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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
 łabędzie.
[...]
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 białą, ale że aż oczy bolą od tego blasku. Jak gdyby „lasowały się” jak gaszone wapno i parzyły nam w oczy.

A jak losy nam sprzyją, to akurat nadjeżdża pociąg. Już z daleka słyhać bicie dzwonu i: czuu! czuu! lokomotywy. 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 *Patrząc* (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 footholds 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 «morbid» 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 umysłowa 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 genesisitic. 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 paraliżujące, 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 wzgórze 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 marquis 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) effortless 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 *Zofiówka*, 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 gardenness 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 (...) ześlizguje się w banał. Wtedy trzeba robić rysunki możliwie suche i tematycznie jak najobjętniejsze: garnek, framuga drzwi i tylko iść po linii podnoszenia uwagi, kontroli obiektywnej. Żadnej ucieczki nie tylko w fałszywą oryginalność. Ale również „w pedał”, żadnego wysilenia 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 natchnienie głupich malarzy (...). Próbuję 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 zachwytowi 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. Piękność tego życia jest zupełnie nieświadoma, na pewno nie urządzona 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 malarskiej, 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 *Pierścień 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 Hauptcie*, 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 *Śmierć 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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