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Notes about Czerniawski

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Abstract: The article constitutes a collection of notes related to the lesser known and rarely commented works by an émigré writer – Adam Czerniawski: his poems translated into English, short texts of literary criticism, short novels and his memoirs. Modern Polish prose is still frequently treated as a ciphertext, of interest only to a limited number of readers who revel in this labyrinth of thoughts. It may seem that at the end of the 20th century – a period so involved in the debate about the traditional understanding of literature – avant-garde variants of prose should be understandable for everyone or, at least, that literary criticism would assign them to the appropriate level in the hierarchy of modern forms. However, the situation turned out to be different. The prose model imposed by Positivism still remains predominant in the habits and tastes of both literary critics and readers, and only recently has this model been questioned. As a result, the short novels by Czerniawski have not yet been sufficiently analysed. Reminiscent of Gombrowicz, these texts can be seen as absolute stories. The feature of absoluteness is visible at all their levels: origin, narration, reading. Everything is possible, yet nothing is accidental or random. However, limiting these narratives to only avant-garde rules would, without a doubt, distort their sense. Czerniawski's prose also uses the infinite potential of the grotesque, plays with its own language, thus making it into an undoubtedly philosophical *Ding an sich*. The prose was also written in order to face traditional sanctities such as, for instance, the incorrigible “Polishness” that glorifies old symbols and sees a divine influence in them. Finally, Czerniawski's prose is based on the “common sense” that can be found in numerous amusing contexts of the surrounding world.

Keywords: Adam Czerniawski, poetry, emigration, translation

1. Summa poetica

1. In 1951, Adam Czerniawski¹ was a student of Ranelagh Grammar School in Bracknell (Berkshire near London) and there he debuted as

¹ Adam Czerniawski (born in 1934) is a Polish poet, prose writer, translator and essayist. During World War II he was living in Palestine, which he left in 1947 for England. There, he completed his studies (English philology and philosophy) and worked as, among others, a philosophy and literature teacher at a number of English colleges. He co-founded the “Kontynenty” poetic group, was an editor-in-chief of the periodical titled *Kontynenty* and collaborated with many Polish emigre periodicals, including *Wiadomości*, *Kultura*, and

a translator with his free translation of *W Weronie* by Cyprian Kamil Norwid in the *Ranelagh School Magazine* (No. 30). A year later he appeared in the same magazine (No. 34) with the poem *Eastern Legend*. This was the beginning of the artistic career of the future poet, prose writer, essayist and translator of Polish literature, one of the pillars of the London group “Kontynenty.”

However, inadequate bibliographies may mislead an inexperienced reader. The poem *Eastern legend* was not written in English, but rather translated into English by Czerniawski. The poet repeatedly said that he wrote his poems only in Polish, as he was not interested in being a “bilingual poet” (like other members of the “Kontynenty” group such as Andrzej Busza and Bolesław Taborski). Therefore, he published the majority of his oeuvre exclusively in Polish (*Polowanie na jednorożca*, 1956; *Topografia wnętrza*, 1962; *Sen cytadela gaj*, 1966; *Widok Delft*, 1973; *Wiek złoty*, 1982; *Jesień*, 1989; *Inne wiersze i Historia ludzkości*, 1999); however, he wrote essays and memoir prose in English (*Scenes from a disturbed childhood*, 1992). Nevertheless, he treated poems differently from the very beginning, acknowledging their autonomous existence.

2. The publication of Czerniawski’s poems in English (*Selected Poems*, translated by Iain Higgins, 2000) is the culmination of an artistic career that spans half a century. It is justified to say that the Canadian poet and translator Higgins came close to the concept of translation that Adam Czerniawski supports: the choice of the translator should also be the decision of the poet, which entails – to put it simply – a search for “good poetry” in the target language. Such poetry (economical with words, maximally objectified, distanced, “expressively naked”), when introduced to a foreign culture, needs to be evaluated **also** in terms of “poem translatability.”

Czerniawski mentions this determining factor in the introduction to the anthology *The Burning Forest* (1988). The translated text must be evaluated according to linguistic categories: the content of the original should correspond to the content of the translation, and the mode of expression should refer the reader to another language system that differs from the language of the original. The adequacy of translation always coincides with the criterion of semantic accuracy and fidelity, complemented by stylistic equivalence (the text of the translation should be adapted to the functional and stylistic standards of the target language). According to Czerniawski, such a translation approach allows one to protect “good poetry” from distortion, because “an attempt to reproduce the full semantic diversity of the original is futile and unproductive” (*The Burning Forest*, p. 21).

Oficyna Poetów. He translated into English poetry of Jan Kochanowski, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Tadeusz Różewicz, and also Zbigniew Herbert’s plays. He received numerous awards, including those granted by the Association of Polish Writers in Exile (1967), The Kościelskis Foundation (1971) and the British Arts Council (1976).

Iain Higgins respects this stance. His translations try to be faithful to the original, and where this cannot be done (*Lekcja poezji / Poetry Lesson*), they are equally interesting in equivalence (“nuż ci w bżuh” translated as “nife in yr gut”). The poet, therefore, found a translator who shared and applied his vision of translation.

3. However, it is not so much the beauty of the translation itself that is particularly important for the Polish reader, but rather how the translator presents the image of the Polish poet to the English-speaking reader. This decision seems to be the most important here, since it contains a clear interpretation clue. Higgins gave up the chronological order applied by Czerniawski in two retrospective volumes (*Władza najwyższa. Wybór wierszy z lat 1953-1978*, 1982; *Poezje zebrane 1952-1991*, 1993). Here, the ordering criterion is different – it is thematic and not chronological. This criterion is extremely interesting because it allows us to look differently at the poet’s works which in the source culture are usually assigned to the neo-avant-garde or neoclassical trend.

Thus, Adam Czerniawski appears in *Selected Poems* as a metaphysical and autothematic poet. The poems collected in six sections of the volume have been mixed together so that their ordering was not determined by the date of their creation, but by their main thought. Such an approach is often risky, because the later poems (artistically more mature ones) must be positioned closely to the early poems (less perfect ones), and the reader is deprived of the insight into the writer’s poetic evolution. In this particular case, however, the translator’s gamble paid off.

It is commonly accepted that in the prose writings of Adam Czerniawski various writing styles complement each other, creating a coherent system. Higgins’s translation project proves that this is the case in Czerniawski’s poetry, as well: the coherent system cannot be disturbed by depriving individual poems of their natural surroundings. Czerniawski creates poems that remain meaningful even when divorced from their time of origin and faithful to the reflection on art and metaphysics that we find elsewhere in Czerniawski’s oeuvre. Metaphysics is the most important topic because it concerns the question about man in the world; art, while asking about man in culture, also determines the place of the poet himself. As a metaphysician, Czerniawski asks about meaning, referring to various scientific systems and philosophies; as a poet he derives inspiration from the traditions of Polish and English poetry, acquiring such allies as Norwid and Różewicz, Eliot and Pound. He has been faithful to this world of thought for half a century.

4. Naturally, a thorough analysis of the *Selected Poems* will require considerable critical reflection from a good translation theorist. Here, I have pointed out only a few threads that might prove useful for future closer readings of the collection. For more than twenty years, the writings of Adam Czerniawski and of the members of the “Kontynenty” circle have been thoroughly and meticulously analysed. From now on, anyone who wishes

to say something new about Czerniawski, should not skip this reading. The translation choices made by Iain Higgins proved beneficial for both the poet and his generation.

2. The mystery of the poem

1. In the years 1967-1971, Adam Czerniawski published 21 critical miniatures entitled *Wiersz współczesny* in the pages of London's *Wiadomości*. The initiator of the idea was Michał Chmielowiec.² When in 1977 a separate publication with these essays appeared (in Poets' and Painters' Press), the author of *Łabędź Sabaudii* had already been dead for three years. Adam Czerniawski wrote in the introductory note: "I take the opportunity to dedicate this book to the memory of Michał Chmielowiec, whose constant interest in this cycle and insistence on further episodes, contributed significantly to the completion of the project" (p. 5).³

Czerniawski had great respect for Chmielowiec, one of the most attentive émigré readers. Hence the repetition of the inscription on his latest book *Światy umowne* devoted to the contemporary poem ("Pamięci Michała Chmielowca [1918-1974]", p. 5). After *Liryka i druk* (1972), *Wiersz współczesny* (1977), *Muzy i sowa Minerwy* (1995) and *Krótkopis* (1998), *Światy umowne. Szkice o wierszu współczesnym* (2001) is another attempt to discuss the poem and its texture. In other words, it concerns the mystery of the poem as a means of representation of the world. Czerniawski – like Chmielowiec – is also a careful and meticulous reader.

2. *Światy umowne* is "a reviewed, extended and at times thoroughly rewritten version of *Wiersz współczesny*." That is what Adam Czerniawski wrote in the author's note, yet a closer examination of the work does not confirm the author's position. *Światy umowne* is not a simple continuation of a book written years before. It is a disambiguation of Czerniawski's poetic programme and an expression of his stance towards the poem as a poetic form. There is no simple substitution of programmes here, because this is not about one and the same programme. In the 1980s, Czerniawski's views used to be more moderate, now they are radical and expressed firmly. The change of *Wiersz współczesny* into *Światy umowne* is not just about minor corrections and stylistic revision. It is certainly much more than that.

This collection of essays should be read from the framing device that the poet-critic suggested. Therefore, one should start from the essay (1) *Architekt, czy też koń* [An Architect or a Horse] and (26) *De amicitia*. In the statements: "A poem consists of words" (p. 7) and "A poem was supposed

² Michał Chmielowiec (1918-1974), penname "Michał Sambor" was a Polish writer, literary critic, poet, and editor of the London émigré periodical *Wiadomości*.

³ All the quotations from the Polish sources have been translated by Karolina Puchała-Ladzińska.

to be treated as an autonomous subject. It was to be read and studied in isolation, in complete detachment not only from the author's biography, but also often in isolation from all his works" (p. 130), which are mutually complementary statements, lies the key to understanding Czerniawski's reading attitude – a follower of the school of New Criticism and a firm believer in Workshop Criticism.

3. In his comments, Czerniawski is meticulous and ruthless. He asks about the poem in the state of its creation and about the context in its truth. He is a Platonic, not an Aristotelian thinker. He believes in the objective value of the work and he strives for objectivity. He even ponders over such a secondary factor – one might think – as punctuation. He says in a gloss to (6) *Interpunkcja i strofy* [Punctuation and Stanzas]: "More convincing are poets who [...] treat the structure of a poem as open. Decisions on the use of capital letters, punctuation and rhymes should not be made a priori: everything must be subordinated to the supreme goal, namely, to create a harmonised work of art" (p. 31).

Czerniawski is an advocate of difficult lyric poetry, as represented by Norwid, Eliot and Pound, though he is also able to appreciate the poets not fully familiar to him, for instance, Jan Lechoń⁴ or Jan Rostworowski.⁵ The foundation of his poetic concept (since he writes all his essays from a poet's perspective), of his acceptance and rejection of individual poems, is the conviction that, as one reads in the commentary to (20) *Poemat dla niepalących* [A Narrative Poem for Non-Smokers]: "no poet wishes to have the value of his work questioned" (p. 104). If this is so, every effort should be made to delve into the meaning of the poem, as thoroughly as possible. On the way to reaching the truth, objectivity, certainty, we may get confused, err, or argue with ourselves. This is inevitable. "The poem – as Czerniawski wrote in his essay (25) *Dziś, tylko cokolwiek dalej* [Today, but a Bit Further Off] – is not a chemical component that can be defined in a way that excludes any ambiguity. Two, even contradictory, interpretations may prove equally valuable" (p. 129).

4. What is the secret of the poem and why are we striving to discover it? It lies, naturally, in words and in their proper and accurate interpretation. The poet-critic tends to be annoyed by the nonchalance with which readers (also critics) approach this small, and ultimately shortened, form of expression, selecting only a fragment from it and ignoring the rest. Adam Czerniawski's interpretive radicalism might be referred to as **anti-reductionism**, if this term (in Norwid's sense) can be applied here.

⁴ Jan Lechoń (1899–1956), born Leszek Serafinowicz, was a Polish poet, literary critic and editor of periodicals, a co-founder of the "Skamader" poetic group. After the outbreak of World War II he moved to the US.

⁵ Jan Rostworowski (1919–1975), a Polish poet and prose writer, a co-operator of the London *Wiadomości*. After the outbreak of World War II he moved to France, from where he returned to Poland in 1968.

Scrupulous reading allows us to understand hidden meanings and discover aspects in the poem that are only hinted at, as well as to fix the text within the larger area of literature and related arts. A poet-critic pays great attention to this issue, because, Czerniawski argues, a poem that is not rooted in art loses something special, namely, it becomes resistant, so to speak, to the dialogue of the material. In the title commentary to (3) *Światy umowne* [Imaginary Worlds] we read: “The function of art is to create worlds that we only explore in dreams and fantasies” (p. 15). Art means all forms of human artistic expression: not only poetry, but also music and painting.

5. One may well like to scrutinise the details of this book, argue with it and accuse its author of adopting a dogmatic attitude towards various issues. But, as mentioned above, *Światy umowne* should be read not only as an ordinary collection of essays, but also as an artistic programme. When two perspectives overlap – the critical and the poetic perspectives, in this case – it is easy to stray from one path of interpretation. And then we will find ourselves in such a thicket of matters and such a blend of problems that it will be difficult to see the wood for the trees.

Światy umowne is the crowning of Czerniawski’s fifty-year love affair with poetry. He takes the reader on a journey during which he uncovers the mystery of the poem, suggesting criteria for evaluating poetry. Are we willing to follow him? No author would be true to himself if he said he did not care. But in the collection discussed here, there is also another directive: “search on your own.” It is better to wander alone in the dark rather than to follow a blind teacher.

6. *Światy umowne* makes for difficult reading. It has been written by a demanding author and intended for a demanding reader. In the final essay, (27) *Pro domo sua*, Adam Czerniawski concludes with the following words: “We have evidence that – contrary to popular beliefs – the work is not easily explained by the conditions in which it was created. [...] Not only recently and not only in the evaluation of poetry does theory go its own separate way, whereas the capricious, untamed humanity follows its own path” (p. 139).

3. The story and the music box

1. While Czerniawski’s poetry and essays have been the focus of most of the critical work on the author, his prose remains the least-described aspect of his writings. One may go as far and claiming that Czerniawski, as a prose writer, does not have his place in the critics’ consciousness and that his prose writings have been pushed to the literary periphery and thoroughly forgotten.

But should one blame the critics for this neglect? The situation is rather more complicated: We do not know the exact number of copies of the first

two collections of Czerniawski's stories, nor do we know how far these books were distributed. It is safe to guess that the print run did not exceed three hundred copies (both were published by the London-based Poets' and Painters' Press), while the method of distribution seems to have been private and library-oriented. Czerniawski's third prose book, already published in Poland by the Warsaw-based Staromiejski Dom Kultury (The Old Town Culture House), had a print run of one thousand copies, but its distribution was similar. However, regardless of the distribution, the number of copies clearly determined the type of reader to whom this work was addressed: the prose is ambiguous, deceptive, perverse, split into many codes, collage-like and mystifying. The intended reader was an elite reader, educated and familiar with the achievements of Polish literature (especially by émigrés) and contemporary world literature.

Części mniejszej całości [Parts of a Larger Whole] (1964), *Akt* [The Act] (1975) and *Koncert życzeń* [The Wish List] (1991) are slim prose collections. The first one comprises eight, the second seven, small narratives, several pages in length. Each collection presents the reader with a metatextual recommendation of the work's worth. *Koncert życzeń* is a longer story or a micro-novel, of a similar editorial style. *Części mniejszej całości* is preceded by – the now famous – two-word preface by Witold Gombrowicz (“Worth reading”) while *Akt* is recommended by a note written by a fictitious editor (“prepared by Józef Zenon Tynicki in accordance with the paragraphs of the small Penal Code and internal censorship”). *Koncert życzeń* sports the most classic afterword of the author of these words. The first two metatexts are worth special attention: the first one advertises the book, whereas the other mystifies it. Both metatexts are peculiar. The two words written by Gombrowicz can be interpreted in a serious or a joking manner, as can the “editorial work” of Józef Zenon Tynicki. The presence of the metatexts signals to the reader an element of playful engagement with the intended audience even before the reading process begins. The metatexts imply a specific narrative strategy, promise a surprise to the reader and create a hypostasis of the “unknown.”

Following the critical reception of Czerniawski's first two volumes (and these are fundamental for the future of this prose), we note that, so far, none of the critics have taken the metatextual elements seriously. The reviewers of *Części mniejszej całości* and *Akt* barely tried to interpret individual stories, their opinion based on a general impression. Most focused on the description of the text fabric, sometimes only throwing a cursory glance over the artistic procedures applied by Czerniawski. The exception was Michał Chmielowiec, who wrote in detail about the first collection. Czerniawski's prose exceeded the reception habits and expectations of most critics; it proved too difficult, incomprehensible and outlandish for them to take it seriously. Of course, none of the reviewers admit as much. And yet the repertoire of critical comments about Czerniawski's prose clearly indicates

the critics' helplessness. Let me quote as an example Alicja Lisiecka who described Czerniawski's prose as "extremely interesting, although still in a rather primitive development phase."⁶ Perhaps the critics would have reacted differently if Czerniawski had followed the suggestion of Stanisław Baliński that "in the field of the descriptive novel, Czerniawski could create interesting and atmospheric pieces." Czerniawski, however, decided to go his own way. Still, literary critics are even unsure of what Czerniawski's own way is.

Is he an epigone of Gombrowicz – as Czesław Dobek claims? Or is he a "syncretist" who draws inspiration from Gombrowicz, Witkacy, Jarry, Kafka, Michaux, and Mrozek, but is still unlike them – as Alicja Lisiecka suggests? Or maybe he is a good observer of the "syndrome" of the absurd consciousness of the modern world, in which the Far- and Middle Eastern puzzles and puns, Rabelais, Münchhausen, Gogol and Maupassant find themselves right next to Edward Lear (and Shakespeare through *King Lear*), the surrealists, Tuwim's *Śtopiewnie* (and probably Khlebnikov's *zaum*), Kafka, Gombrowicz, Schulz, Witkacy, Beckett, Thurber, Mrozek – as Michał Chmielowiec argues? Or maybe he is a "crazy chef," preparing – as the main and only dish – "existential salads" with a bit of everything, as Maciej Broński believes? Or he might be a "complicationist," playing with marked cards, a sophisticated absurdist, for whom the "difficult world" is ridiculously simple, but this message he conveys in the form of mystification, satire, absurdity, grotesque, brutality ("brutalisation") and ambiguity – as Bogdan Czaykowski claims? Or maybe he is a great "collage artist," as Janusz Koryl proposes?

The incompatibility (or rather – the dispersion, the hotchpotch within traditions) of some of these pronouncements seems to be significant here. Czerniawski's short prose pieces draw inspiration from many sources and seem to position themselves **across** those sources. They do not continue a direct pattern, but they modify it, connecting it at the same time to another pattern. Hence, in a single narrative, references to the works of several authors appear, with none of them constituting a *nucleus* of the story, no model being taken over faithfully and none of them being a direct continuation. One could say that Adam Czerniawski's prose is also a prose of simultaneous acceptance and negation of tradition. Almost as in the metaphor of Ignacy Fik⁷: tradition is for the writer like a snake, but this snake devours its own tail.

2. Why has Czerniawski's short prose not been comprehensively described by critics? There is a simple explanation. Modern Polish prose is still treated like a ciphertext, of interest only to a small group of enthusiasts who thrive on investigating mental labyrinths. It might seem that

⁶ See A. Lisiecka, *Kto jest „księciem poetów”, czyli Rzecz o Adamie Czerniawskim i innych*, London 1979.

⁷ Ignacy Fik (1904–1942) was a Polish literary critic, essayist and poet.

at the end of the 20th century, the time of the dispute with the traditional understanding of literature, avant-garde prose creations (let us call them so) would be comprehensible for everyone, or at least that the critics would assign them their right place in the hierarchy of contemporary literature. However, this fails to be the case. The positivistic prose model still dominates the habits and tastes of both critics and readers, despite several decades of struggle with that narrative model.

In the period of postmodernism it became obvious that we accept all novelties but only on one condition: if they come from the outside and refer to a literature different from ours. Polish criticism enthusiastically embraced varieties of French, English, Ibero-American and American prose, and earlier – the breaking of the norm of nineteenth-century realism in the works of Joyce, Proust and Virginia Woolf. However, the approval of novelties in Polish prose does not come very easily. This was experienced in the past by Jerzy Andrzejewski, Leopold Buczkowski, Leon Gomolicki and Wilhem Mach, and contemporary authors still experience it today. Kazimierz Wyka's call from his 1945 essay *Tragiczność, drwina i realizm* [Tragedy, Derision and Realism] "realism is waiting for everyone" – still remains the most powerful voice among the critics. This is as if the positivistically understood "truth about time" was a panacea, a self-sufficient method, the implementation of which must immediately yield an excellent work. Meanwhile, modern prose – as perfectly captured by Ishmael Reed – "can be anything it wants to be: a vaudeville show, the six o'clock news, the mumbling of wild men saddled by demons." However, in order to arrive at such a conclusion, one needs to go beyond the world of one's own literature and tradition, and set oneself other goals than those imposed on prose by the history of Polish masterpieces (conservative by nature).

This was perfectly expressed in *Ragadon* (1987) by Jan Tomkowski. A polemic with the fossilised foundations of Polish prose criticism has been carried out here perhaps in the most severe and yet the most accurate manner.

A novel, he [the critic] said, should play, ring and delight. I can feel some inner melody that reverberates in every masterpiece. As if differently, but still the same. It plays and plays. [...] Have mercy, I whispered, you have mistaken a novel for a music box again.

This is the main point of the dispute. The arguments of the advocates of innovation and the preservers of tradition will lie between a "novel" and a "music box," between what is of a seeking nature and what is available to the general experience (and thus to aesthetic reception).

3. Czerniawski's narratives are – in their Gombrowicz-style grimace – absolute stories.⁸ This feature is revealed on all levels: genology, narration, reading. Everything is possible here, nothing happens by chance, although one would often think that chance plays the main, even the only, role in

⁸ What is meant by absolute stories are texts devoid of a superior ordering rule, closer rather to the very narrative process than to a coherent story.

the discussed collection. Yet the function of chance (rather than randomness) tends to be destructive: it breaks down the structure, creates variant systems, organises the world according to obscure rules. However, chance itself, as Krzysztof Kieślowski has perfectly shown in his film *Przypadek* [Blind Chance], has some sort of ordered sequence, its own beginning and end: it is an unexpected turn in successive events, it introduces a new variant to the story which must (or may) end with only one solution. Chance as a variant of history cannot change it, because it is – by its very nature – invariant. The absolute eye of Providence, so to speak, watches over the ending of the story in Kieślowski's film. In Adam Czerniawski's prose, there is no place for such a chance unless it is understood as a **suspension** of the legal order of the presented world, a suspensory play at the level of stylistics, composition, etc.

If this is the case, then the shorter prose writings of Czerniawski are absolutely suspensory. Organically, they become stories that are impossible to read and not possible to typify. Their style resembles everything, it produces the impression of a mosaic, a compendium of the already known prose forms. Realistic prose and journalistic record, philosophical lecture and conversation (or rather different conversational variants) and detective story will be present in them simultaneously. Seriousness and joke, solemnity and irony, truth and falsehood, realism and situational absurdity. What else can be found here? In *Koncert życzeń* Czerniawski describes this mixture metaphorically as “desperate meowing, which soon transforms into a whine and a squeak, and finally turns into a dull clatter, giggle and stench.”

I frequently call such works **narrative processes** rather than stories in the dictionary sense of the term (regardless of the number of attributives added to them). The narrative process is inherently dynamic: both constructive and destructive, based on constant alternations. It is an internally conflicted form of order and chaos. Nothing is absolutely certain in it, nothing is more or less important. Everything is mutually nullified as in Gonzalo's estancia,⁹ and everything mutually conditions its existence. It is obvious that in such narration processes conventions (or rather: narration strategies) play a crucial role. However, they are suspensory: they suspend the existence of a specific order of the world (the presented world), they send the reader back to the starting point, although this point keeps changing. The reader must be aware of his/her role, after all, he/she, according to an unwritten contract, is the main protagonist of this narration process; perhaps not so much as a living and breathing **reader**, but **the reader's consciousness**, though formed by the writer. In the narration process, the main principle is an understanding of the world in which ontology gives way to cognition.

⁹ Gonzalo is one of the protagonists of *Trans-Atlantyk*, Witold Gombrowicz's novel.

4. In *Feeling and Form* Susan Langer says in that if the reader is unable to understand the “presented world,” something is apparently wrong either with the work itself or with the reading reception. In narration processes, however, the situation is probably different. Carlos Fuentes once called this type of writing “criticism of the art of writing,” the beginning of which he saw in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. With Joyce, this was – in Fuentes’ opinion – “criticism of the individual art of writing, writing of the subjective ‘I,’ excluded writing,” criticism of language economy, perceived by Joyce simultaneously as “luxury and waste.” If we were to extend these observations to avant-garde works that have been appearing in Poland for at least forty years now (artistically revolutionary ones in relation to realistic prose, as aptly expressed by Henryk Berezka), we will find ourselves at the centre of the principles defining these texts.

Will these principles also be applicable to Adam Czerniawski’s prose? The answer is a resounding ‘yes’. Still, limiting the narratives of Czerniawski only to avant-garde principles would slightly distort their meaning. This is, after all, prose that also uses the infinite potential of the grotesque, playing with its own linguistic material and making it an – undoubtedly philosophical – *Ding an sich*. It is also prose aimed against traditional sanctities, such as the incorrigible “Polishness,” glorifying old symbols and seeing divine influence in them. Finally, it is prose based on “common sense,” sought in various amusing contexts of the surrounding world.

5. An attentive reader will perceive in it a constant mockery of eternal human beliefs in all kinds of ideological and totalitarian Providences (whatever they may be and wherever they may come from), he/she will also hear the Great Laughter that sounds in it. We can also share this laughter during the reading of *Narracje ormiańskie* [Armenian Narratives] (2003), a selection of Czerniawski’s stories.

Let us remind ourselves: this laughter is called *catharsis*.

4. The diary of clashes

Krótkopis 1986-1995 (1998) is a manifestation – firmer and clearer than ever before – of Czerniawski’s confession of faith: it is a summary of his reflections spanning nearly half a century on the condition of literature and the presence of the writer in the face of various determinants of history and environment. Finally, it is a question about the sense of humanistic thought in general, especially that which constantly stumbles over the barrier of the “homeland” and the “foreign land.”

Czerniawski is radical, definitive and argumentative in his views. He does not take into account partial arguments, nor does he delve into the psychology of creation. The latter is perhaps for him an element of solipsism, and this stance is the one that the poet-critic takes and exceptional dislike

to. He approaches all erroneous opinions that he deems incorrect with analytic destructivism. He is somewhat moody in handing out laurels and critical comments, and although he masks this with irony (and self-irony), it must be said that both his definitiveness and his irony derive from the same foundation, which is axiological absoluteness.

Adam Czerniawski's literary diary reminds us of Witold Gombrowicz's *Dziennik*, similar in its definitiveness and aristocratic character. Czerniawski does not quote Gombrowicz's famous sentence that art is aristocratic like a prince of the blood, but this claim is confirmed by constant polemics with other writers and translators. He fights against everyone and everything, and this *bellum contra omnes* seems to be the clearest identification of the writing strategy in the book in question.

In *Krótkopis*, Czerniawski is rebellious, pugnacious and brazen, though he never exceeds the limit of good taste. Even where he refuses to admit that his adversaries are right, he does not do it in order to demonstrate their intellectual impotence. He dismisses the lack of wisdom of others, he fights with "coxcombs," who in their self-centeredness exceed the principle of appropriateness and, ignoring the fragile matter of thought, are eager to offer advice to others, although the value of this advice is dubious. This, of course, may not be approved of, but – we have to admit – it is alluring at times.

Czerniawski is sometimes egocentric, but this attitude of the diarist is understandable, the more so because he has to fight not only for his own image (hence the constant mention of mistakes made in his biography), but also for the value of his own artistic thought. As a translator, he reminds us of the inevitable necessity to respect the linguistic qualities of translation, the primacy of semantic accuracy and fidelity of the "secondary text." Coupled with stylistic equivalence, it orders that the translation be subject to the functional and stylistic norms of the target language (here Czerniawski-translator argues with Barańczak's communicative stance, according to which the text of the translation should not be expected to fully and accurately convey all the meanings and the stylistic properties of the original text, consistent with the functional and stylistic standards of the target language, but only to express the basic communicative function of the original, its functional "dominant"). As a poet, he constantly ponders over the strange nature of coincidence, which makes the same images appear in works of various authors, although this was not intended by them. Finally, as an essayist, he constantly reminds us of the need to present the art of the word in the context of other forms of artistic creation, such as painting, music or theatre.

In *Krótkopis*, Czerniawski stays true to himself as an author of critical literary collections. And although his diary is a kind of a "battle log" (blood runs thick here), it is difficult to find a real corpse in it. After all, in Czerniawski's diary (as in any other diary), it is all about trying to answer the fundamental question about one's own origin, one's own place in time and space.

This émigré writer became a Polish writer by his own choice, he could as easily have been an English writer. In *Krótkopis*, Czerniawski attempts to find a credible formula to define the basic ontological question: “who am I?”. In the search for this formula, he eliminates everything that obscures the answer. From the perspective of the exile, it must go as follows: the struggle for one’s own place in literature is the defence of its artistic distinctness. The acceptance of flawed and shallow critical labels is tantamount to accepting falsification of the fragments of a resume, distorting the writer’s worldview, being marginalised. No reasonable person can agree to such a strategy.

It is a very personal volume, internally consistent, and well-written. Focusing basically on metaliterary and philosophical considerations, it also brings a great dose of emotional involvement in matters of poetry and in the art of translation of philosophy, so far absent in other books by Adam Czerniawski. What is definitive in the claims about art is often mitigated by a melancholic reflection; and what is personal is hidden in considerations about the human condition in general (also about stupidity, envy and intolerance).

Such books are either accepted in full or rejected altogether. I wonder what the future will hold for *Krótkopis*, especially as its aesthetic reception is a question immanently present in Adam Czerniawski’s diary.

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