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## Herling-Grudziński - years after

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## Herling-Grudziński — Years After

*Etos i artyzm. Rzecz o Herlingu-Grudzińskim* /Ethos and Artistry. Discourse on Gustaw Herling-Grudziński/, edited by S. Wysłouch and R. K. Przybylski, A 5 Publishers, Poznań 1991.

The political transformations followed by relaxation and, then, lifting of censorship have caused an accelerated reception of the output of Polish émigré writers. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński was relatively well known in Poland to the narrow circle of critics, and among members of the political opposition, also thanks to underground reprinting of his works. Officially, however, his name was included in the list of the authors banned in the Polish People's Republic. Two reasons accounted for this fact: Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's book *Inny świat* /A world apart/— a description of life in the gulag, and his cooperation with the milieu of *Kultura*, the Polish periodical appearing in Paris under the editorship of Jerzy Giedroyc, and also publishing his *Dziennik pisany nocą* /Diary Written by Night/.

The years 1989 - 1991 saw *Inny świat* published by Czytelnik in mass impression, the following volumes of the *Dziennik pisany nocą*, published by Res Publica and short-stories by the Dominican Friars' Publishing House — W drodze. Numerous articles, essays and reviews appeared in the press and Herling's works were even entered into the list of books to be read and discussed by secondary school pupils. Almost at the same time four critical works on the literary output of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński were published as well. Three of them were written

by individual authors: Włodzimierz Bolecki<sup>1</sup>, Ryszard Kazimierz Przybylski<sup>2</sup> and Zbigniew Kudelski<sup>3</sup>. The fourth, entitled: *Etos i artyzm. Rzecz o Herlingu-Grudzińskim* /Ethos and Artistry. A Discourse on Herling-Grudziński/, Poznań 1991, the subject of the present paper, is a collective work and a result of a conference held in Poznań, at the end of November 1990.

The group of invited guests also included the authors of the books mentioned above, who delivered their papers. Consequently, the said collective work presents a kind of survey, making it possible to form an opinion about the present scope of knowledge and intensity of emotions attending the hasty making-up for the years of the enforced silence about the writer. Now a simultaneous appearance in print of so many works devoted to him makes an impression of a kind of outburst, powerful but chaotic, since usually the „critical stance” is accreting for years, the successive scholars having a possibility of discussion with their predecessors or of developing their assertions. In this case, however, everything is happening all at once; the interpretation of particular works has not been preceded by attempts to place that literary output within the general picture of Polish literature, while the hastily formulated appraisals of literary works cannot be based on different views and evidence.

That phenomenon of „outburst” is by no means limited to reception of the works of Herling-Grudziński alone. There is no doubt, however, that after some time such a momentary surge of enthusiasm, due to motives of political nature, will wear out. As it is already to be observed in the book market today, the label „émigré”, and so political literature, previously banned, no more attracts readers in the same degree as it did two years ago when it was absolute novelty. The stage of its everyday availability and reading habits has begun, the works entering into ordinary circulation.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Bolecki, *Ciemny staw. Trzy szkice do portretu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego* /The Dark Pond. Three Sketches about Gustaw Herling-Grudziński/, Oficyna Wydawnicza Plejada, Warszawa 1991.

<sup>2</sup> R.K. Przybylski, *Być i pisać. O prozie Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego/To Be and to Write. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's Prose*/A5 Publishers, Poznań 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Z.Kudelski, *Pielgrzym świętokrzyski. Szkice o Gustawie Herlingu-Grudzińskim* /Pilgrim of the Holy Cross Mountains. Essays about Gustaw Herling-Grudziński/, Fis Publishers, Lublin 1991.

In the instance of writings hardly fit for a univocal classification, that is a difficult process, involving many errors. For example, *A world apart* is very often treated as a document and compared with other stories and memoirs dealing with the gulags. The participants in the Poznań session emphasized the fact that it was, at the same time, an evidence of a literary processing of data and for this reason *A world apart* should be compared with Tadeusz Borowski's concentration camp stories and Dostoevski's *Notes from the House of the Dead*. A similar trap is in Herling-Grudziński's short-stories, often using excerpts from his diaries. The reader, taken unaware, is ready to treat the author's remarks concerning books or documents as references to actually existing sources, whereas in fact, as shown by Roman Zimand, they are often cleverly constructed fiction. In the statements concerning the diary there was to be noted the critics' doubt whether that literary text had not been overestimated. A few times mention was made of Stefan Kisielewski's reproach regarding „the pompous mania for the tragic” which accounts, in his opinion, for interest in the extremes of history. The diary is no doubt a response to communism, though not a direct polemic with the real situation in the Polish People's Republic. And just as the independent literature at home was blamed on the grounds that its assumption of dissent and resistance made it conditioned by the model which it was fighting, having taken over *à rebours* its forms and structures, so the anti-communist literature fell into a dialectic in Gombrowicz's style, without being able to release itself from it.

That list of complex problems can be supplemented by enumeration of topics not even mentioned as yet and not discussed at the session. What requires attention are certainly the links connecting the works of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, who for many years lived in Italy, with Italian literature and culture. Likewise, the question of his Russian contacts, though preliminarily mentioned, has not adequately been studied. Moreover, the volume under discussion includes no analysis of Herling-Grudziński's writings against the background of various trends of sovietology and modes of political interpretation of the phenomenon of communism. Those problems, mentioned by way of example, require interdisciplinary knowledge and extensive studies. No one has discussed Herling-Grudziński's literary criticism in the period between the two

World Wars, though one may assume it can shed light on his mature literary output in the post-war years.

The papers collected in the volume *Etos i artyzm*, though in principle not exceeding certain trends of the theory of literature or even of Polish studies of today, and far from presenting a complete picture of the matter are, in fact, dissertations of pioneer character. This applies to R.T.Przybylski's essay drawing a comparison between the prose of Borowski and that of Herling-Grudziński in *A world apart*, as two types of reaction to a reality beyond the norms of European culture and morals. The author points out to the similarity of the observations made by the two writers, and to the different conclusions drawn by them from similar premises. In Tomasz Burek's essay there is to be found an analysis of the artistic functions of *A world apart*, whereas the attention of other scholars was drawn by the problem of suffering, of the macro-community of the gulag and of response to another person. The ambiguity of the stories provoked evolution of analytical approach. The choice of subjects taken up by authors of the papers delivered at sessions and conferences is often haphazard to some degree. Nevertheless, the absence of essays on political aspects of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's work, for many years considered as extremely dangerous to the political system of People's Poland, and at the same time the striking popularity of interpretations revealing the presence therein of a mystery of sacral nature, seems a telling shift of accent. As a matter of fact, emphasis was laid on the fact that all the metaphysical element in Herling-Grudziński's work stems from the tradition of the 20th-century religious doubt. It begins with the search carried on by an individual and not with requirements of religious denomination.

„In the case of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, metaphysics is not a topic, i.e. not a subject of analysis and qualification, but rather a steady reference point for appraisal of the described visible world. The kind of the relations connecting those two strata of reality, and also the definite type of religious attitude, can be defined — in the light of European tradition — as that of the search for the sacred,” says Wiesław Kot in his essay<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> W. Kot, *Wobec wzorców literatury konfesyjnej* /Against Models of Confessional

The diary is aptly described by Ryszard Kazimierz Przybylski as „a note-book from the journey through the labyrinth of European culture”. This accounts for the fact that the work as such turns into a labyrinth with many intertwined threads. This is one of the few diaries whose author could be scarcely suspect of insincerity or exaggerated egotism. Its consistently intellectual character cannot but evoke respect. Moreover, it is a steadily developing work. The successive issues of *Kultura*, distributed in Poland without any obstacles now, bring new instalments of the diary. Hence the grounds for the statement that the time of its recapitulation has not come as yet since the work is still in *statu nascendi* and transformation. It is good thing, however, that we have seen Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's writings so extensively discussed.

And yet, the author of the present paper can hardly refrain from expressing one reflection. For however adequate the level of the session — the result of which is the volume under discussion — there is no sufficient reason to suggest we have already made up for the losses caused by the many years of hampered access to those works. Every successive work by an outstanding writer is a challenge to the critics and determines the intellectual sphere which becomes a common problem ground of literature.

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, with all the metaphysical colouring given his works after so many years, is to me a symbol of some irrevocably lost opportunities for a different kind of discussions at a time when they could have been topical, animated and free from academic preoccupation with historical truth.

*Anna Nasilowska*