

WOJCIECH KUDYBA

LITERARY AXIOLOGY IN JERZY STEMPOWSKI'S WRITINGS

It might seem that Jerzy Stempowski's conviction about relations between literature and axiology were described in Sławomir Janowski's book *Świat wartości: Problematyka aksjologiczna w eseistyce Bolesława Micińskiego, Jerzego Stempowskiego, Czesława Miłosza*. (*The World of Values. Axiology in the Essays of Bolesław Miciński, Jerzy Stempowski and Czesław Miłosz*)¹. But it is not so. Janowski reconstructed the reflections of these three essayists about the spiritual condition of Europe and basic standards of civilization threatened by totalitarianisms, but he consistently avoided utterances of these writers about values in literature. Meanwhile, it is literary axiology—reflections on ways of evaluating literature, its value for readers and its hidden values—that is an important part of Jerzy Stempowski's essays and should be researched and described. How did Stempowski tackle the problem of the evaluation of works of literature? How did he tackle the complicated issues of the axiological analysis of works of literature? What did he write about the situational dimension of works of literature, which at times receive an extra value for readers? I do not claim to reveal all of the axiological-literary views of Stempowski, but I would like to focus on some elements of the poetics of the reception of literature as perceived by him.

It is worth to notice first, that the act of reading is for Stempowski imminently connected with evaluation. Poetics of reading takes in

¹ Sławomir Janowski, *Świat wartości. Problematyka aksjologiczna w eseistyce Bolesława Micińskiego, Jerzego Stempowskiego, Czesława Miłosza*, Wrocław 2002.

his text a shape of a special axiology of reception; it becomes a theory of ‘worthwhile’ literature. According to Stempowski, the very gesture of selecting a text for reading is grounded axiologically. He recollected with subtle irony that reading habits “show our using of the ability to choose, systemically and on a grand scale; the ability [...] which is the most characteristic cognitive activity of man.” (*Czytelnik o krytyce*, I 18)². This choice is based, obviously, on the idea that a reader considers certain texts to be better, and others as worse; and on the idea that while reading a text s/he formulates positive or negative opinions, which—published, and thus made public—decide about the book market, and has, as Stempowski claims, “if not a decisive, at least a substantial influence on the success of good books”. (I 18)

Regarding evaluation as one of the fundamental components of the reception of a work of literature, Stempowski encouraged conscious evaluation, searched for rational criteria for the evaluation of works of literature and, in this way he entered one of the hottest debates of literary critics in the period between the wars.³ The questions he tried to answer were concerned first of all with the foundations of literary axiology. Which criteria should be used to evaluate works of literature? Are they connected with texts themselves or with extra textual reality? Or maybe they are totally arbitrary, and are an unmotivated, irrational decision of a reader, which gives her verdict without reference beyond herself. Stempowski’s answer seems to be well balanced and reserved. In an essay, “Fizjologia krytyki” (“Physiology of Criticism”), at first he explicitly rejected attempts to formulate evaluations of literary works with reference to extra literary criteria—particularly ideological ones. He argued that their dominance in the discourse of literary criticism “may lead to the degeneration

² The quotations from Jerzego Stempowski’s works come—if not marked otherwise—from: *Szkice literackie*, vol. I–II, ed. by Jerzy Timoszewicz, Warszawa 2001 (vol. I: *Chimera jako zwierzę pociągowe. 1926–1941*; vol. II: *Klimat życia i klimat literatury. 1948–1967*).

³ More on this in Dariusz Skórczewski, *Spory o krytykę literacką w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*, Kraków 2002.

of criticism", makes a review a kind of a censor, "asking books if they are useful to the case of the nation or of the proletariat." (I 70) In the same essay we read: "Art possesses within itself its own measure and cannot be judged from the perspective of extra artistic criteria" (I 67).

Despite such declarations it would be difficult to consider Stempowski as a supporter of an immanent evaluation of literary works.⁴ Although he really leaned towards what was then called the 'ergo-centric' reading of texts, at the same time he saw problems arising when it was a literary work itself that precise criteria of evaluation had to be drawn from. He argued soberly that similar attempts proved futile even when the classical, normative model of thinking about literature was in force. Stempowski wrote:

For many centuries it was believed that the art of writing has a group of specific rules, norms and regulations which form foundations for the evaluation of literary texts. A careful reading of the most popular collections of these rules, such as Horace's "Epistle to the Pisones" or Boileau's *L'art poétique*, allows us to claim that the rules included in them are quite fluid and do not offer the basis to evaluate individual versed texts. (*Czytelnik o krytyce*, I 19–20)

According to Stempowski, such attempts could also have not been successful later, when the Romantic breakthrough strongly challenged the normative way of thinking about literature, while avant-garde movements of the twentieth century have popularized so many contradictory ways of writing literature that not a single one of them could be deemed as forcing critics to take certain axiological decisions. The passage quoted above ends with a bleak conclusion:

The very variety of models of our times leads to the situation when out of literature itself it is not possible to extract more general foundations for the evaluation of individual books. (I 20)

⁴ Cf., remarks of Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk in *Niespieszny przechodzień i paradoksy. Rzecz o Jerzym Stempowskim*, Wrocław 1997, 51–53.

A bit further we read:

For the reasons discussed, critics have never had less foundation for any kind of evaluation of literary phenomena. They have too many models and too few criteria to use for evaluation. (I 22)

Stempowski also watched attempts at the construction of the modern methodology of literary research inspired by Russian formalism—ahistorical and independent from literary fashions and currents. He carefully followed these attempts, as they offered hope that criteria of the evaluation of individual works of art would be grounded in a ‘scientific’, universal model of works of literature. However, Stempowski approached the programmes of various literary theories with more scepticism than enthusiasm. He warned that “excessive dominance of factors ‘internal’ in the literary sense could lead criticism to anaemia, to narrowing literature to technical matters, to treating it solely in terms of craftsmanship.[...] (*Fizjologia krytyki*, I 70). Stempowski’s doubts were connected mostly with the call of many theoreticians to reduce the research field to the observation of only a linguistic character. In the essay “Granice literatury” (“Borders of Literature”) we find the following fragment:

German *Literaturwissenschaft* claims to have objective criteria, it uses mostly the methodological analysis of the style. Dejected by the blend of literature and biography with which handbooks overflow, I have always had a lot of respect for *LW*, However, I also see its inadequacies. [...] In order to give it more space, the role of scenery in works of literature should be, perhaps, considered, and the ways in which classical masters dealt with it [...] (II 181–182).

Stempowski, suspicious towards theoretical and literary paradigms of reading, suggested that the field of literary analyses should be extended to the observation of the world presented and its semantics. He also encouraged comparative literary research. Did it mean a turn towards the history of literature? It seems that this was not the case. Let us recall a fragment of the essay “Czytelnik o krytyce” (“A Reader about Criticism”)

The works of historians of literature are the saddest books a reader may ever encounter. These are huge literary cemeteries, where a historian, armoured in the totally useless criteria and superstitions of past centuries, considers with condescension the lives of dead writers of dead books. [...]

The uselessness of the history of literature for readers is, to a large extent, the result of the fact that historians cannot distinguish dead books, which will not be read in our times, from books which are alive and can offer today's readers the best kind of reading experience. (I 24)

What was the origin of Stempowski's reluctance to differentiate models of a 'professional' approach to literature? The answer is not difficult. Stempowski consistently chose in his essays the persona of a reader-dilettante. Also, when he took part in literary and meta-critical discussion he enjoyed rejecting the role of an expert, and with a certain sense of perversion adopted the role of an average art recipient, as if he wanted to stress that such a way of reading—spontaneous, unarmed in theories—has a particular, incomparable value. Differently than many participants of the heated debate about criteria of evaluation of literature, he did not try to present a scientific paradigm as absolute, and treated with distance claims about its universal and final solutions.⁵ It was the perspective of a reader-amateur which allowed him to recognize the meagre foundations of literary criticism, dogmas of theories and, last but not least, the lack of sensitivity of historians of literature to the contextual, situational values of literary texts. It was the attachment to amateur reading—that is reading which is emotional and filled with 'love'—which made Stempowski search for an approach to literature which would not kill the joy of reading, would not limit cognitive horizons, and would take into account the situational aspects of works of literature, and their inescapable connection with the extra literary reality in which readers live.

What, then, was an act of reading, according to Stempowski? First of all, probably the joy which has been mentioned, the fact

⁵ This is dealt with in Dariusz Skórczewski, *op. cit.*, 268.

of enjoying this activity. Referring to the views of Albert Thibaudet, Stempowski treated the fact of tasting and enjoying as starting points in literary criticism, and taste itself as a basic criterion of evaluation. In a manner similar to Thibaudet, he thought that it is not only reason and cognitive passion which make us start reading, but, first of all, a certain, type of sensitivity, incomparable with anything else, called taste or sense of style. If he had known Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Potęga smaku" ("The Power of Taste"), while answering the question about his preferred way of reading, he might have used this quotation: "but fundamentally it was a matter of taste/Yes taste/in which there are fibres of soul the cartilage of conscience."⁶

For Stempowski, the criterion of taste did not mean separation from a work of literature, or from its historical or literary contexts, or from readers' experiences. The evaluation of a work of literature grounded on a similar criterion is not an irrational action but has a cognitive value and is verifiable, because taste is not something given once and for all, but something which is recreated all the time as a generalization of readers' experiences. Its roots are deep in literary reality—not somewhere beyond it. While presenting Thibaudet's *Physiology of Criticism* Stempowski recalled with approval:

Literary taste was the result of the comparison of books by readers, and does not depend on any extra-literary criteria. (I 66)

According to him, the source of problems connected with the application of a similar criterion is not its imprecise character, but the fact that when we read, "a great majority of readers have never read a book which could serve as a measure of other books" (*Granice literatury*, II 180). Stempowski contrasted objectivity based on theoretical literary doctrines with a different one—based on the individual competencies of an evaluating person, his/her literary culture, and ability to ground the read text in the wide civilizational context. So he avoided a stance which would disregard history

⁶ Zbigniew Herbert, *Raport from the Besieged City and Other Poems*, transl. by John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter, Oxford University Press, 1987, 69, l. 4-6.

and context. He thought that the taste of his readers develops not only thanks to their growing reading competencies, but also under the influence of the cultural and civilizational context of the period. It is fixed not only in a certain changing way of understanding literature, but mostly in historically changing ways of understanding the world and man. He repeated, after Albert Thibaudet:

Taste, [...] however, evolved from generation to generation, not only as new literary models were appearing, but also under the influence of extra-literary factors, as new criteria of internal elegance were evolving, being the result of the endless variety of topical matters and problems of men. (I 69)

Simultaneously, in many essays he was searching for true literary measures in the books of forgotten classics. In the essay "Nad wodospadem w Szafuzie" ("Over the Waterfall in Shafuza") he wrote that in literature "it is only the last distillate which really matters, the one which has come victorious from all temptations, fashions, simplifications".⁷ He was fond of recalling Horace's aphorism from "Epistle to the Pisones": "If something is not the best, it has no value whatsoever".⁸

Therefore, an encouragement to the disinterested tasting of works of literature—which appeared in many of Stempowski's texts—should not be treated as a testimony of literary hedonism. The "pleasurable" concept of literature was welcomed by him with a wry smile. *Delectatio* of books was for him something more than entertainment, more than agitation caused by the artistic structure of a text. The reading experience covers not only aesthetic impressions, but also impressions of sources which are located outside of a literary text—in the sphere of ideas and life. For Stempowski the notions of taste and tasting had a very wide range. They included artistic contemplation and cognitive

⁷ Jerzy Stempowski, *Eseje dla Kassandry*, ed. by Piotr Kłoczowski Gdańsk 2005, 183–184.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

joy, aesthetic experiences, and experiences which one would like to call existential. In the quoted essay on Albert Thibadeut's he wrote:

Delectatio [...] is an operation in which we cannot distinguish factors located inside the scope of literature and outside it. [...] *Delectatio*, in a way, moves within us the whole of our emotional experience, resulting from book reading but also from elsewhere. In the same way, taste, as we have noted before, is not a phenomenon shaped exclusively on the basis of our recollections as readers. (I 70)

So according to him, a reader begins reading with all the stock of his/her reading competence and the burden of existential experiences. They influence the reading. However, not to the extent that a reader might be called a creator of the value of a given literary text. A reader portrayed in Stempowski's essay does not create value. Although s/he has clear predilections to make judgements, which are the basis of his/her choices as a reader, this gesture is more an answer to some values hidden in a work of literature itself, than an unmotivated, arbitrary verdict. According to Stempowski, a separate world of values is the basic, constitutive element of each work of literature. Stempowski strongly stressed that the ordering and evaluative functions of literature are not usurped, that they belong to its essence, because "each work of art contains some attempt to order the imaginary world of an artist according to some values. This order is usually different from the one we know from our everyday experiences." (*O mierze i nieumiarze powieści*, II 52) In another essay he remarked that it is a strong grounding in the world of values which differentiates art from science and Humanities from Positivism.⁹

The basic element of readers' experience, according to Stempowski, is the experience of difference, a peculiar tension between the hierarchy proposed in a text and the one which, regardless of our wishes, shapes our everyday lives, and characterizes the civilization in which we live. Stempowski considered the fact of revealing

⁹ Cf., *O współczesnej formacji humanistycznej*, II 18–19.

the peculiarities of axiology proposed by artists to be an important goal of the interpretative efforts of readers. If he had not defined *expressis verbis* the horizons to which the efforts of readers should be directed, a careful observer of his texts would certainly note that such convictions were implicitly constantly present in his critical literary discourse. The essay "Klimat życia i klimat literatury" ("Climate of Life and Climate of Literature") is exactly about these issues: about a peculiar difference between the order of values which can be drawn from contemporary literature and the hierarchy of values in industrial and commercial western civilization. It is worth recalling a fragment devoted to a novel by William Faulkner.

In the imaginary world of Faulkner life has sense only as suffering and atonement. Love is sinful in its essence, bringing with itself punishment to come, either as long agony in Chicago's 'respectability' or as fifty years of hard labour. It cannot avoid atonement even as *caritas*. A noble doctor, Rittenmeyer, all the time tries in vain to escape from the net [...]. Particularly interesting are the pages devoted to the refusal of social advancement seen as a lie against a true sense of life. (II 134–135)

It is not difficult that Stempowski's interpretation of *The Wild Palms* is directed at revealing Faulkner's axiology. The world depicted in the novel was for him an object of research undertaken to reconstruct the hierarchy of values embedded in it. A similar phenomenon could be observed in other essays by Stempowski. Let us recall the text about comic elements in *Pan Jowialski (Mr. Jowialski)*, or the essay about Poles in Dostoyevsky's novels.

Stempowski had all the tools needed for the axiological analysis of works of literature. He would put some 'quality' in the centre of his considerations and he was able to interpret the language and the depicted world of a given literary text in a subtle way, revealing the axiological aspects of characters and events. He would ground his observations in wide philosophical and cultural contexts, showing the vision of the world and man hidden in a work of literature. Despite this, he regarded this 'scholarly' manner of dealing with

values inherent in a work of literature as insufficient and derivative in relation to the primary experience of confronting 'value in itself'. For Stempowski, most important and conclusive was the moment of joy, enchantment, which could be called the moment of 'being struck by value'. Relying on the conviction of Maupassant, Stempowski wrote:

At first glance Maupassant's confessions seem to be something similarly fantastic, like nine muses or the double peak of Parnassus. It is the peculiar ladder of values which is most striking. At the top, defined as "the only reason of being", are seconds of revelations, intangible and indescribable impressions, in other words things which could not be used in a notary's act or listed in a will.

However, a short moment of cogitation is enough to be convinced that we all [...] use the same criteria as Maupassant. For us it is also a moment lasting minutes or seconds which is decisive, one impression, which we cannot clearly describe, of which we speak cautiously in order not to scare it [...]. This impression is decisive for us in gauging the significance of authors, whom we evaluate according to their best pages.¹⁰

It seems that, according to Stempowski, the value of a work of literature is not something we control. Instead, it has control over us, it controls our imagination and emotions. It is a mystery which imposes on us its disquieting presence and demands faithfulness. Stempowski was blunt with the 'experts' of literature of his period, as he was convinced that it is moments of epiphany, so difficult to explain, which give sense to reading. He was blunt with them because he expected them to be guides showing readers the way to joy.

¹⁰ Jerzy Stempowski, *Kłopoty recenzenta muzycznego*, in Idem, *Eseje dla Kassandry*, op. cit., 194–195.