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BETWEEN NON-FICTION AND THE LITERATURE
OF THE PERSONAL DOCUMENT:
REMARKS ON THE STRUCTURE OF GUSTAW HERLING-GRUDZIŃSKI'S
PODRÓŻ DO BURMY (A JOURNEY TO BURMA)

1

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's *A Journey to Burma* is his early, and today a little forgotten, text that clearly remains on the sidelines of critical attempts made by successive researchers studying the writer's work.¹ Herling stayed in Burma just under a month, at the end of May and beginning of June 1952.² At the invitation extended by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, as the author of *A World Apart* he gave a series of lectures exposing the illusions of communism. During his stay there, the writer made notes "just off the top of my head, nearly every day [...], scrawling them hastily, on aeroplanes, in airport waiting rooms, in chance Burmese tea-houses, in the short break between particular travels, or in even shorter interludes of

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¹ *Dziennik z podróży do Burmy (A Journey to Burma. A Diary)*, edited and with an Afterword by Włodzimierz Bolecki (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999). All quotations come from this edition (unless they are marked otherwise), the respective pages being given in brackets. Of the critical texts on *A Journey to Burma* one should first see Anna Nasalska's interesting sketches "Śladami Orwella. O 'Podróży do Burmy' Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego" (Following Orwell's traces. On Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's "A Journey to Burma"), in *Etos i artyzm. Rzecz o Herlingu-Grudzińskim (Ethos and Artistry, On Herling-Grudziński)*, ed. Seweryna Wystouch, Ryszard K. Przybylski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo A5, 1991) and Włodzimierz Bolecki's "Posłowie" ("Afterword," in *Podróż do Burmy. Dziennik*, 148–159).

² Herling consistently used the English form of Burma, whereas in Polish it should be „Birma.”

morning and evening cool breezes [...]” (pp. 9–10). From these notes a text was compiled that Herling decided to publish in several installments in the London weekly “Wiadomości” (“News”). The whole, as a separate, cohesive book, was published only thirty years later, in 1983, also in London, by the publishing house “Puls.” The writer had to wait for the first official Polish edition of the book for another sixteen years.

This sequence of dates, which was already indicated by Włodzimierz Bolecki, was not without meaning for the way the text itself read:

In its first edition of 1953 *A Journey to Burma* could first of all appear to be a late press report, and in the book edition of 1983—a reportage of a journey. From today’s point of view those genre nuances turn out to be just situational components of Herling’s overriding literary form that was being formed then—that is, of a diary.³

Hence, it appears that, for the proper interpretation of *A Journey to Burma*, its natural context, which is doubtlessly *Dziennik pisany nocą* (*A Journal Written at Night*), is equally as important as the author’s interference in the title of the work, ascribing to it a clear indication of its genre. It is exactly the *Journal*’s fully crystallized form that allows one—in Bolecki’s opinion—to have a closer look at the work of the early 1960s and to see in it something more than just a live report of an encounter with a fascinating culture, a difficult history, and the present, that is still being formed, of the exotic country that Burma was then and still is. The result—in the interpretation suggested by Bolecki—is that *Journey* gains the dimension of a universal tale of “experiencing the ultimate loneliness of a man in the world,” and *ipso facto* is inscribed in the fundamental current of Herling-the-diarist’s discourse.⁴ Therefore, Herling says that “we are living in a world one cannot be reconciled with, one in which the poverty and suffering of some meet head-on with others’ contempt and stupidity, and which in its every part at the same time dazzles and rejects us, fascinates and shocks, making one permanently repeat the question about who man is and what his place is.”⁵

A solid argument confirming the direction of Bolecki’s interpretation seems to be the characteristic opening of the diary, in which the name of the

³ BOLECKI, “Postówie,” 152.

⁴ Bolecki points to specific motifs connecting *A Journey* and *A Journal Written at Night*, e.g. jinking descriptions of nature and architecture, situating the narrative on the borderland of wakefulness and dream, or nostalgia for Poland (p. 156).

⁵ Herling’s diary is devoted to his travel in Burma, but each of its notes could have the subtitle “*Ecce homo*,” tates Bolecki (ibid., 155).

plane, “Aeolus” (the diarist is to travel from London to Rangoon in it), automatically introduces a great mythological context: “At the moment that I’m writing these words and when we are setting out to Burma in an aeroplane that was given the double name of the god of the winds and of the sailors who accompanied Jason in his quest to find the Golden Fleece, the first test flight of a new trans-oceanic jet airliner the «Comet» is taking place” (p. 10). And then, in a tone deliberately fairly emotional and a little pompous, “and still we have evolved as terrestrial-aqueous amphibians and when solid ground escapes from under our feet we feel suspended in a dead void between the sky and the earth, with our hearts terrified, convulsively pressed against the ribs, like an unopened parachute. Wings on the arms!...” (p. 11). Quoting this passage allows the researcher to formulate the following judgment: “The mythologically opalescent beginning of *A Journey to Burma* makes the meanings of particular situations that are later described by the diarist universal and symbolic.”⁶ This is true. However, one cannot avoid noticing in Herling’s text a clearly-sounding irony. The quoted passage is concluded in the following way:

Heavy stones at our feet dragging us down and down, where the foot may touch the earth, and the hips effortlessly carry the firmly-set torso. Fear is a feeling equally as primitive as helplessness and ignorance. Therefore, what is left is to sit back in the recliner seat, plug our ears with cotton wool and submit with resignation to the whirr of the motor that drills into the brains like a dental burr into a bad tooth. This sound does not resemble the sounds of Aeolus’ harp (p. 11).

This passage weakens the interpretation thesis formulated by Bolecki and makes all attempts to simply universalize the meanings of the diaristic notes in *A Journey* debatable. The narrative of the diary is clearly oriented to the *hic et nunc* of the reported events, in this way being inscribed in the convention of the reportage (of a journey), which by no means signifies that it is deprived of passages that doubtless avoid such categorization. However, we would like to interpret them not so much in a parabolic key, but as evidence of the crystallization of a mature form of diary, and at the same time as places in which the author’s most intimate voice may be heard.

It is not our aim to search for an overall hypothesis concerning the interpretation of Herling’s work, so we are not going to make attempts to enter a polemic with the interpretation proposed by Bolecki, the more so that our

⁶ Ibid., 155.

reading by no means invalidates it. On the other hand, we will try to follow the road that he rather clearly indicated in his text. He placed *A Journey to Burma* in its proper literary context, as if abstracting the reading of the work from the political-historical context that imposes itself on the recipient, which was certainly the more difficult than, as the critic himself noted, if only the diary had been written in English, as it would assuredly have become an example of truly postcolonial literature.⁷ Therefore we will be interested in the possibility of describing the literary structure of the text of *A Journey*, of its poetics. In our outline we will indicate the most important, in our opinion, elements, allowing, possibly, a precise grasping of the fundamental principle organizing the analyzed text.

2

Universally known and repeatedly quoted, Herling's meta-text self-commentary talking about the unattainable ideal of a diary, in which "«un-chained history» moves, sometimes faster, sometimes more slowly, sometimes on the stage, sometimes in the background [...]. And in the left bottom corner [...] the observer and chronicler's miniature and barely sketched self-portrait", may serve us—once again—as a convenient starting point for further reading.⁸ As Zdzisław Kudelski convincingly showed, Herling's work is far from the ideal formulated in this way. He wrote:

The writer's personality dominates on the pages of *A Journal [Written at Night]*: whatever he writes about, everything has the badge of individuality. On every level of the text, starting with the vocabulary, style, the form of expression, or the range of the problems tackled, the author's expressive presence may be noticed. Ironically, and as if against the author's intentions, it is exactly this growing, multi-dimensional image of himself [...] that at some moments is the basic s u b j e c t of the work.⁹

After Bolecki we may add here: "[...] the sphere of the author's subjectiveness in *A Journal Written at Night* belongs to exceptionally intensive and

⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁸ Gustaw HERLING-GRUDZIŃSKI, *Dziennik pisany nocą (A Journal Written at Night)* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1995) (the note of 3.II.979).

⁹ "Czy pisarska porażka?" (Is it an author's defeat?) ("O 'Dzienniku pisany nocą' — About 'A Journal Written at Night'") in the same, *Studia o Herlingu-Grudzińskim (Studies on Herling-Grudziński)* (Lublin: TN KUL, 1998), 156.

suggestive ones.”¹⁰ From the point of view of the structure of the text itself, the diarist, who is so intensely present in his notes, albeit often indirectly, is necessary for making the whole—a whole that has so many motifs and consists of so many genres—cohesive. According to Bolecki, without that overarching perspective *A Journal Written at Night* would be threatened with falling apart into a group of fragments that often would not match one another, that would belong to different genres and would have different characters: of everyday notes, notes about texts read, small essayist forms, fierce political polemics, learned lectures on the history of art etc.¹¹

As was said above, *A Journal Written at Night* is doubtless the basic point of reference for *A Journey to Burma* that is of special interest to us here—also, or perhaps first of all, in the formal dimension. The mature and well-formed shape of Herling’s diary is clearly the target for which *Journey* seems to be probably the most important transitional stage. It is this perspective from which we would like to have a look at it now.

What in *A Journal Written at Night* became its peculiar distinctive feature, that is a clear tension between an intimate confession and a rather objective—as was assumed—presentation of definite facts or opinions, in *A Journey to Burma* turns out to be a factor that breaks down the text from the inside. At first sight it seems that we are dealing here with a rather typical realization of the genre of reportage, in which its author uses the form of a diary of a journey, making his notes day by day and ascribing definite dates to them. So Herling’s text supplies us with a lot of topical, personally checked facts, descriptions, and also portraits of actual, characteristic and varying inhabitants of Burma. The reporter rather regularly presents the reader with current editions of local Burmese dailies, quoting a variety of pieces of information and different opinions from them, usually in the form of precise and extensive quotations: “In today’s «Nation» (the largest English daily in Rangoon) a puzzling editorial appeared celebrating the 62nd anniversary of the birth of the leader of the anti-French insurrection in Indo-China, Ho Chi Minh [...]” (p. 53), and a lengthy quotation from the text mentioned follows. The reporter also does not avoid giving information of a typically encyclopedic character: “Bassein, May 27. The third greatest town

¹⁰ Włodzimierz BOLECKI, “Dziennik pisany nocą. Tezy” (*A Journal Written at Night. Theses*), in the same, *Ciemna miłość. Szkice do portretu Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego* (*Dark Love. Sketches for Gustaw Herling-Grudziński’s Portrait*) (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2005), 102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108, 109.

in Burma, situated in the south-west bulge of the peninsula—in one of the many mouths of the Irrawaddy—with about 70 thousand inhabitants” (p. 80).

In the descriptive layer the narration is extraordinarily vivid—the author, as it were, tries in the most complete dimension possibly to make evident what he sees himself.¹² The description of his visit to the Shwedagon Pagoda:

A pair of giant leogryphs with fangs poked in their jaws and with ears in the shape of ox horns guard the entrance to the walkway leading to Shwedagon, and just behind them there are smaller statues of legendary monsters and alchemists armed with the philosopher’s stone. We enter a corridor shaded with a dome that is a sort of a long underground gallery with a view to the sky, and with two rows of stands instead of columns on both sides. Climbing up the several hundred steps we stop every couple of moments in front of the stands: fresh and artificial flowers, devotional items, incenses, Buddhist brochures, pendants and small votive umbrellas, bracelets and necklaces are sold here; between the stands there are also outwork shops where hunched men forge some trinkets of silver or saw combs of tortoise-shell, or even smoking kitchens where for a few annas each pilgrim may fill his mug with rice and spices. And finally the end—the last few steps, a sudden outbreak of light and... (pp. 30–31).

This fragment is also characteristic for another reason. An important genre feature of the reportage is its tendency to evoke in the recipient a state of certain tension, usually connected with his waiting for a further course of “action”—which certainly is a peculiar tribute to the journalistic character of this type of expression. Let us look at the quoted passage from Herling’s *A Journey to Burma*: the reporter builds up the tension—like in a good crime story—by delaying the moment of the enlightenment: he climbs up the shaded steps, along with his companions, and although his aim is to see the Shwedagon Pagoda, he stops every now and then at the stands. The moment of reaching the goal and seeing the temple is presented as a sudden moment when he is dazzled by the brightness of the brilliant light, probably understood literally (stepping out of the shadow into the bright sun), but also metaphorically—being stunned by the uniqueness of the view that appears before the writer’s eyes. The very description is concluded with an expressive pause marked in the text by ellipsis. The next paragraphs are only a proper

¹² In such cases reportage theoreticians usually talk about “changing into the reader’s eyes.” Cf. Krzysztof KĄKOLEWSKI [entry] “Reportaż” (Reportage), in *Słownik literatury polskiej XX wieku* (*A Dictionary of the 20th Century Polish Literature*), ed. Alina Brodzka, Mirosława Puchalska, M. Semczuk, Anna Sobolewska, Ewa Szary-Matywiecka (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1992).

actualization of the reader's expectation and give a full picture of a new and extraordinary place. Hence, the sentence opening the next paragraph reads:

Nothing, really, nothing of what I saw in the Near East can be compared to the oriental splendor of this city inside the city, and to the extravagant, like in a fairytale, wealth of the composition of its space. The words "magical" and "unreal" only roughly describe the broad yard with tens of temples (tazaungs) and refreshment houses for the pilgrims (zayats) whose architecture consists of a madly rampant accumulation of forms (p. 31).

The narration devices used in this way allow the recipient to indirectly participate in discovering a new world; they, as it were, introduce him to the very center of the described space and produce the feeling of participation in something real. This is also one of the very typical genre properties of the reportage that Herling willingly uses in his text.

As a matter of fact, this is not the only device whose task it is to keep the recipient's attention and to make the reality described evident to him. Another way is the use of an extraordinarily naturalistic description of the city space, saturated with numerous details. The picture of a poor quarter of one of the Indian cities may be a good example here; a picture that makes it possible to nearly sensually feel the evoked space:

An evening in Calcutta. The city is stifling, busy to the point of breathlessness, similar to a natural element. The heat already starts to evaporate from the sidewalks and roadways scorched with an all-day stream of sunlight. Lots of people lie down to sleep in the streets (in Calcutta alone there are supposedly half a million homeless people in the four million of its inhabitants), and after two hours everything comes to a standstill in a mysterious, motionless void between the day and the night. On the roadways, just beside the sidewalks, white cows roam unsupervised, in some squares herds of goats stand without moving. [...] By many buildings we pass old men with long beards and hair—at first it is hard to say if those shriveled skeletons covered with bags of skin that is scorched to a hard thong, are asleep, or if they sit all night in a lethargic stupor. Pestering, almost insolent hosts of beggars, especially little, completely naked children. [...] On the yards and crossroads men and women in rags clinging to their heated bodies fight for a place at the water-taps. At about eleven o'clock it is already difficult to make one's way between the shakedown, naked paupers with only loincloths, and half-naked, twisted, rachitic beggar-women with babies at their flabby breasts (pp. 107–108).

Moving towards a certain conclusion, we would like to cite the most fundamental distinction in the whole area of non-fictional prose that was made by Małgorzata Czermińska: theoretically—for in practice these borders may often be blurred—it would be possible to point to three main, neighboring

regions: non-fiction, literature of the personal document and the essay. The essence of the first one is decided by its “documentary character,” “authenticity” and the desire to make the communication objective. Literature of the personal document is separated from non-fiction by the clearly present personal element, whereas the essay is distinguished by controlling the events intellectually, by developing reflections on the given subject—its typical area is the interpretation of facts.¹³ In Herling’s diaries a clear formal tension is situated between the areas of non-fiction and the personal document; the essay, albeit present, does not seem especially significant from the point of view of the diaristic strategy. Interpretation is rather the author’s permanent tendency—Herling always tends to turn off the curtain of appearances from the reality that he is watching—than a definite literary convention. This can be well shown in actual texts and their mutual correlations—but this is a completely different problem.

A Journey to Burma is, then, first of all a story whose genre is close to the reportage, in which the basic role is played by its tendency to be authentic and to avoid excessive subjectivization—although, at the same time, it emphasizes the role of the reporter himself who does not want to remain only an impersonal medium (in any case this is rather typical of the literary kind of the modern reportage). However, there are also passages wherein clearly, albeit usually only just for a moment, another, very personal, tone comes to the fore in *A Journey*—a tone that is rather typical of another genre of non-fiction literature, that is, intimate diary. Hence, we find passages directly showing situations in which an actual record is composed and reveals the motivations, moods and circumstances in which the author finds himself:

Towards the evening, a bottle of gin. I am sitting and writing this diary. Lazarus runs up to my table from the dark corner of the room every dozen minutes to fill my emptied glass again and again. A stifling dusk, behind the windows crows’ cawing and the usual evening concert of crickets, in the beams of the ceiling birds’ chirping and the monotonous whirr of the fan. Gin, more and more gin, and emptiness. Time stops and tropical boredom begins (p. 104).

Very personal records also appear, often devoted to presentiments or anxieties, incomprehensible and tormenting the author, which cannot be simply intellectually controlled:

¹³ See: Małgorzata CZERMIŃSKA, *The Autobiographical Triangle. Witness, Confession, Challenge* ([S.l.]: Peter Lang, 2019), 21–27.

After dinner, a two-hour sleep. Here it is something similar to a loss of consciousness. I often wake up not knowing for a moment who I am, where I am and what I am doing here. Just before the beginning of the real monsoon and the rainy season deceptive blows of the wind so rarefy the air and satiate it with the heat of the sun that besides the sense of suffocating they evoke an indefinite state of anonymity, nihilism and impersonality. After today's experiences I wake up with a prick of anxiety that is more piercing than before, and I can hardly resist the first impulse to run out of the house I do not know where or why. Maybe it is just at such moments that the Burmese take bows to their stone Buddha? Or perhaps, when even Buddha is not enough they spring up from the ground with a mad scream and run forwards, touched by the flow of Amok (pp. 61–62).

Often current events become a peculiar ignition triggering reactions that were earlier suppressed, as in the following passage:

At night a torrential rain fell. Raindrops heavy like hail beat the roof tiles, the shutters' hinges were creaking, the walls of the house were rickety because of the violent blows of the streams of rain. Outside, either the bubbling or swoosh of the rapid streams formed in the street was heard. Soon after midnight the downpour was enriched by the accompaniment of a thunderstorm. [...] It took Burma and this—in audible in London—beating of raindrops against the wooden tiles to feel, for the first time for many years, a surge of nostalgia (p. 92).

Introducing this type of, essentially very intimate, records, Herling causes a rather obvious form of reportage of a journey to get internal shocks, and on its surface, that was homogeneous till now, structural cracks appear. It is exactly here, in the inner conflict that we have only sketched, that we should look for the most interesting structural feature of the text, in which the reportage narration is broken up with forms typical of the convention of a personal document. When we remember Herling's opinions of an ideal diary that were quoted above we notice that *A Journey to Burma* perfectly well meets the conditions set out there—we may risk the statement that it does so even better than *A Journal Written at Night*.

At the same time *A Journey to Burma* proves to be a text important for reconstructing the complete and proper image of Herling the diarist; it may be treated as a peculiar journey searching for the proper shape of a diary, putting Herling's later self-thematic statements in a somewhat different light, as well as additionally throwing light on *A Journal Written at Night* itself, with its exceptional, already fully-shaped form. Self-thematic motifs present in the author's later work to a large degree have a rhetoric character, and his deliberations on the proper structure he should choose as a diarist give the impression of ostensible ones, as he had already made the choice—so it seems—before.

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PODRÓŻ DO BURMA (A JOURNEY TO BURMA)

Summary

This text describes the literary structure (the immanent poetics) of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's 1952 diary *Podróż do Burmy (A Journey to Burma)* to properly situate this work in the domain of non-fiction and to indicate the most important characteristics of the writer's diarist conception.

Key words: diary; reportage; narration; text structure.

Translated by Tadeusz Karłowicz



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