph by A. Boldyrew, *Społeczeństwo Królestwa Polskiego wobec patologii społecznych w latach 1864-1914*, Łódź 2016.

suggestive that readers can feel like eye witnesses – a fact which, in turn, evokes in them not compassion or mercy, but pity. It is also often the case that the generally appreciated pungency of Kirchner's style evokes smiles in readers, which might indicate that the humorous (intentionally?) descriptions included in the brochure were a proof of Kirchner's distance towards the cases he described, which evoked in him not so much compassion as aversion. He actually devoted the most space to beggary as a phenomenon stemming from laziness and indolence, but also intention and treachery. That is why Rev. Kirchner's work is also a philosophical study on the almost animal-like nature of a human being, seen right through by the careful eye of a reserved observer.

For the author, the leading thought of *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach* – i.e. "If mercy is supposed to be rational, it must through detailed knowledge, a clear judgement, and a deep understanding grasp the material of its work"²³ – was an obvious methodical consequence leading to an ascertainment that mercy had to be rational, not resulting from a momentary bout of compassion, and thus the description of the study material is of a dispassionate character, somewhat devoid of empathy. The author expressed this thought more precisely in an interview by Wincenty Kosiakiewicz, in which he argued that:

(...) Charity should be, maybe not even those who practise it but by necessity by those who manage it, studied using clearly scientific methods
 (...) Through experiment, similarly to how chemists at our factories study sugar. With the difference of the specific methods applied (...) Therefore, history and statistics, the image of that which has been done and the limits of that which is, can offer important help. In short, my perfect situation would be enlightened charity which would substitute the existing chiefly reflexive charity we profess.²⁴

The assumption to develop an unemotional overview of the state of things, which could seem difficult to achieve when one deals with a living object of study, became the *sine qua non* of a reliable description and concrete conclusions. Kirchner carefully calculated the percentage of families that needed significant support; families who – due to actual disability or other reasons outside their influence – could not support themselves with honest work. That percentage was low. The brochure is clearly dominated by examples of "professional beggary", i.e. scroungers preying on people's mercy, refusing to accept jobs offered to them or pretending to be working, and cons faking or exaggerating their poverty. Their approach to gainful

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Varsoviensis [Wincenty Kosiakiewicz], *Z rozmów i wrażeń. Dobroczynność oświecona, "Kraj"* 1903, issue 15, p. 15. In that interview, Kirchner also mentioned the names of social activists with whom he would eagerly cooperate and promote the 'enlightened charity' through a purpose-established periodical. Those figures included: Adolf Suligowski, who wrote about the housing situation of paupers; Kazimierz Rychłowski – writing about the mentally ill; Antoni Wysłouch – writing about prostitution; and Judge Aleksander Moldenhawer – writing about neglected children.

employment was negative as they were extremely reluctant; they remained in poverty somewhat at their own request as they enjoyed the idle lifestyle, and since they wished to retain it at any cost, they became proficient in swindling. Kirchner mentioned various detestable examples of beggars' "decorative" inventiveness: smearing raw meat and liver over own body or tying up limbs to pretend serious illnesses, wearing extremely tattered clothing to pretend to be even more pitiable, renting crutches, fitting out rooms to resemble sleazy hovels (in case a philanthropist visited them, they could pretend extreme deficiency intended to convince the visitor to offer more aid). Shocking displays of diseases, disability, widespread filth, alleged hunger, and helplessness caused by objective factors were all the staple elements in the theatre of beggary. Those who demanded support the most emphatically were usually thieves, hustlers, and regular alcoholics who used all donations for purposes other than expected by the benefactors while mocking the naivety of their sponsors ("Apparently they organise an alcohol-ridden party every night. They cry and moan all day long so at least before bed they can have a laugh and some fun at the «merciful» people"²⁵), who, as Kirchner stressed, were often poorer than the recipients who did not know how to save money and – instead of spending the received money on food or other things necessary to live – they organised alcohol-filled feasts, demoralising the young ones and teaching them how to easily gain money, i.e. through disgusting preying. As the author stated overtly, "Beggary loves its profession"²⁶, only to add further on: "It is a good industry, this beggary, you are not threatened by bankruptcy, you do not need effort, you have a good piece of bread, (...) beggary is considered as a very good, reliable and peaceful lifestyle"²⁷. Beggars even organised the funerals of their kin so as to gain as much as possible on them.

Kirchner also presented Bałuty paupers within various situational configurations. There were beggars "violently wedging" between people and extorting or basically stealing alms and then arguing that they received too little; there were ragamuffins perfectly trained in beggar mantras, who spoke "like deputies to the parliament"; there were even comical situations as in the following passage:

One time some ragamuffin came up to me to ask me to lend him 10 roubles for clothes as he could not wear such tattered clothes to the church to confess. Naturally, he assured me he would repay me soon. I refused and explained that he could go confess wearing those rags just as well. I shut the door and left him. A moment later I was told that the beggar sat comfortably on the stairs, took out a bottle and chug, chug... he drank it all in one sitting.²⁸ Poverty was the cause of prostitution and pimping. Neither in this case was Kirchner economical with providing examples usually underlining the ugliness of not only the deeds, but mainly of the people. He was sickened

²⁵ W. Kirchner, *Walka z nędzą*, p. 12.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

by old “grey, incapable, deformed” men having small children²⁹; he was terrified by incest.

Kirchner’s booklet featured the clear animalisation of the group of people he discussed. Several examples are worth quoting:

A beggar’s request includes so much deceitful flattery, so much some kind of a dog’s fawning (...) As a result of the constantly turning whole soul, thought and will, to receive a bit of bread or money for food or drink, those beggars turn into animals. The needs of the stomach take away all of their human abilities. Such a beggar bent forward, with protruding eyes, greedy and crazed, with half-opened mouth, hurrying with her quick pace, with a pot in her hand for a hot meal, often appears like a hungry dog. You cannot come to terms with **this**.³⁰ (emphasis – DSK)

Many of the paupers he visited had a distinct “facial expression of an animal living in a den: a boar; mindless and greedy”³¹. Kirchner also applied that stylistics to a description of a visit at a mentally ill woman’s place:

I once visited a sick woman. She led me to basically a pigsty, without a window, with only a hole opened to the wind and ill weather (...) There was no floor, only wet sand. There was a bed by the wall; in it, under the duvet, a half-animal half-human, a woman, her mother, insane.³²

Associations with animals were clearly not a sign of compassion but, rather, contempt for the situation in which those people found themselves due to not so much poverty as helplessness and complete disregard for that which constitutes the core of being human. The reduction of needs to the most primitive level evoked in the writer anger and disdain for such a state of affairs, which was caused by the fact that the people had grown accustomed to asking for support and by their passivity, which is a constituent element of being a beggar.

Therefore, before a benefactor reaches for their wallet, they should, as Kirchner warned, realise that giving alms instead of providing help will only cement an alleged beggar “slyly qualified in the begging procedure”³³ in his art of camouflage. This infallibly leads to demoralisation. This is why the author was an opponent of spontaneous reflexive support, and he not only enlightened prospective Samaritans about their gullibility, but by providing distasteful examples he also inspired them to think about the phenomenon of poverty as a challenge for the mind, not emotions. The withholding of a merciful hand is an act of prevention of corruption and wastefulness, and desisting from giving alms or withholding the gesture

²⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

³¹ Ibid., p. 4.

³² Ibid., p. 21.

³³ Ibid., p. 4.

until one verifies the actual condition of the person who asks for it are the principles which are supposed to prevent the spread of corruption in the lowest classes deprived of dignity not so much by their living conditions as the debasement by their passivity when faced with various fortunes or, what is worse, by their foul characters. For Rev. Kirchner, beggars, thieves, harlots, and cutthroats were “the rubbish of the physical and moral excreta of our society”, “spreading around the living room of our city”³⁴. Therefore, actions to prevent that plague were the obligation of all rational people who cared about the good of the community.

One of the fundamental ways to prevent that ailment and the carefree *ad hoc* free distribution was not an incentive, but a categorical compulsion to work³⁵, which was a socially beneficial activity. Kirchner offered a diagnosis of the corruption with passivity in writing that: “Idler misery is inherently decomposive and demoralising. Thus, anything that lies in mud motionlessly rots and infects the air”³⁶. This is why he developed his project discussing various kinds of jobs and not excluding the elderly or the disabled.

Kirchner also had the ambitious, if not utopian, plan to liberate the primitive human being from primitivism – through Art. In an interview from 1906, he clarified:

Give a labourer two constitutions at once, triple his earnings, and he is always going to exit the dirty factory, stroll the same dirty streets, wear the same disgusting junk, sleep in the same dirty stinking hovel, sit around for hours in the same dirty inn if you do not lure him out using the light of culture from which it is already close to a sense of aesthetics and the love of beauty... Many roads lead to Rome. Let us give them art education at school, certainly a cultural background at home, let us construct cities which are hygienic and beautiful, let us strive for beauty in the construction of every house, church, lecture room, let us have museums, let us organise lectures, special lessons, and beautiful role models for work. In such conditions, even labourers can change. Their needs will change, they will view the world differently.³⁷

That idealistic project assumed aesthetic education to be instilled in children from very early on, i.e. in schools and philanthropic institutions, and a development of the “decorative industry” intended at a general scale, producing furniture and trinkets. Kirchner believed that Beauty could change people, discourage them from major crimes; he believed that aesthetics was influenced by ethics. This probably echoed his admiration for the

³⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁵ W. Kirchner was a proponent of the theory that only work could prevent misery as it constituted an activity having a salutary effect on man. Vide P. Wilamowski, *Zamiast jatmużny – praca! (Wywiad z księdem Kirchnerem)*, “Kurier Poranny” 1904, issue 41, p. 3. Kirchner organised in the Warsaw Charity Association an initiative to seek out jobs for the unemployed.

³⁶ W. Kirchner, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³⁷ M. Winiarski, *Sztuka dla wszystkich. Rozmowa z księdem Kirchnerem, “Świat”* 1906, issue 26, p. 9.

Hellenic culture, in which major emphasis was placed on aesthetic education which influenced moral growth as beauty not only stimulated the senses, but it also opened people's perceptions to goodness, truth, and virtue. The art of photography – which combines art, utility, realism, and imagination – became for Kirchner a way of implementing those ideas, though clearly at a micro level. Regretfully, we do not know what he thought about the aesthetics after the war.

Even though critics did not argue against the social theses of *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach*, they raised doubts as to the rigidity of Kirchner's recommendations for prospective benefactors, who were supposed to dispose of all affections and act being guided by limited trust. Ludwik Krzywicki, who in his recollections referred to Kirchner as a "rigid doctrinaire"³⁸, not being convinced by the text, asked:

But what am I supposed to do with my stupid heart which rebels against reason? What am I supposed to do with my mind which suggests to me that such a systemic training of reason drains the very sources of compassion and having neutralised by sensitivity to the sight of a crying child by its mother's breast it shall neutralise me even more towards the inhumane patterns of misery? (...) what am I supposed to do with my stupid heart which does not want to ask whether someone deserves a donation, and when seeing a fellow human in desolation it is ready to support even a harlot! And, finally, how to deaden the protests of my lively feeling being against the bureaucratic patterns of compassion, against cattle-like classification of those hurting, against the reasoned weighing of good and bad deeds when my brother, my sister in humanity hurt!?

And he concluded:

The mind opposes my heart, and the latter in its mindlessness is probably wiser than the former: the mind indicates the means of "just" division of alms, yet the heart, lead by instinct, feels that even though justice will be served, with it the source of compassion may dry out (...) There are practical, wise pieces of advice in front of me. I know they are wise yet (...) personally I shall stay true to the voice of my stupid reflexive sensitivity. I shall give alms to whoever moves me.³⁹

Krzywicki did have a point, though it was a point made by his heart; one which is, clearly, contrary to that made by the mind. Kirchner considered this and protested against this exact reflexiveness of compassion, and saw in it the greatest weaknesses abused by those spreading sickness, which had to be eradicated, not just alleviated.

Kirchner was attacked even more severely, though through similar arguments, by Artur Gliszczyński, who signed his texts with the pseudonym

³⁸ L. Krzywicki, *Wspomnienia*, vol. 3, Warsaw 1959, p. 203.

³⁹ R.K. Żywicki [Ludwik Krzywicki], *Na widnokregu*, "Ognisko" 1903, issue 7, pp. 163-164.

'Homo'. He was a commentator of *Głos* and in a series of four retorts he reproached the author of *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach* for not knowing the reality of the borough which he discussed, and he questioned the concept of compulsory work at "earning houses", instead proposing a twelve-step material and moral restoration programme. Glisczyński accused the author of the brochure ("an overly delicate inhabitant of Łódź") of a clumsy contradiction-riddled attempt to reconcile the strict principles of economics with the love for others, using carefully selected examples from the text. The commentator noted and emphasised that which in *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach* was emphatic due to the very topic; the over-arching abomination and a clear tendency for separatism which would enable one to separate that which was aesthetic from that which was ugly, and the healthy from the sick so that it would not shock with ugliness and cachexia⁴⁰. One could argue even further: Kirchner's views were not only distant from the common vision of the compassion of Catholic priests, but they were also disturbing as they applied aestheticism as the measure of all things. Kirchner did later try to cover up those traces of extreme aestheticism in the evaluation of the world by publishing in *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* the article titled "Własność i jałmużna"⁴¹, in which he tried to justify – from the point of view of a Catholic priest – the absolute moral value of help for the poor, yet once again he offered an extreme opinion – this time an ethical one – which turned his article into an incoherent elucubration.

An anonymous commentary in the *Czerwony Sztandar* completely disavowed and twisted the interpretation of *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach*. The leftist commentator, without going into detail, used Kirchner's text as a pretext for anti-Church propaganda, warning potential readers that, lo and behold, "earning houses" were intended to establish a close connection between the clergy and factory owners in order to recruit cheap forced labour. Having twisted the author's intentions, the commentator argued that the monitoring of, e.g., former prisoners or common cutthroats – an idea mentioned by Kirchner – was supposed to be a tool for detecting the so-called political criminals and, to make matters worse, in partnership with the Tzar's police⁴².

Modern researchers quote Kirchner's brochure in minor fragments and rarely – more as an example of drastic descriptions of poverty⁴³, or of statistics and data⁴⁴, disregarding its exceptional ethical or literary dimensions. The suggestive force of the descriptions and their richness and irony indicates Kirchner's extensive writing skills. The ability to examine, remember details, and use them in order to compose complete images also indicates his journalistic capabilities,

⁴⁰ Homo [Artur Glisczyński], *Nędza łódzka*, "Głos" 1901, issue 36, pp. 549-551; issue 37, pp. 566-569; issue 38, pp. 582-583; issue 39, pp. 599-600.

⁴¹ W. Kirchner, *Własność i jałmużna*, "Tygodnik Ilustrowany" 1903, issue 16, pp. 302-303; issue 17, pp. 322-323.

⁴² *Klerykalna filantropia*, "Czerwony Sztandar" 1904, issue 14, p. 4. To learn about the complex relations between socialists and the clergy, vide M. Śliwa, *Polscy socjaliści i katolicyzm – zbliżenia i oddalenia*, [in:] *Religia jako źródło jako źródło inspiracji w polskiej myśli politycznej XIX-XX wieku*, eds. T. Sikorski, A. Wątor, Szczecin 2007, pp. 119-138.

⁴³ A. Barylska, *Początki rozwoju opieki pedagogicznej nad dzieckiem chorym w Łodzi*, "Rozprawy z dziejów oświaty" 1979, vol. 22, p. 115.

⁴⁴ M. Sikorska-Kowalska, *Wizerunek kobiety łódzkiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku*, Łódź 2001, pp. 59-60.

which were certainly the basis for his refined visual perception specific for a painter. Kirchner was surely an aesthete. It would be difficult to argue that the sight of people and things that were disgusting, and thus abjectionable, did not influence his evaluation of the reality or trigger beastly associations which led to contempt. Somewhat trapped in the proverbial "ivory tower", Kirchner wanted to create and record beauty while the reality, i.e. the fact of being a priest – additionally burdened with the mission of philanthropy – forced him to come into contact with ugliness, with "bodies smeared with dirt", with "defaced children afflicted by smallpox", with "yellowed phthisics", infants "dried up as wood" with "feet swollen from the cold". The fact that he viewed people through the prism of aesthetics was clearly visible in his confession in the text titled "Rozbitki", in which he commented upon the human oddities he encountered while inspecting a soup kitchen at Czerniakowska Street:

During my stay in Munich I stepped several times into the vestibule of the local Academy of Fine Arts, which featured many live models. I do not remember finding there such superb types as I did here. It would be worth, I thought, for painters to visit this place and use these individuals for their studies.⁴⁵

Who knows if Kirchner's separation from the Church had not begun because of aesthetics. After abandoning priesthood, he did devote his time to that which was his calling and devotion, namely photography.

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⁴⁵ W. Kirchner, *Rozbitki, "Kurier Warszawski"* 1903, issue 176, p. 2.

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SUMMARY

Włodzimierz Kirchner (1875-1970) – former priest, activist in the Łódź and Warsaw districts of the Christian Charity Association, he supported the efforts of the organisation by publishing articles on philanthropy. He was a proponent of the so-called

'enlightened philanthropy', i.e. he argued that social support cannot be of a spontaneous and chaotic character, but, rather, it should be controlled and monitored so that unemployment can be prevented.

To justify his theses, the main of which was a conviction that giving alms was a waste of money and a tool spreading demoralisation, he conducted an analysis of dysfunctional communities, e.g. Baluty (near Łódź back then). He depicted the inhabitants of the area (serving as a synecdoche of the dysfunctional communities throughout Poland) as a group of pretenders and impostors hustling potential benefactors by using a theatricalisation of behaviours which evoked empathy. He collected and published his conclusions in the brochure titled *Walka z nędzą na Bałutach*, which – due to its controversial recommendations of emotional restraint and the application of the method of control and monitoring – stirred aversion among various groups of intellectuals. Kirchner was accused of blind support of doctrines and extreme aestheticism, while the leftist press accused him of hypocrisy typical of the clergy.

Keywords

Włodzimierz Kirchner, philanthropy, charity associations, journalism of the early 20th century, Łódź, proletariat

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Black Love: On the Colours of Feelings in *Confiteor* by Antoni Szandlerowski

“Black dove”, “black iris”, “dark cloud”, “black corridor”. The images of Antoni Szandlerowski¹ concerning love arouse anxiety. The writer’s letters to Helena Beatus were posthumously collected by the addressee in a collection titled *Confiteor* and published in 1912. Engaging in his discourse, the author uses expressions such as “black”, “darkness”, “dark” with great frequency, which has not received much attention to date². His imagination is dominated by images of unlit corridors with no exit, the nothingness of the grave or vermin devouring a still living body. What is such a perception of reality caused by? How does the artist vent his emotions and why does he combine positive symbols, such as the dove or iris, with epithets such as black,

¹ Antoni Szandlerowski (1878-1911), a Young Poland writer, the author of, e.g., a lampoon attacking the clergy, titled *Elenchus cleri alias choleri* (1906), a Biblical drama *Paraklet*, and posthumously published letters collected in the work titled *Confiteor* by Helena Beatus. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

² A. Szandlerowski was discussed by Krzysztof Biliński in his book titled *Literackie przejawy modernizmu katolickiego w Polsce*, Gdańsk 1994, pp. 45-70, as well as by Dariusz Trześniowski in his dissertation titled *Dramat mistyczny Antoniego Szandlerowskiego*, [in:] *Dramat biblijny Młodej Polski*, ed. A. Szubert, Wrocław 1992, pp. 241-261. These texts focus mainly on the drama *Paraklet*. Apart from these, there were many more references: G. Legutko, *Miłość nasza jest jak Sfinks... Confiteor Antoniego Szandlerowskiego i Zachód Heleny Beatus*, [in:] *Postać księdza w literaturze*, eds. G. Głab, S. Radziszewski, Radom 2014, pp. 97-114; W. Gutowski, *Antoni Szandlerowski, czyli próba mistyczno-religijna*, [in:] idem, *Nagie dusze i maski*, Kraków 1997; E. Jakiel, *Ks. Antoniego Szandlerowskiego literackie uobecnienia casus conscientiae*, [in:] *Etyka i literatura. Pisarze polscy lat 1963-1918 w poszukiwaniu wzorów życia i sztuki*, eds. E. Ihnatowicz, E. Paczoska, Warszawa 2006, pp. 214-222.

gloomy, dark? Expressions of this type appear in his writing much more often than in the case of other modernist authors (Przybyszewski, Miciński, Przesmycki or Baudelaire) and even representatives of dark romanticism (Słowacki, Tieck, Hoffmann, and Poe). It can be naturally assumed that in the case of Szandlerowski the sincerity of the literary discourse results from the epistolographic form of his work. However, the equally strong prevalence of darkness and blackness is not to be found in similar works.

Szandlerowski's internal conflicts result from, among other things, the author's temperament and the circumstances of his life. Szandlerowski caused scandals. The first one was the publication of a lampoon attacking the clergy (*Elenchus cleri alias choleri*), while the second one was connected with his love affair with a neophyte, a married woman, Helena Beatus. In *Confiteor*, Szandlerowski addresses her as Bożenna and the whole work is a literary proof of love between a priest and a Jewish woman³. The life of the modernist writer was complicated and surely had impact on the shape of his works and the selection of discussed issues. One should not, however, interpret such a heavily conventionalised text on the basis of a biographical or psychological interpretation of the work.

Confiteor, therefore, abounds in symbols characteristic of the literature of the Young Poland. They most accurately reflect the inner dilemmas of the author and his rich poetic imagination. Whereas purple waters in *The Fall of The House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe are supposed to – according to Gaston Bachelard – show blood, bringing terrible moral, spiritual, and physical fall of the characters⁴, black light in Szandlerowski's works depicts joy full of impurity – dirty, dominated by pangs of conscience and contradictory desires. This is why his texts are full of ambiguities; the author multiplies synonyms in his enumerations, breaks sentences, he is nervous, even neurasthenic, and at the same time painfully frank. *Confiteor* glitters with motifs taken from literature and culture (including the Bible) as the writer had a particular liking for complex allegories. This way of constructing the literary discourse was characteristic of modernist authors. Many writers created in the spirit of symbolism as this was one of the most important artistic postulates of that time⁵. In addition, this trend represented the development of romantic concepts concerning art by artists of the Young Poland⁶. Szandlerowski, though he expressed his feelings directly in his letters, was not free from the tendencies prevailing in his day; conversely, he favoured them, especially symbolism. He had a tendency to anthropomorphise his feelings and passions⁷, yet he was far from objectifying affections⁸. What

³ A reference to the writer also appears in Artur Hutnikiewicz's work: *Młoda Polska*, Warszawa 2012, p. 432. Cf. entry: *Antoni Szandlerowski*, [in:] *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*, vol. 46, Kraków-Wrocław 2009-2010, pp. 601-603.

⁴ G. Bachelard, *Zmarłe wody w marzeniu Edgara Poe*, transl. A. Tatarkiewicz, [in:] idem, *Wyobraźnia poetycka. Wybór pism*, Warszawa 1975, p. 135.

⁵ M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *Symbolizm i symbolika w poezji Młodej Polski*, Kraków 1994, pp. 43-44.

⁶ J. Abramowska, *Rehabilitacja alegorii*, [in:] idem, *Alegoria*, Gdańsk 2003, p. 16.

⁷ M. Podraza-Kwiatkowska, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

distinguishes Szandlerowski from many writers of the Young Poland is that he expresses his own emotions with descriptions of glows, colours, reflexes, fading, or descriptions involving a total lack of any light. Less frequently, he does this through involving somatic reactions of individual parts of the body or meteorological phenomena.

Great accumulation of gloomy 'landscapes' of this type is visible particularly in his first letters to Helena. Three most important symbols appearing in the text include: the dove, the iris, and the motif of fading. Szandlerowski uses them in a non-schematic way⁹, which is why it is worth looking into them in detail.

The dove

In one of his first letters, Szandlerowski addresses his beloved in the following way: "My friend... my black dove..."¹⁰. The symbolic significance of the dove is obvious, it is associated with purity and innocence, inspiration, devotion, rebirth¹¹. Szandlerowski obtained an oxymoron by means of adding the adjective "black": he reconstructed the meaning of the symbol which is deeply rooted in the European culture and mentality. Beatus still appears as delicate, sensitive, and beautiful, but at the same time becomes a forbidden allure, in a way jeopardising the peace of mind of the oversensitive, neurasthenic artist.

Monologues indicate that the addressee of the letters participated in the writer's dilemmas and he understood them perfectly: "Bożenno... let autumn set in soon – leaden, melancholic, weepy, turbid autumn! Let apparitions disappear – let vampires begin to bite and suck me... This is all for

⁹ In his works, Szandlerowski prefers to use symbols in accordance with declarations of modernist authors: they may be understood in a number of ways and interpreted exclusively in the context of the given work. It does not mean, however, that he does not resort to allegories which are present in culture yet he tends to exploit the Biblical tradition. In order to understand the characteristics of the works of the modernist writer, it is necessary to comprehend precisely what symbol is. Hans-Georg Gadamer writes that "the symbolic representation becomes separated from the schematic representation. It is a representation (rather than merely an indication as in the so-called logical 'symbolism'), yet the symbolic representation does not present a concept directly (as transcendental schematism in Kant's philosophy) but indirectly, 'as a result of which the expression does not contain the proper scheme for the concept, but only a symbol for reflection'" (H.G. Gadamer, *Symbol i alegoria*, [in:] *Symbola i symbolika*, transl. M. Łukasiewicz, selection and introduction: M. Głowiński, Warszawa 1990, p. 101). Gadamer further develops his thought: "Extending the concept of symbol to the dimensions of a universal aesthetic principle did not pass without resistance as the internal unity of the image and the meaning, which is the essence of the symbol, does not have absolute character. The symbol does not eliminate completely the tension between the world of ideas and the sensual world as it allows for the possibility of disproportion between the form and the matter, expression and content. In particular, the religious function of the symbol is based on this tension" (Ibid., p. 103). The last sentence is really important for the interpretation of Szandlerowski's letters as he repeatedly attributed his works with solemn or even sacred overtone. This topic should be developed and discussed in a separate paper.

¹⁰ A. Szandlerowski, *Pisma Antoniego Szandlerowskiego. Confiteor*, 2nd edition, Warszawa 1912, p. 2.

¹¹ The entry: *Gołqb*, [in:] W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 1990, p. 99.

you!..."¹². Similar exclamations appear in the entire *Confiteor*. Calling Beatus a modernist *femme fatale* would make, however, her relation with the writer shallow. Their relationship seems to be deep, most probably pure, based most of all on the rare affinity of souls.

It is worth adding here that the symbol of the female dove – turtledove – comes from *Song of the Songs* and is a metaphor of a beautiful bride. The presence of Biblical associations is self-evident in the case of Szandlerowski; they constitute a way of perceiving the reality. In Szandlerowski's works there are many symbols and traces drawn from the Bible. In his letters, the *signifié* is his feeling for Beatus, while the *signifiant* becomes the passion of Christ, the metaphor of Mount Tabor, or the figure of seductive Mary Magdalene.

The iris

In Szandlerowski's texts, the iris symbolises either Beatus or love for her. However, it is also a flower of the goddess of the rainbow. Being aware of the transitory significance of this plant, the author of *Paraklet* compares himself and his beloved to thunder, tempest, and the promises of sunny spells which come after the storm:

We are the last moment of accumulated electricity – the thunder... we are a double rainbow stretched on clouds where fervent sighs and tearful desires of whole generations met... And this is why our love is so overground, so heavenly... We are like that thunder... like that rainbow... Their kingdom – to heavenly regions... And we have an elevated flight... even more than that: the flight of our love is not only unearthly, but – unworldly!...¹³

This is a very erudite fragment when one bears in mind the symbolism of the rainbow in culture: having its curved shape, it represents a bridge between the earthly world and the heaven. This is why Szandlerowski calls her kingdom "heavenly regions" and the flight which he makes with his beloved elevates him not only over the earth, but even outside of it. By means of this gradation, the author created a description of transcendence occurring by dint of love ecstasy. It should be added that the thunder can represent either transformation or manifestation of the divine power; it begins "the *tremendum* of the storm"¹⁴. The thunder serves a privileged function in nature as it comes from heaven¹⁵.

The iris in black slightly changes the symbolism of the plant: it becomes a dark rainbow, devoid of colours, shimmering merely with shades of grey, visible – as in *Prodigiorum ac ostentorum chronicon* by Lycosthenes – only at night, being an omen of the end of the world or major changes approaching. The comparison to the "black iris" appears in one of the letters as many as

¹² A. Szandlerowski, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

¹³ A. Szandlerowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁴ M. Eliade, *Sacrum, mit, historia. Wybór esejów*, 3rd edition, transl. A. Tatarkiewicz, selected by M. Czerwiński, Warszawa 1993, p. 129.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 128-129.

three times: in the introduction ("My black iris... I flow down on you at night..."¹⁶) when Szandlerowski addresses his beloved; then for the second time ("My black iris... my destiny... my sorrow..."¹⁷) when he laments to her about how much distress is caused by his love to a woman; and, finally, in the last sentence, i.e. when he finishes his letter to the beloved, convinced about their mutual prayer ("I pray in humbleness with my black iris..."¹⁸). Therefore, in the case of the quoted letter the flower represents a concept around which the discourse directed to Beatus is constructed. Although the author is in unspeakable torment, he blesses God, and the purity of his beloved is redemption to him. In fact, this only seemingly inconsistent discourse exposes the internal conflict of the author of the letters.

Szandlerowski describes his love using also other names of flowers, for instance "black pansies"¹⁹, a symbol of memory. Yet it is the iris that appears in the whole collection many times; it is one of the writer's favourite symbols: "My black iris... bloom for that day with your sorrow... dress up in quiet lament..."²⁰. Love also provokes remorse. Their materialisation is, according to Edward Jakiel, connected with ethical sensitivity; the researcher refers to this phenomenon as "materialising concretisation"²¹. Aware of the tragic situation, he finds himself encompassed with the desire to dissolve in oblivion. Szandlerowski confesses: "What I would leave from this world is you and the black irises"²². He wants nirvana, but he does not imagine his life without his beloved and their feeling, therefore he imagines happiness after death as the binding of two souls in eternal love. As a priest, he is aware that the affection which he is entangled in is forbidden on Earth. Meetings with his beloved take place at night and it is possible to see other colours than grey, sadness, and darkness only in the poet's imagination: "At night I flow down on my black iris... I rock it to sleep... illuminate its dreams with a rainbow tale..."²³.

Comparing her to black irises does not always represent a way of metonymic (*totum pro parte*) description of Beatus; in some letters they also function as her attribute, decoration: "Give me your hand... Tears roll down my eyes... let them set into black irises on your hand... braid them into your hair... show me yourself like this... I am waiting..."²⁴. Constructed from the matter of tears, symbolising pain tearing two people in love, they show love synonymously with suffering; in *Confiteor*, these two contradictory feelings are inseparable, they are connected with Helena Beatus and cannot exist without one another. The tragic situation dooms the couple to eternal torment, which is to last till the grave.

¹⁶ A. Szandlerowski, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 78.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

²¹ E. Jakiel, Ks. Antoniego Szandlerowskiego literackie uobecnienia *casus conscientiae*, [in:] *Etyka i literatura. Pisarze polscy lat 1963-1918 w poszukiwaniu wzorów życia i sztuki*, eds. E. Ihnatowicz, E. Paczoska, Warszawa 2006, p. 220.

²² Ibid., p. 8.

²³ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

The motif of fading

This is one of the most frequent and most vivid motifs in *Confiteor*. When Szandlerowski begins to write about colours different than black, these hues tend to fade, turn pale:

I look and look... aprons shine in the sun like lupine... clover... like meadows green... I hear their cheerful laughter, playful from under rainbow browbands... Like the setting sun they shone with colour after colour in the distance – and vanished²⁵.

The green and rainbow blur, and the author of the letters again falls into despair. The poem written to his beloved is pervaded by the vision of decomposition and the end, as is the case in the works of Paul Verlaine or Charles Baudelaire, French symbolists:

W złocistym pyle słońca – blakną...	They fade... wilt... – in the golden
więdną...	dust of the sun
A nocą skarżą się w rozdreszczu	At night they lament in quiet
cichem	tear-shiver
Jednak... i one mają chwilę jedną,	Still... they also have at least one
Kiedy zapachną... zalśnią barw	short moment
przepychem –	When they smell... shine with the
	splendor of colours –

This is a decadent perspective that is characteristic of the poetry of the Young Poland. Szandlerowski analyses love through transience and death. He contemplates the acute sensation of the end, which leads to the decadent attitude²⁶, so inappropriate in the case of a person wearing a cassock – the concept of the void is contradictory to faith and the promises of Heaven. The author of the letters senses that human life is as elusive as the smell of flowers or their ephemeral beauty: "I can still smell the scent of wilted roses... They were hanging and crying after you had gone... and the smell was roaming and looking for you... (...) I was drunk with this strange fragrance of wilted roses..."²⁷.

Floral motifs were willingly used in order to illustrate death and express the sensation of the end, particularly after the publication of *Flowers of Evil* by Charles Baudelaire, whose decadent, even nihilistic attitude played a vital role in shaping the trends of the epoch²⁸. The quoted poem by Szandlerowski is parallel, in many respects, to the poem *Spleen* by the French poet, particularly with regard to the symbolic layer. Both works include a motif of diffusing sensory impressions, which accompany solely those things which are worldly. Baudelaire writes:

²⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁶ T. Walas, *Dekadentyzm wśród prądów epoki*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 1977, no. 68(1), p. 99.

²⁷ A. Szandlerowski, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

²⁸ T. Walas, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

I am an old boudoir where a rack of gowns,
perfumed by withered roses, rots to dust;
where only faint pastels and pale Bouchers
inhale the scent of long-unstoppered flasks.²⁹

There are naturally no clues to think that the author of *Paraklet* consciously used Baudelaire. The two fragments can be juxtaposed to illustrate a certain literary process, highlight the prevailing trends in the way of thinking and writing that combine similar poetic sensitivity. The context can also be provided by well-known in Poland *Kwiaty* (*Flowers*) by Stanisław Korab-Brzozowski or *Powinowactwo cieni i kwiatów o zmierzchu* (*The Affinity of Shadows and Flowers at Twilight*) by Wincent Korab-Brzozowski. These works prove that the symbolism of wilting, decomposition, loss of colours is part of the aesthetics of the Young Poland – and this is precisely where Szandlerowski got his inspiration from while writing his letters to Beatus.

The specificity of Szandlerowski's works is precisely described by the neologism used in the poem, namely "quiet tear-shiver" ("cichy rozdreszcz"). The letters gathered in *Confiteor* are full of dark, unjustified fear as well as contradictory passions and desires, the fulfilment of which is synonymous with going against the values which he previously believed in. They vent not so much fear as sheer terror caused by overwhelming love. Szandlerowski illustrates anxiety with the use of aposiopesis. The nervous agitation of the priest is conveyed by understatements by means of numerous dashes which – in the literature of the Young Poland – denote poetic musing. Feeling the intense affection gives rise to a strong internal conflict. Thus, in his letters Szandlerowski multiplies synonymous enumerations and conveys contradictory passions with the use of elliptical sentences or infinitive complements: "began to tangle... toss... tear..."³⁰.

Suspension points reconstruct the voice sticking in his throat: the modernist author does not find words to express how great his feeling and gratitude for Beatus are. The aforementioned techniques are aimed at reflecting the blurring reality and the disappearance of hues on the linguistic level. Szandlerowski's descriptions are pointillist, which makes his feelings look as if they were behind some fog. The author of the letters feels lost, he expresses his internal disorientation combined with adoration for the beloved through using accumulating apostrophes:

The irises are bowing... gilding... more and more transparent, closer and closer to shine away completely... They are dying. And do you know - why?... As in my four walls there are plenty of your heady thoughts... plenty of your angelic feelings... plenty of your incredible gazes... The irises feel this... and die in silence. Let alone - me!³¹

²⁹ C. Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, transl. Richard Howard, Londyn 1982.

³⁰ A. Szandlerowski, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

The irises – symbolising, as it was already mentioned, Szandlerowski's love for Beatus – wane, wilt, die; the author of the letters is convinced that he fades together with the flowers. Fading flowers and feelings are transformed into the void. His beloved, being the source of suffering for the author, is at the same time a promise of his redemption. Szandlerowski, describing his feeling for Beatus, becomes often ecstatic and confesses that he writes his dramatic play, *Paraklet*, not for the want of fame but in order to leave some legacy after their feeling, which he referred to as "a baby". However, he fails to find in the everyday reality the glow which would shine upon the greyness of his suffering, since nothing can give the world new colours. This is why he confesses:

I will get new treasure from you... new colours from your eyes... fresh feelings from your hands... You will give me all this as I have only one song left to finish my work... I value my work above everything else but you because it is you...³²

He speaks of the benevolent influence of Beatus on his sense of emotional instability in the following way:

Emptiness opened before me – terrible, callous emptiness... Everything that surrounded me changed into some corpse eye sockets... I did not see any vermin, or even appendages to the skull in them... Emptiness... emptiness... And I slowly felt that I was lying down – like a corpse into the coffin – into these infinite and boundless eye sockets... I shivered. And then some radiant hands began to weave, tangle something over this void... The emptiness slowly started to fade, blur, disappear... These were your hands as you suddenly stood in front of me like daylight (...)³³.

Contrary to appearances, this description is deprived of any coquetry which could be expected from a lover towards his beloved; this is more of an expression of sincere gratitude resulting from someone's unconditional devotion and possibility of feeling intimacy. The addressee of the message is, therefore, the only person capable of saving Szandlerowski from the sensation of falling into the void. The author writes that without his beloved he gets the impression as if he was sinking in a place completely deprived of light, which he compares to eye sockets. The vermin accompanying the images of decomposition enhances the anti-aesthetic expression of some letters.

Colours in the visions of the poet of the Young Poland blur to such a degree that he begins to express his fears *expressis verbis* that he is going to be blind soon:

³² Ibid., p. 9.

³³ Ibid., p. 38.

They say I strained my eyes... And it seems to me that it is something different.

I have the impression that I set my eyes into the void and in order to take them off it, I must have damaged them...

In any case – blindness was foretold to me...³⁴

The vision of blindness is horrifying. Undoubtedly, Szandlerowski hears the whisper of the emptiness which makes him describe the world as black, gloomy, dark – devoid of any colours or having them only for a brief moment. The escape from *horror vacui* is again possible because of the beloved; it is only thanks to her that the writer “has not got stuck in whimpering yet”. In his artistic visions, he sees Lucifer whom he compares to “a blind thunder”. Similar motifs may be found in Tadeusz Miciński’s poetry, it suffices to quote the volume *W mroku gwiazd* (*In the Darkness of Stars*), where star light was used to create an image of sin, guilt, and transcendental experiences. With the eye of an artist of the Young Poland looking into the void, Szandlerowski notices that God’s light, once bright and being a signpost, is becoming a “dark, dead infinity”. The eyelids of his beloved are compared to “golden sunrises”, but also to “sunsets of faded glows³⁵” and they are the only thing which could save the artist from emptiness rampaging around him and devouring everything.

These images result from the dilemma between the obligations of the oath of priesthood and the desire for love; they are manifestations of the excruciating feeling of sinking in sin. Paul Ricoeur speaks of a similar issue in the following manner:

The first conceptualization of the sin, which is totally different from the conceptualization of the stigma, may be described in a variety of ways on the level of symbols: missing the target, straying from the path, rebellion or being lost denote to a greater extent a violated bond than some harmful substance. Changes in the symbolic intentionality, caused by a new experience of evil, takes place due to the change in basic images. The relations of contact in space are substituted with signposting relations: path, straight line, getting lost, like the metaphor of wandering represent analogies of movements of existence understood globally. At the same time the symbol shifts from space to time: “the road turns out to be a spatial trace of movement which the fate follows³⁶.

All the symbolic images mentioned by the French philosopher accompany Szandlerowski in *Confiteor*. The author speaks of himself: “I – son of the earth, son of the curse, rebellion, tossing, highs and lows (...)”³⁷.

Pessimism and prevalent darkness in the literary discourse may have yet another source. The first letters clearly show the author’s frustration

³⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁵ This quote and the preceding one: Ibid., p. 12

³⁶ P. Ricoeur, *Symbolika zła*, transl. S. Cichowicz, Warszawa 1986, p. 72.

³⁷ A. Szandlerowski, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

- not so much sexual as artistic - as Szandlerowski is suffering from a creative crisis. He thinks that *Paraklet* is his last work:

My work moved on... ran... dashed - galloped... I cursed you, suffered from you, blasphemed and prayed with you... People will read it... Poor things - they will not understand even if I were to tell them - that everything I wrote - this one grand word - You!... Nothing more... I have written two big acts... I will write no more - until I come back... Until I come back! And I am still not going anywhere... And yet I can write no more as I am left with no words as I disentangled all the thread...³⁸

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When he brings Act III to a close, there is a lot more optimism in his discourse; the writer appears serene or joyful, perhaps even ecstatic in his speech:

You see - how far we have to go... how many grand conquests await us - how much common victorious loot... Oh Bożenna... blood is coming to my head... We are not going - like Dante - through hell, purgatory and heaven - but though some roads which are not roads, through air waves which have no name in the human language! Aren't you scared by this road? Doesn't it seem to you to be a dream?³⁹

In the following letters, descriptions of darkness and emptiness appear with much lower frequency. This may indicate an improvement in the mental condition of their author, who discovered the joy of creating and found a way of expressing his affection to his beloved through art. Nevertheless, the motif of fading and losing colours returns many times: "The irises are bowing... gilding... more and more transparent, closer and closer to shine away completely... They are dying..."⁴⁰

In almost each letter, Szandlerowski describes longing for his beloved and love so great that it is almost impossible to endure, causing indescribable bliss, but also piercing pain. What terrifies him the most is death and, as a result, the necessity to separate, which is why the motifs of transiency, dying, longing, and sinking into the void constitute inseparable components of his correspondence.

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³⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

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SUMMARY

The imagination of Antoni Szandlerowski in his collection of letters to Helena Beatus (*Confiteor*), his beloved one, is dominated by black. The aim of this article is to show that this colour plays a major role in *Confiteor* therefore it is used by the author most of the times. When he writes about how pure and beautiful Helena Beatus is, he uses metaphors such as: black dove, black iris, dark cloud, dark corridor. It shows how pessimistic about the future and how guilty about the love he felt Antoni Szandlerowski was. The internal conflict was caused by the will to fulfil as a lover and the duty to continue priestly services. Antoni Szandlerowski is full of doubts. He misses Helena Beatus and feels that he cannot be happy without her. On the other hand, he knows that they cannot make their desire to live side by side real. Since the world is a place of pain and misery where the love cannot thrive due to social norms, lovers can bind together only after death. This way of thinking led Szandlerowski to many neurological disorders, caused nightmares and a painful impression that the whole world around fades away. Szandlerowski uses symbols such as a black dove and a black iris to describe his beloved one and to show the dichotomy of his perception. Therefore love is the source of all the pain and suffering for him.

Keywords

Antoni Szandlerowski, *Confiteor*, symbolism, epistolography, black colouristics

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‘Meteor’ as the First Official Łódź-Based Literary Group

The history of the creation of the poetic journal and the ‘Meteor’ group

When in 1918 Poland regained independence after more than 100 years of partitions, new conditions emerged which fostered the development of the Polish culture and literature, which was particularly visible in Warsaw, Kraków, Lviv, and Poznań. Łódź, however, stayed behind during the inter-war period. To quote from *Literatura Łodzi w ciągu jej istnienia. Szkic literacki i antologia* by Ludwik Stolarzewicz, a chronicler of urban literary life and a promoter of academic and cultural activities:

it is the second most populated city in Poland – and one of the last ones... in terms of its literary and academic life.¹

The author of the compendium explained the situation by saying that:

Łódź has never been a city which drew the literary folk offering them acceptable material and cultural conditions. In fact, it is located too close to Warsaw, which for the “people of letters” has always constitutes an object of longing and strive.

That is why no one will ever stay in Łódź for good.²

¹ L. Stolarzewicz, *Literatura Łodzi w ciągu jej istnienia. Szkic literacki i antologia*, Łódź [no publisher information], p. 51. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

² Ibid., p. 7.

The chronicler thus concluded his pessimism-riddled argument: "There are few Łódź inhabitants who have remained faithful to their family town."³ Ludwik Stolarzewicz's position was shared a few decades later by Elżbieta Pleszkun-Olejniczakowa, a researcher of Łódź's interwar literature, who – in the article titled *Kulturowy rozwój Łodzi w okresie międzywojennym* – argued that:

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Łódź did produce in the interwar period any outstanding creators. I omitted creators who despite being born in Łódź, created outside it; otherwise one should list first of all Julian Tuwim, who was born in Łódź but whose output was fairly unrelated to the city of his birth, though he did receive from his family town Łódź's Literary Award, or Meteors, i.e. poets who had attended Łódź middle schools but who wrote their poetry in Warsaw...⁴

However, I believe it is worth studying closer the biographies and artistic activities of those 'Meteors', who were the originators of presumably the first (and – mainly for that reason – significant) literary group in the Łódź area. Despite living in Warsaw, at the verge of their writing careers, they eagerly used Łódź as the leading motif in texts they published in *Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor* and beyond, describing it as an example of an industrial city and the city of a major revolution.

The founders of 'Meteor' first met in the building of the Municipal Men's Middle School in Łódź (today: Tadeusz Kościuszko High School no. 3⁵), which they all attended in the years 1925-1926. Marian Piechal⁶, Grzegorz Timofiejew⁷, and Kazimierz Sowiński⁸ – captivated by literature – made themselves their first literary attempts, which sometimes proved successful, e.g. Marian Piechal, still as a middle schooler, decided to write *Przed*

³ Ibid.

⁴ E. Pleszkun-Olejniczakowa, *Kulturowy rozwój Łodzi*, "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Polonica" 2015, no. 3(29), p. 7.

⁵ In the years 1891-1916, the school – where Russian was the language of instruction – was called the Governmental Men's Middle School in Łódź. It was founded by Karol Scheibler. Between 1904 and 1914 it was attended by Julian Tuwim. In 1905, the school's pupils engaged in an effort to introduce Polish as the language of instruction at all schools.

⁶ (1905-1989) – a Polish poet, essayist, and translator, co-founder of the Meteor literary group (he published his works under the pseudonym Wiesław Drzewicz), and from 1929 to 1931 a member of the Warsaw-based Kwadryga group. In 1929, his début collection of poems, *Krzyk z miasta*, was published, and in 1930 he published *Rozmowy o pacyfizmie* – a collection of interviews with Władysław Broniewski, Paweł Hulka-Laskowski, Antoni Słoniński, and Józef Wittlin. Vide: *Współczesna Łódź literacka. Słownik Autorów*, ed. T. Błażejewski, Łódź 1989, pp. 94-97.

⁷ (1908-1962) – a Polish poet, writer, and translator, co-founder of the Meteor literary group (1928), the editor of the *Prądy* periodical (1930-1931) and the *Wymiar* periodical (1938-1939) as well as of the underground *Biuletyn Kujawski* bulletin. Vide: ibid., pp. 121-122.

⁸ (1907-1982) – a Polish poet, writer, and an author of dramas. In 1921-1928 he attended the Governmental Men's Middle School in Łódź. Already then, he was a co-editor of the *Almanach Literacki* school gazette. He débuted with his poems in the *Głos Poranny* journal. He then published in the Meteor literary monthly, published by a literary group with the same name. The group published one collection of the poet's poems, titled *Gwiazdy na strychu*. Many of the poems within the volume raised the topic of the harsh living conditions of Łódź labourers. After Meteor was dissolved in 1930, he continued his activities by publishing in the *Prądy* periodical. Władysław Broniewski, in: *Współczesni polscy pisarze i badacze literatury. Słownik Bibliograficzny*, eds. J. Czachowska, A. Szałagan, Warsaw 1994, vol. 1, pp. 281-287.

pomnikiem Adama Mickiewicza w Warszawie⁹, in which he employed a crafty composition of the sonnet. That early work of his was published in the fifth issue of a Warsaw-based periodical, *Biesiada*, in 1924¹⁰.

Grzegorz Gazda, the author of *Słownik europejskich kierunków i grup literackich XX wieku*, indicated the year 1928 as the start of the operations of the Meteor literary group. In February, the first issue of *Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor* was released in Warsaw by dint of the efforts of the group's originators. Such a form of publication of the achievements of poets was typical of literary groups which operated in the interwar period. A similar history applied to the popular at that time Skamander group, whose members used to publish in the periodical which carried the same name, or the Awangarda Krakowska group, whose poets would publish in *Zwrotnica*. The fact of running own periodical guaranteed the artists easier access to readers as well as it very often enabled emerging poets to débüt in the literary market.

Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor, which was the complete name developed by Grzegorz Timofiejew, Marian Piechal, and Kazimierz Sowiński, was supposed to be a monthly, yet only three issues were published, which have survived in fragments to this day. Bolesław Kaczorowski, the publisher, did stipulate the option to order a quarterly, semi-annual or annual subscription (a piece of information included in the masthead).



Cover of the first issue of *Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor*¹¹.

⁹ Marian Piechal, *ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. 284-287.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor* 1928, issue 1.

That indicates that it was expected to become successful, that the texts by meteors would become popular, and that young poets would supply it with material for new issues, which sadly did not happen. The ephemeral nature of the group and the journal was hidden in the very name, which can be further confirmed by the cover of the first issue designed by Paulina Halpernówka. Following the contemporary trend, she proposed a geometric composition which utilised the symbols of the Moon and the Sun surmounted by a hand-drawn title of the journal *Meteor*, which should be associated with astronomical terminology: a meteor is a bright trace left by a meteoroid rushing through the Earth's atmosphere. It is probable that the founders of 'Meteor' intended to leave a similar trace with their works.

The Meteors' programme

The idea to start the Meteor literary group was not only triggered by the desire to début or promote own poetry among Łódź readers. Meteors also intended to practise their literary skills using new avant-garde methods and ideas, eagerly adopted from the Russian empire at the beginning of the 20th century and not – as one might assume – from Western European capitals. Grzegorz Gazda thus described the phenomenon:

Therefore, despite many dynamic contacts with the Western culture maintained mostly by painters (Tadeusz Peiper's Spanish experiences are worth mentioning at this point), the first concepts, innovative ideas and avant-garde strategies were basically adopted through Russian inspiration. Also, because, mind you, a considerable portion of Polish lands, including Warsaw and Łódź, was up to 1918 Russian partition and Russian was the official language there.¹²

What must be said, though, is that members of 'Meteor' were particularly close to the attitudes of the representatives of futurism, which developed on the foundation of a rebellion against the traditional approach to painting, architecture, and literature. Both Meteors and the representatives of the Italian trend felt a strong need to influence – using sometimes minor works of literature – the perception of the existing systems and state institutions, which should be exerted by the society. That device typical of authors of the 1920s was raised by Tomasz Cieślak in the text titled *Bóg i niebo w poezji rewolucyjnej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*:

The community trying to transfer onto the Polish soil a pro-reading model of revolutionary poetry, particularly the *Nowa Kultura*, made efforts to establish a cooperation with futurist authors not so much due to their innovative devices, but due to their negative approach to traditions and historical heritage, the slogans of social and artistic progress they professed, and the

¹² G. Gazda, *Rosyjskie inspiracje polskiej awangardy*. Vide: https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/bitstream/handle/11222.digilib/132613/LitterariaHumanitas_012-2003_1_17.pdf?sequence=1, [accessed: 20 January 2019].

cult of activism, violence and war, all close to the revolutionary attitude. The clearly leftist world view choices by Polish futurists were also significant.¹³

The closeness of the socialist state had a direct influence on the shape of the Polish proletarian poetry. In the early 1920s, the Worker Culture Association of Cultural and Education Organisations was formed; it reflected the principles of the Soviet Proletkult. Its main goal was to create "a culture of the masses"¹⁴. Since that moment on, proletariat poetry was marked by the cult of a collective hero and a disdain for past literature. Fervent debates were held over those postulates by the representatives of evolutionist arts across the pages of 1920s periodicals, e.g. *Robotnik*, *Głos Literacki*, *Lewy Tor*, and *Wiadomości Literackie*. That was also the path which the founders of *Czasopismo Poetryckie Meteor* followed.¹⁵

The first issue of *Meteor*, published in February 1928, began with a collective two-page *Editorial*, in which the groups' guiding principles were formulated. In the introduction, the authors referred to the age-long human struggle to "grasp the inner-most experience and cast it into words"¹⁶, which is the only carrier of truth.

The originators of the first Łódź-based literary group presented themselves in the first words directed to the readers of *Meteor* as fierce proponents of lofty form, sophistical rhymes, beauty in words, and compositional precision and clarity. They noticed the ever-valid value of classical poetry and they wished to save it from being forgotten, boldly stating their readiness to "pick up the banner of Pure Art which has fallen out of the stiffening hands of the last survivors"¹⁷. The recent middle schoolers defended ferociously humanistic values, aesthetics, and the norms of classical beauty, which were all contested by the events of the recent war. They assured that:

We view the mission of art in eternal beauty and eternal truth and we shall not allow for it to be tarnished by some foul tendencies. We hereby raise the banner of healthy Poetry.¹⁸

History and tradition, according to the founders of *Meteor*, was supposed to be the force supporting new battles for "a new workday, agricultural reform, health fund, and a dictatorship of the proletariat"¹⁹. Words were supposed to be the most efficient means of expressing the grandness of the academic and technical progress, the industrialisation of cities, the development of industry to a scale previously unknown, and the emergence of a new society and a new working class.

¹³ T. Cieślak, *Bóg i niebo w poezji rewolucyjnej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego*, "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Polonica" 2001, no. 4, p. 75.

¹⁴ A.Z. Makowiecki, *Kultura Robotnicza*, [in:] *Literatura polska, przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, vol. 1, Warsaw 1984, pp. 27-28.

¹⁵ Z. Barański, *Rosyjska literatura radziecka*, [in:] *Dzieje literatur europejskich*, vol. 3, Warsaw 1989, p. 259.

¹⁶ *Od Redakcji*, "Czasopismo Poetryckie Meteor" 1928, issue 1, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The thoughts and discussions of the theoreticians of the Meteor poetic group on the function and value of words and of poetry culminated in the development of the so-called ‘constructive metaphorism’, which was employed as the artistic programme of their literary community. In the final fragment of the foreword, they addressed the readers in the following manner:

May the stretched-out aerials of Your nerves accept every sound of the inspired words! Open the closed shutters of Your eyelids to the path of true Poetry, Poetry with a “broad breath”, within the horizon of which there appears the Constructive Metaphorism as one of Its first and morning starts.²⁰

Within this concept, poems were supposed to focus on chains of uniform metaphors or on a single metaphor. Its task was to bind poetic works which should “talk life”. The fact of selecting this particular rhetoric figure out of all resulted from the fascination which Timofiejew, Piechal, and Sowiński shared with the works by the artists of Awangarda Krakowska, for whom the metaphor was a path for expressing and creating a new poetic reality.

Another text – similarly important for the formation of the Meteor’s programme – was one by Władysław Bieńkowski²¹, titled *Na barykady* and published in the second issue of the periodical. It directly referred to one of the most important events in the history of interwar literature, i.e. the 1925 publication of the *Trzy salwy* poetic bulletin, which was the joint effort of Władysław Broniewski²², Stanisław Ryszard Stande²³, and Witold Wandurski²⁴, who:

while stirring artistic rebellion were also thinking about radical social and ideological changes. They were developing their leftist attitude

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ (1906-1991) – a Polish commentator, sociologist, and politician, from 1930 to 1936 a member of the ‘Życie’ Socialist Youth Organisation and the Young Communist League of Poland. During the Second World War he was an editor of underground periodicals: *Głos Warszawy*, *Literatura Walcząca*, and *Przełom. Trybuna Wolności*, and a member of the Central Editorial Board of the Polish Workers’ Party. Władysław Bieńkowski, in: *Współcześni polscy pisarze...*, vol. 1, pp. 265-267.

²² (1897-1962) – a Polish poet, representative of revolutionary poetry, translator; a soldier of the Polish Legions, participated in the Polish-Soviet War. In 1925, together with Stanisław Stande and Witold Wandurski, he published *Trzy salwy* – the first Polish manifesto of proletarian poets. His poetry was strongly bound with his biography and fortunes, and the history of the Polish nation and of the activists of the labour movement; it possessed visible revolutionary and patriotic undertones. Władysław Broniewski, ibid., Warsaw 1994, vol. 1, pp. 281-287.

²³ (1897-1937) – a Polish poet, translator, and an activist of the Communist Party of Poland; he collaborated with the *Nowa Kultura* and the *Kultura Robotnicza*, an official body of the Communist Worker Party of Poland. He also collaborated with the *Dźwignia* monthly. In 1925, together with Władysław Broniewski, with whom he became friends, he organised a semi-legal Warsaw Worker Theatre (later: Worker Theatre Studio), which operated until 1931. Stanisław Ryszard Stande, ibid., Warsaw 1994, vol. 7, pp. 433-434.

²⁴ (1891-1934) – a Polish dramatist, poet, commentator, director, political activist, and cultural-education activist; in 1916-1919 he studied law in Russia, he lectured at the Free Art University and was a director and the manager of an amateur theatre in Kharkiv. After returning to Poland, he was the manager of a theatre in Łódź. He was an activist of the Communist Worker Party of Poland and the KPP. He collaborated with *Nowa Kultura* as well as *Kultura Robotnicza*. Witold Wandurski, ibid., Warsaw 1994, vol. 9, pp. 26-29.

precisely in admiration of the 1917 revolution and its class outcomes in Russia.²⁵

As the three poets stated in the foreword to the poetic collection:

We are not writing about ourselves. We are the labourers of words. We need to express that which other people of the trade cannot express. In proletariat's ruthless fight with bourgeoisie, we stand firmly to the left of the barricade. Anger, faith in victory and joy (joy in the fight) require us to write. May our words rumble like cannons through the streets of the centre, may they echo in factory districts. We are fighting for a new social order. This fight is the core of our works.²⁶

Similarly to the authors of *Trzy salwy*, the members of 'Meteor' considered the poet as a person who helps workers express their postulates and their deep discontent with the continuing class divisions.

In the first words of the manifesto, Władysław Bieńkowski indicated the double personality of contemporary poetry which, on the one hand, postulated the proletariat's fierce struggle with bourgeoisie and, on the other, proposed falling back on the Romantic tradition and – in following it – presenting personal dilemmas of the author within a moody atmosphere. Thus, the commentator suggested that readers should conduct an experiment:

Look closely at the other side of the barricade! If you could do a vertical cross-section of a contemporary creator, you would be struck by the lack of any mental association between one surface, existing absolutely, approach to phenomena of a social nature and the domain of aesthetic sensations, various feelings, and general personal experiences, so to speak.²⁷

The two-element structure of poetry was also discussed by Władysław Broniewski in the poem titled *Poezja*, included in the already mentioned *Trzy salwy*. The poet devoted the first stanza to poetry maintained within the Romantic spirit, which he defined as follows:

Ty przychodzisz jak noc majowa,
biała noc, uśpiona w jaśminie,
i jaśminem pachną twoje słowa,
i księżycem sen srebrny płynie, (...)
szepcesz sny,
szepcesz słowa tajemne,
w słowach cichych skąpana jak
w deszczu...

You come as a May night,
white night, asleep in jasmine,
and your words smell of jasmine,
and the silver dream flows with the
moon, (...)
you whisper dreams,
you whisper mysterious words,
in quiet words soaked like in the rain...

²⁵ G. Gazda, *Rosyjskie inspiracje polskiej awangardy*, [in:] *Literaria Humanitas*, Brno 2003, pp. 167-165.

²⁶ W. Broniewski, S.R. Stande, W. Wandurski, *Trzy salwy: biuletyn poetycki*, Warsaw 1925, p. 5.

²⁷ W. Bieńkowski, *Na Barykady*, "Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor" 1928, issue 1, p. 33.

Po czym wreszcie w strofie czwartej jasno stwierdza, że:
Nam te słowa ciche nie starczą.
Marne słowa. I błahe. I zimne.
Ty masz werbel nam zagrać do marszu!
Smagać słowem! Bić pieśnią!
Wznieść hymnem!

Finally, in the fourth stanza, he clearly stated that:
For us, those quiet words are not enough.
Feeble words. And trivial. And cold.
You are supposed to snare drum us to march!
Lash with words! Hit with songs!
Lift with hymns!

In the above-quoted poem, the author clearly referred to the Romantic tradition, according to which a poet's task was to spur the nation to fight, give courage, and ensure eternal glory for the heroes of the events. In the time of growing social conflicts, i.e. dictatorships and class struggles, Broniewski wished to use poetry mainly for revolutionary purposes as it could not remain contrary to the reality in which the society was fully immersed.

In his essay, Władysław Bieńkowski attempted to define proletariat poetry, its essence and function. Therefore, he somewhat ironically referred several times to Paweł Hulka-Laskowski²⁸, a writer and a representative of worker poetry, who saw value in money as the only factor which defined affiliation to a social class. The fact of having money became – according to "Mr Laskowski" (as Bieńkowski referred to him) – the basic criterion which differentiated the proletariat from the bourgeoisie. He criticised Paweł Hulka-Laskowski's position by stating that:

With his mind fixed on the ideology of "becoming brothers", Mr Laskowski creates a townsman/Ford social theory clearly leading to a situation when if someone is a proletarian, that is his own fault and to correct it he should strive to become richer. Away with the old social and economic truths! The world is an idyll where anyone can or even should become a Rockefeller.²⁹

The third and final issue of *Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor* included another text of a manifesto character, i.e. *Mitologja czynu*. Here, Władysław Bieńkowski offered a severe account of both authors and readers of literature in terms of their willingness to act. To that end, he used the Romantic and the Young Poland traditions, i.e. periods when artists incessantly called for actions and fight only to suddenly lose that accumulated energy and justify social passivity, which, as the author noted, became convenient as when:

²⁸ (1881-1946) – a Polish writer and translator; activist and commentator. He was born in Żyrardów in a working-class family as the son of Józef Hulka and Elżbieta née Howorko, workers of a textile factory, a Protestant family of the Czech origins. Paweł Hulka-Laskowski in: *Współcześni polscy pisarze...*, Warsaw 1994, vol. 3, pp. 284-287.

²⁹ W. Bieńkowski, ibid.

we found ourselves in a situation in which the internal eagerness for action found an unobstructed exit, when there vanished those bonds with which we justified our indifference, which, I am not afraid to say this, we nurtured to have a ready-made excuse for our attitudes – in that moment we started to realise that that long-accumulated energy devoured itself, that our strength was false. We learnt that between a belief in actions, between a sense of strength for its application and the action itself there is a major mental link which have just faded in us.³⁰

In the second part of his argument, Bieńkowski commented in critical terms on the lack of a programme, the lack of an action plan, and the asocial attitude being promoted by the poets of the Warsaw-based Skamander poetic group. That reference was justified as Skamandrites, who were seemingly the proponents of a simple joyful life, considered poets as people who could shape their own individual visions of the world, and whose works had an exceptional influence on the society.

The worker dimension of Meteors' poetry

The works of the Meteor poets – published in the poetic journal in 1928 and later in the weekly literary supplement to *Głos Polski* – were not uniform in terms of ideology; on the contrary, they were extremely individualised. Apart from the most eagerly raised proletariat and social topics related to the Łódź community, there also appeared those which took the form of musings on personal issues and existential matters.

However, in order to fully describe the works by Meteors, one must begin with works which belonged to worker poetry, which was used most often as it constituted a weapon in the struggle against the ruling bourgeoisie. In the first issue of the journal which united the Łódź-based literary group, there appeared a poem by Kazimierz Sowiński, titled *Pajak fabryczny*³¹:

Dzień jest szary w słoneczne, niespo-
kojne plamy,
kradzione z nieba siatką zakurzo-
nych okien.
Czas się zwija na kłębki nicią
bawełnianą:
co godzina powolnym odnosisz je
krokiem.

Aż jedna chwila zadrży przeraźli-
wym świstem,
zatrzyma cię i przerwie twój marsz
niestrudzony. –

The day is grey with sunny relentless
spots,
stolen from the sky with a net of
dusty windows.
Time bundles up with a cotton
thread:
every hour you carry them moving
slowly.

When suddenly one moment will
shake with terrible wizz,
it will stop you and interrupt your
tireless march. –

³⁰ W. Bieńkowski, *Mitologia czynu*, "Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor" 1928, issue 3, pp. 49-53.

³¹ K. Sowiński, *Pajak fabryczny*, "Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor" 1928, issue 2, p. 30.

Wachlarz drzew się na czole chłodnym rozłoży liściem,
po żyłach się rozejdzie spokój pracy skończonej.

O, wróć prędko do Sali kierować nici pasmem
biegiem transmisji liczyć ostatnie godziny:
nim wieczór czerwonym murem zdusi turkot maszyn,
słowo redukcja słońce zegarem twym uczyni.

I wówczas wszystkie nici, jakieś w życiu wysnuł,
szmatami pajęczyny wyjrzą z brudnych kątów.
Długie nogi pajaka do oczu ci się wcisną,
by wśliznąć się do mózgu i myśli popiątać.

Czarna ci noc otworzy wszystkie drogi świata,
byś poszedł pierwszą lepszą i zapomniał krzywdy,
ale miasto-selfaktor nićmi je posplata w węzeł twardy, jak rozpacz. Nie rozplączesz go nigdy.

A hand fan of trees will spread in a cool leaf on your forehead, and the peace of finished work will spread through the veins.

Oh, come back soon to the Room to guide threads in a line with the course of transmission count the final hours: until the evening deadens the rumble of machines with a red wall, the word reduction will turn the sun into your clock.

And then all the threads which you have spun throughout your life, will peer with cobweb rags from dirty corners. The spider's long legs will push into your eyes, to slide into your brain and tangle your thoughts.

Black night will open all the world's roads for you, so you could follow whichever and forget harm, but the city-spinning machine will bind them with threads into a knot hard as despair. You will never untangle it.

The poem was directly addressed to an employee of one of the cotton-processing factories, which operated at that time. The typical Łódź labourer, bent over a ball of cotton, is presented as a slave to the job, counting their time by observing the result of the endlessly repeated activity, i.e. finished wound-up balls, which the poet indicated in the first stanza:

Czas się zwija na kłębki nicią bawełnianą,
co godzina powolnym odnosisz je krokiem. (...)
Wachlarz drzew się na czole chłodnym rozłoży liściem,
po żyłach się rozejdzie spokój pracy skończonej.

Time bundles up with a cotton thread,
every hour you carry them moving slowly. (...)
A hand fan of trees will spread in a cool leaf on your forehead, and the peace of finished work will spread through the veins.

Kazimierz Sowiński compared the poem's addressee to a spider, whose only task, and one which he desires, is to spin threads. That bold and essentially negative comparison deprived the labourer of the ability to think – and of power – and it depicted their passivity and inability to act. The factory spider, who was the addressee of the words written by one of the founders of the Meteor group, was part of the worker collective: deprived of individualism, living in a "spinning machine town", from which, as the final line indicates, there is no escaping.

Then, in the third issue (December 1928), the author included a poem titled *Wigilja*³², which – similarly to the previous one – constituted a special depiction of the monotonous and predictable life of the factory proletariat:

Już niedługo się skończy godzina
najkrwawsza
i fabryka westchnieniem otworzy ci
drzwi,
ostatnią ci godzinę wyturkocze
warsztat
i rozwiąże uwagę w dwa sznurki
szarych brwi.

Rozplątany kłab myśli potoczy się
bezładnie
torem podmiejskich ulic, potem
polnych dróg –
do wiatru jak do dzbana ustami
przypadniesz,
by wargi ci otrzeźwił jego mroźny
chłód.

Pan Bóg – Dobry Gospodarz cichutko
zapali
w górze na Mlecznej Drodze tysiąc
gwiazdnych świec,
ażebyś, wśród zasp śnieżnych powoli
stąpając,
mógł lepiej swych zmęczonych, chorych
kroków strzec.

lecz cię znużenie ciężko na ziemi
położy,
gdzieś na pustem rozstaju zabłąkanych
dróg...

Soon the bloodiest hour will end
and the factory will open the door for
you with a sigh,
the workshop will rumble the last
hour
and will untie attention into two
strings of eyebrows.

The untangled ball of thoughts will
roll inertly
down suburban street, then rural
roads –
you will fall into wind like with your
lips on a bottle,
so its chill could sober up your lips.

Good Lord – the Good Host will
quietly light
up in the sky in the Milky Way
a thousand starry candles,
so that you could stomp slowly
through snow drifts,
so you could better protect your tired
sick steps.

but weariness will put you hard to
the ground,
somewhere at the crossroads of some
forsaken roads...

³² K. Sowiński, *Wigilja*, "Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor" 1928, issue 3, p. 5.

nagle oczy w zdziwieniu szeroko
otworzysz:
gód cię szybko zaniesie za rodzony
próg.

Igły świerku zapachną i gwiazd
świeczki zadrzą,
rogal księżyca wyjrzy z za obrusa
chmur –
sięgniesz i czarną dłonią rozłamiesz
go twardo,
ale nie przełkniesz, bo nie będziesz
mógl.

Potem wszystko zasypią białe śniegu
płatki,
do syta ich naniesie synym ustom
wiatr:
to Pan Bóg będzie z Tobą dzielił się
opłatkiem –
ty dasz Mu wśród modlitwy opłatki
swych warg.

suddenly you will open your eyes in
surprise:
hunger will quickly carry you past
your family threshold.

Spruce needles will smell and the
candles of the stars with shiver,
the crescent moon will peer from
behind the tablecloth of clouds –
you will reach out and break it hard
with your black hand,
but you will not swallow as you won't
be able to.

Then everything will become covered
with the white flakes of snow,
the wind will bring until satiety for
the bluish mouth:
it will be the Lord who will break
with You the wafer –
you will give Him surrounded by
prayers the wafers of your lips.

Kazimierz Sowiński noticed that the labourers lost all their accumulated strength and energy at their workplace. Paradoxically, only there, surrounded by noise and rumble, could they focus and harness their thoughts in order to perform their “work” well:

Już niedługo się skończy godzina
najkrwawsza
i fabryka westchnieniem otworzy
ci drzwi
ostatnia ci godzinę wyturkocze
warsztat
i rozwiąże uwagę w dwa sznurki
szarych brwi.

Soon the bloodiest hour will end
and the factory will open the door
for you with a sigh
the workshop will rumble the last
hour
and will untie attention into two
strings of eyebrows.

In his work, the poet did not omit the question of the consequences of the factory drudgery. The tiredness and weariness which accompanied labourers prevented them from noticing even the highest values. In the third stanza, the author mentioned God, an element which played a special role in proletarian poetry. God was often held accountable for the exploitation of the working class, which was indicated by, among others, Aleksander Wat.³³ Yet, Kazimierz Sowiński placed God in the role of the good Host, suggesting that the society also possessed many experiences associated with the

³³ A. Wat, *Policjant*, [in:] *Poezje zebrane*, Warsaw 1992, p. 30.

rule of a bad host, i.e. the oppressor. The Lord was attributed with a whole array of positive qualities. He was charitable, merciful, empathetic, and he showed people ways which they should follow. That device was a metaphor of a road leading to a social revolt. Christ appeared in the text as an ally of the proletariat, a leader of the impending revolution. Any doubts as to how labourers perceived God in the pre-revolutionary depiction were dissipated in the final line, in which the author inserted the motif of breaking a wafer. The breaking occurred symbolically; a person who often doubted the existence of the Lord and his good intentions reconciled with Him.

A similar view of worker existence was offered by Włodzimierz Słobodnik³⁴ in *Praca*³⁵.

Prężą się, tężą gumy muskułów.
Nabrzmiewa bryłą siły opiął
Przegięty tułów.

Ośmiogodzinnej pracy kowadło
Iskrami sekund pryska i lśni.
Młoty roboty druzgoczą kadłub
Tępych, ospałych, leniwych dni!

Buch! – młotem w lewo – ! buch! –
młotem w prawo!
Złoty miód potu namaszczza
skronie.
Sława robocie! Potowi sława!
Sława zgrubiałej, chropawej dłoni!

Muscular rubber flexes and hardens.
Swells drunken with the power of
form
The bent back.

The anvil of the eight-hour
workday
Sputters and glistens with sparks
of seconds.
Labour hammers shatter the hull
Of blunt, sluggish, lazy days!

Poof! – hammer to the left – ! poof! –
hammer to the right!
The golden money of sweat anoints
the brow.
Hail to work! And hail to sweat!
Hail the callous course hand!

The author focused on the appearance of a tired worker who stays in endless motion as well as on the disgraceful conditions in which he spends eight hours a day, as that was the daily work norm achieved during the Łódź Revolution of 1905. The clatter of anvils and hammers, and the roar of machinery could be heard all around; the scene was dominated by the sight of muscles flexed to the extreme, sweat flowing down people's foreheads, and the unnatural position assumed by labourers to prove the slogans: "Hail to work! And hail to sweat! / Hail the callous course hand!"³⁶

³⁴ (1900-1991) – a Polish poet of Jewish descent; translator of French, Russian, and Soviet literatures; satirist, author of children's books. He studied Polish at the University of Warsaw. In 1921, he made his poetic débüt in the *Pam-Bam* futurist pamphlet. During the interwar period he was a member of the Kwadryga literary group. Włodzimierz Słobodnik, in: *Współcześni polscy pisarze...*, Warsaw 1994, vol. 7, pp. 329-332.

³⁵ W. Słobodnik, *Praca*, "Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor" 1928, issue 1, p. 16.

³⁶ W. Słobodnik, *ibid.*

Labour aristocracy grew wealthier and more powerful through the extreme exploitation of proletarians sentenced to factory drudgery which considerably exceeded human physical endurance, as was indicated by Grzegorz Timofiejew in the poem titled *O koniu, który teskni*³⁷:

Miasto uraga o świcie, kiedy woźnica cię pogna,
Przez przymknięte powieki okiennic patrzą szyderczo okna.

The city reviles at dawn, when the carter rushes you,
Through closed eyelids of shutters windows peer sneeringly.

Obsiadły cię oczy niedobre, jak gdyby muchy natrętne...
O, przyjacielu – koniu, jak smutno wleczesz się stępa!

Ill eyes are set on you, as if some persistent flies...
Oh, my friend – horse, you drag so sadly!

Ploty szczerzą się do Ciebie sztachet spróchniałe zęby
I plują śliną zieloną – liściastą zielenią dębów. –

Fences grin at You with their teeth of rotten rails
And fire green spit – leafy green of oaks. –

Aż cię policjant na rogu ruchem pałeczki wgnatwa
W sznury jadących powozów, w szpły, tworzone przez auta.

Until a policeman at a junction tangles you with his baton
Into a stream of carts, into nodes created by cars.

W kolejce twojego cierpienia, tnącem zębami godzin,
Jak zagubioną podkowę zostawiasz na bruku młodości.

In the history of your pain, cutting with hours' teeth,
As if with a lost shoe you leave your youth on the cobbles.

Dopiero gdy zmierzch ci posypie gwiazd pozłocisty owies,
Wracasz zmęczony do stajni spocząć na miękkiej słomie.

Only when dusk sprays your starry golden oats,
You return tired to the stable to rest in soft straw.

W źdźbła śpiewające wsłuchany niespokojnie, dawne wspomnienie...
O łąkach śnisz słodko zielnych.
– wspominasz dawne wspomnienie...

Listening restlessly on to strews singing, an old memory...
Of meadows you dream, sweet and green. – you reminisce old events...

Gdy ślepia twe noc jak kobyła grzywą ciemności przysłoni,
Czujesz się źrebcem małym w zielonej kołysce bloni.

When the night finally covers your eyes with darkness like a mare with her crest,
You feel a young colt in the green cradle of a pasture.

³⁷ G. Timofiejew, *O koniu, który teskni*, "Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor" 1928, issue 2, p. 24.

Here, the poet used an essentially suggestive comparison between a labourer and a horse. The rhythm of the life of a man working at a factory is governed by commands and bans established by the aristocrat, and the observance of those rules is enforced by the policeman³⁸. The miserably paid labourer, just like the domesticated animal, is a necessary tool in the hands of their master – one that is used for multiplying the fortunes of the factory owners' families:

W kole twojego cierpienia, tnącem
zębami godzin,
jak zgubioną podkowę zostawiasz
na bruku młodość.
Dopiero gdy zmierzch ci posypie
gwiazd pozłocisty owies,
wracasz zmęczony do stajni spo-
cząć na miękkiej słomie.

In the circle of your pain, cutting
with hours' teeth,
Like a lost shoe you leave your
youth on the cobbles.
Only when dusk sprays your starry
golden oats,
you return tired to the stable to rest
in soft straw.

The man has been deprived of his "coltish" joy and waywardness, and instead became a trusted servant of the local capitalist locked in a Łódź factory.

In texts which discussed the problems of labourers, Meteors consistently argued that the thick factory walls were not the appropriate place for human beings – they could be compared to a dungeon in which proletarians were exploited; they only returned home by dint of the so-called "passes" once they finished work, only to regain their power for the next day of the grind.

Revolutionary reflections in the texts by the *Meteor's* poets

In the minds of natives and visitors, the old Łódź appears only as an industrial centre dynamically developing from the mid-19th century, the traces of which can easily be found, e.g. by studying the city's architecture filled with factory complexes and manors of their owners. When considering the city's history, people very rarely recall the year 1905 and the Łódź Insurrection, also referred to as the "June Days". On 22nd June, an insurrection broke out on Wschodnia St.; it was fuelled by numerous strikes and lasted until 1907. In none of their poems did the poets affiliated with *Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor* clearly indicate who fought to eliminate the exploitation of labourers by Łódź factory owners. Yet in some works, e.g. in the already mentioned *Pajak fabryczny*, authors clearly referred to one proletariat postulate, i.e. an eight-hour workday. The demand was commented upon by Emil Noiński, the reviewer of the article titled *Dziedzictwo rewolucji 1905-1907 roku*:

The events of the 1905-1907 insurrection have stirred much controversy among historians for many years now. In the PRL's [People's Republic of

³⁸ The policeman in the poem, as in Aleksander Wat's early poems – mainly in the poem *Policjant* – is depicted as a guard of "safety" and is a symbol of social oppression and the marginalisation of the working class. The "policeman with a bulldog's eye" is God, who enforces order which he himself established. The reality in which revolutionaries live resembles a prison cell.

Poland] historiography it was presented extremely single-sidedly with the emphasis put on the issues of the worker movement. Thus, a false image of those years were created which clearly glorified the participation of only one political camp in the insurrection, while in fact its main driving force was a universal protest in which side by side workers there also participated peasants and pupils fighting for Polish to be used at schools. Therefore, the revolution far exceeded the framework of "proletariat" rallies.³⁹

The question of the insurrection was raised by Stefan Flukowski⁴⁰ in the poem titled *Rewolucja*⁴¹:

Żołnierze u gwiazd wiszą jak na
szubienicy –
gwiazdy na czarnych sznurach
zwiśły u księżyca –
czerep rogaty wleczę małych
gwiazd miljony –
i nurzą je jak koty w spiralnej
mgławicy –
wodzowie po ścieżkach polnych
szukają rumianków –
i ciągną jak kościelni za sznur lila
dzwonki –
spragnieni piją resztę wody w po-
tłuczonym dzbanku –
ich sławę dzwonią w białe w niebo
pierzaste skowronki.

Z żądłami zębatami ku słońcu
podbiegły
pszczoly z ulów, po trawie próch-
nicą sypiących. –
mrówki czarne zajadle, urodzone
w dębach,
i szarańczy żółty tuman błysz-
czący –
Wczoraj dźwignęły pszczoly na
skrzydłach ul własny

Soldiers up with stars hang in the
gallows –
stars on black lines hang from the
Moon –
a horned head draws millions of
small stars –
and wallow them like cats in a spi-
ral nebula –
leaders seek camomile in field
paths –
and they drag like sextons draw
bell lines –
the thirsty drink the last of water
from a broken pitcher –
fluffy larks thrust into the sky sing
their fame.

With their toothed stings there
came towards the sun
bees from hives, spreading decay
on the grass. –
black ants fiercely, born in oaks,
and the glistening yellow cloud of
locust –
Yesterday bees lifted their own hive
on their wings

³⁹ E. Noiński, *Dziedzictwo rewolucji 1905-1907*, eds. A. Żarnowska, A. Kołodziejczyk, A. Stawarz, P. Tusiński, [review], "Niepodległość i Pamięć" 2010, no. 17/1 (31), pp. 375-377.

⁴⁰ (1902-1972) – a Polish writer and poet affiliated with the Kwadryga literary group, one of the first and most important representatives of surrealism in Poland. Flukowski's poetry expressed the apotheosis of work as the basic value of the world. A recurring motif in his works was the image of everyday people's work perceived as the completion of God's act of creation. Stefan Flukowski, in: *Współczesni polscy pisarze...*, eds. J. Czachowska, A. Szalagan, Warsaw 1994, vol. 2, pp. 325-328.

⁴¹ S. Flukowski, *Rewolucja*, "Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor" 1928, issue 3, p. 66.

i rzucili pod jabłoń, jabłkami
nabitą -
mrówki nogami kopiec po lesie
rozniosły -
szarańcza cisnęła w dół sklep nieba,
mrokiem kryty.

Senne szczury na trupach płyną
mętem rzeki -
Nie myślą, nie czekają ranka, co
zaświeci:
Wyjdą z wody na brzegi: będą szu-
kać domów
Rozsiadłych w piaskach sypkich
pod lasem dalekim.

Piękną miedziane chmury - grad
szarańczę zasiecz -
Mrówki zniosą pod korą białe,
okrągłe jaja -
Kulawy dziad ul kryty blachą
w sadzie ustawia -
Nad ziemią błękitne niebo smu-
gami się wlecze.

and thrust it under the apple tree,
filled with apples -
the ants spread the hill through the
forest on their feet -
the locust thrust down the sky, cov-
ered with darkness.

Drowsy rats flow down the river on
corpses -
They do not think, they do not wait
till morning to come:
They will emerge from the water
onto the shore: they will seek out
homes
Spread in loose sands by the nearby
forest.

The copper clouds will break - hail
will kill the locust -
The ants will lay underneath bark
white round eggs -
A limping duffer will put a hive
with a metal roof in the orchard -
Blue sky drags in streaks above the
ground.

The author metaphorically transferred (as suggested by constructive metaphorism) the field of insurrection battles into a meadow which is the stage of the fierce battle between bees and ants, the disguise of which the poet used in order to convey labourers oppressed by the crazed locust, i.e. the tsar, represented by the army and the police. Already in the first stanza, the poetic persona presumes that the memory of the insurrection fights from 1905-1907 will not survive the trials of time: "fluffy larks thrust into the sky sing their fame." The concept of placing the revolutionary activities in a completely different reality and presenting the insurgents as an insect colony provides grounds for discussing the importance of the uprising and its significance in the minds of Poles. This can be inferred from the following lines:

Wczoraj dźwignęły pszczoły na
skrzydłach ul własny
i rzucili pod jabłoń, jabłkami
nabitą -
mrówki nogami kopiec po lesie
rozniosły -
szarańcza cisnęła w dół sklep nieba,
mrokiem kryty.

Yesterday bees lifted their own hive
on their wings
and thrust it under the apple tree,
filled with apples -
the ants spread the hill through the
forest on their feet -
the locust thrust down the sky,
covered with darkness.

From that pessimism-riddled image of the Łódź Insurrection depicted by the author, some minor rays of light “emerge” timidly while the “blue sky drags in streaks above the ground.”

A similarly interesting metaphor of the insurgents fighting in Łódź was used by Stefan Flukowski in the poem titled *Śmierć na Mount Evereście*⁴²:

Prę Irvinie i Mallory! Woli twarde
kleszcze
sprężyły swojemięśni i ściśnęły
gardła,
więc orząc dzicz żywiołów, jak
uparte radła,
naprzelaj odwalają złą, spiętrzoną
przestrzeń.

Prę pod włos prużą grzywy
chłoszczącej wichury,
co żagle ciał zamiata, napięte na
linach,
i w burzy wrżących śnieżyc,
krwawo walcząc, płyną
po płaszczyznach, opartych o prze-
paść chmury.
Aż przeprę zbałwanionych śnieżyc
oceany,
tabuny skał skaczących z wichrami
na karkach,
i staną: na szczycie, płynącym
w chmur falach, jak barka,
wiecznym wiatrem jak flagi łomo-
tem miotani.

A wtedy węzłymięśni rozwiążą się
miękko:
już dalej iść nie można – już
wszystko się stało –
teraz mózgi naleje krew wolno
i biało
i marzenia popłynąocięzałą rzeką.

Irvine and Mallory push on! The
will's hard claws
flexed muscles and gripped throats,
so ploughing savagery of elements,
like stubborn listers,
thrust aside the bad heaped space.

They push against the grain they
rip the feather of the slashing
storm,
which sweeps body sails, tense on
lines,
and in the storm of boiling snow,
fighting bloodily, they flow
over the surfaces, resting against
the void of clouds.
Until they push through the oceans
of feathered snowstorms,
crowds of rock jumping with wind
blows in necks,
and they stand: on the top, flowing
in the waves of clouds, like
a barge,
thrust with the rumble of eternal
wind like flags.

And then the knots of muscles will
untie softly:
there is nowhere more to go – all is
done –
now brains will fill with blood slow
and white
and dreams will flow in a heavy
river.

⁴² S. Flukowski, *Śmierć na Mount Evereście*, “Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor” 1928, issue 3, p. 67.

Zamknięte lodem powiek stawy
 oczu widzą:
 odbija się w nich większy szczyt,
 większy bez granic!
 tam pójdą! Tam ku niemej, otwartej
 otchlani
 i nagle – runą z nieba czarną
 błyskawicą...

Na białej karcie śniegu, gdzie nic
 się nie dzieje,
 czarną kropką ciał martwych
 skończą epopeę...

Closed shut with ice on eyelids, the
 ponds of eyes see:
 they reflect a taller peak, bigger
 without limits!
 there they will go! There, towards
 the silent open void
 and suddenly – they will fall from
 the sky in a black lightning...

On the white sheet of snow where
 nothing happens,
 they will conclude the epic poem
 with a black dot of dead
 bodies...

The bloody events from the insurrection were compared to the expedition to Mount Everest, the tallest peak in the world. The poet began the poem by encouraging the insurgents to fight, to fend off the enemy, i.e. the "heaped space." To that end, he referenced in the first words the figures of two legendary mountaineers: George Herbert Leigh Mallory⁴³ and Andrew Irvine⁴⁴, who in 1924 tried to summit Mount Everest, which ended tragically. Even though the expedition ended in the deaths of both climbers, their achievement became historic. A similar course of events applied to the ferocious fight of the insurgents. Stefan Flukowski described the struggles of the proletariat after drawing inspiration from his observations of atmospheric phenomena in the mountains. He included in sequence: winds, snowstorms, clouds. Depending on their intensity, they symbolised attacks of the enemies on the insurgents, who died in glory in the fervent of the fight, leaving a faint trace: "On the white sheet of snow where nothing happens, / they will conclude the epic poem with a black dot of dead bodies."⁴⁵

Apart from discussing the dramatic outcomes of the insurrection in the short poem titled *Zdarzenie*⁴⁶, Grzegorz Timofiejew – the main theoretician of Meteors – also referred to the degradation of a human being as an individual who became part of a mass:

⁴³ (1886-1924) – one of the greatest mountaineers of the interwar period, the only member of all three British expeditions to Mount Everest in 1921-1924. A history teacher by trade, he worked in the Charterhouse (until 1921, with a gap during the First World War). C. Ankers, D. Roberts, *Zaginiony. Rzecz o odnalezieniu Mallory'ego na Evereście*, Warsaw 2012, pp. 15-17.

⁴⁴ (1902-1924) – a British mountaineer; he participated in the 1924 British expedition to Mount Everest. During the first attempt to summit Mount Everest, he and George Mallory, his climbing partner, vanished on the north-east ridge. They were last seen only a few hundred metres from the peak. Mallory's body was recovered in 1999; Irvine's body has not been found to date. Vide: *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁵ S. Flukowski, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ G. Timofiejew, *Zdarzenie*, "Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor" 1928, issue 3, p. 61.

Ktoś się nagiął, ktoś się pochylił,
 Ktoś ciało jak gałązkę pod ciało kół
 kładł.
 Trzasnęło! - - - - Potem
 Była cisza pozostała - - - - -

Someone bent, someone inclined,
 Someone put their body as
 a branch under the body of
 wheels.
 It snapped! - - - - Then
 There was yellowed silence
 - - - - -

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 W ciche, żółknące dale
 Ktoś, westchnawszy, bezszumnie
 odszedł.
 (A gdy szedł, wieczór krwią
 zapłamił
 I zgubił imię najsłodsze).

Into quiet, yellowing distances
 Someone, having sighed, left
 buzzlessly.
 (And as he went, he stained the
 evening with blood
 And lost the sweetest name).

The author raised the important issue of fate awaiting a labourer as an individual, not like it had been done in previous texts by poets who published in the Meteor poetic periodical, where a labourer was part of a mass of the fighting proletariat. No one can identify the fighters, one amongst them is referred to in the poem as "someone" who "having sighed, left buzzlessly".

Conclusion

The artistic activities of the Meteor group showed a minor presence in the literary community. The only surviving proof of its existence, apart from references in the biographies of its representatives, includes merely three issues of *Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor* as well as scattered texts in *Dodatek Literacki* and in several issues of *Głos Polski*. As a result, the Meteor group could be considered as being ephemeral. (After 1945, many groups of such focus operated in Łódź, e.g. 'Statyzm' or 'Metro', established by Henryk Zasławski⁴⁷). The lack of interest in the achievements of the group resulted mainly from the lack of literary aficionados among the inhabitants of Łódź. Even though the members of the group raised regional topics, e.g. the events of the 1905 Insurrection, the June Days, and the despicable working conditions in the factories within the cityscape, the poets did not gain any major popularity. Yet, their achievements were significant enough to constitute a reason for considering 'Meteor' as the first Łódź-based literary group. Importantly, however, Meteors did not prove original enough to stand out among proletariat poets or those poets who emulated the Awangarda Krakowska group.

⁴⁷ Born in 1948 – an employee of the Youth Culture Centre, the founder of the 'Centauro' literary group. He débuted in 1970 in the Literary Almanac of the Distance Club of Young Writers under the pseudonym Kamil Przybylski. Vide Henryk Zasławski [in:] *Współczesna Łódź literacka. Słownik Autorów*, ed. T. Błażejewski, Łódź 1989, p. 132.

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SUMMARY

The article is devoted to the first Łódź-based literary group called 'Meteor', which operated in 1928-1930. The author mainly focuses on providing a reliable discussion of the circumstances of the establishing of the group by its founders, i.e. Grzegorz Timofiejew, Marian Piechal, and Kazimierz Sowiński, and a careful specification of

its programme. She also interpreted the Meteor's works, i.e. revolutionist literary texts published in the *Czasopismo Poetyckie Meteor*, created by the members of the group.

Keywords

proletariat poetry, the "Meteor" group, literary group in Lodz, Poetic Journal Meteor

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REVIEWS

Essay as a Hydrofoil Boat: Reflections on Reading Jan Tomkowski's Anthology of Polish Literary Essay¹

One feature of the Polish essay is its special – even ostentatious – personal character: I am this and that and I do not care much about the rest; this is precisely what I need to fight for under the literary sun².

(...) as it is the aesthetics that is the mother of ethics rather than the other way round. If you were of a different opinion, please recall the circumstances in which you fall in love³.

Piloting the quasi-genre

The lightness of thought is not (always) being lightsome. The essay is not as light as a poem and not as heavy-going as a philosophical discourse. In one word: a hydrofoil boat. It does not glide and it does not roll away. I did

¹ *Polski esej literacki. Antologia*, introduction and edition by J. Tomkowski, 1st edition, BN I 329, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 2017. Hereinafter referred to as PELA, together with the page number.

² J. Błoński, *Król esej?*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" 2000, 3 December, p. 12. Błoński's column appeared in his section titled *Mieszaniny*. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish].

³ J. Brodski, *An Immmodest Proposal*, [in:] *In Praise of Boredom*, transl. A. Kołyszko, M. Kłobukowski, selection and edition by S. Barańczak, Kraków 1996, p. 189.

not invent this all by myself; I am making a reference to Joseph Brodsky, an expert essayist, who was looking for something between the pace of a car and a plane (so he was looking for a hydrofoil boat, so to speak).

Michał Głowiński, who in a conversation with Piotr Szewc calls the essay a 'liberal genre', refers to the essay as truant in a river-interview with Grzegorz Krzywiec.

The essay is rococo: light, sophisticated, elegant. The essay is not rococo: not easy to read, intellectually unfrivolous, erudite. It reconciles subtlety and gravitation.

A fragment from *Portret Kanta* by Bolesław Miciński

Perhaps the most interesting meta-reflection on the essay as a form in Polish essay writing is a fragment from *Portret Kanta* (*A Portrait of Kant*) by Bolesław Miciński, titled *Od autora* (*From the Author*): just like Walter Hilsbecher in *Essay über den Essay* or Italo Calvino in *American Lectures* (especially in his unforgettable *Lightness*), the Polish essayist, who died prematurely, names the properties of the writing which he refers to as essayistic. I will quote here the first paragraph – the most general and quasi-definitional one, so to speak:

The artistic assumptions of this draft are included in the title: *Portret Kanta* (*A Portrait of Kant*). The portrait, hence the assumptions are of pictorial nature, while the life of Kant was proverbially colourless and monotonous, which caused considerable difficulty as it was necessary, *ex definitione*, to avoid all kinds of extra-pictorial elements, such as psychological analysis, text interpretation or historical commentary. **One ambition of this draft was the transposition of notions to images.** This is why the essay is preceded by an extensive introduction on painting. The pictorial assumptions determined not only the form but also the volume of the draft which had to be concise out of necessity, like the painting to be seen with one glance. This caused the lingering recurrence of several *leitmotifs*. The aim of these reprises was to shorten the whole in the memory of the reader: keeping in the current consciousness the motifs which fade during the perusal. This is why the ending includes the sentence which is to be found in the introduction. The perseverance of topics (window, castle ruins, green curtain) was also aimed at highlighting the tragic monotony of the life of the Kaliningrad thinker. The same pictorial ambitions made him use the play of light and shade almost in excess. But how (...) to depict the disappearance of the sense of reality, which tormented the philosopher in a different way? This is precisely why the trees behind the window are compared to patches of paint on a still wet watercolour and Kant in the lime alley is similar to 'flat', two-dimensional Egyptian drawings.

(PELA, 403-404, emphasis added by BM)

The essay is an attempt, always brave if not risky, at style; at finding an adequate equivalent of the topic or rather a constant search for it (openness of the form harmonises here with the uniqueness, specificity and peculiarity of the designate). The essay on Kant is a greater challenge than that on Aristotle. It is, generally speaking, a challenge.

In this sense: many texts collected on 1000 pages of the anthology are merely drafts rather than essays. Often interesting drafts, on different subjects, drafts intersecting with the poetics of the reportage or column (as in the case of Wisława Szymborska, who was an outstanding poetess, columnist, reviewer and epistolographer, but she was not an essayist). But they are not outstanding essays. Even when Jan Tomkowski chooses well-known essayists, those who are considered essayists, he selects not necessarily the most outstanding achievement of the given essayist. Also, there was no place for some authors at all.

The essay is not every text which does not fit in to other genres. Its mastery goes against the poetics of *silva rerum*; sometimes while reading the anthology one may have the impression that it is precisely this principle that Tomkowski adopted in his selection of texts. His nonchalance may be compared to putting a tailcoat on a naked body (without references).

(The essay does not stem from excluding other genres, other possibilities, but, in a sense, going beyond them. The essay is, so to speak, not possible to be pastiched. It is impossible to write an essay in the way in which Bolesław Miciński, Józef Czapski or Maria Janion did. It is possible, only worse and this will not be an essay after all).

Some references, however, (but this is another problem – one of publishing the essay in this series) take away the flavour of understatements; they relieve the readers in their search, whereas the acribic references (compulsory in the edition of *Biblioteka Narodowa*) do not take this away. Does the essay, with its lack of humbleness regarding genre divisions, its separateness and personality, fit in such an understanding of edition at all? Does the essay not burst this intention of the master edition? There is no model for the essay or model for essay edition. Too many explanations, assistance, turning allusions into obviousness, conscientiousness going against the lining of essayistic language, which is usually noble (velvety or silky), but which everyone should recognise individually rather than follow the opinion of the expert (particularly that the references of the expert 'objectify' in a subjective way⁴).

The thing with the essay, so to speak, is like with Greek. Either you have mastered this alphabet, language, at least passively (read, interpret it),

⁴ A good example is the lack of references to the dedication to the essay *Siena* by Zbigniew Herbert (from the volume titled *A Barbarian in the Garden*), which says: 'To Konstanty Jeleński – an Alexandrian'. This is a dedication of an essayist to an essayist. It could not be explained, for instance, that Jeleński was born in Alexandria (he was born in Warsaw and died in Paris). The dedication is a metaphor, referring to the Alexandrian origin of the essay: the essay is not from Athens or Rome or Jerusalem: the essay is from Alexandria. In addition, Herbert notes, using a code, his attention to Constantine Cavafy, who was close to him and who was an Alexandrian (both in terms of his place of birth and him being an outstanding essayist).

or you are a barbarian, which used to be excellently thematised in Polish essay writing, to recall, for instance, *A Barbarian in the Garden* by Zbigniew Herbert (also as a kind of dialogue with Cavafy).

Therefore, the essay assumes a certain required level of literary culture on the part the recipient, and this cannot be replaced with anything else. In order to write a good essay (there are no other), it is necessary to be an intelligent and well-read person; and to read the message that it is an essay – likewise⁵.

There are contradictions in defining the essay in juggling associations on the part of the most outstanding essayists. For instance, Jan Kott wrote that:

I will write after Gertrude Stein: “an essay is an essay is an essay. It is not an essay to write of an essay but to write an essay!”⁶

In contrast, in his conversation with Włodzimierz Bolecki, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński says that:

What does the essay mean? It is a genre which is extremely exciting and demanding. A **true essay does not only border upon a literary work, it simply is one**. It is not only a demonstration of knowledge or intelligence of the essayist. **It has to have a special construction**. There were not too many essay masters in Poland, Jerzy Stempowski, Ludwik Fryde or Bolesław Miciński, for instance. They always had more to say in their essays than it was imposed by the subject⁷.

The tautological (resulting from the paraphrase of Stein) and simultaneously rebellious definition – in accordance with the leftist temperament of Kott – and the aesthetic definition (it is about ‘special construction’) as well as the ethical one by Herling-Grudziński (it is about ‘true’ essays in the alleged opposition to ‘untrue’ essays – or what I am referring to as drafts here) all have a certain feature in common. In the blessed helplessness of defining, outstanding essayists themselves resort to metaphors and to examples.

⁵ There appear to be no errors in the anthology; reading carefully, I found only one mistake: on page 815 in the essay by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński titled *Siedem śmierci Maksyma Gorkiego* (*Seven Deaths of Maxim Gorky*) (1963) there is a mistake in the date in the following sentence: “It is about the anonymous «Letter of an Old Bolshevik», written directly after the trial of Zinoviev and Kamenev in August 1956 (so several months after Gorky’s death) and smuggled from Russia to London”. The year should obviously be 1936, not 1956. Maxim Gorky, or Alexei Peshkov, lived in 1868-1936. There is also some shift in the references to *Kilka szczegółów* (*Several Details*) by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz: the explanation of the word “*tub*” (bark of a tree, usually of a lime – a word qualified as obsolete) appears on page 995, whereas the word itself appears six pages earlier, on page 989 in the sentence “A cart made of wood splint is turning from the market into Żydowska Street (...).” It is worth adding that the word ‘*tubianka*’ (wood splint basket) – still in common use today – is derived from the word “*tub*”.

⁶ J. Kott, *Pisanie eseju*, [in:] *Lustro*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 104-105. As cited in: Małgorzata Krakowiak, *Mierzenie się z esejem. Studia nad polskimi badaniami eseju literackiego*, Katowice 2012, p. 188.

⁷ G. Herling-Grudziński, W. Bolecki, *Rozmowy w Dragonei*, Warszawa 1997, p. 306. As cited in: M. Krakowiak, *op. cit.*, p. 189, emphasis mine – KKK.

What is interesting and unique, and what was highlighted by Małgorzata Krakowiak in her pioneer work on the literary essay, is the fact that the essay escapes typologies (such as: lyric – narrative – drama, or: prose – poetry). Its matter is as real as it is imaginary, but it does not create fictional worlds (perhaps except for probabilistic purposes). The essay is situated on the antipodes of literary fiction and at the same time it draws a lot of inspiration from it: literary characters can be protagonists of essays – as in *Lalka i perła* (*The Doll and the Pearl*) by Olga Tokarczuk, the author of an excellent volume of essays and drafts titled *Moment niedźwiedzia* (*The Moment of the Bear*); literary phrases (e.g. winged words) can be considered in the essay; a place created in literature can be an inspiration for the essayist – as was the case with Stanisław Barańczak and his Macondo. And, indeed, the essay gets closer to other arts: there is, for instance, essay-writing revolving around *ekphrasis* in painting or sculpture (Czapski, Herbert, Herling-Grudziński, Pollakówna).

The lack (and excess) will turn back against it

In the anthology, there are no eminent Polish female essayists, such as Maria Janion, Barbara Skarga, Joanna Pollakówna, Jolanta Brach-Czaina, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, or Renata Lis, and the very closing of the choice of Polish essay-writing between Cyprian Norwid – who was, indeed, very well selected as the first Polish essayist, the author of masterpiece *Białe kwiaty* (*White Flowers*) and *Czarne kwiaty* (*Black Flowers*)⁸ – and Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz seems to be androcentric (but also here there are some spectacular deficiencies, such as the lack of Stanisław Lem, Jan Gondowicz, Piotr Sommer or Marek Bieńczyk). The essay, a rebellious form, was in favour of auto-emancipatory authoresses. The lack of representativeness can be also seen in omitting the whole thematic areas of Polish essay-writing: dissident essay (Adam Michnik, Jakub Karpiński), historical essay (Jacek Bocheński, Jerzy Jedlicki, Jan Tomasz Gross), essay on art (Joanna Pollakówna, Ewa Kuryluk, Mieczysław Porębski, Maria Poprzęcka), theological essay (Jerzy Nowosielski, Ludwik Wiśniewski), anthropological essay (e.g. Tadeusz Śląwek, Zbigniew Mikolajko, Dariusz Czaja), or interpretational essay (due to hermeneutics, this one particularly frequently shifts from literary studies towards literature). And so on. As expressed in the introduction, I do not agree with the author of the anthology that it is the easiest thing to confront lists of persons, lists of Polish essayists. The list of essay writers is a list of attendance. Checking it (and possibly adding those who are absent – not by their own fault) belongs to the duties of those who discuss the endeavours of the anthologist.

The literariness of the essay (there are two further clarifications of the essay in the title of the anthology: 'Polish' and 'literary') is never measured

⁸ A dissenting opinion should nonetheless be mentioned. In his essay titled *Wiosenne chrunie. Witkacy w Tatrach* (from the volume: *Paradoks o autorze*, Halart, Kraków 2011, p. 183, ref. 20), Jan Gondowicz writes that *Tatry w śniegu* (*The Tatra Mountains in Snow*) by Stanisław Witkiewicz (senior) 'is the first Polish essay (1886)'. This essay can be found in *Pisma tatrzanskie*, (vol. 1, Kraków 1963).

by its topic (the same way that the level of the water is not measured, for instance, in amperes). The measure of essay literariness includes these features which I mentioned at the beginning of the draft – this special balance between the poetic density and intellectual gravity; the constant formal aporias, from which the essayist, like the fencer, comes away unscathed due to stylistic mastery.

Hence it seems to be a dubious practice to include fragments of larger works, their chapters, rather than the essay as a form which is originally cut by the author. This happened with, for instance, *Myśli o dawnej Polsce* (*Thoughts about the Old Poland*) by Paweł Jasienica, where the length of the fragment confined to the portrait of Queen Jadwiga of Poland from 1949, together with the excellent commentary, would be enough. However, a fragment is not an essay. This is brilliantly discussed by Walter Hilsbecher in his *Essay über den Essay* (*An Essay on the Essay*); the author sees in the fragment and in the aphorism some kind of competition for the essay (the classic text by Hilsbecher appears in the references to the edition of *Polski esej literacki*). If Jasienica did not cut this fragment as an essay, did not give it the (subjective, surely, and signed by him) form of the essay, this should not be done by Tomkowski, who is aware, I suppose, of the differences between draft, aphorism, fragment, and the essay. The title – outstanding, sometimes irritating, intellectually sublime – is one of the essential features of the essay, the domain of this author, and it cannot be *Thoughts about the Old Poland (fragment)*, unless that was the author's will (which it was not). The situation is similar with *Koniec świata szwoleżerów* (*The End of the World of Chevau-légers*) by Marian Brandys, whereas the stylistically excellent *Puszkin z Petersburga* (*Pushkin of Petersburg*) by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz holds up as a whole, having been made a whole by the author himself.

As is well-known (Tomkowski mentions this in the introduction), the essay has entered into relations with many several other literary genres; there is the phenomenon of essayisation of the novel or, more broadly speaking, prose (also historiosophic); there are reportages with elements of the essay. Essayisation is a phenomenon derivative of essay expansion, its exclusive allure (not to say attractiveness, as this would border on an oxymoron). The anthology of the literary essay is by no means an anthology of essayistic fragments or the intertwining of such fragments with essays *tout court*.

Concept?

It is impossible for someone who discusses this anthology of essays not to raise the question about how the author of the introduction, who also made the selection of the texts, understands the genre. The anthology, let me remind – bouquet from Greek – refers to the most beautiful flowers, specimens of its species. Is it a complete bouquet, is it enough to read this anthology (being a student of Polish philology, for instance) to have some idea about Polish literary essay?

The introduction is a lecture of an expert or, at least, his alibi. This is why it is worth reading 110 pages and consider if the proposed concept is coherent, convincing, how this anthology relates to the wealth of the Polish essay and whether it really is a model choice. Pointing to numerous deficiencies in the choice of names raises doubt. They represent a gap in the intersubjective canon of Polish literary essay.

And how about the very understanding of 'essay' and 'literary essay'? Is there any difference between them? The terms 'philosophical essay' or 'travel essay' do not eliminate the preliminary assumption about their literariness (this anthology is made up of such travel or philosophical essays, portraits of persons and places, works or cultural threads). Literariness is a constructive feature of the essay, which makes an essay an essay.

In this sense, it is sometimes worth accepting auto-diagnostic arguments of authors whose texts were included in the anthology, not only as a manifestation of the topic of modesty. And consequently, in the biography preceding the draft (not: essay) by Ludwik Bohdan Grzeniewski, titled *Archipelag gaf* (*Archipelago of Gaffes*) (version from 1981), there is a sentence: "Even though the writer himself did not like the word «essay» and was consistent in not using it (he preferred the unspecified and less obliging term «draft»), it is precisely the essay writing that comprises the most valuable text written by him" (p. 863). On the contrary: we do not have to. Perhaps I am inclined to agree with the presumption that Grzeniewski is accurate in qualifying the genre of his texts as 'less obliging' and more undefined. At least the draft quoted in the anthology is precisely a draft, an argument spun around anecdotes, a slick story based on these anecdotes; it does not have the intellectual rank of the essay, it makes no claim to finesse.

For soft landing with grace (of the hydrofoil boat)

English, the *lingua franca* of today's world, is not my language. With less advanced knowledge, it both simplifies and confuses the language, and definitely does not stroke the palate; with more proficient knowledge (Shakespeare and the rest), when I read it out loud, it irritates the vocal cords earlier stroked by the smoothness of Russian, its pleophony mighty as the Volga river, and the light champagne bubbliness of French.

Of course, excellent essays are written in English: Woolf, Yeats, Auden, to name the greatest. Natural language, home language has always fostered writing essays, as is the case with writing poetry. It is difficult to write essays in a foreign language which was merely learnt.

The essay as a genre-no-genre⁹, difficult to capture, is not and will never be the *lingua franca* of literature. It is a dissident (otherwise the dissident essay is a distinctive sign of Central and Eastern Europe as well as Russia, it notes the history of this strange part of the world): it is this amorphous phenomenon which goes beyond normative poetics. The essay is, perhaps, a poem in prose.

⁹ The spelling with dashes is, of course, intentional.

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SUMMARY

The paper is a multifaceted and contextual attempt at discussing the anthology of Polish literary essay in the version proposed by Jan Tomkowski in the edition of Biblioteka Narodowa (Series I, no. 329). It is also an essay on this essay anthology.

Keywords

Polish literary essay, anthology, genre, quasi-genre, master edition

Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschany (born 20 December 1970 in Poznań) – professor, specialist in Polish studies, comparatist, essayist, author of poems as well as poetic and autobiographical prose (an award in K.K. Baczyński Competition, 2006). She specialises in poetry and its interpretation as well as the reception of poets writing in German and French in Poland; the Holocaust; synapses of poetry and visual arts; European and Polish literary essay. She is the author of numerous books, including: *Rilke poetów polskich* (2004; 2nd ed., 2017), *Rycerz i Śmierć. O 'Elegiach duinejskich' Rainera Marii Rilkego* (2010; 2nd ed., 2015), *Interlinie w ciemności. Jednak interpretacja* (2012), 'Все поэты жиды'. *Antytotalitarne gesty poetyckie i kreacyjne wobec Zagłady oraz innych doświadczeń granicznych* (2013), *Skąd się bierze lekcja polskiego? Scenariusze, pomysły, konteksty* (2016), *Nikt nie widzi dobrze. Eseje* (2018), as well as of a volume of prose titled *Zielony promień* (2006). She also co-edited the collection of Anna Pogonowska's poems, titled *Wiersze (nie)zapomniane* (2018). She published about 300 scholarly papers and drafts. She is the co-author of a textbook titled *Staropolskie korzenie współczesności* (2004). The academic supervisor of the Association of Jewish Culture and Literature Lovers 'Dabru emet' (UAM). Mother of Tobiasz and Lena Miriam.

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Measures of Time of Literature

Review of Rafał Pokrywka's book titled *Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna*, Universitas, Kraków 2018

Ever since Günter Grass was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1999, German has been the second most popular language among Nobel laureates in literature – five years later the prize was awarded to Elfriede Jelinek, and in 2009 to Herta Müller. Other German authors have also been recognised internationally by critics, readers, and literary scholars – some of the world's best-sellers were *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink, *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald, and the lesser known in Poland *Measuring the World* by Daniel Kehlmann. There is not a shadow of a doubt about the importance, also in the Polish context, of this major European literature. When discussing the current German literary scene, Rafał Pokrywka in his study titled *Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna* (Kraków 2018) also indicated that many of the works he referenced have an extra-national character – by dint of both the topics they discuss and the origins of the writers themselves. The method applied in the discussed book is, as the author himself stated, a combination of the interpretation of individual novels in cultural contexts and an analysis "of the literary field and the forces which exist in it understood in sociological terms"¹, and the outcome of the description of the selected area of literature is supposed to be "a set of statements regarding the functioning of German-language novels at the beginning of the 21st century in the German, Austrian and Swiss (German-language) literary fields, statements

¹ R. Pokrywka, *Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna*, Kraków 2018, p. 8. I shall reference consecutive quotations from this edition by providing the page number in parenthesis after the quote. [Unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish].

surely non-definite and non-revolutionary, which, however, could be used as an element of a general history of modern literature (...)” (p. 11). Rafał Pokrywka’s book has found an interesting place between two others collective works (also prepared by the Universitas Publishing House), namely: a volume published two years prior edited by Monika and Stephan Wolting, titled *Zrozumieć obcość. Recepcej literatury niemieckojęzycznej w Polsce po 1989 roku* (Kraków 2016), in which Rafał Pokrywka discussed the Polish reception of the novels by Daniel Kehlmann, Wolf Haas, and Daniel Glattauer; and the volume titled *Zaangażowanie. Reprezentacje polityczności we współczesnej literaturze niemieckiego obszaru kulturowego*, which was edited by Ewa Jarosz-Sienkiewicz and Monika Wolting, and was published in May 2019.

Pokrywka began his work with a discussion of the limits of the titular word ‘*współczesność*’ [modernity] (as well as of the terms ‘*postmodernizm*’ [post-modernism], ‘*post-postmodernizm*’ [post-post-modernism], and ‘*ponowoczesność*’ [post-modernity]), which is useful for later analysis. He referred in short to the studies by, e.g., Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Umberto Eco, stressing that the purpose of his study was not to define modern literature within the categories of an absolute, of an era-defining nature, or other general concepts of periodisation (p. 12). It was between specific texts – and the author discussed more than sixty of them, not to mention those not specified in the subtitles of chapters – that the major questions of the book were posed, without the danger of unfitness of using words which seemed not from our times. In the introduction, the researcher also challenged the utility of the popular opinion on the polyphonic (and, at the same time, the dynamic and non-obvious) nature of modern literature, as well as the conviction that the supposed quality could enable one to differentiate modern literature from non-modern literature. Next, he analysed several elements that are significant for the current literary field, i.e. social, media, political, and aesthetic factors.

The author discussed the assumed period within another perspective, this time by analysing the phenomenon of the turn of the century, along the symbolic year 2000, which could also be considered as a turning point in the history of literature. The importance of that date was indicated in works of literature and major German-language volumes in literary studies. At the same time, the period saw a generational change, which is present in the reflection on the history of literature also by dint of the fact of awarding the Nobel Prize to Günter Grass – “generations of those born in the first half of the 20th century, the children of the interwar period and the time of the Second World War become the past (...) Just as well as a certain ethos of a writer perceived as a moral guide and an authority figure” (p. 29). He did stress, however, that the change did not mean that the new literature abandoned the problem of settling the accounts with Nazi forefathers. He saw in that gesture also a broader dynamics of German-language prose, which “assumes a continuous return to the same topics with a new set of experiences, with a new perspective, and, finally, with new writing skills (...)” (p. 32). In the incessant “reminding modern works of themselves” (p. 365), the author recognised hope for literature, which is more and more dominated by “the

social time" (p. 364). The consecutive subchapters of the introduction focus on the limits between the national literatures of German-language countries, the processes of universalisation, and the reflection on the validity of using national keys, and the researcher emphasised a still exceptional role of the works by Austrians in the discussed literary output. One should mention at least the works by Robert Menasse, Elfriede Jelinek, and Josef Winkler, who share a critical attitude to Austrian nationalism and the revealing of "invisible structures" (p. 271), which is specific for the the nation's literature, at different moments in its history. When mentioning these authors, among others, Pokrywka developed a reflection regarding the dynamics of creating literature of a political nature and its currently different pathways, among which one of the most noticeable movements is a conservative movement, the outcome of, *inter alia*, "the retirement of the generation which formed German literature of the post-WWII years and the disappointment in the ideals of 1968" (p. 41²). That generational change has also left a trace in the form of a decline of the ethos of "a writer and a critic as a moral institution" (p. 43³) and, in turn, a much smaller number of literary groups and manifestos, and it partly resulted in writers having functioned in the state of "loneliness by choice" (p. 43). The author concluded that part of the introduction devoted to the turn of the century with a discussion of the factors which determined the classification of literature at the beginning of the 21st century, and a reflection on the modern practices of using the categories of high and low literatures, as well as the importance of "the context, dictionary, and the actors of the field, conducting a typical for them operations on a genre" (p. 53).

In continuing with the introduction of German-language novels of the past two decades to his original overview, the researcher focused on the central word of the title of his work, namely *the novel and its actors* (producers, actors of distribution, professional and non-professional recipients). He discussed both the elements of the definition of the novel and the sociological theory of the genre by Werner Michler, which enables one to assume "distance towards the existing and forming genre classifications" (p. 56). He stressed, though, that in his work he was not creating new typologies, and the applied notions functioned in his typology as non-verified axioms.

Despite the conviction of the instability and blurriness of the lines of the term 'modernity', Rafał Pokrywka composed in an interesting way the main portion of his study surrounding the consecutive dimensions of time: the past, the present, and the future. These divisions did not, however, define, in this case, the division into old, new, and the most recent books – in other words, they did not refer to the categories of literary history – but, rather, they indicated "positions from which texts start off into modernity", "the contexts of reading" (p. 68). The first group of novels – according to the assumed temporal structure and the importance for German-language

² As the original Polish version reads: "odejście pokolenia formującego literaturę niemiecką lat powojennych oraz rozczarowanie ideałami 1968 roku".

³ In Polish: "pisarz i krytyk jako instancja moralna".

writings⁴ – was, therefore, defined by a look behind oneself, which is often an action of the “angel of history” (one might find it surprising that the entire volume lacks any reference to texts by Walter Benjamin, even more so considering the fact that Pokrywka has used in his work the achievements by various philosophers and theoreticians of literature and culture). The central position of this first part of the analytical volume (titled *Przeszłość [The Past]*) “is occupied by the culture of memory and remembrance” (p. 68). As Jerzy Kaążny wrote in the article titled “Who does history belong to? A reflection from a literary scholar”⁵, published in an issue of the *Przegląd Zachodni* journal with the theme ‘The past – memory – the present’, “The problems of modern recollective literature remain strictly bound with other fields of the social discourse”, and as such constitute a backdrop of various topics and writing strategies. Today still, which is particularly significant for Austria and Germany, “Recollective novels have remained for the last twenty years in central focus of the intensive discussions by scholars and politicians on this subject”⁶. This part includes (meta)historical narratives – including the ‘self-negating’ ones, which Andrzej Kopacki discussed in his book titled *Literatura samonegacji*⁷ (which is similar to Rafał Pokrywka’s research, though it posed different reading objectives) – as well as the reflection on historiography or the myth-forming qualities of the historical novel, which Daniel Kehlmann exposed in his famous *Measuring the World* (Pokrywka compared the author’s status of a “literature celebrity” to the case of Szczepan Twardoch), thus opening a well-known though somewhat dusty genre for new inspirations. Despite the fact that the researcher did not focus in his discussion on the notions of translation and the Polish reception, in the fragments in which this seems justified he referred to the experiences of Polish readers and the domestic (Polish) literary scene. This applies to Kehlmann’s novel, which in Poland did not open the backdrop for the required associations and experiences, which is why its international success and minimal domestic perception had to be at least roughly explained by the author of the study. The other new historical novel selected by the author is Thomas Hettche’s *Pfaueninsel* (not translated into Polish), which constitutes an example of the dominance of everydayness, building the narrative through small stories, and giving a voice to marginalised figures. Further in his publication, Pokrywka referred to post-colonial themes, without which, as he put it, “the modern historical novel would not be possible” (p. 84). At that point he discussed, e.g., Lukas Bärfuss’ *Koala* – published in Poland in 2017 by Ossolineum and translated by Arkadiusz Żychliński,

⁴ The author of the study emphasised that “today, historicity is one of the main, if not an absolutely central, determinants of writing (and reading) literature in this area. Historicity can also be defined as a receptive category, as directing readers towards a certain reading mode, in which a text assumes the characteristics of narration about that which was or about that which could have been, often for the benefit of political interpretations trying to take possession of «facts»” (pp. 72-73).

⁵ The original Polish title reads: “Do kogo należy historia? Refleksja literaturoznawcy”.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

⁷ A. Kopacki, *Literatura samonegacji. Postawy narracyjne w prozie niemieckojęzycznej przełomu XX i XXI wieku*, Warsaw 2009.

with an afterword by Grzegorz Jankowicz – which was warmly received by Polish critics. When discussing the colonisation of Australia, the bloody “devouring of land and creatures, about desire and aggression, about *libido* and *destrudo*” (p. 97), the Swiss writer created a painfully valid account of today’s world. This is because, as Pokrywka put it, it is impossible

to overestimate the analytical value of the historical novel, especially in its post-colonial variant. The conviction that it offers an account of only the sad and closed past is immensely naive. (...) Texts about the past which discuss conflicting cultures, seizure of land, and rejection and racial branding strike time’s nerve, they want to be read together with the modern literature of migrants and on migration, as well as with new texts about women (it is impossible to separate colonisation and sex). Furthermore, those novels, though founded in past ages, introduce readers into the tragedies of the 20th century, they may reach even deeper than political analyses or historiography as they do not know – and at this point justice should be given to Bärfuss’ method – the limitations of academic discourse, the disciplines of academic genres, or the clumsiness of statistics. Read together with the accounts of personal tragedies in the 20th century, they reveal new levels of reflection, each time less sentimental or obvious.

(pp. 97-98)

In the subsequent chapter, Pokrywka combined the record of a nomadic state (also present in most of the previously discussed works) with, first, the story of the fortunes of two women (Helene, the protagonist of *The Blind Side of the Heart* by Julia Franck, and Katalin in the novel *The Swimmer* by Zsuzsa Bánk, a writer of Hungarian descent) and, second, the stories of the characters of *The Emigrants* by W. G. Sebald [an author whose works are important to Polish readers by dint of Małgorzata Łukasiewicz’ translation, and yet they are more difficult – as they were most influential in the 1990s – to classify within the landscape of modern German-language literature, as Pokrywka indicated (p. 104)]. In this fragment, the researcher referenced the literary output of Thomas Bernhard, who was close to Sebald, as he did when he discussed the experience of suicide present in Bärfuss’ book, tackling Austria’s past and “familial ecosystem” (p. 157), and returns to the province. Despite the fact that the Austrian’s works had been written before the temporal limit line assumed by Pokrywka, their impact does not diminish as the time passes. The texts referenced by the author of the monograph in this chapter – but not only this one – often raise the topic of Jewish history, yet it would be best to treat the topic separately and to isolate it within the book’s structure, if only considering the space it occupies in the discussed literature.

Pokrywka continued his discussion of individual fortunes within the figure of peregrination by acquiring an insight – via the works by Günter Grass (*Crabwalk*), Herta Müller (*The Hunger Angel*), and Lutz Seiler (*Kruso*) – “into totalitarian mechanisms through the symbolic enclosed space with a utopian or heterotopic nature” (p. 110), but also into “opening literature to

the notion of the «German fate» (p. 121). Within the group of books important for the area of literature discussed by Rafał Pokrywka – books that are unique and available for Polish readers only in their original versions – one should highlight the novel *Der Turm* by Uwe Tellkamp, which was a literary reaction to the fall of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) and the unification of Germany (this topic is also represented in Pokrywka's anthology by the work titled *In Times of Fading Light* by Eugen Ruge). In the following chapter, the researcher examined generational memory and family narratives, a surprisingly high number of which was written around 2003, which was considered a literary turning point, a change of the old, mainly accusatory, paradigm of remembrance. Yet according to Pokrywka, significant strategies had already appeared in the 1990s (e.g. Martin Walser's reminiscing on his childhood or the search for the Jewish identity in Robert Schindel's *Gebürtig*), but he chose later novels as special examples: *Es geht uns gut* by an Austrian writer Arno Geiger, and *The Eighth Life (For Brilka)* by Nino Haratischwili, who was born in Greece. *Returns to the Province*, which I have already mentioned in the fragment regarding Bernhard's works, is similar in terms of the topic to this chapter, which includes, *inter alia*, an interpretation of the novel *Kino Muza* by Artur Becker, a Polish emigrant in Germany, as well as a context of the Polish literature of little homelands. The part of the volume titled *Przeszłość [The Past]* which includes all the topics I have mentioned concludes in two chapters devoted to the "palimpsest nature of love literature" (p. 160) and the authors who represent the fading generation of people born in the interwar period, i.e. Martin Walser and Peter Handke.

In order to enable readers to gain a more detailed look into the consecutive parts of the discussed publication on their own, allow me to outline only the main threads in the remaining two periods. In *Teraźniejszość [The Present]*, which covers the most current affairs "of a high discursive potential" (p. 68), the author discussed the young adult novel, in which the coming-of-age experience comprises, e.g.: the fact of being on the road (similarly as in the case of the novels analysed in the initial chapters of the part titled *Przeszłość [The Past]*); texts which are a proof of the impact of the theory of evolution and the coexistence of a human being and nature; various ways of problematising corporeality (not only in the feminine variant); previously tabooed aspects of motherhood; love or geopolitical narratives; and the literatures of migrants and on migrants (in the context of the modern migrant crisis, but also of the search for home as a paradigmatic experience of modernity). These narrative works are filled with eccentricities, quotations, and covert quotations, as well as a risk of temporariness. Then, the *Przyszłość [The Future]* part, potentially directed towards the New, begins with the uncompromising sentence: "Disappointing: the fact of entering the future does not bring any radically different topics, only an expansion of the potential of the already discussed ones" (p. 295). A further discussion includes, however, projected tasks for works directed at that which is to come, and the point would be to provide an answer to questions such as: "what will happen to a world in which the final

sentiment, i.e. compassion, is lost?", "why doesn't humanity commit a collective suicide after all?", "how are urges going to be satisfied?" (p. 304).

The manner of grouping modern German-language novels proposed by the author of the volume is not flawless, just as any other is not. Despite the differences in the sizes of all three main parts (not considering the introduction and the short chapter concluding the whole), one might get the impression that they apply at a similar extent to important topics often raised in this kind of literature. However, one should underline that the book is a systematised narrative conducted by a single author, which enables readers to view the discussed literature from a uniform perspective. Such an option is not available in the case of collective works – valuable for other considerations – in which individual articles differ in terms of, e.g., the approach to a topic, the level of specificity, or their initial assumptions, while their selection is limited to the most valued or most widely accepted works and it depends even more on personal preferences and on how extensively a specific output has been studied by researchers. The compositional strategy applied by the author and the character of individual interpretations are related to two concepts of time: a linear concept (through the accepted analytical categories which define three main parts of the volume), and a periodic concept (expressed in the recurrences of texts and topics).

Furthermore, the discussed publication is invaluable considering the intention to discuss various novels for readers for whom access to modern German-language literature hinges on the selections made by publishing houses and translators, or who have the option to read selected books in their original versions yet do not wish to follow publishing blurbs, best-seller listings or even the lists of laureates of literary awards. The author of the study – despite addressing Polish readers and discussing the most recent literature, which quite often has not been translated yet – has not based his narrative on a much more familiar foundation of reception and translation. This does not mean, however, that he did not utilise the achievements of Polish literary critics or texts on the history or theory of literature, including these which do not strictly apply to German-language literature. The extensive bibliography references, e.g., books by Przemysław Czapliński on prose since the 1990s, books by Adrian Gleń on the most recent phenomena and literary texts, and works by Grzegorz Jankowicz on the Polish literature after 1989. Obviously, it also includes works on German-language literature, which, however, unlike in Rafał Pokrywka's assumptions, focus on reception and translations. These are volumes such as: *Literatura niemiecka w Polsce. Przekład i recepcja*, edited by Eugeniusz Czaplejewicz and Janusz Rohoziński (Pułtusk 2009), and *Zrozumieć obcość. Recepcja literatury niemieckojęzycznej w Polsce po 1989 roku*, edited by Monika Wolting and Stephan Wolting (Kraków 2016), as well as the volume similarly devoted to that which happens at the meeting point of two linguistic and cultural areas, namely *Teatr – Literatura – Media. O polsko-niemieckich oddziaływaniach w sferze kultury po 1989 roku*, edited by Małgorzata Leyko and Artur Pełka (Łódź 2013). In the latter one, the most important article for Pokrywka was the one by Wolting: "The Polish reception of works of the most recent German-language

literature rewarded with the *Deutscher Buchpreis*⁸ (pp. 197-207). However, I feel that the volume lacks – even if only in footnotes – references to a few books, e.g. essays and studies by Andrzej Kopacki⁹ (*Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna* only mentions the volume titled *Literatura samonegacji*, which I have already indicated) or articles by Hubert Orłowski¹⁰.

Apart from the extensive source material (the researcher may have analysed a single literary genre, yet he did not select only these texts that are considered by critics as highly artistic literature), the topic of the discussed publication is associated with the challenges specific for the attempt at creating a synthesis *in medias res* – from the centre of literary modern times. Rafał Pokrywka seems to be moving within this field with much ease, which enabled him, first, to offer an original multidimensional overview of the titular area of the novel which utilises the tools of, e.g., another cultural theory of literature, but also, second, to develop intertextual references to prose works in various languages and from various periods.

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SUMMARY

The article is a discussion of a study by Rafał Pokrywka titled *Współczesna powieść niemieckojęzyczna* (Kraków 2018). The author of the study analysed selected works written at the turn of the 21st century, and – in an interesting manner – developed his discussion around a progression of three dimensions of time: the past, the present, and the future, which constitute the contexts for reading individual narratives. The interpretations of German, Austrian, and Swiss novels, both these which exist as Polish translations and these which have not yet been translated, are

⁸ In Polish: "Polska recepcja dzieł najnowszej literatury niemieckojęzycznej wyróżnionych nagrodą Deutscher Buchpreis".

⁹ Vide A. Kopacki, *Spod oka. Eseje o literaturze niemieckiej i nie tylko*, Warsaw 2002, and *Muszle w kapeluszu*, Wrocław 2012.

¹⁰ Vide H. Orłowski, *Zrozumieć świat: szkice o literaturze i kulturze niemieckiej XX wieku*, Wrocław 2003.

accompanied by cultural and sociological contexts, while the (re)definitions of the words used in the title of Pokrywka's volume presented in the introduction enable one to place this original overview in the context of modern studies on the most recent literature.

Keywords

German-language literature, novel, modernity

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CONVERSATIONS (NOT ONLY)
ABOUT READING



Zbigniew Herbert's Journeys to the South

A Conversation with Andrzej Franaszek and Francesco Matteo Cataluccio, Conducted by Krystyna Pietrych
(during the discussion panel at the 12th 'Puls Literatury' Festival in Łódź, 8 December 2018)

Krystyna Pietrych: The immediate pretext of our conversation is the impressive two-volume biography by Andrzej Franaszek, titled *Herbert*. But an equally good pretext, as it is difficult to grade it, is what the organisers of the Festival wrote in the programme. Let me quote: "Our tour guide in the literary journey from the North to the South is Zbigniew Herbert, whose year proclaimed by the Sejm RP we are currently celebrating". It is worth remembering this fact, especially that the Herbert Year [2018] is inevitably drawing to an end. I thought that it would be worth discussing several important issues connected with the journeys of Zbigniew Herbert to the South, using the opportunity that we have such eminent guests here. And I would like to begin chronologically. We can say, obvious as it may seem, that before Herbert headed for the South in the physical sense, he had set out there, in fact, much earlier in a symbolic way. Naturally, I am referring to his first poetic volume, titled *Struna światła* (*A Chord of Light*) from 1956. This is why I want to ask you what South meant to Herbert when he made his debut as a poet? I mean the South from the poems *Do Apollina* (*To Apollo*) and *Do Ateny* (*To Athena*) or from the poem about Daedalus and Icarus. After all, Herbert had not experienced the South directly at that time yet. He experienced it, so to speak, culturally. What kind of South was it?

Andrzej Franaszek: This topic obviously cannot be exhausted in just a few sentences. When we speak about journeys to the South, we have in mind journeys in the direction of the Mediterranean Sea and towards, as Herbert

willingly stressed, the sources of European culture. In his case, this is a journey to Greece in the first place or, to be precise, Ancient Greece; then to Italy as the extension of the Roman Empire. These are two countries which are the most important from his point of view. I think that what is really interesting in the case of Zbigniew Herbert is the fact that for him this mythology was never only a cultural ornament, which is also partly drawn from the tradition of his familial Lviv, the city which is connected with, for instance, Jan Parandowski, probably the most well-known Polish author of tales on Greek mythology. It was not just something that we learn about in the course of our school education. He really took this mythological reality personally and, as we know, also interpreted it this way. One example, in fact a late one, is the book titled *The King of the Ants*. Its subtitle includes a phrase: "private mythology". If, for instance, in the early 1970s Herbert (who had not published his book of poetry titled *Mr. Cogito* yet) was faced with accusations that he had been escaping into antiquarianism when writing of Athena and Marsyas rather than about contemporary times, and if young poets such as Ryszard Krynicki accused him of hiding in the comfortable asylum of timeless culture, that was untrue since he referred this mythological reality to contemporary times. He read it anew. And if Herbert is a major poet of reflection on history and human activity in history, primarily on the infinity of evil which man was capable of creating in history, this is also due to the fact that he interprets ancient history. His adventure – this journey to ancient times – undoubtedly begins in his youth, at school, for instance during his Latin lessons. Many of us can remember the wonderful essay titled *Lekcja łaciny* (A Latin Lesson), in which Herbert makes references to his Latin lessons in his gymnasium. But he does not only confines himself to memories. He also speaks about the experience of disillusion which was shared by people of his generation. About bringing up this generation in the belief that each of its representatives is an heir of ancient culture, the ancient Greeks and Romans, and that Lviv is the frontier of Europe. About the realisation – which is illustrated by the example of the poem titled *Przemiany Liwiusa* (*Transformations of Livy*) – that we are not, in fact, descendants of winners (those who establish empires), but, rather, of those who lost in history – nations which either lost or were totally exterminated by the Romans. This interest in ancient times – this journey of Herbert to the South – begins at that very time and it continues when, as a relatively young poet, he writes poems in the early 1950s and initially puts them back into the drawer, because he has no possibility of publishing a book. When he makes references to Athena or Apollo in these poems, he obviously does not aim at some trivial antiquarianism, but, for instance, shows the cruelty which is inherent to every artist. His relationship with ancient times is, therefore, very personal, anchored in life experience: in his biography, in education. But, above all, this relationship is – as I see it – sincere.

Francesco M. Cataluccio: I have always been fascinated with Herbert's story about his education in the gymnasium in Lviv: this famous professor Grzegorz Jasikowski, who drew the map of the Forum Romanum on the

board... When Herbert was in Rome for the first time – as a barbarian in the garden – he mentioned that one merit of his Latin teacher was that he did not feel alone there, as he put it, "lost among stones". And he added: "I recall him with gratitude". In addition, another gymnasium student of interwar Lviv, Stanisław Lem, also mentioned that the role of Latin – not as a language but as classical culture – was very important in the whole school education. And that it sparked students' interest. If we recall how Witold Gombrowicz depicted a picture of tuition at a school in Warsaw in *Ferdydurke*, we can clearly see that the way of looking at the future was totally different in Lviv. The reason for that could have been the considerable distance from the territory of the former Roman Empire; perhaps it was the distance that strengthened his conviction about the value of that world and its culture. It should also be added that Herbert paid a lot of attention to the figure of Marcus Aurelius and the philosophy of stoicism, to which his master, professor Henryk Elzenberg, devoted ingenious essays. And it was precisely the Mediterranean culture that created stoicism. Herbert once said that the philosophy of stoicism was a real lesson of life for him and that owing to it he was capable of surviving all his life tragedies. It enabled him to look at the reality and himself in such a way that he was able to fight, as life is a constant struggle. And in order to fight this battle, it is necessary to adopt an attitude such as the one proposed by the philosophy of stoicism.

AF: Yet Herbert's stoicism is devoid, I should think, of this ancient 'naivety'. Because when we read stoics, such as Seneca or even *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, we often find out that we can easily free ourselves from suffering, remain outside some random events, gain a special kind of autonomy: it all depends on our mind or on our spirit. Herbert does not have this conviction. This really wonderful poem, *Do Marka Aurelego (To Marcus Aurelius)* – dedicated to Henryk Elzenberg – depicts the fragility of human civilisation, fragility of our lives surrounded by politics, by history, by barbarians. And we could also add – on a slightly different level – surrounded by suffering. In a poem written much later, *Mr. Cogito Meditates on Suffering*, also an excellent one, it is clearly stated that it is impossible to be easily freed from this suffering; create something which as if did not concern us, as an orthodox stoic would have said. Herbert says: nothing of this kind. But we can at least act with this suffering a little. Try to withdraw from it. Also through art, through creating something and gaining distance in this way. So Herbert was a stoic, but a stoic 'with a past' of the 20th century...

KP: And, consequently, it was a different kind of stoicism. As you said, the Mediterranean culture – which we arbitrarily refer to as the South to mark the direction of the expedition – was a tool for Herbert, a tool of both cognition and self-definition on the personal, individual plane. But it was also a possibility of diagnosing, in the language of Aesop, what was happening not in the South, but in Poland back then, still in the 1950s and then in the 1960s. This cultural heritage, all that he gained from his school in Lviv, is indeed very important but then he undertook his journey: the first to the

so-called West, to Paris, in 1958, and the second to the South, to Italy, in 1959. I would like to ask a question: what changes for Herbert in his picture of the Mediterranean region after he has had a direct contact with Italy and Greece? To what extent is this picture modified and how?

AF: This is a difficult question, in my opinion... But maybe one more sentence do add here. We can infer, from what we were all talking about, that the experience of ancient culture is, according to Herbert, not only language and history, but also some spiritual formation. Herbert cites in his late utterances a famous poem by Rilke, titled "Archaic Torso of Apollo", from which we learn that it is not only us who look at the statue; it is not only us who look at the antique heritage, but also this statue – and what is behind it, so the perfection of the form, the artist's endeavour, certain moral code once present in our civilisation – is looking at us. And in the finale we read: "You must change your life". This is a very well-known poem, perhaps quoted all too often, but I think it is very true. And Herbert also says that it is not only us who look at paintings in museums. Also paintings look at us. We do not always rise to the challenge, we do not always live up to this heritage. Herbert displays the attitude of humbleness towards the past. At a certain point, possibly during his first trip to the West, he turns very clearly – regarding his interests connected with the history of art – to the past. The avant-garde of the late 1950s clearly disappoints him. He is under the impression that this is mainly humbug, a machine producing subsequent works with great ease. And then he chooses the past. His fascination with Piero della Francesca begins. He sees his paintings first in the National Gallery in London, and then in Italy, precisely during his journey in 1959. And we could also add that when he visits the South – both Italy and Southern France – he gets saturated with colours, flavours, smells. Then he writes that he fell in love with the Provençal cuisine, that he adores bathing in the sea. From the *Barbarian in the Garden* I can remember the description of a pizza, drinking *orvieto classico*... So we do not have a tale from a course book on history or history of art, but a record of experiencing the joy of life. When Herbert arrives in Spoleto for the first time – invited to take part in a music and literature festival – he writes to his parents that after a day and a half he knows about half of the town and that he could nearly speak Italian. And he begins to wonder, of course ironically, what is better: the fate of a beggar in Spoleto or that of an eminent poet in Warsaw. With the supposition that it is maybe better to beg for a glass of red wine in Spoleto...

FMC: It is worth noticing that Herbert, setting out as a "barbarian" to the Mediterranean "garden", was very well prepared for the journey. He was by no means an ordinary tourist. Before he set off, he read many books. And what he was later saying on Siena, for instance, was based on solid knowledge, also on the history of art. He was befriended with assistant professor Maria Rzepińska, the author of *Historia koloru* (*The History of Colour*), who lived in Kraków. Regrettably, this ingenious book has not been translated into Italian. Herbert reproached me for that, for that matter. I consider the

way he looked at paintings to be extraordinary. Naturally, he observes the motifs, being excellently prepared for this, but he is also interested in what is material. For instance, he read letters of Bruegel in order to find out how much particular paint colours cost. He was a very specific lover of art – not one that is idealising, but, rather, focused on the concrete. And I think that having this knowledge at his disposal during his journey to Italy, Provence, or Greece, he wanted to see through the prism of art what the reality was like. I remember that when we were together in Milan and we were watching *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, he was mainly interested in what there was on the table. He was looking at people who were having bread and wine, and he was pondering what else they could be eating. And it was a fantastic topic for him: what was actually being eaten during the last supper?... And he was laughing that *The Last Supper*, which Veronese painted in Venice, is a huge baroque supper – a totally incredible table probably created with the audience of this painting in mind. I have been always extremely intrigued by this liking for the concrete in Herbert the “barbarian”...

KP: Something different caught my eye. When I was reading Herbert's texts anew not long ago – owing to the biography written by Andrzej Franaszek – I began to ponder on his journeys. I agree with you that what he experienced during those journeys was a kind of incarnated culture in which he had already been functioning. But certain things began to disturb me when I took a closer look at these journeys... Don't you have the impression that there was something else beside fascination and delight; beside this sunny side of the Mediterranean region? I was alarmed, for example, by a letter written by Herbert probably from Crete. Herbert writes in it about a touch of death in a very depressive manner. Maybe this South was not, after all, so unambiguously bright, radiant, wonderful – as an experience?

AF: Of course, it wasn't. And it is probably clear that we cannot summarise any progression of Herbert's life, or anybody else's life, in just one formula. It is obvious, therefore, that travelling was not only joy and delight even though there was also plenty of delight and joy. It seems to me that the moments in which Herbert was happy in his life most often were precisely the moments connected with travelling. And there are indeed a lot of those joyful anecdotes here. Maybe Francesco will tell us in a moment about how Herbert was singing operatic arias in his tenement... But beside this there are, of course, other experiences, maybe the deepest ones; and the one you referred to is this type of experience. I was also fascinated many years ago when I came across such testimonies for the first time. Those were precisely touches of death. In his letter from Crete, he records his way through the street from the harbour to the hotel in burning heat – such a heat that can strike only in the south of Europe. Herbert feels that he is actually shrinking, that he is close to death, but not the literal death from heat or exhaustion, but from disappearing, being consumed by nothingness. The sweltering heat turns into white nothingness which consumes him. And he says that he has

to capture two things: there is a metal bed frame in the hotel room, there are a lot of objects in the museum – and that keeps him on this side of existence. But this is, of course, quite untypical of Herbert – there are not many instances of such a touch of nothingness in his works. There are also other aspects, however, which he quite often mentions. Travelling was like wrestling with the world on different levels: trying, for instance, to rise to the challenge. And, indeed, once you have reached Acropolis, which you dreamt of for dozens of years, you have to find in yourself the ability to be genuinely delighted rather than note some kind of disappointment. That involved also daily wrestling in the financial sense. His travelling budgets were generally rather tight. So he hitchhiked and slept in the cheapest hotels. There is one more aspect. When we read *Modlitwa Pana Cogito – podróżnika* (A Prayer of Mr. Cogito the Traveller), we will find there an address to God: "Forgive me that I did not fight like Lord Byron for the happiness / of conquered peoples and only treasured the risings of the moon / and museums". There are also similar comments in some of Herbert's letters. I went to Greece several times, it was Greece of the military junta, an enslaved country, I knew it but I did not write about that for a number of reasons. For instance, because I do not think that it is always the writer's task to meddle in the temporality and political affairs. If I, as a writer of communist Poland, write about the Greek fascist government, it is clear that I will be ideologically used. But this does not mean that I did not notice it. And, reconstructing Herbert's way of thinking, I feel certain ambiguity: I saw Acropolis, but I also saw persecuted and suffering people... So I think that apparently it is possible to point to at least several difficult aspects connected with Herbert's journeys.

FMC: Overseas journeys were like getting a breath of fresh air for Herbert. During our meetings he would say: "I breathe at last". But it should be taken into account what he, metaphorically speaking, had in his suitcase. He carried with himself, in the metaphorical sense, a very heavy suitcase from Poland. He surely could breathe abroad, but he always carried some heavy burden with him as well. And this excellent extensive book by Andrzej Franaszek explains this matter very well. I learned a lot from it. Herbert's journeys – getting to know different cities and cultures – did not solve his problems. His longer stay in France in the second half of the 1980s turned out to be very difficult for him. He lived with his wife in a council flat in a district of Paris quite far from the city centre. They both had little money. They rarely went out in the evenings as they were apprehensive of the Arabs who formed the majority of the inhabitants of that district. In addition, at that time, and we are talking about the last period in Herbert's life, his mental problems exacerbated. Despite this, meetings with art provided him with moments of genuine satisfaction and escape from trouble. And I noticed one intriguing thing in his contacts with art. I met two people in my life who reached the works which they were looking at through drawing. The first one was precisely Zbigniew Herbert, and the second one – Andrzej Wajda. Looking at the catalogue from the exhibition of Herbert's drawings which was prepared for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków in

2015, it is possible to find out how he drew, for instance, human faces. And Wajda – I remember this from his stay in Bologna and Venice – always carried his sketchbook with him. It is known that he drew a lot when preparing his films, as initially he wanted to be a painter. And his drawings are somehow similar to the drawings by Herbert. And when you look, for instance, at these portraits drawn by Herbert, it is instantly clear that these are not some student copies of Raphael's face, but his personal interpretations. When I compared the originals – five or six of them – with Herbert's works, I noticed that the portraits which he drew are extremely tragic. It can be clearly seen e.g. that the eyes are sadder. I think that this way of drawing was a representation of his way of looking at himself. And the paintings which he looked at were just a pretext: they were, in reality, like mirrors. And the countries which he visited were also such mirrors. His stay there provided him with a pretext to look at himself from a distance when being far away from his country. The tragic philosophy of the life of Mr. Cogito, which is also ironic, was manifesting precisely at that time.

AF: There is a beautiful essay by Józef Czapski, titled *Tumult i widma* (*Tumult and Phantoms*), which revolves around a ship's voyage – if I remember correctly – to South America. Czapski begins this essay with the statement that when we set out for a journey, our demons – various anguish and pangs of conscience – are left as if behind. And the journey liberates us from them, at least for some time. At the end of his text, Czapski says: so, now the phantoms have caught up with me. And the peace ends. The same happened to Herbert. He wrote beautifully not only about delight, but also, for instance, about immersing into the new city on the first day of stay drinking in every detail and exploring what the colours of this city are, what materials it is built of, what the smell of the air is like, how people behave, in front of which shops or bakeries they gather... He was naturally a person travelling to museums, making pilgrimages to paintings by Rembrandt or Vermeer, but he also noticed the tangible, material, physical world. He could describe this, he could take part in this savouring of the world. And naturally, trivially, I would say, this enriched his writing about art. It seems to me, however, that a certain change was taking place over the years. Relatively young Herbert, going to the West for the first time and then writing *Barbarian in the Garden*, tends to immerse more into human relations. It is the similar case with middle-aged Herbert, who travels to Greece and writes essays from the volume titled *A Labyrinth by the Sea*. But that older Herbert – finishing, not without some effort, *Still Life with a Bridle* in his old age – this is Herbert who is separate, withdrawn, more focused e.g. on a single image.

KP: My following question is actually connected with this. When I was comparing the other day some fragments of *Barbarian in the Garden* and *Still Life with a Bridle*, I kept thinking how much these two texts differ – of course not only thematically, but how different this North is and how different this South is. And this is closely related to Herbert's age. Actually, in *Still Life with a Bridle* there is not a single fragment which would concern sensory

experiences, which would indicate that he delights in the food, taste, or touch...

AF: Admittedly, we can say that he might have liked the Dutch cuisine less than the Italian one...

KP: Without doubt, but this is pretty obvious... No smell reaches him, though, despite the fact that at the same time he is extremely sensitive to colours and details found in paintings. When the travelling Herbert was described earlier, he was referred to as a "barbarian" – as he called himself quite ironically and with a wink – who was going West from the East, which was also due to the fact that it was communist at that time. Now we saw his journey on a different axis: the North – the South. As a result, I would like to ask you: what was this 'northern' Herbert like? How was he different from the 'southern' Herbert?

AF: It is important to notice that, basically, there are three directions on Herbert's map. There is the South which meets the West and, in fact, this is one direction – let's say the Mediterranean Sea, but this part of it which remembers the Roman Empire. Anyway, Herbert felt much better in the south of France – in Provence – than in Paris. He believed that the extermination of the Albigenses was a catastrophe in the history of Europe which brought about the demise of the Southern culture. We remember this from *Barbarian in the Garden*. Herbert's map also features the North and this is not only due to Dutch paintings, but also his interests in, for instance, the Vikings, and his willingness to write about Scandinavia: here we have an unfinished project – a book-essay titled *Saga o podboju* (*A Saga on Conquest*). Sicily was for him an interesting place – one where the North and the South met, where the Normans from the North met the Arabs, creating, for a brief moment at least, an intriguing unusual kingdom in which different cultures intermingled. We remember, of course, that this is precisely the setting of *King Roger*, the opera by Karol Szymanowski and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz.

The East is conspicuous by its absence on Herbert's globe. And this is undoubtedly connected with the very beginning of his life, with Lviv, and a certain tradition of thinking of a large part of Poles at that time, namely that we are here the heirs of the Mediterranean culture. And further to the east there is grassland and barbarians. And if this grassland eventually comes to Herbert in 1939, it is not in the form of Dostoyevsky, but of the Red Army and the NKVD. Factors of this kind make Herbert never really take any interest in Russian culture, which is also a certain limitation. If Czapski could sharply distinguish communism from flesh and blood Russia, the Russian culture, and, finally, concrete people who he met "in this inhuman land", Herbert actually never turned to this direction. He turns his back to the East and marches to the South, to the West, to the North – anywhere but not there.

FMC: Yes, this is true. Herbert would often joke that he comes from Scotland. What he meant is that his family is of Scottish origin and has

nothing in common with the East. This is, in fact, an interesting topic. There is one thing that I have always found really valuable, namely that despite all the geopolitical problems, many representatives of the Polish culture – intellectuals or writers – were capable of understanding and thoroughly assessing the Russian culture. Czapski, who studied in Saint Petersburg still before the revolution... Gustaw Herling-Grudziński – but not also the likes of him who were in the labour camp... Or Miłosz himself... Herbert, in turn, always remained very insular. He admitted that Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov and a couple of other authors were outstanding writers or poets, but they simply did not belong to him, because he was connected with a totally different culture and, above all, different sensitivity. I remember such a discussion once in France about whether or not Russia belonged to Europe. At that time, Herbert happened to be in Paris. Milan Kundera wrote his famous text ("An Introduction to a Variation", *The Book Review*, 6 I 1985), in which he stated that Dostoyevsky was not close to him, that his philosophy of life was completely alien to him and that, generally, the Russian culture did not belong, in his opinion, to the European culture. Europe is defined by the ancient Greek culture whereas Russia – the ancient Slavic culture. Joseph Brodsky responded to these statements ("Why Milan Kundera Is Wrong About Dostoyevsky", *The New York Times*, 17 II 1985), giving convincing arguments as to why that was not true. Herbert told me then that he did want to write on this topic, but that it was Kundera who was right and touched upon the gist of problem, and Brodsky could not speak otherwise because he was a Russian. Therefore, it may be said that according to him Europe ends in Lviv, and there is something completely different to the east of it...

KP: Precisely. If Europe ends in Lviv – and traces of such thinking are present in Herbert's works actually all the time – another question arises. What is the reason, in your opinion, why Herbert never went to Lviv after the war? Did you come across any documents or traces that would explain that? Didn't he want to go there?

AF: In contrast to the title of a well-known poem by Adam Zagajewski, Herbert was not going to Lviv... Essentially, there are two possible attitudes of people who lost their hometown, be it Lviv or Vilnius, Wrocław or Gdańsk... Those who adopt one attitude say: if there is a possibility, let's go there, because we need to see, touch... And Herbert could go on a trip to the Ukrainian People's Republic in the 1960s or 1970s, and visit his hometown... In turn, people representing the other attitude when going through the trauma of abandonment do not want to undertake any attempts at all to confront the hometown. They do not want to see, in particular, that it is now in other hands, in a different form, with different names of streets, written in a different alphabet. I think that we are not surprised by this. I like one anecdote, but I am not going to relate it now, stealing it from one of its protagonists; instead, I would merely like to announce it. So, there is a beautiful moment when Zbigniew Herbert and Francesco Matteo Cataluccio are

standing, maybe not in a gondola but on board of a vaporetto, and they are sailing around Venice. And here something happens with Lviv, doesn't it...?

FMC: Yes. Herbert claimed that Venice was a city similar to Lviv. This is a little funny, but he did explain these connections to me. Firstly, because the lion is the sign of both these cities. It goes without saying: Venice is the city of St. Mark, hence the lion. But not only this. Secondly, slightly because of architecture. Herbert claimed that tenement houses on the Lviv market had clear connections with the Italian culture. Thirdly, due to the connections with the Byzantine Empire, which were of particular interest to him. In the last period of his life, Herbert wanted desperately to go to Ravenna – precisely because of those interests in the Byzantine world. But this idea, like many others, remained unaccomplished. And Venice is really closely connected with the Byzantine Empire. I had been always very impressed with how much he knew on this topic. Once, he gave me a two-volume edition of *Listy (Letters)* by Stanisław Brzozowski (edited by Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1970). Laughing, Herbert read to me a fragment of a letter of this writer to Wula and Rafał Buber (of 31 December, 1905): "We have seen little in Venice so far, anyway St. Mark's Square and part of the Doge's Palace. St. Mark is peculiar. It is beautiful, as if it had been built by a pirate for his lover. There is this randomness of the loot. This or that is there, because they laid their hands on it. Style? This is also the style. Perhaps the only criterion against this beauty is its impossibility to develop". As practically everything that it is made of – like the columns – was robbed from Istanbul. Herbert, agreeing with Brzozowski, joked that it was not a church of the Italians, but of the Byzantine world. There is one more anecdote. When we look at the facade of St. Mark's Basilica, on the left side we can see lions which were brought from the Byzantine Empire. And next to them there is a strange bas-relief which features Alexander the Great lifted by two birds in accordance with the legend that he was granted ascension after his death. Herbert said that most Italians would be shocked by the information that in St. Mark's Basilica there are bones of Alexander the Great and not the bones of the church patron, as there is a legend saying that the expedition which was to transport the relics of St. Mark from Alexandria on the orders of the government of Venice accidentally took with them also the remains of Alexander buried nearby. According to Herbert, the presence of a pagan image on the facade of a Christian church would be a sign confirming this mistake and indicating that there are really no relics of St. Mark inside...

AF: There would be some charm in piligrimaging to the relics of Alexander the Great...

FMC: Precisely. This temple was for Herbert the quintessence of the Byzantine Empire, since St. Mark's Basilica is not the cathedral of Venice but, in accordance with the Byzantine tradition, the cathedral of power. This is the Doge's chapel, situated next to their palace.

AF: It can be said that there are two moments – Venetian moments – at the beginning and end of Zbigniew Herbert's life. At the beginning we have the market in Lviv. A young lad buys for himself roasted chestnuts there. Herbert will come across them in Paris years later and will write to his parents that the smell of these chestnuts is for him the smell of the past which is out of his reach for ever. In the middle of the old town there is an ugly Austrian town hall which looks like some inferior barracks, but around there are splendid Renaissance tenement houses designed by Italian architects brought to Lviv. And on one of them there is a bas-relief showing the lion of St. Mark, as it was the seat of the Embassy of the Republic of Venice. On the other end of this biographical story, so about 70 years later, Herbert is gravely ill lying in his bed in Warsaw, with a small tube delivering him oxygen as he could not breathe in any other way – unable, in fact, to undertake a journey greater than getting out of bed and reaching the bathroom. And he comes up with an idea that he wants to escape from this world; we could say – escape death; go to Venice, live there. I remember that when I heard this, it sounded half-legendary, half-apocryphal. Yet how moved I was when I found in Herbert's archive the plane tickets which the nurse bought him along with hotel room reservations. This undertaking was naturally completely unworkable but, on the symbolic level, very poignant.

KP: Exactly. One can say that on a symbolic plane Herbert did visit Lviv in a way. I mean, if Venice was to be symbolically connected with Lviv, as this is a really major clue. I would also like to ask about two things. One of them surprised me greatly when I started to recall Herbert's poetry – read it with regard to his journeys. And I saw a thing which I did not expect – maybe you noticed it somehow, too. In reality, there are very few Herbert's poems which contain traces of the direct of experiencing space in the topographical, geographical sense. These include, naturally, *Clouds over Ferrara* or *Rovigo*, but rather as a kind of non-C, an inscription of non-being rather than being in that town. I was wondering why his poetry does not reflect this infatuation with the South, fascination and even the hardships of experiencing it. This was surely present in his essays and correspondence. Do you have, perhaps, any hypothesis about it?

AF: I do not have any explanation. I remember, however, that one of his travelling companions, Magdalena Czajkowska, drew attention to this very issue when writing a text about Herbert's works. She noticed that if Herbert's poetry was heading towards a certain, let's say, abstractness and this is why it was not saturated with the topographical or temporal concrete, essays make up for a reversal of this situation. In particular his early essays, which are full of sensory details.

FMC: I do not have clarity on that. I have always been under the impression that Herbert ignored his essays. Poems are what is important and essays just accompany them. Hence it is different than in the case of Miłosz, where all the forms make a whole. In my opinion, however, Herbert's essays are

important, but not as personal as his poems. His intention to describe the Byzantine world was an idea not for poems, but for an essay...

AF: We could say that his poems are like a Latin inscription carved in stone. If Herbert went to Latin classes as a young man and recalled later that Latin struck him with balance and perfection, it was like an inscription carved in the Roman type as compared to rustling, clumsy Polish. His poems are also sometimes carved in a marble slab in Roman type. And when you carve stone, there is no time or place for descriptions or too many adjectives – you need to convey an essence. I present all this, of course, a bit as an essayistic joke...

KP: And, actually, a convincing metaphor. The final question: what do you think – is Herbert's vision of the South – of the Mediterranean region in a broad sense – important, attractive, interesting, useful for the contemporary human being? To what extent, in your opinion, is it not outdated?

AF: It is possible to answer this question in a number of ways. For instance, I remember how many years ago someone in the editorial office of *Tygodnik Powszechny* said: why should we read *Barbarian in the Garden* if we have such excellent guidebooks to Italy? We have the Internet and in it there is everything we need in order to cognise the world. We can go there any minute. But the answer would be like this: Zbigniew Herbert as a historian of art may not have been a very original and – although we would think so – professional author; and professional historians of art point to different borrowings or incorrectness of some of his ideas. But if someone, and this is not only my impression, read *Barbarian in the Garden* in a good moment of their life, for instance in secondary school, they will always go to Siena remembering what Herbert wrote about Siena. He was capable of spreading his love and passion towards works of art which he wrote about, towards those places which he visited. And later, naturally, we will read other books, like Kazimierz Chłędowski's excellent monograph devoted to Siena, and we will find out much more. But we owe it to Herbert rather than anyone else that our emotions are moved and that we fall in love with the story about the city.

FMC: Yes, this is true. In any case, essays from the *Barbarian in the Garden* collection have never been translated into Italian. No one found the reason to do so. They claimed: what do we, Italians, need this for? I think that this attitude is wrong. Herbert's essays are, above all, a stylistic masterpiece. Another masterwork is the way he looks at Siena, Greece, or the Dutch art. I think that, above all, Herbert's way of thinking and style of writing both retain their freshness. *Barbarian in the Garden* was a book which was very abstract for Poles in the 1960s as very few of them could travel abroad. It was certainly important to them that there is someone who is capable of talking about their journeys in such a fantastic way. But I still meet many educated Poles who look at Siena or Orvieto from Herbert's perspective.

KP: True. When you read *Barbarian in the Garden* today, it is not in order to obtain detailed information from a historian of art. This is something we already know or we can easily check. What is absolutely unusual about these essays is some kind of victory of Herbert the poet. Their language is incredible. There are such wordings which could not be found in any guide, since an artist is needed to create them.

Edited by Jerzy Wiśniewski

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ZBIGNIEW HERBERT'S JOURNEYS TO THE SOUTH

SUMMARY

The topic of a conversation of three literary scholars which took place in the last months of the Zbigniew Herbert Year (2018) is the experience recorded in the poet's poems and essays of the Mediterranean culture, antiquity as a tool of cognition, an important code as well as the experience of his real journeys to the south of Europe being a kind of dividing line in his literary output and resonating in it.

Keywords

Zbigniew Herbert, essay, culture of south Europe, art history

Francesco Matteo Cataluccio (1955) studied philosophy and Polish philology in Florence and Warsaw. He is an author of many articles on the history and culture of Poland and Eastern Europe as well as an editor of the Italian edition of works by Witold Gombrowicz, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński or a collective Italian and Spanish edition of works by Brunon Schulz. He is known to the Polish reader as an author of books such as *Niedojarzałość, choroba naszych czasów* [Immaturity: Disease of Our Time] (ZNAK, Kraków 2006), *Jadę zobaczyć, czy tam jest lepiej. Niemalże brewiarz środkowoeuropejski* [I'm Going to See if It's Better There] (ZNAK, Kraków 2012) and *Czarnobyl* [Chernobyl] (Czarne, Wołowiec 2013). His correspondence with Zbigniew Herbert was published in the volume *Herbert. Studia i dokumenty* [Herbert: Studies and Documents] edited by Piotr Kłoczowski (Warsaw, 2008). He received the Ryszard Kapuściński Award for Literary Reportage in 2013.

dr hab. Andrzej Franaszek (1971) – a literary critic, a lecturer at the Pedagogical University of Krakow, a secretary of the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award. He is the author of *Miłosz. A Biography* (Kraków, 2011; for which he was granted, for instance, the Kościelski Award, the Nike Audience Award, Kazimierz Wyka Award as well as The Award of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage), *Ciemne źródło. Esej o cierpieniu w twórczości Zbigniewa Herberta* [Dark Spring. An Essay on Pain in Zbigniew Herbert's Work] (Londyn, 1998; 2nd edition: Kraków, 2008), *Przepustka z piekła. 44 szkice o literaturze i przygodach duszy* [A Pass from Hell. 44 Drafts on Literature and

Adventures of the Soul] (Kraków, 2010) and *Herbert. Biografia*, t. 1-2 [Herbert. Biography, vol. 1-2] (Kraków, 2018). He is currently working on a biography of Józef Czapski.

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“A novel that does not uncover a hitherto unknown segment of existence is immoral”

A Conversation with Marek Bieńczyk on Milan Kundera’s Works (Conducted by Olga Żyminkowska)

Olga Żyminkowska: How did it happen that you became a translator of Milan Kundera’s works in French? What was the context of the first rendition?

Marek Bieńczyk: It is a long story which partly dates back to the 1980s and the whole political context of those years. The other day I was in Prague where there was a meeting devoted to Kundera on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday, which he celebrates this year. I talked to Alain Finkielkraut, a French philosopher and a friend of Kundera, and he told me that it was *The Joke* that represented the most important book for his generation. It was May, 1968... For me and for many of my friends and acquaintances the most important work by Kundera was *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which came to us in a very special moment and was a shock, without which probably I would have never decided to translate Kundera. It was only after the perusal of this book that I read his earlier works. They were not easy to get, because part of them was published only in France and our censorship did not let them be imported. I even had a mate who traded in books in the street for 25 years and he probably made the biggest amount of money precisely on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*...

OŻ: Therefore, was *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* an aesthetic discovery or, rather, an intellectual one?

MB: It was both. In his book, Kundera sets the proportions between the individual 'I' and the collective 'I' in a way which is slightly different from

what was known from Polish literature. The need to show appreciation for the individual 'I', to understand individual experience of each of us against the background of unfolding history was something unusual in the times of great collective manifestations and marches during the martial law and in the subsequent years. We liked it that the book which speaks of politics in such a radical way is full of light and vitality while the Polish prose of that time was a little 'hopeless', churning in patriotic needs or – like in Konwicki's works (whom I adore, after all) – it was drowning in melancholy, enfeebling through maundering in the streets like the protagonist of *Rzeka podziemna* (*The Underground River*)... I recall a moment just before the March strike, which seemed decisive, the Soviet invasion was near... I was walking through a park on my own, I had some free time, I sat on a bench and experienced an almost mystical feeling that I was not 'I', but I was a collective subject...

OŻ: "I' is someone else"...

MB: Yes, there was something from this ecstasy which the poet wrote about. 'I' is everyone else, 'I' is we all.

OŻ: But *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was not your debut as a translator of Kundera, was it?

MB: No, it had already been translated by Agnieszka Holland, but in the 1980s when a secret conference was held...

OŻ: In Katowice in 1986?

MB: Yes, this was the time of the climax of Kundera's popularity in Poland. At that time, I translated a dictionary of Kundera's terms for the purposes of that conference and later for *Res Publica*. And it was the first Kundera's text that I translated; still in the originally longer form. It was later attached in its abridged version to *The Art of the Novel*, which I translated soon after.

OŻ: After that came *Immortality*?

MB: Yes, the paradox was that Kundera was writing *Immortality* in Czech. But I told him that I could sense a typically 'French' style of writing. It turned out that Kundera really began to write this book in French, a few dozen pages, but then returned to Czech.

OŻ: What does this 'French' style of writing involve?

MB: I think that it is about an even greater clarity of speech. Though it is generally a feature of his writing, at least up to a point. I felt this 'Frenchness' of his style with my senses and he readily agreed on the translation of *Immortality* from French.

OŽ: Is this change of the medium from Czech to French connected with world-view changes? Or maybe was this the issue of choosing French as a more international language? Or a matter of certain political manifestation...?

MB: This was not a political act. If it was any kind of act at all, then it was an artistic one. At that time, he was continuing to develop the utopia of world literature, *Weltliteratur*, as the homeland of the writer. This was a kind of teasing departure from the national language which is, so to speak, a particular language, and it is all too closely connected with national phantasms and profusion of stereotypes. He did not want to be read as a dissident writer. This was a symbolic step in the direction of liberating himself from all kinds of clichés on him, including auto-thematic clichés, e.g. that the writer has to write in his own language.

OŽ: Was this connected with changing the way of thinking about the novel?

MB: This was connected with changing the form of the novel, since his first novel written entirely in French, i.e. *Slowness*, and two subsequent ones are short novels which have the form of the fugue. Earlier he had rather been faithful to the form of a seven-part sonata, to use musical terms. Changing the language is also connected with his belief that French, which he is now using, is a quite clear language, devoid of unnecessary ornamentation and virtuosity, and this is how he saw the art of the novel: say what is the most important, do not make sentences and descriptions overwrought.

OŽ: Is it possible to notice a greater role of ornamentation in those works in Czech?

MB: The easiest thing is to set a Czech-French dividing line in Kundera's literary output. This is quite simple. The second dividing line, slightly different, would split those novels whose plot is set in the Czech Republic and those set outside this country. The third dividing line is less evident but, to my mind, deeper: this is the dividing line between *The Joke* and the author's subsequent moves. You asked about ornamentation... If we were to measure 'language weight', language wealth in his books, *The Joke* would be much heavier than *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* or *Immortality*. This is connected with two things. Firstly, *The Joke* is a novel written by still quite a young man... Do you like *The Joke*?

OŽ: It is not my favourite book of this author.

MB: I have read it again recently. I was struck by the power of this novel... perhaps his best one... There is a kind of zest, energy in it which results, firstly, from the writer's age and, secondly, from the fact that it has a different narrator than later novels or, to be precise, there is no narrator whatsoever, since this book consists of monologues uttered by the characters. Brilliant monologues. This kind of monologue trance, which Kundera evoked, can be

found only in novels by Roberto Bolaño thirty years later... And afterwards Kundera is beginning to introduce an external narrator, which changes the language of the novel.

OŻ: His prose is perhaps becoming more 'intellectual'. Could this be due to musical inspirations? His novels do not stand out as being particularly inspired by painting or, generally, visual arts.

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MB: Yes, after all he was a musician by education. I remember I was at his place in Paris, and a day before my visit he had listened to Janaček's opera and then he was telling me about how he had been waiting in suspense to see how the orchestra would play the concrete note in the second act... But also Kundera's stage imagination is developed; dialogues of his characters often create a theatrical scene.

OŻ: So the dividing line in his output is the change of the narrator?

MB: Apart from stories which the writer tells in his books, he also tells a story of his form. In Kundera's works, the course of the novel leads from the large form to the smaller form, or from the swelling form to the purified form. I feel in this his 'gnostic' sensitivity, which manifests through the gradual process of disincarnating the novel. There is less and less matter in it and this is in some part connected with the position of the narrator. In any case, this is one of the reasons.

OŻ: I would like to continue with the thread of the narrator. What role does the narrator perform after this division? As we read in Kundera's essays several times, the novel is, according to him, a space where moral evaluation is suspended. Sometimes, however, I am under the impression that after the dividing line of *The Joke*, the narrator attempts to explain and sometimes judge characters loudly and clearly, maybe sometimes too unambiguously... This creates certain tension between the declared impartiality and the narrator who comments in an explicit manner.

MB: Good point. But I would say that he is not often caught red-handed giving explicit judgement; maybe except when he adopts a sarcastic tone, as he does at times in *Slowness*, which is why I came to like this book less today. Generally speaking, these novels do not provide answers after all, but only a sketched field, a musical score.

OŻ: But there are, for instance, the so-called keywords, with which the narrator often assesses the characters...

MB: 'Assesses' is perhaps too strong a word. Keywords, such as 'darkness' or 'cathedral', serve to describe different activities of imagination in each of us. But you are right in this sense that you can feel his liking for Sabina, for instance, and irony towards her lover. Overall, it can be said that the blocks

of the structure of the novel are stacked clearly, yet the field of relation between them is ambiguous.

OŽ: So we could say that the tones of the variation are clear, but it remains to be seen what music they will play, again using this musical metaphor. The blocks of the structure which you mentioned can come in the form of the protagonists. Some critics accuse Kundera of creating 'paper' characters, or characters who are supposed to be only figures of some idea, and who are anti-psychological...

MB: This is true, they have always been anti-psychological. The language used by the protagonists is a thematic-existential language. Do you remember the notion of 'existential code'? It greatly appealed to us in the 1980s. Such an 'existential' way of talking about a human being is connected with the anti-psychological [Wilhelm – OŽ.] Dilthey's tradition. It has both analytical and poetic potential. True – some characters are more physical and some are less. It was possible to make a film out of Tereza and Tomas [*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, directed by P. Kaufman – OŽ.], even though Kundera has never hidden the fact that these are characters-ideas. Or, rather, characters-themes. All protagonists are created by the author in the same way; he keeps underlining the way of their 'conception', how they were born in his mind. And then, in the course of events, some characters acquire this 'body'...

OŽ: For instance, Jaromil from *Life Is Elsewhere* seems to be a figure that is quite clear psychologically.

MB: I remembered him in the same way. Likewise, Chantal from *Identity* seems to be quite incarnated. I also clearly see Agnes from *Immortality*.

OŽ: I think that what we are talking about touches upon a very important problem of truth and fiction in the philosophy of Kundera's novel. On the one hand, the fictionality of characters is heavily stressed and, on the other, his novels seem to claim the right to analyse the reality outside the novel...

MB: The notion of the character is fundamental to him, it goes without saying. Characters are this 'experimental ego', but it is only through them that it is possible to say something about the world. Through their existential concrete. Friends of mine who were Kundera's students in Paris and created the magazine called *L'atelier du roman*, consider the literary figure to be the base for creating the novel and talking about it. Certain things cannot be said without literary figures. Hence the novel, not philosophy. Do you remember Kundera's sentence that characters are existential experiments for him...

OŽ: ... "unfulfilled possibilities of human existence".

MB: This can be annoying about them that they are so consistent in this experiment. Kundera drafts them in such a way as to make the

character-experiment vivid. They can seem to be 'paper' characters when compared to their 19th-century counterparts, but Kundera understands that he will not be either Balzac or Flaubert, because he is already at a different stage of novel development. I must confess that I have always been curious about which of Kundera's characters I can actually 'see' and which I cannot...

OŻ: And why. Does the fact that we 'see' the given character help us to reconstruct the ideological layer of the novel, or maybe it makes concentrating on the ideological dominant more difficult?

MB: I think that they are supposed to be signs, notes in the composition. Each of them, nonetheless, represents a separate whole. From the point of view of the reader, those protagonists who are more evocative will obviously be more attractive. I do not know if you have seen some reviews of *Cold War* by Paweł Pawlikowski. If there were any critical remarks, they concerned the fact that the characters are dead, empty, that their relationship is incomprehensible. And these are characters typical of Kundera, elliptical in a sense. Kundera is, generally speaking, a writer of ellipsis: through uncovering certain features and behaviours of the characters, he always refers to the whole, which is some 'grand existential theme'. Personally, I like this technique. Even though now it can be seen as slightly dated after several dozen years. But please, do not talk about "the novel's ideological layer"; this is not a good term for Kundera.

OŻ: Or is it, perhaps, that – according to Kundera – also 'human nature' (not only the nature of the character) has some musical structuring, or that a human being's identity is shaped through keywords which form a chorus, recurrent problems, and situations in the compositional whole of life? Does Kundera go beyond the novel and state anything about a human being as such?

MB: Yes, he does, and keywords may be treated as composition notes, 'nodes' of existence which sometimes determine the whole life. What does Kundera say about a human being? Among other things, he says that a human being cannot be described analytically, in Freudian terms, for instance; the psychological description says little or nothing about existence, and it is existence that Kundera is interested in. And existence can be described through the novel, although naturally this will be an infinite description. In addition, Kundera is very sensitive to the theatre of human behaviours. This is very Proustian. Extraordinarily Proustian in him. He likes demystifying. I remember a situation when he once told me in some bar: "Let's sit near the restroom, because I like looking at how people are behaving when they know they are being observed while going to the restroom". He is staring in a way in which [Witold – OŻ.] Gombrowicz does, just as Gombrowicz is observing how [Joanna – OŻ.] Młodziakowa is going to the restroom.

OŻ: Can we say that Kundera is a sceptic if it comes to recognising the possibilities of reaching some truth?

MB: Definitely. The novelist may not know one truth. And he is skeptical in his outlook on the state of culture and civilisation. When it comes to the possibilities of cognition, Kundera, let's repeat this, believes in the novel; he follows [Hermann – OŻ.] Broch. He believes that cognition through the novel is more advanced. I am under the impression that Kundera believes also in beauty, although this may be a thread which is not discussed. Moments of beauty in human life are rare and difficult to capture, but they exist...

OŻ: Is this capturing of beauty connected with some cognition again?

MB: These are metaphysical intuitions which the characters are living through. They represent the truth of their world: a possibility of beauty appears in their world. Some of the characters of his novels see it, i.e. those who are more self-conscious and who understand more of life, such as Tomas from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*...

OŻ: Does it mean that they need the narrator-hermeneut less?

MB: Perhaps it rather means that they are such possibilities of existence that can experience this beauty. This is not ultimate beauty, these are all temporary revelations.

OŻ: It has always seemed to me, in turn, that Kundera has been deeply sceptical of beauty in particular, which may be connected with his ardent criticism of lyricism, which manifests the most in *Life is Elsewhere*...

MB: Why do you call it scepticism? The lyrical attitude is just an attitude of an over-theatricalised identity... For him, lyricism is not a guarantee of beauty at all. Rather the opposite. Of kitsch – yes, but not of beauty.

OŻ: Interestingly, Kundera began his literary career writing poetry...

MB: But he soon renounced it. He wiped lyricism on every level, but mostly on this level of existential attitude which gives a human being an easy identity. Maybe this is why so many people harass him politically – both from the right and from the left – as Kundera is somewhat politically indefinable. He does not delight in revolution due to its kitschiness, which resembles – you remember those descriptions – a collective dance round a circle. Recall the Polish government dancing and holding hands at [Tadeusz – OŻ.] Rydzyk's party... You have a tangible example of what the lyrical attitude is in Kundera's works – kitschy to the core. Sometimes this demystifying attitude assumes a more decisive form, as in *Slowness*, in which there is not only irony but also sarcasm and satire, which personally I am not fond of...

OŻ: Criticising the lyrical attitude, Kundera draws attention to certain solipsism of the lyrical 'I' who may one day say that life is beautiful only to deny it the next day. These two contradictory theses are simultaneously true as the criterion of authenticity is included only in the subjective feeling. I keep pondering what Kundera could think about novels in which the figure of the narrator gets near the lyrical subject, as is the case in sentimental and epistolary novels?

MB: He definitely likes them less. So he will value [Louis-Ferdinand - OŻ] Céline more than [Albert - OŻ] Camus. It is not easy, however, to admit this openly. He certainly appreciates [Marcel - OŻ] Proust or [Gustave - OŻ] Flaubert, where the lyrical 'I' of the characters is subjected to ruthless demystification. Consequently, he has difficulties with [Fyodor - OŻ] Dostoyevsky, whose characters go to the limits of their Self, like Jan Palach, whose gesture of self-immolation is - according to Kundera - blatantly anti-Czech, going against the Czech nature. Likewise, he will like the psychoanalytical prose less, e.g. [Georges - OŻ] Bataille... Freud, in a sense, could be regarded by him as a lyrical thinker as he locks himself in a dogma, a pattern or a system, which Kundera does not like.

OŻ: What is, therefore, his approach to philosophy? On the one hand, he admits to drawing inspiration from philosophy, but on the other - he does not want to be called a philosopher...

MB: Because he is not one. He reads philosophers selectively, he takes from them what he needs. He will not write anything about [Martin - OŻ] Heidegger, but this philosopher is important to him when he warns against the technicisation of the world. Back then, in the 1980s, there was even a notion of the "Kundera's human being", i.e. one that is enlightened, critical; a reflexive essayist, so to speak.

OŻ: Then, Kundera tends to identify philosophy with dogmatism...

MB: Yes, one could not mention in his presence the name of [Jacques - OŻ] Derrida, or semioticians such as [Gérard - OŻ] Genette, because he would scoff them. Perhaps he simply refused to understand them. He did this in the name of anti-dogma, albeit the significance of this gesture was peculiarly dogmatic. So he understood philosophy traditionally, i.e. as a system of dogmas...

OŻ: Which was perhaps quite unfair to many contemporary philosophers...

MB: You are right, although he may not have read the philosophers of the last few decades in great depth.

OŻ: Kundera once uttered an important sentence, namely that if the philosophical essay is included into the structure of the novel, it acquires a totally

different meaning than the meaning it would have if it was a separate work. However, Kundera often chooses the form of the essay from the beginning to the end. Is it possible to say, therefore, that Kundera states something, affirms it in his essays, and the same theses become only suppositions in his novels?

MB: Kundera includes the essay in the novel as a function of thinking of individual characters; it also serves to construct a thematic spectrum of the presented world. The essay in the novel is not burdened with such seriousness as it is in the case of closed essays, which are, in majority, a presentation of his aesthetic ideas.

OŽ: And his interests in phenomenology? The influence of Jan Patočka on young Kundera is often mentioned in this context. I am under the impression that this may account for his perception of human nature in a 'synchronic' way, i.e. one that aims at discovering the this nature's unchanging essence. Likewise, the variation structure of his novels seems to correspond with this tendency to look for what is important.

MB: It can be said that Kundera is a phenomenologist 'by nature' – as Proust and Flaubert. Obviously, he read Patočka or [Edmund – OŽ] Husserl, but probably he is simply a 'natural' phenomenologist. You are right in saying that he constructs somewhat ahistorical human nature even though this is not any timeless nature, but nature which manifests itself in happening.

OŽ: So his essence is not transcendent?

MB: Let us say that he is somewhere between transcendence and immanence. Today, for instance, with the invention of electronics, impatience is not the same as it used to be, but the phenomenon of impatience still exists.

OŽ: I have recently taken an interest in a certain thread – maybe not so popular – in Kundera's works, namely the presence of drama as a literary genre in his output. As we know, he debuted with a collection of poems, which was followed by a theatre play titled *Les propriétaires des clés*, and then he came back to drama only once in his later works, i.e. in a variation on *Jacques the Fatalist*. I am wondering why Kundera abandons writing theatre plays for the benefit of the novel? Because we have already explained why he abandons poetry.

MB: It is difficult to say. I have never talked to him about this. I can only presume that he has never fully abandoned theatre. It appears to me that theatre moved to the territory of the novel and theatricality is preserved in the relations between characters. Note that many scenes in his novels are written as theatrical scenes, actually with stage directions: who stands where, which place a character goes to, when they start to scream, when they sit on a chair, etc.

OŻ: And maybe the reason for this is the lack of presence of the narrator in theatrical plays? All we deal with in drama is stage directions.

MB: Perhaps – this is not a bad thesis. The figure of the narrator in Kundera's works is quite complex. We deal, in a sense, with another character, but one that has wider competences. This is a heavy influence of his stay in France.

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OŻ: The theatrical play is perfect for showing polyphony, which Kundera is constantly aiming at.

MB: Yes, it is, yet polyphony is present in his works all the time, particularly in those longer novels.

OŻ: Finally, I would like to ask you about your being inspired by Kundera in your own works. Your latest book (*Kontener*) seems to have quite a distinct musical structuring, as is the case in Kundera's works. To what extent are these conscious inspirations?

MB: It is difficult to say. I was wondering many times what I have in common with him. We are certainly divided by the language. As opposed to him, I do not aim at language clarity. On the other hand, we share the liking for ellipsis and the shape of the composition, which you have already mentioned. Yet, I am quite distant from Kundera as far as my fondness for verbal ornamentation is concerned. And the essays which I am writing – or what can be called essays in absence of a better term – are thought in a completely different manner, i.e. fictional inclusions are essential to me in the essay; I introduce the fictional character into the essay. The opposite happens in Kundera: he introduces the essay into the novel.

When I was writing *Tworki*, I knew from the start how the novel would end and that I would include a time shift identical to that from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, namely: the death of the protagonists takes place earlier and the last chapter comes back to the time before their death. I do not know now if I adopted this technique from Kundera or I came up with it myself. It is likely that I adopted it.

OŻ: Would you define yourself more as a novelist or an essayist? Or maybe these two genres should not be separated?

MB: Sometimes I refer to myself as 'a genre bastard'. I wrote too few novels to refer to myself as 'a novel writer'. Probably I am not a pure essayist either, since all my essays are, as I said, infected with the narrative of the novel. So I am somewhere in-between. The other day I went to a colloquium held by a former Kundera's student and when I happened to say something 'off the cuff', his commentary would appear: "You are a novelist". This means that I do not speak the way you speak in seminars, but in a way that is typical of novels. I am treated – if anyone pays attention to that – a bit like a specimen,

a strange case in nature. If I were to define myself in any way, I would say that I am just 'a writing human being'.

OŻ: Is the choice of the genre 'a worldview choice' for you, like it was for Kundera?

MB: Definitely not to such an extent. Kundera ideologised the choice of the novelistic form quite strongly.

OŻ: So would it be possible for you to write poetry? We know that in the case of Kundera this would be impossible.

MB: Some kind of lyricism is, in fact, foreign to me, namely the immediacy of experience, delighting in it. Admittedly, this kind of poetry in Polish is very rare these days. The new generation of authors grits their teeth not to, God forbid, reveal any trace of lyricism! So if anyone wants to be really modern in the Polish poetry, they should keep their own emotionality and naivety in check, because feelings are always naive. In my case, the choice of the genre results from a rather undefined but strongly internalised imperative of the mixed form; there is some place in it, in any case, for lyricism and sentiments. I presume that this can be traced back to the geography of my childhood. I was brought up, bluntly speaking, in a 'hoodlum' district of Warsaw (also Andrzej Stasiuk lived there for some time). As a result, I learnt to be somehow distrustful towards the 'purity of the form'. Of course, I like elegant writing, but I am sceptical of 'solemn' writing.

OŻ: So would you say that you belonged more to the Hrabal tradition?

MB: Partly yes, partly no; like Kundera, I do not have the tale-telling talent similar to that of Hrabal, although I stylised some texts for tales. I am now being reminded of an anecdote when, once in Paris, Hrabal went for a pint with Kundera and one day he told him some fascinating story and the following day he told him the same story but with a completely different ending. This is unthinkable for Kundera's style! Hrabal meets the Polish phantasm of being Czech. France does not have this phantasm, so Kundera is easier to read and more important to the French than Hrabal is. Poland is maybe the only country in which Hrabal is much more popular and more widely read.

OŻ: In closing, would you care to make some comparative assessment of Kundera's role against the background of the contemporary European literature? Can we look for some similarities in style, e.g. in [Michel - OŻ.] Houellebecq's works?

MB: Houellebecq is, indeed, a bit from Kundera's school. This is about such a kind of prose which is not autotelic, it is 'close to life'. Houellebecq would be close to Kundera's style, even though he is read more as a prophet, which definitely does not happen in Kundera's case. With all Houellebecq's

virtuosity, there is a certain sharpness of his *hic et nunc* diagnoses, and this is what people expect from us now. Diagnoses in Kundera's works are not so clear-cut, they have a larger degree of subtlety. If Kundera's works were, in turn, juxtaposed with the expectations of the Polish readers, I would say that Poles do not appreciate composition in literature so much, preferring literature which is less 'structured', more direct, without ellipsis, outright.

OŻ: If you were to summarise your 'prophecy' on the future of 'kunderology' and the interest in Kundera in both Poland and all over the world, would these be two separate prophecies?

MB: It seems to me that in Poland nowadays Kundera is read particularly at universities; his works are, simply, researched. In turn, he seems to be received less 'methodologically' in the world. When I read text of Frenchmen, Italians or Canadians on Kundera, these are texts of universal character and often devoid of the widely understood context of their creation, which was so important for Poles. And further future? I have no idea; today it seems that it will be Houellebecq who will survive, but in fifty years' time?

OŻ: Kundera seems to dissociate, in general, from everything that is not the text itself. From his biography, from the political context; this is particularly visible in *Testaments Betrayed*.

MB: Yes, he does, this is why he did not include many more 'political' texts in the issue of *la Pléiade*. And for us, Poles, this political context was immensely important, which I mentioned when talking about *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*... He wrote *A Kidnapped West* then; it was so immensely important, but he renounces this text today.

OŻ: In the case of poetry, only several poems from the collection titled *Man: A Wide Garden* have been translated into Polish...

MB: This is true, he radically distances himself from his early Stalinist poetry; his poems are not to be found in *la Pléiade* either.

OŻ: Is it possible that the unwillingness towards autobiographical interpretation may result from some earlier structuralist tendencies? I am thinking of the Prague School.

MB: No, no, he just thinks he is an artist and artists do not have biographies. His works are his biography... There was even quite a funny situation when one of the Polish newspapers published an interview with Kundera. It came as a surprise to me, because, knowing him, I had known for a long time that he did not give interviews. I even asked him about it. He naturally denied; he did not speak to anyone. Eventually the whole situation came to light. In the end, Kundera issued a statement for the Polish press that the interview had never been conducted. Anyway, that interview was very boring

and by no means provocative... The author simply adjusted the questions to the theses included in *The Art of the Novel* in order to appear in Kundera's company.

OŻ: A story like for a new novel...

MB: Yes, Kundera's game of pretence and truth... a joke... which could give rise to something.

SUMMARY

The interview with Marek Bieńczyk covers, in general, the subject of the philosophy of novel by Milan Kundera and the reception of his works nowadays in Poland and abroad. Marek Bieńczyk – the French translator of Milan Kundera's novels – talks about the history of his first translations and the beginnings of scientific thinking about Kundera. Moreover, he explains the problems connected with Kundera's authorial and elaborate philosophy of novel: the conception of narrator, hero and composition. Bieńczyk also narrates his own memories with M. Kundera. What is more, he indicates the inspirations he draws in his own work from innovative prose by Czech novelist, who is celebrating his 91st anniversary this year.

Keywords

Kundera, interview, Bieńczyk, translations, novels.

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'The translator's extraordinary artistry'

An Interview with Magdalena Heydel, Conducted by
Karolina Król

Karolina Król: How did your acquaintance with Barańczak begin?

Magdalena Heydel: I was writing my Master's thesis on [Edward Estlin - KK] Cummings – among other things about his translations by Stanisław Barańczak – and it just happened that Barańczak was in Poland at that time and my supervisor, inestimable Stanisław Balbus, asked him if he would like to read my work and write an additional review. As a result, I have in my collection a review written by Stanisław Barańczak on the dissertation in which I am quite critical of his renditions of Cummings.

KK: What do you think about Barańczak's concept of translation? Many people claimed that individual poets lost their distinctness in his translations, becoming similar to his own idiolect.

MH: Stanisław Barańczak is a powerful translator. This is a figure who perceives his translation works as part of his literary activity rather than in terms of reproduction, which we learnt – or, rather, we were trained – to describe in the categories of humbleness, imitation, being in the shadow, and so on. I do not want to say that the attitude of being in the shadow and following the author is necessarily a mistake, or that it is not a good way of translating, but I also do not want to say that such a capable author of translations who leaves his stamp on the texts and treats translation as a creative activity makes a mistake. For me, the most interesting thing is to look at the output of Stanisław Barańczak, or any other translator, with reference to the space of possibilities of the given genre, if I may say so, or the type of creation which we call translation.

The question about Barańczak's output is very vast and difficult. You open a space for a huge debate. It seems to me that if we want to give a description of this output in a reliable way, it is not worth using terms such as 'accusing' or 'objecting' or 'defending'. It is, generally speaking, not this description mode. It seems more interesting to me to try to describe the way in which Stanisław Barańczak carries out his translations. And here surely the creative rather than reproductive element is brought to the forefront on different planes – from the very theoretical concept which Stanisław Barańczak constructs on the basis of what was elaborated by the Poznań school animated by Edward Balcerzan, to the purely poetic side, i.e. such a kind of artistic freedom which he exercises in translation and which was a framework for his translations.

KK: There is the question about whether this freedom is not too great...

MH: Then again, we would try to assess and say how far one may or may not go. It seems very interesting to me to see how the creative personality of Stanisław Barańczak works on these texts. Besides, only someone who is confident about their own standard can assess if this is too far or not. I am not sure of my own standard in assessing translation works and I would rather not absolutise, and it seems to me that it would be some kind of dogmatism if I said that translation is up to this point and then it is not. What is there behind this line: is this no longer a translation or maybe this is something more than a translation, something different than a translation... where is the boundary? Stanisław Barańczak, I should think, would ask this question in the following way: is it worth writing a very good poem in Polish, taking into account also the fact that the translator will drift away from the stereotypically imagined shape of the original text, or is it perhaps better to stick to this image and work more economically on the poetic layer? He would definitely go for the first of these two options.

KK: I am wondering about the issue of freedom, thinking of, for instance, the recently published rendering of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, made by Jacek Dukaj. Is it hard to say whether the change of the realities is still a translation or, rather, an independent creation of alternative stories?

MH: Of course, but Dukaj himself insists that his work is not a translation and he actually gets upset when critics try to compare him to translators and demonstrate that he is a mediocre translator or, on the contrary, an extraordinary translator. This is one side. The other side is that Barańczak does not introduce changes of this type, i.e. he does not resort to such apparent adaptation procedures in the substantial part of his translation activity, namely one concerning the so-called 'serious' poetry. It is true, however, that there are such areas in Barańczak's output where major changes are introduced. This could be observed, for instance, in his renditions of 'non-serious' work and translations – rare, for that matter – of children's literature, such as Dr Seuss. Again, it seems that the same principle comes to the foreground,

i.e. writing a good work is more important than what can be referred to as a translation which is a humble but not a really brilliant rendition of the original. In addition, Barańczak knows what he can afford to do in different genres; he makes clear divisions in this respect. It seems very interesting to me that the flexibility which he maintains in his translator's job confirms this preliminary assumption, i.e. that it is possible to use different concepts of working with the text in relation to different literary genres.

As a matter of fact, there are probably no reasons to introduce changes to translations of serious works. Considering the fact that Barańczak serves as a populariser of poetry in the anthology titled *444 wiersze poetów języka angielskiego XX wieku* [444 Poems by 20th-Century Poets of the English Language] – and it is difficult for me to comment in more depth on his translations from languages other than English – if he puts himself in such a role, this is not because he wants to challenge the authority of the authors whom he introduces into the cultural circulation of the Polish language. Even if the translation activity of Barańczak is far from humble, it is by no means – as it seems to me – polemic or questioning the value of the translated text. Barańczak often says that there is a lot to be done with regard to the presentation of poets of the English language to the Polish reader. When he left Poland, he suddenly stood in front of a huge library in Harvard, where everything *was*, and I have a vision in my mind that he simply felt weak in the knees, his hands began to tremble, his eyes opened wide, and he thought: "God, so much of it!". It should be remembered that it was 1980, which is the moment when Poland was really still provincial with regard to access to the goods of world culture. For instance, the access to the contemporary poetry of the English language was very limited, which is why, to the best of his efforts and interest – which cannot be denied to young Stanisław Barańczak – that glance at the shelves where everything *was* may have led him to the state of euphoria.

KK: That euphoria could surely account for this incessant persistence of Barańczak in creating his translational work. The poet confessed in *Ocalone w tłumaczeniu* (*Saved in Translation*) that it had been precisely translation that he devoted most of his time to (obviously apart from sleeping).

MH: I agree, especially that traces of that euphoria are present in both his essays and correspondence, in which Barańczak says that he will translate as much as he can. If his translation output is compared to poetic areas presented by other translators, it is possible to speak about different kinds of records broken by Stanisław Barańczak. In addition, there is this element of delight which seems immensely important to me. There are translators who work through strife, struggle, battle. There is a load of evidence for Barańczak's delight in the text documents which he left.

KK: During the conference titled 'Ameryka Barańczaka' ('Barańczak's America'), differences between Barańczak's anthologies and Sommer's anthologies were pointed out on a number of occasions.

MH: I agree, there are many differences. They choose different poets to translate and they are interested in different aspects of poetic language. But, on the other hand, there are also authors who were translated by both, such as Cummings or Seamus Heaney. Piotr Sommer was the first translator of Heaney into Polish; his renditions are unusually interesting and really valuable. Later on, Heaney was translated mainly by Barańczak and it was him who canonised the Irish poet in the Polish literature. Surely you know the essay by Jerzy Jarniewicz which states that there are "translators-ambassadors" and "translators-legislators". Making this distinction, Jarniewicz chooses Barańczak and Sommer as representative figures. Stanisław Barańczak is the translator who reaches for areas – as he declared himself, for that matter – which are unknown but full of treasure. He indicates that we are really falling behind with absorbing foreign literature of, for instance, the 20th century (not only in English) and there is a lot to be done in this respect. Sommer, in turn, is not interested in this. Sommer renders these poets in whom he is personally interested, and his taste and choices are very specific as opposed to 'omnivorous' Barańczak. I am not claiming that what he chooses is not worth attention. On the contrary, Sommer is such a poet and such a translator who is willing to work on the peripheries. He was interested in the Scots and the Irish, and if also in Americans, then not those from the current mainstream but, rather, those off the mainstream. Barańczak and Sommer are very different in this respect. When it comes to composing their anthologies, Barańczak can be described as someone who takes care of the representativeness of his choice. Examples of such 'representative anthologies' include *Od Chaucera do Larkina. 400 nieśmiertelnych wierszy 125 poetów anglojęzycznych z 8 stuleci* (From Chaucer to Larkin: 400 Immortal Poems of 125 English-Language Poets over 8 Centuries), *Fioletowa krowa. 333 najsławniejsze okazy angielskiej i amerykańskiej poezji niepowąznej od Williama Shakespeare'a do Johna Lennona* (The Purple Cow: 333 Most Famous Specimens of English and American Non-Serious Poetry from William Shakespeare to John Lennon), *Antologia angielskiej poezji metafizycznej XVII stulecia* (An Anthology of the 17th-Century English Metaphysical Poetry), *Od Walta Whitmana do Boba Dylan'a. Antologia poezji amerykańskiej* (From Walt Whitman to Bob Dylan: An Anthology of American Poetry)... Barańczak intends to show what is the best. He is aware – and I am convinced that it is implied in his works – that time passes by, life slips away, the disease hits, and one should not get distracted, one should deal with what is the best in order not to be late in the first place.

KK: The choice of authors whose texts he translated and presented in *Biblioteczka Poetów Języka Angielskiego* (A Library of English Language Poets) could point to such an understanding of his vocation as a translator.

MH: Yes, these are giants. Barańczak chooses for his *Biblioteczka* poets whose names went down in the history of poetry. It is possible to make an accusation of it – and it did happen that he was accused of that – and say that it is easy to translate those who are best when somebody had already

made the choice of the names, but that it is more difficult to see grandness in those whose art has not been called grandness yet. However, it is also possible to describe this in a completely different manner, i.e. as a gesture of presenting what is worth knowing, what undoubtedly builds cultural heritage, and what the Polish language does not have in its resources. Personally, I do not have such a critical nerve in myself so as to see any shortcomings in Barańczak's attitude. I think that in order to describe something, first you have to understand before you can start to criticize.

KK: This measuring himself against the giants is also a kind of test to one's own artistry and capabilities as a translator.

MH: Indeed, measuring himself against major poets was also undoubtedly a test in itself for Barańczak. I think that it is also worth describing this phenomenon; this is so agonic – almost Bloomish – that he measures himself against the grand ancestors without unnecessary modesty but, rather, as equals. Each incarnation made by the translator is some kind of a self-challenge. I am convinced that Barańczak displays a lot of vulnerability, so to speak, to this kind of challenge or 'auto-bet'. This is a kind of poetic game with oneself; bouncing off one's own limits, transgressing one's limitations. Barańczak is interested in those poets who capture emotions and senses not only directly with words, but also through their artistry and poetic art. It is essential to him (which is closely connected with his ethical and metaphysical programme) that poetry is a 'no' said to death, but this 'no' is said to death not so much by the word itself as by poetic artistry. On a side note, this is a grand topic of the 20th century: whether we are allowed, whether it is possible – and if so, then how – to write beautiful poetry in the century which witnessed such terrible historical events.

KK: And whether it is possible to write poetry in the first place. Theodor Adorno famously said that it was impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz.

MH: Exactly. It turns out that poetry is possible and assumes different forms. Barańczak looks for those authors who do not give up on art. Poetry written in difficult moments of the 20th century is characterised by certain amorphism, i.e. it says, with every fibre of its being, that there are no longer any rules. We are in the world of fluidity, scream, and whine; well-formed and elegant speech is indecent and surely unauthentic. Barańczak did not translate Ginsberg and similar poetry, and he says in his correspondence with Czesław Miłosz that he is not interested in literature which turns into whine, and he is delighted with poetry which is capable of preserving the form in the face of death.

KK: Since you mentioned the correspondence between Barańczak and Miłosz, could you say something more about it? During the aforementioned conference in Poznań, titled 'Barańczak's America', you delivered a lecture on Barańczak's letters to Miłosz. We do not have access to them – they are

kept in the archive in the Beinecke Library and have never been published. Moreover, you mention that the public knows only that part of the correspondence which was written by Barańczak, which largely hampers the overall reception of the exchange.

MH: This is the correspondence of two authors who are very important to me. I dealt with the translation output of both of them. Both lived in the United States. They are representatives of two different generations, yet they are close to one another with regard to their ethos and also as far as their artistic choices are concerned. In these letters, Barańczak clearly turns to his master. This is correspondence which is private, but at the same time there is no doubt that it is devoted to professional literary issues. These immensely interesting letters seem to be an excellent comment on the works of both poets. Barańczak writes with great respect and his critical remarks concerning texts by Miłosz are always made with a bow. It would be interesting to know whether this to any extent affected Miłosz's way of thinking and refining arguments. On the other hand, the question remains about to what degree Miłosz reacted to what Barańczak sent him. It can be seen from the letters that Barańczak sent Miłosz every single thing which he had produced, i.e. each subsequent volume of his translations. The opinion of Miłosz must have been of considerable importance to Barańczak. There is also quite an interesting difference there. Miłosz underlines various sentences and fragments in the letters from Barańczak which puzzled him or aroused his interest. In the correspondence about Philip Larkin, he marks 'hints' concerning what he could change in his own text devoted to Larkin. He underlines, for instance, the sentences in which Barańczak criticises his concept of pessimism and nihilism in Larkin's poetry. If I remember well, Barańczak does not make any comments concerning poems by Miłosz, yet when Miłosz sends him typescripts of his essays, Barańczak presents his numerous reflections or he comments on theses put forward by Miłosz. Barańczak, in turn, never sends Miłosz unfinished texts which would require some kind of reworking; instead, he presents him with ready and already published texts, often stressing that he is interested in Miłosz's opinion yet he does not ask about advice. With this gesture, he becomes, in fact, independent from the opinion of Miłosz. This can result from the fact that he would like to spare Miłosz the effort. On the other hand, I am convinced that Barańczak is very sure of himself. He knows what he wanted to write. He knows that he thought the thing over and wrote it the way he wanted, so now any critical remarks of Miłosz are, in reality, reviews of a reader rather than workshop comments.

KK: Was there any polemics between the poets in their correspondence?

MH: Apart from that concerning Larkin (the poets were engaged in polemics with regard to the understanding of the concept of lyric poetry, i.e. what it really is), Barańczak sends Miłosz his anthology titled *Z Tobą, więc ze Wszystkim. 222 arcydzieła angielskiej i amerykańskiej liryki religijnej* [With Thee, Therefore with All: 222 Masterpieces of English and American Religious Verse] and

he feels obliged by the reaction of Miłosz to explain how he understands the "lyric poetry" phrase. Naturally, I have not seen the letters by Miłosz, because they are in the archives of the Barańczaks, but I gathered from Barańczak's answer that they had discussed this very notion. They were wondering to what extent this phrasing is up-to-date. Barańczak defends the category of lyric poetry, trying to justify it by the subjective position of the person speaking, and reflection on the world. Miłosz finds this category slightly *passé*, associating it with the Young Poland.

KK: Comparing the output of both poets, it is perhaps possible to arrive at similar conclusions. Poetry by Barańczak, in particular his late poetry, is personal; it concerns mainly the individual. In *Sztuczne oddychanie* (*Artificial Respiration*), the poet gives a voice to the protagonist whom he dubs N. N., yet in the vast majority of his texts he speaks directly without using any mask lyrics. Miłosz uses this device much more often, starting from his excellent *Voices of Poor People*.

MH: There are direct utterances of the subject also in religious lyric poetry which Barańczak translated. In this correspondence there is another interesting polemic, i.e. one concerning *A Year of the Hunter* by Miłosz. Barańczak is full of enthusiasm, but he completely disagrees with the portrait of Cyprian Kamil Norwid sketched by Miłosz. He sent his comments after reading the whole book, so they probably had no impact on *A Year of the Hunter*. Thinking of polemics between the authors, it must be remembered that their letters are by no means theoretical treaties. Barańczak reacts with enthusiasm to what Miłosz sends him, what he read, or comments on what he sends to him. It is not that they intentionally take up selected topics; instead, they pay attention to the issues which emerge from concrete situations, concrete books or texts. Barańczak draws attention to a certain feature of the poetry by Miłosz, namely that it is anchored in the concrete thing. Poems of great metaphysical, poetic, or cultural importance are always deeply rooted in a very concrete situation, place, and time.

KK: Barańczak defines metaphysics in a similar manner, juxtaposing it with mysticism. According to him, metaphysics should stem from the real concrete world and only later wander towards other dimensions. Mysticism, in turn, lacks this quality of being rooted in the concrete.

MH: Talking about this concreteness, it works a bit like when we notice in others what we are intrigued by. This can also be connected with the observation concerning the poets that Barańczak chooses to translate. When we look at the contents of *444 wierszy poetów angielskiego XX wieku*, none of these poets is an author who would write some great metaphysical treaties and generalise too much. They all work close to the world and the detail, which by no means belittles the importance of their works. Robert Frost - obviously famous for picturing nature and rural life, somewhat similar to Heaney, Cummings with New York, Auden with his humour, Bishop, who is, after all, a master of description and an immensely detailed one...

KK: This is perhaps what the power of art would be all about. Art is impossible to be one hundred percent classified into any categories; it is somewhere in-between. To what extent, in your opinion, did Barańczak succeed in assimilating the English-language poetry into the Polish culture?

MH: It seems to me that this is a case to a very large extent despite endeavours of different publishers not to reveal it today. His translations were published, then they disappeared and are now almost impossible to buy. Hence the idea of the *444 wiersze* anthology. Note that when one speaks of the English-language poetry, the name of Barańczak immediately appears and even if somebody does not have access to these texts, they will still be aware of the existence of the translations by this particular figure. He created some kind of canon and showed a great wealth of what delighted him. His achievements regarding the acquisition of Shakespeare are certainly not to be underrated. His renditions triggered an enormous explosion of renewed interest in Shakespeare. It seems that Barańczak's enthusiasm and delight made many people – including not necessarily specialists – realise that Shakespeare is not some kind of strange antique shop with a glass display cabinet, but a vivid author who is worth reading.

I also suspect that Barańczak's intention with regard to assimilating the English-language poetry is connected with the desire to adopt a certain model of literary life. Namely, in Anglo-Saxon countries – especially in America – poetry is treated as one of the types of discourse present in the public space. The number of festivals, the publishing market, the fact that poetry appears in the public space and accompanies different events – also non-literary ones – and that poetry is promoted as a kind of discourse about the world; that occasional poems are written; that there is the institution of poet-laureate who performs a public function... It all looks completely different in Poland due to the fact that we continue to be invariably animated by the romantic spirit, which says that the poet is a bard meant for higher purposes, and writing letters on planting cabbage is an absurd of all sorts. Due to his translations and the way he wrote about poetry, Barańczak made an attempt – as it seems to me – at democratisation, or maybe he gave a chance for democratising the approach to poetic works. It must also be stressed that these translations began to appear in our country at the time of a civilisational, political, and cultural transformation, which is why foreign poets began to come to Poland, invited by – among others – Jerzy Illg. It turned out that they are vibrant people rather than monuments; that they are normal, they laugh, talk to readers, are willing to sign books... It seems that Barańczak's translation activity, apart from its other merits, found a very good moment for popularising that poetry in Poland.

KK: And how were these translations received back then? I am under the impression that nowadays a new translation is an event only in the hermetic literary circles and, regrettably, is not really present in broader awareness.

MH: We are all doing our best to turn new translations into events also in the public space, but this is not always successful, especially when there is

no support on the part of the market. Today, the Polish literary life functions in market categories rather than only in the categories of cultural values. This was slightly different in the 1990s. When Barańczak came to the Jagiellonian University to give lectures on Shakespeare and translating poetry, he attracted unusual crowds. It was difficult to get to the lecture room. It was similar in the case of lectures with Miłosz. The lecture hall in Collegium Novum was bursting at the seams. The same happened when Josif Brodski came. At that time, these events had a dimension of discovering new discourses, new areas, new ways of poetry existence. To my mind, Barańczak completely changed the way of thinking about translating poetry. It is no longer possible to translate as if Barańczak did not exist. It was him who set certain standards of poetic maximalism.

KK: As you happened to mention Barańczak's lectures, could you say a few words about your first contact with him?

MH: Our first meeting was connected, as I mentioned before, with his review of my Master's thesis. Barańczak could not be present at the viva, but we went for a coffee later. Back then I was a very young person and probably did not use that opportunity, since I found it difficult to speak freely with him. I remember that during that conversation Barańczak said one very important thing. He stressed that American English is completely different from British English. Naturally, these were the times before the advent of globalisation and this distinction was much more vivid than it is now. He thought not only about issues concerning the language, but also about distinctness of poetic traditions.

KK: One of the issues of *Przekładaniec. A Journal of Translation Studies* concerned 'Ameryka Miłosza' ('Miłosz's America'). What is Barańczak's America like?

MH: I hope that the publication after the conference at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań will give an insight into Barańczak's America. There is a lot to be done in this respect. Firstly, it is necessary to wait for access to Stanisław Barańczak's archive. Secondly, it is worth reading those magazines in which Barańczak published his texts in English, and check who he got acquainted with. This would allow one to follow his presence in American cultural circles. That world is presented as very tempting in his poems and essays. It offers certain ease and freedom, inclines towards the human being, and is not only a place of constant struggle. On the other hand, Barańczak quite quickly exposes this ease as a certain illusion. Everything, it seems, is for sale and, at the same time, it is devoid of any value. Ignorance accompanying Americans in contact with such an E. E. (Eastern European) as Barańczak certainly turns out to be painful.

The difference is also visible in university life. Barańczak comes to America from a country in which there are huge deficiencies when it comes to access to culture; everything is acquired with effort, with a sense of deficiency. In the USA, in turn, universities are well-prospering companies. I suspect that it must have been quite a bizarre experience for him to shift

from the intellectual circles in Poland, where science is a value in itself, to the world in which science is actually a commodity. Now a question appears about the frame of mind of a person who deals with literature of a country which is not necessarily the most important in the world when Polish or Slavic studies do not seem to really correspond with the American reality. Within the English-speaking world, Barańczak was probably famous mostly as an author of journalistic and critical texts which he published in the press. There were not many publications of his poems in their English translations. This thread appears in his correspondence with Miłosz, who thinks that those translated poems by Barańczak are at odds with his later poetry. Barańczak, in turn, replies that his later poems are practically untranslatable.

KK: Do you notice any differences in the functioning of literary magazines in America and analogous periodicals in Poland?

MH: In Poland, there used to be many periodicals devoted to culture which disappeared soon after the system transformation. The economic reality largely changed the cultural reality. I am under the impression that now the situation in Poland is slightly changing. There are several literary titles, but there are problems with the common ground for an exchange of ideas on culture, and in particular on literature. We have, for instance, *Pismo (Magazine)*, which by definition is supposed to be the Polish *New Yorker* – it is yet to be seen if it will come true. The idea itself to publish poems whose role is to talk about the world is surely very significant. The presence of literature in the public discourse is greater in the United States. Poetry is present in both the *New Yorker* and in the *New York Times*. In any case, in order to compare the situation of literature in Poland with that in the USA it is enough to look at literary or cultural columns in daily newspapers as well as the number of their literary supplements. There are bulky sections devoted to cultural events there. But not in Poland. It is worth remembering that promoting culture (e.g. 'Polityka Passport Awards') is not the same as a conscious conversation about literature, and drawing into its orbit both specialists and interested readers. We are still waiting for magazines which would discuss the currently released books from within different fields.

SUMMARY

The interview focuses mostly on Stanisław Barańczak's methods of translation and his translation oeuvre. Similarities between Polish and American literary life also play a significant role in the text. Another important issue is Barańczak's and Czesław Miłosz's correspondence which has not been fully published and remains stored in Beinecke Library archives.

Keywords

Stanisław Barańczak, translator, poetry, Czesław Miłosz

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