

Marta Wyka

Our century according to Herling-Grudziński

Literary Studies in Poland 26, 69-80

1992

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Marta Wyka

Our Century According to Herling-Grudziński

An allusion in the title of this essay refers directly to the basic principle of Herling-Grudziński's writing. The principle is unanimously acknowledged by all his critics (and its existence is confirmed by the writer himself). Therefore, I only recollect it here: the writer's interference into events of this world - the main theme of *Dziennik* (Diary) - is hardly palpable. The same applies to his short stories and essays: the narrator is hidden behind the plot and discourse, his life is presented in the context of general facts. Hence, *Dziennik pisany nocą* should be considered opposite to, for instance, *Rok myśliwego* by Miłosz, as well as to Gombrowicz. Miłosz is the hub of the universe he creates in his diary. Herling puts himself into the shade. But not completely and not always. Nevertheless, placing „my” (mój) and „our” (nasz) in opposition seems well-grounded. Wat's *Mój wiek* (My Century) the allusion in the title refers to is shaped by the use of the adequate pronoun. Indeed, in the first place it was Aleksander Wat's century, but to a large extent we could agree with his diagnosis. Obviously, Herling did not write *Nasz wiek* (Our Century), but he proposed a kind of its vision. His withdrawal of the author's person into the background, to the corner of the painting as it were, makes it difficult to bring him to the full light. Thus, the vision of the century is created through the mediation of the body of literary and cultural opinions, through allusions and recurrent references to certain names and book-titles. In the sphere of culture our century was

shaped as if outside the individual impact of the writer, but it is the writer and only himself who makes his own incisions, selections and hierarchies.

Briefly, Herling, a modern writer, not only attempts to present his epoch objectively, but also subjectively deforms it. Or, generally, he gives us some particular image of the epoch, although his basic narrative method is an account of the facts. One more reservation: clearly, it is not possible to reproduce Herling's panoramic vision of his century's culture with its variety of particular opinions, comments - in short - with its exuberant life. My intention here is a kind of usurpation, an attempt at classification, at constructing a model, with a risk of oversimplifications on the one hand and dangerous selections on the other. The outcome of my reading Herling, of necessity arbitrary, is difficult to foresee. But let us not lose hope.

*

Again, I think that we should begin with one more recollection: Herling's attitude to history. Stempowski called it „the unleashed history” and Herling agreed with him. Mandel'stam spoke about „the century / of the wolf” and Herling approved of his opinion. Then, „the Hegelian bite” - the wound which, according to Miłosz, was inflicted by dialectical history on those who succumbed to its evil spell and wanted to be wounded. Herling often derides the spell as well as those who consciously surrendered to it. What should be done then with this unconquered land of historical experience? In „Książę niezłomny” Guido Battaglia says:

You see [...] it is characteristic of emigration that it is the other time, time bestriding the present which keeps flowing between their legs. One leg is stuck in the already petrified history while the other keeps searching for a point of support in the history to come. They cannot change its position, even if they tried hard to tear the hind leg out of the petrified side and plunge it in the stream of the current history. They are wholly directed towards the future.¹

What is, then, „the already petrified history”? Most probably, it is the kind of experience described in „The Shadow Hour” with the help of Pirandello's sonnet:

¹ G. Herling-Grudziński, „Książę Niezłomny”, in: *Wieża i inne opowiadania*, Poznań 1988, p. 121.

When I think about the moment in which my life opened into the vast and vain world: there - I say - there I started on my way.²

„There” means Kielce, Grodno and Lvov, as well as the Warsaw of Fryde, Koniński, Blüth, Miłosz, and also Conrad and Celine he read in his youth. It means the individual „perspective of youth” which is one’s particular fate and, at the same time, general historical experience. In short, what I am speaking about now is the double root of Herling-Grudziński’s work, the root acting as „the petrified history”, which is extremely important in shaping his maturity. Although we are flowing in the current of history, unable to control it, the current itself is flowing over stones which remain in one fixed place. The stones are our attachment to the native land and intellectual fascinations of our youth. „I envy Miłosz his *Dolina Issy*” - Herling writes in his *Dziennik*. This is what his unwritten novel could be like - a story of his childhood, of its fears and defeats and of the lakes of his childhood which once reflected the face of the child, the boy. These memories are recalled in *Dziennik* several times, with their romantic tone, albeit subdued, like everything that concerns the individual fate of the writer.

The motif of initiation becomes more distinct with passing to the sphere of intellectual life. In view of his birth date as well as his literary preferences Herling belongs to the last spiritual generation of the twenty-year period between the First and the Second World Wars. His collection *Żywi i umarli* (The Living and The Dead) published shortly after the war proves the typical continuity of such preferences. In addition to his deep experiences of childhood, youth and home it is another experience of solid grounds, or - in another words, the bridge between his youth in the period between the wars and his maturity achieved in emigration. The decline of the period between the wars is also the time when a new spiritual tone - personalistic, catastrophic, metaphysical - comes into existence. Joseph Conrad’s writing becomes a parable of the individual dark fate. What is important, the parable is accepted by the young generation. At that time the most pronounced expression of this spiritual option can be found in Marcel Blüth, but the Conradian spirit pervading the youth intellectual and spiritual experiences soon becomes, quite surprisingly for a spirit, material

² G. Herling-Grudziński, „*Godzina cieni*”, in: *Godzina cieni*, Kraków 1991, p. 12.

(what I mean here is the role of Conrad in the philosophy of the young Home Army soldiers).

Conrad is one of the options which manifest fears of the generation. Statements which later become metaphysical motifs of Herling's diary can be easily traced in his first book. In „Sztuka podróżowania” (The Art of Travel) it is the idea of metaphysical journey:

every real traveller must be, to some extent, like Conrad. If we can reasonably say that Shakespeare was an actor who saw many miracles in the mirror of heaven and the other world, we should also remember that Conrad was a sailor who noticed them even in the mirror of the sea and the world.³

The hero of „Wywiad imaginacyjny z bohaterem Tajfuna” (An Imaginary Interview with the Typhoon's Hero), captain MacWhirr says:

After all, my friend, there are things you won't find in the wisest books.

And there is „the communy of blood shed in defence of the only and nameless book”. This is the conclusion of the text written to commemorate Ludwik Fryde. The book here is the model and the myth, and also the book written by young Miłosz, the one from the poem *O książce*, the only and nameless book - it is true - but also the one belonging to the epoch when great humanistic ideals (Norwid, Goethe, Hafiz) seem to fight with the modern military times („bullets were singing over our heads”). In his essay on Berent's *Nurt*, one of the most important books of the metaphysical decline (also Miłosz concurs with him in this opinion in „Prywatne obowiązki”), Herling compares the Italian Legion of Dąbrowski with modern times and forms the following statement-question: is this new tension of the underground Europe capable of „finally crushing the crust of the too rationalistic world?”

The direction of Herling's thinking about the modern reality, grounded so firmly in the period between the Wars, is clearly visible: the rationalistic world will not fall if attacked with metaphors alone. But the reality of „miracles” which cannot be understood with the help of reason, but only with intuition in Herling's mature works, becomes equally important as particular observation of life.

³ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Żywi i umarli*, Lublin 1991, p. 59.

Herling stresses (and often repeats) that he is a disciple of Ludwik Fryde's school of criticism. Thus, he situates himself in the third literary generation of the period between the Wars. And he could probably repeat after Fryde that the greatest authorities of their century were Chesterton and Norwid. The names are mentioned when Fryde reproves Brzozowski and his spiritual influence on the young generation. What is remarkable, though, is that when going back to the Fryde - Brzozowski - Wyka argument after many years, Herling-Grudziński agrees with Wyka, who defended Brzozowski. He accepts „the weapon of illusion and the weapon of reality”, which means that he takes Brzozowski's side. We shall explain a little later why.

Young Herling's concern was not only with shaping his spiritual experience. Among the young men of letters spirituality was often associated with social radicalism. The same proved true for young Herling: in his search for the life philosophy there appeared radicalism, folklore and literature as well as communism.

What other books did he read and admired at that time? Karol Ludwik Koniński, although the only Koniński's writings he could be familiar with at that time were *Pisarze ludowi* and articles published in periodicals. In his admiration for Koniński I can see some important close similarity of the writers' personalities, some kind of unconscious apprehension that one of Koniński's themes in his feverish notes from the period of the Nazi occupation would become the banality of evil. It was the theme of Herling, Hannah Arendt and others who experienced both Nazism and bolshevism. Koniński, confined to his bed in a small village near Cracov, tried to record the sense of the banality of evil. Obviously, Herling's own experience, the experience of a prisoner of „a world apart” would be - one can say - more credible. At the same time, for many people of his generation this is the crucial part of his biography. But, is it also an accidental one? When Herling writes later that he would like to render the years of *A world apart* in the form of novel of initiation, the initiation concerns not only the Soviet system but also himself. Under such circumstances totalitarianism was put to the test and the young man was growing to become the a writer. It was the place where to look for *Zeitgeist*. *A world apart* ends with the fall of France and it is not a mere coincidence and concurrence of dates (Sikorski-Majski agreement and freeing Polish prisoners from Russian

concentration camps) that such is his coda. Therefore, although the fall awakens the strongest emotions in the Jewish communist, the feeling of despair is more general. The consequence is the end of one of the most fascinating myths of the pre-war Europe, never to be reborn. Hence, *A world apart* (a *Bildungsroman*) concerns the systems which reduce individual passions of those particular people who were brought up in the particular Europe with its particular values. The European intelligentsia commonly share the despair.

„I feel that some chapter has been closed. France was a dogma. I am looking at it and I have no strength to reject it” - Andrzej Bobkowski wrote at that time.⁴

The place where Herling had to part with the pre-war Poland was Lvov under the Soviet occupation. It was the place which became the testing range for communism, shaping standards of behaviour later accepted in the Polish People's Republic (an outstanding vision of the range can be found in Strykowski's *Wielki strach*). The experience of *A world apart* may also function as a kind of metaphor expressing the inevitable fate of those who made their choice. A Conradian metaphor: „Our barrack was sailing out to the moonless sea of darkness and, like a ghost ship, it was escaping chased by death every night, carrying the sleeping crew of the condemned”.⁵

*

Let us repeat: the places of his childhood, the attachment to the written and unwritten, merely apprehensible books of his youth. The traces of experience are antirational, metaphysical, catastrophic. Furthermore, bonds of heritage. What is the function of this body of experiences in the subsequent history of our century?

According to Herling, 20th-century literature began with Hoffmantsahl's *Letter of Lord Chandos* (1901). It „brought literature back to the zero point, it initiated the 20th century with the question concerning the very *raison d'être* of literature”. Language was no longer capable of expressing the destruction of reality and its mysteries escaping verbal expression. Today „words are creeping over us, devouring us”. What should the writer do then? He would like - we read in *Dziennik* - „to

⁴ A. Bobkowski, *Szkice piórkiem*, vol. I, Paris 1957, p. 42.

⁵ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Inny świat*, Warszawa 1990, p. 200.

regain the centre between reality and mystery” (8 April 1971, p. 157)⁶. The task is radical and impossible, but Herling’s literary preferences and realizations show us that it was particularly important to him. Herling-Grudziński’s argument with Jerzy Stempłowski stems, as it seems, from that attitude. The point is, of course, „the climate of life and the climate of literature”, which, in Stempłowski’s opinion, are mutually exclusive elements of modern culture (life is rich and stable, literature is gloomy and catastrophic). To which Herling replies:

Contrary to Hostowiec’s observation, I consider the present climate of literature not a distorted mirror, but, to some extent, the mediated reflection of the present climate of life, not a symptom of hallucinations but the proof of the mind’s presence, even if it is true that pigeons in *La chute* soar too high and the colour and package of potassium cyanide in *The Wild Palms* is wrong.⁷

Undoubtedly, this opinion results from the spheres of Herling’s intellectual life shaped by Kafka and Camus, by the philosophy of the absurd. *Sąd ostateczny* (The Last Judgement) was published in 1957, *Cierpienia młodego outsidera* (The Sorrows of a Young Outsider) in 1960, in the years when the first place in European culture was unquestionably occupied by French existentialism and its predecessors. While Herling feels a kind of spiritual unity with them, Stempłowski is one of their adversaries. Later, Herling expresses his pity for Sartre’s defeat, considering it in the more general context of the universal crisis of trust in a certain version of European intellectualism in its caricaturally left-wing form.

But now the point is one of Herling’s great fascinations - the man of the absurd and his various incarnations in European literature Herling perceives. Although it was Camus who inspired the search for him, he exists also in Stendhal and Flaubert. Is not Flaubert’s exclamation: „Je suis mystique et je ne crois à rien” characteristic of the condition of the man of the absurd? Herling calls this state Flaubert’s „mystery of reality: mystical lack of faith, praying on knees in front of the stuffed worm-eaten parrot.” (25 May 1980, p. 35).

⁶ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Dziennik pisany nocą (1973-1979)*, Paris 1984. Further quotations from *Dziennik* from the following editions: *Dziennik pisany nocą 1971-72*, Warszawa 1990; *Dziennik pisany nocą (1980-1983)*, Paris 1984; *Dziennik pisany nocą (1984-1988)*, Paris 1990.

⁷ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Godzina cieni*, p. 108.

But who is the hero of Camus's *La chute*? How does he cope with the absurd world? According to Herling, he does not agree to his own life story, he is a judge for himself, he is contradictory to himself. He resembles the hero of Kafka, but he carries further on: the former escapes „from the hell of the absurd to the purgatory of the transcendental religious consolation”, the latter accepts his own condition of an outsider. Briefly, the hero of Camus is happy because he chooses the way of the fall and it elevates him (it is the point where Camus and Russian literature with Dostoevski meet). But there remains the problem of faith, of „religious consolation”. In Herling's work modern culture is clearly divided into two spheres: the sacred and the profane. Choosing the sacred Herling points to its two wings: the catholic sacred as represented by Greene and the secular one as represented by Camus.

Does „the epoch of adventures and sufferings of the nonreligious soul” still last in our century? Herling quotes here a phrase from Brzozowski and we may assume that he agrees with it, he approves of Brzozowski's diagnosis which, after all, was written at the beginning of our century.

To describe the time of alienation one should choose, or create, a language of allusions, allegories and magic realism. Herling's admiration for Marquez's *Cien años de soledad* is noticeable. According to Herling, this is the only modern novel which is alive, alive against death of the genre which cannot be cured of the plot atrophy.

Herling's preference for Kafka, Camus, Dostoevski and others whose names recur in *Dziennik* was, at the same time, his act of negation. He makes his point clear rejecting Hemingway's or behavioral option, which constituted one of distinct possibilities of defining our century.

The epoch of great alienation is also the epoch of catastrophic returns - because Herling perceives the past of catastrophism through his current experience. What I mean here is, first of all, his stressing the topical importance of Witkacy, the eschatological madman of the period between the Wars. In *Dziennik* there is a meaningful note about Witkacy (or, to be precise, about his *Pożegnanie jesieni*, the novel which is read more often, with more impact on one's life philosophy than any of Witkacy's plays) who is called „a catastrophic realist”. By the way, this term is precisely applicable to the type of catastrophism represented by Stemplowski, who saw the catastrophe of Polish fate in the laws of history. And, further:

some fragments of his novel sounded as if they were written right after the catastrophe by a mad chronicler who played clown out of despair [...] In *Pożegnanie jesieni* - what a strange impression! - there is no future, as if the history itself came to its end [25 January 1980, p. 19-20].

The end was written by the epoch of crematories, „the example of the broken and trodden Decalogue”. Further, Herling writes:

I agree with this interpretation to some extent, but I think about another toxin recently infiltrating to the vascular system of the modern world: the sense of the world's fragility. A year ago, Roberto Vacca, an Italian scholar, who is now over forty [...] published the book entitled *Il Medioevo prossimo venturo*. The vision of the Middle Ages as “the nearest future” is a kind of exceptionally credible apocalyptic scenario. The story is set in winter, in the America of tomorrow [24 September 1972, p. 158].

There is no need to summarize the content of the book. However, it seems interesting that Herling turns his attention to what seems a natural tendency of our times to produce negative, catastrophic antiutopias (from Koestler to Konwicki). And this kind of utopia does not seem strange to him, since even Witkacy, who perceived the fatalism of history without continuation, and presented the future world as the domain of anti-culture. Thus, one can say that Witkacy provides arguments for Orwell.

An individual loses his identity, his uniqueness. He is in search for faith. He defends himself against the devil. But the question is whether all those acts can ensure to the human being a noble place in the modern world. As far as the sphere of values is concerned, Herling accepts, as it seems, Konstanty Jeleński's term - „the impossible humanism”. This statement is, also, his comment to Miłosz's poem:

If I were to show what the world means to me / I would take a hamster or a hedgehog or a mole / I would place it in a seat in a theatre in the evening / Lending my ear to its wet snout / I would listen to what it is saying about the glitter of spotlights / About the souds of music and ballet figures. [Naples, 4 May 1987, p. 263].

Therefore, „man is neither the king of all beings, nor the centre of the universe” - says Jeleński. Herling quotes his opinion and agrees with it. The end of personalism? Yes, if our age remains the age of ideology.

Before our age of ideology gives its last breath in some remote and quite uncertain future, before the habit of writing 'ideology' in quotes is accepted, if it is ever accepted, before the pathology of power and desire for power are called by their proper names,

everyday lessons should be introduced to all schools, wherever possible, illustrating what has been and still is the modern ideology without quotes [12 January 1980, pp. 13-14].

Thus, what we get here is a view of mind in which utopias continue to exist and multiply, and personalism dries out. And it seems that Herling does not believe in replenishing its sources.

I have not devoted a single word so far to Herling's interpretation of Russian literature. It is a theme for another study, but what seems important here is some particular orientation of Herling's thinking about Russia and its writers, and - first of all - about the Russian soul. I will recollect it briefly. In his *Dziennik* Herling quotes Marian Zdziechowski's opinion on Polish-Russian relationships: „the trembling of something very small confronted with something very big” (4 April 1972, p. 113). Without trembling, Herling often returns to Russian maximalism which he considers a distinctive feature of both Russian literature and Russian frame of mind. Discovering and accepting this maximalism for himself, he is close to Brzozowski's *Plomienie* (The Flames). He mentions that book as the model of behaviour characteristic of rebellious youths, related to Camus. This point of view can be adapted to modern times:

I think it is now necessary for Europe and the West in general to consider Russia and its Soviet totalitarianism as a philosophical and moral, and not only a political and military problem. (Dragonea, 12 August 1981, p. 127).

*

There are two unchangeable spheres in the current of unceasing search for one's own identity carrying the modern man - the sphere of leisure and the sphere of his anchorage. This is polis - the city - the repository of values on the one, hand and nature on the other. The two great myths - of city and of nature - may function as some counterbalance to antiutopias. Kielce, Naples, Venice - are cities; Dragonea, Capri, Sorrento are images for nature. Herling fully identifies himself with the vision presented by Herbert in his *Raport z oblężonego miasta* (The Report from a Besieged City). Such is the eternal city we carry in our minds. The city condemned to destruction by the enemy forces it cannot control. But outlaws and castaways will always be right and any reasons of state do not count.

This is the image of Venice:

The essence of a dream - enhanced, tense, intensified reality connected with the eternal change, fragility and transitoriness - is the essence of Venice. There is no city in this world which would be as real, as full of life and, at the same time, as illusionary, entangled in echoes, sounds, lights and shades, and mirror reflections. In a way, Venice is the image of our civilization. We shall wake up from this daydream when *città lagunare*, Venice which cannot be saved, will fall into the sea depths [Venice, 29-31 August 1977, p. 229].

This beautiful and persuasive metaphor contains all characteristics of a civilization expecting a catastrophe: life and illusion of life, reality and dream bound to fall. I think that one can feel Spenglerian aura emanating from this image: it was Spengler who, with similar persuasive power, described the agony of civilization he interpreted as the last and the most refined phase of culture which cannot be saved.

What is our century like according to Herling-Grudziński? What is the dominant in its culture? It would be a trite to repeat that its crucial factor was totalitarianism in its various manifestations. But it should be stressed that it was not successful in leaving its stamp on our century. The intellectual life of our epoch was always confronted with new obstacles and conquering them, always solved new intellectual problems. The problems originated in metaphysics: it was the source of the man of the absurd and his spiritual world as well as the world of literary fiction submitted to it. The man is torn between Alienation and Apocalypse. Therefore, his epistemological perspective cannot be reduced to simple historical experiences. Utopias of his century frighten him. Myths lose their regenerative power. The enigmatic hero (Herling's term), the real hero of our epoch is born between the extremes, if he cannot find any reason for either of them. His ability of self-transformation comes from Kafka, from Dostoevski - his unceasing anxiety as well as the question - who am I? A catholic, a layman, an angel, a devil, or, may be, only a character from some novel? Therefore, the rebellious and alienated, rooted and emigrating city-dweller is looking for rest in nature. He always carries with himself the image of polis and always defends it.

It is obvious that some characteristics of the enigmatic hero can take us to Herling himself. Which of them? It is Herling alone who could solve this problem. Somewhere in his diary Herling writes about

cosmo-Poles. He enumerates them with much admiration: Czapski, Jeleński, Stemplowski. But he does not belong to them. How could we call him, then? I abstain from any definition. The question remains open.

At the beginning I revealed my intention of reading Herling's works selectively, as it were. Could my reading be objective? Or, maybe my own century is totally catastrophic, absurd, metaphysical and mystical, the age of my generation open to any account confirming this diagnosis? In this context, the act of reading Herling's works has some additional meaning: it can give evidence for the spirituality of a certain generation, for its receptivity to some definite intellectual trends. It seems to me that what is particularly important in Herling's work are the proofs of the continuity of a particular tradition and its unavoidable, though natural, burning out. I mean the tradition of the period between the Wars, which went in two different directions after the Second World War: its doctrinal rejection in the beginnings of the Polish People's Republic culture on the one hand and, on the other, the strong support offered to it by émigré writers. Obviously, it is the image of the objective and non-forcible growth and fall of the particular formation of culture that nowadays we find epistemologically inspiring. Herling clearly perceives the burn-out of the personalism of his youth, the change in metaphysical dangers. Once he was a witness and a participant of the process in which a value system were established. Now he describes how its foundations shake.

Kisielewski criticized once his attitude as one that could serve as an example of what Irzykowski called „the pompous mania for the tragic”. It is not my intention to consider this a blame, although it seems that this particular persistent pessimism, characteristic of the disciples of catastrophism, does spread throughout Herling-Grudziński's books.

Transl. by D.G.