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Białoszewski: Idyllic

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It has been half a century since the publication of Miron Białoszewski's debut making collection. Białoszewski turned out to be a revelator of poetic language of the scale that today is still difficult to assess, but the *novum* of his poems in 1956 relied also on their bringing forth a record of a peripheral existence, a very particular kind of record – although that too was obviously influenced by the venerable poetic tradition. His poetic work can be placed within the tradition of “the idyll of the Self,” especially in one of its models that Renato Poggioli names the “the idyll of one's own room” (67).¹ One's own room is to be understood not as much a bastion of privacy (which around that time was completely unprotected), but rather as a shelter or a recess providing the peace necessary for contemplation and relief. It is the *locus amoenus* of the Stalinist age. Rituals and object filling this private space, such as the stove “like a triumphal arch” (in “Oh! Oh! Should They Take Away My Stove...”),² or the wardrobe („Sztuki piękne mojego pokoju”) transform

¹ R. Poggioli *Wierzbowa fujarka* [The Oaten Flute] transl. F. Jarzyna, „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich,” Vol. 3.1, p. 67. Białoszewski's volume is rich in traditional pastoral imagery, such as the suburban garden of Eden in „Ballada z makaty” in all its seasons; a beer selling booth in Wołomin that summons the shepherds like the manger in Bethlehem („Filozofia Wołomina”); there are Chekhovian oxen and angels in “Słowa dokładane do wiśniowych wołów” and the smell of hallway in a Warsaw tenement building evokes the image of a hop plantation on the day of brewing. („Zadumanie o sieni kamienicznej”)

² Quotations from Białoszewski based on translations by Andrzej Busza and Bogdan Czaykowski [BCZ]. Where translations were unavailable, I leave original poem titles and provide a working translation of the quoted passage (AW)

the hermitage into a private *Sans souci* in which one dances the quadrille and precious time passes, as the ending of the latter poem informs. Solitude is an essential state to the contemplating mind, as essential as air and the mythology of a poet which in this case is nothing other than a private idyll of belonging, belonging to a confraternity – and not just any confraternity: the speaker of Białoszewski’s poem is aware that he joins a long lineage of predecessors: “Yet/ my hermitage/ has its temptations:/ solitude / memories of the world/ and that I consider myself a poet.” (“Of My Hermitage With Calling” [BCZ]).

One’s own room is also an extension of the Self which for Białoszewski is the most basic instance of being-in-the-world – omnipresent to the extent characteristic of Romantic poets who perceived the boundaries of the Self to be the only boundaries of the world. It is interesting indeed that an arch-anti-Romantic such as Białoszewski shares with the Romantics the belief in the supremacy of the Self, a paradox that could perhaps be explained if one views his poetry as a demonstration of power of the projecting, creative Self of the poet – in other words, if one views Białoszewski poetic work as a realization of the “defensive and aggressive variety” of subjectivity (148).³ Hyperactivity of the lyrical voice is an attempt to reconcile the contradiction resulting from existence within two separate and conflicting orders: subjectivity and the world. Białoszewski achieves this in the simplest possible way – by negation. He strives to be like a child: unified with the world. And the worm of consciousness? The poet pretends not to feel its bite. Being in all possible forms is good by its very nature and such is our existence in it as well. “I am happy that I think” (from “A Joyful Self-Portrait” [BCZ]) means: I am happy, therefore I am: “consciousness is a dance of joy” the poem continues. Being is joy, but being no more is “joy unspeakable.”

Readings of Białoszewski’s early poems offered by prominent critics such as Jacek Łukasiewicz and Artur Sandauer determined important interpretative directions inasmuch as they mystified the body of his work. The poet’s alienation, his decision to take the position of an outsider – his “scavengery,” emphasized by Łukasiewicz,⁴ and the allegedly ostentatious, almost nihilistic strategy of a “va-grant” posited by Sandauer,⁵ were in fact – or so one might infer today – strategies

³ Discussed by Agata Bielik-Robson in *Duch powierzchni. Rewizja romantyczna i filozofia*, Universitas, Kraków (2004) 148 and elsewhere.

⁴ „Acknowledging the importance of the heroic attitude, one would be more inclined to acknowledge an even greater importance of a different one, one suspicious towards itself, one that looks for ready-mades among the rubbish and attempts to investigate their usefulness, one that is likely to be described as ‘scavengery’ (...) This ‘scavenging’ attitude is very important in poets.” J. Łukasiewicz, *Szmaciarze i bohaterowie*. [Rag-men and Heroes] Więź, Warszawa (1963) 109.

⁵ Sandauer saw in Białoszewski a „combination of an artist and a tramp.” The critic relied perhaps too heavily on Sartre’s reading of Genet in *Jean Genet– comedien et martyr*, also recalled in his essay („Poezja rupieci” [Poetry of oddment] *Kultura*, 1966 Vol. 29-30). „Of course Białoszewski is not a criminal but he has a similar attitude.” After: Sandauer, *Samobójstwo Mitrydataesa*. Czytelnik (Warszawa) 1968. 121 and 127.

of a dandy who turns necessity into virtue, a choice definitely more aesthetic than political. Sandauer's categorization in particular appears to be a misunderstanding. The nonchalance of the critic paired with his patronal goodwill (the latter cannot be denied) equipped him with too great an inclination to utter half-truths about Białoszewski's poetry.

It was neither poetry of a "tramp" nor "a poetry of oddment." Białoszewski was a dandy and he longed for things of beauty, even though he had to settle for "oddments," and those who remember him, recall him as someone far from a "tramp." The fascination with ugliness and rubbish, attributed (and suggested) to him by Sandauer were not his own. Sandauer writes: "Białoszewski is fascinated with broken and derelict objects, neglected and covered with dust. What seems yet another apotheosis of 'commonality,' the "floor" [in his poem] is nothing else than the 'the lying side of our daily Lord, our ordinary days.' After a closer look, one discovers that the more disused the object, the more will Białoszewski be fascinated with it." Both Białoszewski and Czachorowski practiced the cult of beauty:

Miron's poetic youth seems almost compensational with regard to the severe poverty of existence – rich and baroque, laden with jewels of metaphors, expansive, multi-worded. This is how his friend, Swen–Czachorowski, wrote as well; it was a poetic cultivated in the circles of young poets of Kobyłka. He did not immediately obey Ludwik's [Hering] absolute and adamant postulate: brevity, austerity, not to say – ordinariness. (257)⁶

But it was also not "everyday beauty," which in the work of other poets – for instance, in Leopold Staff's *Wilkina* – invites rather sentimental sacralizations of the ordinary. The fascination with what is accessible to touch and sight, generally common, everyday, and rudimentary, apparent in *The Revolution of Things*, is of a rather different origin. It results from the experience of uncanniness of the ordinary. Such a category immediately leads us in the direction of the Freudian *Unheimliche*, except in this case we seem to be facing its – so to say – positive variety. Białoszewski appears to be a phenomenologist of what Freudian discourse would refer to as *Unheimliche der Gewöhnlichkeit*, but the convenient Freudian trope is false in this particular instance. A more suitable interpretation of *Unheimliche* as strangeness is suggested by Stanley Cavell in his investigation of the "ordinary"; it is the result of skepticism that has that found its newer incarnation in the philosophy of language from Wittgenstein's writings. Modern skepticism equips language as a tool of everyday communication with the ability, or even desire, to undermine and challenge itself and by doing this it raises awareness of the surreal character of the real, in other words, of non-obviousness of what is real. From this perspective, the world itself becomes problematic – "a scandal to phi-

⁶ H. Kirchner „Tworzenie Mirona. Nowe źródła biograficzne” In: *Pisanie Białoszewskiego*. M. Głowiński, Z. Łapiński (eds) Wydawnictwo IBL PAN (Warszawa) 1993. 257.

losophy” as Kant would have said.⁷ What evokes anxious attention or fascination bordering on awe is the epiphanic scene of appearance, the aura of event in itself. Beginning with Hofmannsthal, the appearance of an ordinary thing in its proper form, natural and almost necessary and yet suddenly non-obvious and resisting our knowledge of it (both visual knowledge and one previously acquired that allow for its immanentization or assimilation) represents the modern epiphany.⁸ This is precisely how an epiphany happens also in *The Revolution of Things* [Obroty rzeczy] where the appearance of things is always helped by the presence of the subject.⁹ The subject reveals itself as a necessary catalyst, an interaction and a co-presence, as the “Self” is more than the locus of manifestation of *principium individuationis*. It is also its cosmic extension: “We are starfish. / Not separate from anything. / Dispersed.” („My rozgwiadzy” [We, starfish]). In “Noce nieoddzielenia” [The Nights of Un-separateness] the subject is a co-existence. “It is from my breast / that stairs of reality grow... Strike me / O structure of my world!” („My Jacobs of Exhaustion” [BCZ]) Białoszewski facilitates the appearance of things because the phenomenon never ceases to please and amaze him: “I gape astonished / and I astonish myself / and comment on the lives of things around me.” (“Of My Hermitage With Calling” [BCZ])

An older division of labor, as Aleksander Wat observes, assumed surprise and marvel to be the domain of philosophers while the task admiration was given to poets.¹⁰ This division was abandoned in Romanticism – in *Balon*, sentimental poet Kajetan Koźmian writes: “Our task is to gaze, marvel and praise.” His sense of marvel still concerns, conventionally, the “high” object of rhetorical *decorum* (in

⁷ S. Cavell “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary” in: Cavell, *In quest of the Ordinary: Lines in Scepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1988. 154: “My idea is that what in philosophy is known as skepticism (for example, as in Descartes, Hume and Kant) is a relation to the world, and to others, and to myself, and to language, that is known to what you might call literature, or anyway responded to in literature, in uncounted other guises – in Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, in Emerson’s and Thoreau’s “silent melancholy” and “quiet desperation,” in Wordsworth’s perception of us as without “interest,” in Poe’s “perverseness.” Why philosophy and literature to not know this about one another – and to that extent remain unknown to themselves – has been my theme ut seems to me forever.”

⁸ Ryszard Nycz discusses modern epiphany in *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*. Universitas, Kraków (2001) 41 and elsewhere.

⁹ A. Bielik Robson discusses epiphany as „providing affirmative power in the disenchanting world” and the related, inextricable „will to participate” of the subject as well as the power of the gaze complementing the sphere of ontology in the “Introduction” to Ch. Taylor *Źródła podmiotowości. Narodziny tożsamości nowoczesnej* [Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity] transl. M. Gruszczyński et. al., T. Gadacz (ed.) with an Introduction by A. Bielik-Robson. PWN, Warszawa (2001) p. L and n. Bielik-Robson develops the idea in *Duch powierzchni*. 126, 343 and elsewhere.

¹⁰ „Dziewięć uwag do portretu Józefa Stalina” In: A. Wat. *Świat na haku i pod kluczem*. K. Rutkowski (ed.) Polonia Book Fund, London 1985. 135-136.

this particular case, “fairer sex”). One of the Romantics compared poetic admiration to a child’s sense of wonder.¹¹ But the Romantic poet became a philosopher. Admittedly, a philosopher in the service of a beloved absolute, the absolute of Beauty that demanded admiration, but admiration accompanied by a fearful wonder or awe. Romantic beauty began to relish the sublime, where awe is an important a category in the investigation of the nature of esthetic experience. In the gaze of Mickiewicz’s subject in *Sonnets of the Crimea*, wonder at the world of natural objects and phenomena is accompanied both by admiration and awe. The post-Romantic poets gladly position themselves in this aesthetic, although, tired with the growing degree of intellectualization of the discourse on the subject, they are ready to side with the “naïve” gaze. Beauty, according to Josif Brodski, strips away sense from reality. Faced with an object or phenomenon that evoke admiration, one does not ask what they mean, it is enough that they *are*. Białoszewski strives to be a child of admiration understood in such naïve terms.

The instance of the *appearance* of things does not awe the speaking subject, it does not frighten nor confuse him, or bring forth resistance or manifestations of cognitive helplessness in the face of strange order. In the scene of their *appearance*, things are illuminated by an aura of positive sublimity and this appearance of things needs to find appropriate representation in the language of the poet, a representation worthy of ordinariness taking the form of mystery play:

How glad I am
that you are a sky and a kaleidoscope
that you have so many artificial stars.
and that you shine so in a monstrance of brightness when I raise
your hollowed half globe round the eyes
against the air.
How unrestrained you are
in your richness
my colander. (“Grey Eminences of Rapture” [BCZ])

The stove in the poem “is also beautiful” in the evening when it “enters the elements/ of monumental shrouding.” In “Podłogo, błogosław!” [Bless, O Floor!] the presence of the floor, its color and texture, “greybrowness of turnip” makes an appearance in several scenes, perseverations, and alternations. Białoszewski writes his own *Metamorphoses*. Each increasingly devout presentation of the object in the poem is a trace of what its essence appears to be. Throughout this chase, changes its ontological status: the thing becomes a “concerting word” – as in Czachorowski’s poems, the order of language, in other words, the order of late allegory, is revealed as the proper order of the existence of things. Finally, the attempt to express [in words] turns into an incantation, in a prayerful chant.

This presentation is has been making appearance forms in poetry in increasingly diversified since Romanticism: next to poetry that entered the circle of tormented

¹¹ S. Coleridge, *Biografia Literaria*, Vol. 1, London 1817. 85.

delectation with the sublime and awesome, there is also poetry that is celebratory, epiphanically hymnal (*vide* Novalis) but also ironic, a record of negative sublimity (*vide* Baudelaire), inspired by the “surprise of things” – precisely by the simplest ones. It was Wordsworth who spoke of “dignities of plain occurrence” (5).¹² And dignities of plain occurrences are only a step away from the dignity of trivial and insignificant. Mickiewicz gives an intriguing reply to his friends’ insistence that he visited the alleged grave of Homer in Smyrna.

I was entirely uninterested in that!... There was [at the entrance to Homer’s Tomb] a pile of manure and rubbish, all remains thrown in together: filth, rubbish, swill, bones, broken skulls, a piece of old shoe sole, some feathers – that I liked the most. It stood there for a long time, as it all looked to me like front of an inn in Poland. (561)¹³

More than with anything else, Mickiewicz is preoccupied with the scene of ordinary things (in this particular case, a pile of rubbish) making an appearance in an extraordinary way. In Norwid, ordinary things, insignificant and seemingly trivial details will soon become a medium of most strange correspondence and epiphanic “drama of small things.”¹⁴

The world is a “storehouse of contemplation” to the author the author of *The Revolution of Things*, a place of “the carnival of poetry/ for a solemn unceasing amazement” (“Of My Hermitage...”). What should be noted (and what suggests the “idyll of one’s own room”) is the fact that the strangeness of everyday objects, differently than in Freud or – too look into more literary and familiar sources – in Tuwim or Gombrowicz, is not sinister or demonic in its character. It does not result in tormenting repetitions, it does not deprive of sense and turn our definition of reality inside out. Strangeness in Białoszewski is not a hole in the Great Other, in the symbolic system that we use to tame the world. On the contrary, it makes reality more attractive and strengthens it. Because of its “strangeness,” reality turns out to be friendly and deserving of adoration, it evokes admiration instead of dread, moreover – as critics have noted – Białoszewski’s everyday is sacralized.¹⁵ It is the gesture of sacralization and the accompanying ritualization of mundane activities directs us most successfully at the notion of everyday lived as positively experienced *Unheimliche*. Ordinary objects and actions do not evoke

¹² „Dignities of plain occurrence”. After: P.V. Marinelli *Pastoral. The Critical idiom*. Methuen, London (1971) 5.

¹³ After: D. Siwicka. *Turcja* In: J.M. Rymkiewicz, D. Siwicka, A. Witkowska, M. Zielińska *Mickiewicz. Encyklopedia*. Świat Książki, Warszawa (2001) 561.

¹⁴ „A small thing! Is it a small thing? ... to see in the movement of heel/ in the cork sole of the shoe – to see the soul at work – it is drama!” Norwid, *Aktor* [Actor] (second version). Act I, Sc. I. 8-14. R. Nycz describes those trivial events and details that in Norwid’s *Black Flowers* and *White Flowers* become the center point of „simple allegories” as an novel “project of an epiphanic discourse” in *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*. 90 and elsewhere.

¹⁵ J. Kwiatkowski „Liturgia i abulia” in: J. Kwiatkowski, *Klucze do wyobraźni*. PIW, Warszawa (1964).

awed amazement, which does not mean that they do not appear sublime: when they become the object of attention, they evade description. Their contemplation leads to the scene of recognition. *Anagnorisis*, or recognition, revelation, discovery, is an old trope that found its way from tragedy to pastoral elegy. In modern elegy it always has the character of epiphany.¹⁶ One should emphasize that the elegiac *anagnorisis* is always a recognition by someone – subjective perspective is always present in the scene of recognition, and the elegy reveals itself as the starting form of the subjectivization of poetry, the prototype of the monodist utterance and, as such, of the lyric. The Romantics chose elegy as their favorite genre and located monody in reflection – exponent of the presence of the speaking subject. Coleridge believed elegy to be “form of poetry natural to the reflective mind. It may treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject for itself, but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself” (15).¹⁷ As expected of a late modern or postmodern poet, Białoszewski is “pre-romantically” lyrical – he often gives up on the monologic utterance – but never on the subject, and his manner of representation of things is drastically subjectified. The elegiac perspective turns out to be also his perspective, even if it is not directly evoked. Things *are* – and this is wonderful! – but they always break, become lost, fall apart or are destroyed. This is evident to Białoszewski who took years to write *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*. But they exist not only in the perspective of loss. They are lost in other ways, too.

In the scene of recognition, the alleged nature of things always reveals itself to be something yet different. Does it exist at all then? If it does, it can never be finally captured, and thus it exists in an almost divine way known from apophatic theology. Things appear to us always in their “revolution” [PL obrót, *pl.* obroty] therefore in motion, in a volatile form. A trace of this instability is found in the language: in Polish, things can “take a turn” [PL: przybierają obrót] and to “brać kogoś w obroty” implies engaging or forcing someone into an intense activity. The *Polish Language Dictionary* cites a sentence by Henryk Rzewuski as one of the usages of “obróć (*pl.* obroty)” [revolution, spin, turn] – “Zwyczajnie juryści, nie umieją ręką, więc językiem biorą nas w obroty.” [Since they cannot do it by hand, jurists use their language]. Qualified as archaic by Witold Doroszewski, the expression “być (znaleźć się) w obrotach” means “to find oneself in trouble.” Revolution [obróć] is also present in expressions such as “zmiana kierunku, przebieg, tok (sprawy, rozmowy)” [turn of direction, turn of events, conversation turn]. “Obrotny” [*adj.*] means “agile, nimble.” Things, therefore, *appear* in their accidental forms of existence. But the majesty of those forms is not in any way lesser than the majesty of ultimate things:

¹⁶ Compare: A.F. Potts *The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegist*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1967. 36 and elsewhere; K.E. Smythe *Figuring Grief Gallant, Munro and the Poetics of Elegy*, McGill-Queens University Press, Quebec (1992). 11 and elsewhere.

¹⁷ After: C.M. Schenck *Mourning and Panegyric. The Poetics of Pastoral Ceremony*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London (1988) 15.

Wall, I am not worthy
that you should fill me with constant wonder,
and you too, fork...
and you, dusts... (“Of My Hermitage...”)

Writing becomes an act of adoration, joy; in Białoszewski’s poems the speaker “dances” – as the poets of old did, recalled by Aleksander Wat. And his poetry becomes a figure of mystery play, of laudatory ritual, of apotheosis. The voice of *The Revolution of Things* belongs to an ecstatic who dances before the majesty of ordinary things. This tone will not change much in his latter volumes, though it is never as clear as here.¹⁸

“‘A rag–man’ cannot afford optimism in the attitude to his art and towards himself” Łukasiewicz writes in his essay. But, as have already seen, this observation is not applicable to Białoszewski! Unlike Różewicz, Czycz, Bursa, and the “turpists” of the ’56 generation, Białoszewski has a positive poetic mythology and even though it cannot be placed within the tradition of “the idyll of lyrical inspiration,”¹⁹ it creates the idyll of writing as participation in the *happening* of the world. The latter, in turn, in someone “considering himself a poet” seems to be a consequence of the idyll of being itself.

First I went into the street
down the stairs,
would you believe it,
down stairs.
Then acquaintances of strangers
and I passed one another by.
What a pity
you did not see
how people walk
what a pity. (“A Ballad Of Going Down To The Store” [BCZ])

One could say that, as a record of described experiences, the text itself becomes the pastoral *otium*. It is thus not surprising that Białoszewski does not shy away from the role of the poet. On the contrary, he subscribes to it. Balcerzan notes that Białoszewski’s poetic strategy is in fact a strategy of “arch–poet”: “at the core of it there lies a tolerance ‘for everything that exists.’”²⁰ Naturally! The sense of being at

¹⁸ “Art” Balcerzan writes: „is a ‘joy of multiplication of everything by everything’ – as we read in “Próba dopasowania się” from *Rachunek zachciankowy* – a joy both childlike and refined. E. Balcerzan, *Poezja polska w latach 1939-1966*, Vol. 1: *Strategie liryczne*. WSiP, Warszawa (1982) 239.

¹⁹ Balcerzan classifies Miłosz’s „Do Tadeusza Różewicza poety” as an „idyll of lyrical inspiration,” in other words, an expression of optimistic mythology of poetic art, and contrasts it with Różewicz’s poems from that period, bearing witness to the “agonizing shame of writing.” One should add, however, that Balcerzan points to “Song on Porcelain” admitting that Miłosz, too, calls this positive mythology into question. (op. cit. 230, 229)

²⁰ Op.cit. 237. Balcerzan continues: „In Białoszewski everything is worthy of respect because literally everything is the locus of constant metamorphoses that fascinate and

home in the world equips Białoszewski's subject with something more than a sense of security: "everything that is" becomes the object of poetic activity, therefore an area that subject to the poet's authority.

Invariably at the source of the arch-poet's strategy there lies the character of Orpheus. He symbolizes poetry as such, but from the earliest days pastoral poets considered Orpheus to be also their protagonist.²¹ The Orphic belief in the magical, shamanistic powers of the poet and the causative character of language, *residuum* of ritual speech, language of mystery plays, can be found in the poets of the European Renaissance; in Poland, Jan Kochanowski's Song XXIV is an Orphic praise of poetic art. A rendering of Horace's famous *Exegi monumentum...* Kochanowski's Song XXIV contains the figure of the metamorphosis of rebirth ("Endowed with a pinion that is mighty and rare/ A poet of two forms, I will take to the air"²² – Orpheus was often portrayed as a swan) – the birth of immortality. It is then hardly surprising that readers of poetry hear the echoes of Orphism in Białoszewski: "More durable than brass" is Irena Urbaniak's title of her reading of "Oh! Oh! Should They Take Away My Stove..." "My Inexhaustible Ode To Joy" is, one should add, a reverse elegy or an unrealized elegy, a *manque* elegy (complaint, the dirge turns into a hymn, into an incantation that is an affirmation). Language seen as an "inexhaustible source" is the cause and the legitimization of immortality, Urbaniak writes. Her title is a metaphor, the author does not refer to the Orphic tradition in the essay but the intuition did not fail her: the modern, post-mallarmean exponent of Orphisms posits the poet as an intelligence writing in verse, the language of the poem as a "singing mystery" (a mystery as it gives up on representation) and poetry itself – a figure of lost wholeness, universe that used to echo with the music of the spheres (Friedrich 153; McGahey 130).²³ In *The Revolution of Things*, music of the spheres resounds when "Cecylia plays the wringer" in *Tryptyk Pionowy* [Vertical Triptich].²⁴ But there are also echoes of the

render despair impossible (...) Białoszewski's hero cannot free himself of the weight of dazzle and marvel."

²¹ Compare: R. McGahey *The Orphic Moment. Shaman to Poet-Thinker in Plato, Nietzsche and Mallarmé*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1994, C.M. Schenck *Mourning and Panegyric...*, 2 and elsewhere, 58 and elsewhere. "The crucial link between pastoralism and Platonism, and between Arcadian and modern forms of initiatory pastoral, is Orphism." Schenck, 20

²² Transl. Michael J. Mikoś

²³ First two expressions from H. Friedrich, *Struktura nowocześniejszej liryki* [The Structure of Modern Poetry] PIW, Warszawa (1978) 153, the latter by R. McGahey from *The Orphic Moment...* 130.

²⁴ The allusion seems clear to those familiar with *Hail! Bright Cecilia* by the „British Orpheus,” Henry Purcell, with lyric by Nicolas Brady ("Ode to Saint Cecilia"), praising music as the echo of divine harmony. Matters complicate, however, further in the poem: "Saint Cecylia in politure / wheel – manual – Emmanuel / – roller – interval – fugue." Perhaps then, it is a reference to one of the chorals by Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach, or perhaps Cecylia's name is an play on the name of one of the orchestras? Such as The Saint Cecylia Chorus & Orchestra (created in 1906) or

longing for Wholeness: the table is a sufficient reason for poem with a telling title: “Stołowa piosenka prawie o wszechbycie” [A Table Song Almost Of The Universe]. In “The Salt of Structure” seawaves seem to play Bach and the poet – Orpheus, commands them: “waves! / put on your wigs / tssss” [BCZ]. “I am all things/ and sometimes I am all things” he says “Liryka śpiącego.” [Verse Of The Sleeper]²⁵ With his sense of humor and inexhaustible linguistic ingenuity, balancing on the verge of presentation and taking advantage of the incantational power of meaningful euphonies, Białoszewski definitely could be referred to as intelligence writing verse. A singing mystery as well, one that entrusts its existence to the volatile substance of language, one that exists in a constant oscillation of meanings whose flickering figures the liminal condition of Orpheus, stretching between the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

But one should perhaps discuss one more echo of the pastoral poetic tradition in Białoszewski, namely, the element of dialogue, always present in his poems. Ancient idylls gladly used dialogue and the colloquial tone. Virgil’s “mysterious, mystically–philosophical” (in the words of its publisher) “Eclogue VI” is a monologue of Tityrus (containing utterances of others, Silenus in particular). In Theocritus’s “Idyll VII,” Simichidas introduces into his narrative his own song and the song of Lycidas.

Agon, or dispute, usually a poetic competition between herders in a quiet retreat, becomes a figure of argument resolved in a civilized, peaceful, even friendly manner and culminating with an exchange of gifts. Accompanying the dialogue, the speech of simple people is introduced, with its colloquial tone, the tone of argument and debate, the tone of confession. This pedigree of dialogue forms blurs gradually, with the appearance of genres of living speech, folk idiom and the language of several professions in high literature. From there, other considerations play the key role, but the beginnings of the conversational idiom in poetry are to be found in Theocritus’s idylls and Virgil eclogues – as well as the praise of the familiar represented by native land and landscape, by closest neighborhood. The interlocutor – resident of Arcadian retreats, detached from everyday obligations becomes a figure of citizen while his dialogue – a figure of debate by the free and happy. The conversation inscribed in the text is a ploy aiming at a compromise between two forms of social life: the active and the contemplative one. It allows to change the idyll of solitude for the idyll of human family. “We are not men, nor have other tie upon one another,

Orchestra dell’ Akademia Nazionale de Santa Cecilia (1908). Białoszewski might have owned their recordings of the compositions by J.S. Bach’s son.

²⁵ Edward Balcerzan comments: „*Everything* returns: this is the foundation of the arch-poet’s strategy. In Białoszewski everything is worthy of respect because literally everything is the locus of constant metamorphoses that fascinate and render despair impossible (...) Białoszewski’s attempts to adjust to *Everything*. (...) His *arch-poetry* does not demand admission of its uniqueness but it attempts to become a theory of *all-poetry* (...) a theory of common poetic experience that does not set requirements reaching outside the everyday.” *Poezja polska...*, 238 and 242. It is an observation very much applicable to contemporary orphism very well!

but by our word,” Montaigne comments (87).²⁶ Unlike in modernism, Renaissance writers and readers had no doubts that the *pastoral* is an allegorical utterance and that it is concerned with ethical goals (Ettin 3).²⁷

Montaigne's position is clear: what he is fleeing, in the final analysis, is not human society in general but “servitude and obligation”; what he cherishes is not solitude as such, but the possibility this offers to him to focus and find himself so as finally to communicate better with others. “I throw myself into affairs of state and into the world more readily when I am alone.” (III, 3, 625). Solitude is the means but not the end; in Montaigne's case, it improves his sociability. (Todorov 133)²⁸

The closer to modernity, the more intriguing the dialectic of solitude and community becomes, taking the form of aporia.²⁹ Todorov comments that for Rousseau, solitude was a treasure that allowed to avoid the trap of alienating mechanisms of worldly life. “The man of opinion,” in other words – the “worldly” man, always wears a mask, Rousseau writes in *Emile*. That which he is, seems nothing to him and what he seems to be, is everything. One could say that it was Rousseau who was the first to outline the difference between *être* and *paraître*. It was also Rousseau who, already in a modern fashion, made the other a guarantee of individualized subjectivity: the social man “lives outside himself, knowing to live only in the opinion of others. And it is from their judgment alone that he derives the sense of his own judgment alone that he derives the sense of his own existence,” Rousseau writes in his essay *On the Origin of Inequality Among Men* (Todorov 107).³⁰ He manages to avoid aporia: solitude, tempting with the promise of self-sufficiency but evoking fear as well, seen also as *de facto* impossible, becomes “dearly beloved solitude,” as the contradiction finds in it a happy solution. Solitude is illusory, as for the writing man the presence of the reader in the text becomes a substitute of presence, while the text itself becomes a substitute for direct communication. “Writing is that paradoxical activity which demands that one flee from others in order to meet them more effectively,” observes Todorov (138).³¹ The Romantics added to this the questioning of the possibility of understanding. The subject of Mickiewicz's “To Solitude” is “an exile in both” – in the world of beloved solitude and outside of it. He is himself only in his text but he writes it provoked by the language which (as one learns from the famous line in The Great Improvisation – “Alone! Ah man!” – concerning precisely the language)

²⁶ M. de Montaigne *Próby* [Essays] Vol. 1. Transl. T. Boy-Żeleński, PIW, Warszawa (1957. 87). This particular remark refers to taking responsibility for words. After: T. Todorov *Ogród niedoskonały. Myśl humanistyczna we Francji*. transl. H. Abramowicz i J.M. Kłoczowski, Czytelnik, Warszawa (2003). 133. [Translation based on: T. Todorov, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. Princeton University Press (2002)

²⁷ A.V. Ettin *Literature and the Pastoral*, Yale University Press, New Haven (1984) 3.

²⁸ T. Todorov *Ogród niedoskonały*... 133.

²⁹ Adam Zagajewski's 1983 essay, „Solidarność i samotność” is one of the last examples.

³⁰ After T. Todorov *Ogród niedoskonały*, 107.

³¹ Op.cit. 138.

is a deceptive occurrence, blurring and mutilating the intention of the speaker: it always means something different than it says. Can the substitute, then, take the place of the original? The latter, if accessible, is accessible without the mediation of language (“An Evening Conversation”), in a utopia of direct communication, one beyond the code, allowing to “pour the soul straight into another” (“Conversation”).³² For a strictly postmodern poet, such as the avant-garde Przyboś, the non-transparency of language is no longer a problem and justifies the *raison d'être* of the poet, but loneliness is undesirable and soon, fortunately, becomes impossible: the co-creative presence of the other, the reader – a future poet – is something expected and assumed, culminating in the utopian vision of the society of artists.

Białoszewski lives in the conversation, he sees it as theater *avant la lettre*. And not only that. For debuting Białoszewski, writing is a kind of conversation, even though he does not share the enthusiasm of his avant-garde predecessors with whom, after all, he had a lot in common (maybe this is precisely because the model of communication assumed by the poetry of social realism turned out to be its caricature.)

After all I speak to men
I don't write for wardrobes only.
Be then – O I!—humpbacked
with the hump of humility
before my fellow beings
and with the hump of understanding. (*O mojej pustelni...*)

Conversation is, clearly, marked with impaired understanding but in *The Revolution of Things*, the element of conversation grows stronger, becoming a notation of speaking („Zadumanie o sieni kamienicznej”), and from one book of poems to the next acquires new senses: an ordinary conversation becomes an allegory of sociability but also of a political dialogue, disappearing or hidden in the years when Białoszewski's poems were created. The making public of the “domestic” conversation and of the private dimension results in the “domestication” of the public sphere, especially in the domestication and commonalization of the idea of culture.³³ This commonalization is essentially synonymous to democratization. Białoszewski is a true rarity in a Romantic, aristocratic culture laden with gentry sentiments that have always pushed manifestations of plebeianism into the sphere of shameful inferiority. His Madonnas from Raphael's paintings enjoy carousel rides in the suburbs while right next to them their neighbors, “tenants of Art Nouveau,” are asleep, the landscape of left-bank Warsaw evokes images of ancient Mesopotamia

³² Mickiewicz. The dream of a communication „beyond the code,” inherited from the Romantics by the poets of Young Poland” is discussed by Jan Prokop in: „Od retoryki nadmiaru do utopii pozakodowej.” *Żywioł wyzwolony. Studium o poezji Tadeusza Micińskiego*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków (1978) 32 and elsewhere.

³³ Formulated by Emerson, „domestication of the idea of culture” is a realization of the Emersonian idea of an intellectual democracy and his concept of the common as a social *habitus*. This and similar Romantic concepts of democratization of culture are discussed by Cavell.

whose bazaar rams are crowned with “Aurignac aureoles” and where “sheepskins of golden Homers” hang down, the roller of the wringer turns, “wheel – manual – Emmanuel / – roller – interval – fugue,” and sheets are hung to dry by “Saint Veronica.”

This commonalization also includes his poetic diction – and not without a reason. Białoszewski’s language avoids the standards of high and ordered style. It avoids, to use Miłosz’s term, a “properly set” tone, a clear and understandable diction with no trace of the struggle with the difficulty in translating from the strange and alienating world of things to the language of the subject endowed with the ability of self-knowledge. Already Białoszewski’s debut volume suggests that there is a philosophical distrust behind his practice.

One of the first statements of Cavell’s *Must We Mean What We Say* is that we know neither what we think, nor what we mean and that the task of philosophy is to bring us to ourselves – to bring back words from their metaphysical to their everyday use, or to replace the conceptual knowledge of the world with a sensual one, or with bringing us closer to ourselves – which is not something self-evident at all and which makes the search for ordinariness the most difficult task within human reach, even if (especially because) it remains within man: “No man is in any better position for knowing it than any other man – unless wanting to know is a special position. And this discovery about himself is the same as the discovery of philosophy, when it is the effort to find answers and permit questions, which nobody knows the way to nor the answer to any better than yourself” (xiii).³⁴

This seems self-evident to the author of *The Revolution of Things*:
And they go round
and round.

Piercing us in nebulae.

Try and catch
a heavenly body
one of those
called “close at hand” ...

And whose tongue
has savored to the full
the Milky Drop of an object?

And whose idea was it
that dimmer stars
go round the bright ones?

And who thought up
the dimmer stars? (“On The Revolution Of Things” [BCZ])

³⁴ S. Laugier *Koncepcja zwykłości i demokracja intelektualna*, transl. M. Apelt, *Res Publica Nowa* 2000 nr 12, s. 99. [Cavell’s quotation from: *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book Of Essays*. CUP, 2002. xiii]

The task of poetry, according to Białoszewski, is to bring us back to ourselves, lost in the labyrinths of language adopted too thoughtlessly and with too much good faith. “What is the way out of the word?” he asks („Nie umiem pisać”): how do we leave the word get to the thing without losing ourselves in the world where both the deficiency of speech and the strangeness of things hastily assumed to be extensions of ourselves lie in waiting? Reports on the meetings of mutually irreducible beings, such as the “translation of an umbrella” or “translation from the mattress” („Dwa przekłady”) is both an everyday and a most difficult practice for a poet aware of his profession.³⁵

Translation: Anna Warso

³⁵ Ryszard Nycz formulates the notion of translation from „the factual into the expressible” inspired by, „...jak to powiedzieć” from Białoszewski’s later volume, *Oho! R. Nycz, Literatura jako trop....* 226.