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ENCOUNTERS WITH PEOPLE AND CULTURE
IN MIRON BIAŁOSZEWSKI'S POETRY:
LEONARDO AND FACES FROM MATEJKO

The seemingly peculiar structure¹—with an index, from which everything starts—will be explained later.

Index of painters in Białoszewski's works²:

- Angelico Fra *OtM* 294
- Bonnard Pierre I 117; VIII 167

“—it is so that you get to these simplicities after many experiences. If a painter had not liked male nudes, it means that he liked babes. And when it is a male nude, then it means that it is something. If he has two of them, then it is even better. David has so many naked boys. It turns out that he liked boys. A simple test. Weiss only babes. Bonnard not a single male nude. Renoir? O, yea. I should have started with him, only babes, and when he painted a son, Coco, he turned him babe-wise. These are the simplest of things”. (*Traf* [A Blind Chance], VIII 167)

¹ This text is a fragment of a larger work entitled *Pan Mozart, pan Bach, pani Reginka, ja. Spotkania z ludźmi i kulturą w twórczości Mirona Białoszewskiego* [Mr. Mozart, Mr. Bach, Mrs. Reginka, Me. Encounters with People and Culture in Miron Białoszewski's Works].

² Roman numeral—volume number according to *Utwory zebrane* [Collected Works] (Miron Białoszewski, *Utwory zebrane*, vol. 1–10, Warszawa 1987–1994); Arabic numeral—page number; *OtM*—*O tym Mickiewiczu jak go mówię* [About this Mickiewicz as I Speak of Him].

- Bosch Hieronim V 100

“It was to be spiritual and inspired. And it is, and goes on like this. But bodies play practical jokes. As do ghosts. You want them as you want smoke and this is a little sin. Then it gets dark. Darkness is blinking in the eyes. Often a thunderstorm comes. The hallucinatory one. Ghosts are surging, and they have bulging and changeable shapes. Bosch. O yes. From this. And others. And those who were there in various corners of the world. Such and such, hermits. It is not enough to eat little and dry. Sometimes it helps. They have just such things evaporate from a stone of deep thought. Smoked, circled overhead. They calved and tempted”. (*Frywole - 3 [Fivolous - 3]*, V 100)

- Boticelli Sandro VIII 159
- Boznańska Olga VIII 161

“I read a sentence: ‘A device did not aspire to Antiquity, unless we are to treat the Victorian period as Ancient’. Realizing that what is alive for me, for someone may be an antique, because it is thirty years old. Boznańska, who went outside wearing simply what she had. The fact that it was not fashionable...”. (*Traf [A Blind Chance]* VIII 161)

- Brueghel Pieter VIII 78; IX 243

“A bi-plane again circled above, till he let off itself, as if a buzzing fly, these. They flew down, unwound on the way from the sky into grass. They were like little clouds.

You could see parachutes quite well, but people are tiny. No wonder that when Icarus was falling, not a single person saw him. Lap! But how did Brueghel know? They knew everything. How clouds look from above, how you fly and sit on a cornice”. (*Chamowo [Boor-place]* [VIII 78])

“The centre is quite small with tower blocks, not too many people. Two Babel Towers of ten stories each. The same as in Breughel’s. One is a town hall. The other a railway station”. (*AAAmeryka [AAAmerica]*, IX 243)

- Cellini Benvenuto V 252

- Czyżewski Tytus V 73. *See* Leonardo da Vinci
- David Jacques-Louis IV 182; VIII 167. *See* Bonnard Pierre
- Dürer Albrecht IV 81
- Eyck Jan van VIII 164. *See* Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn
- Fidiasz VII 94. *See* Karpiński Franciszek
- Goes Hugo van der VIII 164. *See* Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn

Gogh Vincent van VIII 176

"And when I did not know if the grey bone still feels fine in the hand, or not, then she, so it seems, had it written on the paper. 'A small bone for Vincent'. Because the poodle had the same name as van Gogh".
(*Traf*, VIII 167)

- Goya Francisco IV 259
- Greco El I 151–152; VIII 154–155, 157, 164

"drętwiałem bez stylu
jak w dzieciństwie
jeszcze na most
ale na niepokój
według El Greca
zmartwychwstałem
w jego neonach
w tym samym rzucie
i szaleństwie"

[I was getting numb with no style
like in childhood
still to the bridge
but because of anxiety
in El Greco's way
I resurrected
in his neon lights
in the same projection
and madness]

(*Mosty pierworodne i El Greco wybawiający* [Firstborn Bridges and El Greco Who Saves], I 151–152)

“—El Greco hit with the white colour like crazy. Now they are afraid of the white colour. Formerly not. He put on the white colour and only later other colours; that is why they are so shiny and smooth. There is a thick layer of it but it is levelled off with this skidding tool”.
(*Traf*, VIII 155)

“Dąbrowski Square. Le. considers two displayed copies of El Greco.

—El Greco is the best. Original. And he painted as he wanted. This angel from the Annunciation has the feathers of a turkey. She is a typical Spanish woman. How is this angel supported?

—On a cloud, slightly above the floor. She threw her needle-work and scissors.

—O yes, obviously. This angel is looking not at her but at his own hand.

—And the Holy Spirit is more in the background, but between them, he has left a vapour trail, like a plane”.

— If it was not for painting, then... then... what would humanity be worth? (*Traf*, VIII 157)

- Hogarth William VI 167
- Ingres Jean IV 182
- Kandinski Wasilij II 178
- Kossak Wojciech IV 243–245
- Leonardo da Vinci I 38, 415; IV 82–83, 276; V 70–71, 73, 252; VI 27–28, 51; VII 94; VIII 159, 165, 201; X 136, 142–143, 149, 157

“[...]

A one w Leonardach min,

W obrotach Rafaela

[...]”

[And they in Leonardo’s face

In Raphael’s spins]

(*Karuzela z madonnami* [A Carousel with Madonnas], I 38)

“We return to the picture [...]

Le. gathers conclusions:

—Not black, red. Not stubborn, but mild, very mild. Not primitive but crafty. Less Byzantine, more Leonardian. Beautiful as a woman. A straight nose, full lips, with a thin white line as a new moon... Sad and smiling. Polish Gioconda". (*Cała noc u Matki Boskiej* [The Whole Night at the Mother of God], IV 276)

"I run into Louvre's prom. The hospitable one. One doesn't have to ask, because it seems obvious. Inside architecture is pathetically full of colours. I see a small crowd. Surely in front of the Gioconda. A person with outstretched hands stirs away from the crowd in a coat —with a collar of otter fur—as Lu. said

brows of a sable, put up

—you mustn't be late here.

Gioconda has in front of her a square made of sticks and stuffed chains. These chains are supposed to prevent theft and throwing stones at it, as someone has recently done. But it wasn't the same bloke who chopped Michael Angelo's *Pieta*". (*Ja i Artur S. w Paryżu* [Me and Artur S. in Paris], V 71)

"Then I didn't look at Gioconda. To some extent because of the contempt for its being so clichéd. And a bit because of the warning of Tytus Czyżewski, who malignantly told Lu. about Gioconda —it's old crap.

However, one day I stopped to look. It's not old crap. I was so charmed, so ashamed.

No, no...There are things to which nothing sticks". (*Ja i Artur S. w Paryżu*, V 73)

"Le. tells me that it is known that Leonardo da Vinci wrote two codexes. One is in London. There were rumours about the other one, that Leonardo himself gave it to a close friend of his servant girl, he was a painter himself, that he inherited everything after Leonardo, that he appreciated the master's things a lot, but when he needed money he would sell something. And so he sold the codex to Spain, apparently. But nobody knew where it was. Only just now one bloke was looking for folk songs and accidentally came across the codex of Leonardo da Vinci. Cybernetic machines were given these texts to check, and drawings. The question was asked

—where are these drawings from?

The machines answered

—Leonardo was drawing them from his own body.

The way the machines answered convinced the scientists to believe in it. Anyway, there is an interesting sentence at the end of the codex: 'Read me, because I come to the world so rarely'.

Le. also said that Leonardo admired his own body. And he liked it". (*Szpital* [Hospital], VI 27-28)

"Mr. New had two family visits. Two middle-oldish women, two children, a youth a bit from Leonardo da Vinci, with locks of hair, an angelic sharp gaze mixed with an impish smile". (*Szpital*, VI 51)

"—It is more difficult to paint from the memory than from a model. Mr. Kochanek from Krosno [Stanisław Kochanek (1905-1995), a painter,] told me about Leonardo's way. I was wondering about it. It turns out that it is about a type of a model. It's a model. From the memory, but the observation must be there as well. It is something more than a portrait. It is the creation of a new type. Like Leonardo". (*Traf*, VIII 159)

"As for me, I prefer us to be cosmically lonely, than to learn that some others dictated various things, built pyramids for us, sent us Hammurabi and Leonardo da Vinci and put us on remote control, allowing me this honour, with my inspiration. It is better to lose the greatest sensation than to gain such an affront. And if it was God? With God the whole thing looks better, it has more options, with perspectives going both ways". (*Traf*, VIII 165)

"doły
puste
smoki wyzdychały
fiszbiny po nich wiszą
leonardowskie"
[holes
empty
dragons died

baleens still hang after them
Leonardian]
(*Wasza wczasowiczowska maść* [Your Holidays Hoighness], VIII 201)

"Korytarz
Pusto
śmione światło,
idę, w loży u siostr
uśmiecha się znajoma?
tak... to ona
Gioconda"
[Corridor
empty
dimmed light,
I am going, in the box of sisters
there smiles an acquaintance?
yes... it's hers
Gioconda]
([*Korytarz...*] [Corridor], X 136)

"usiadłem pod wiszącym drzewem,
tu może być popołudnie Giocondy,
dalej koty, śmietnik, kokony z gipsu
po kończynach (coś dla Leonarda),
w porządku:
Giocondzie też to i tamto zalatywało"
[I sat down under a hanging tree
here Gioconda's afternoon may happen,
further cats, rubbish heap, cocoons of plaster
down the limbs (something for Leonardo)
all right:
Gioconda smelt of this and that]
([*usiadłem pod wiszącym drzewem...*] [I sat down under a hanging
tree], X 149)

- Matejko Jan IV 190; V 6, 161, 274; VI 25; VIII 9, 16

“The rest—these are portraits of forty kings by Matejko. Litographed. This famous collection. [...]

It took some time. The ordering of kings all right. Because I even remembered that Olbracht before Aleksander”. (*Ostatnia Marszałkowa* [The Last Marshal’s Wife], IV 189–190)

“A change of trams. I enter this scrum of people. It always serves me well.

Oh, Bolesław Śmiały...

He stopped by the wall. Blue eyes, hair like Piast kings and princes, pert nose and spiky and this glance and surprise and Matejko. Humour. I have it. I am jumping into a tram. I am writing down. Exit, platform, I am writing down. Also on Foksal. Which author does it in front of his publisher’s? I am still writing when on the stairs”. (*Po krzyku, po tomiku* [Quick Volume], V 6)

“Long haired, eats more than others, because he is quite buxom, was a boxer. He has not only chubby locks, but also a moustache. Going in two streams to the end of his head. Half way through they are like hair pretending to be a moustache. I woke up this morning and looked at him

—Matejko’s Bolesław Chrobry, yeah...” (*Szpital*, VI 25)

“Zosia Romanowska lived close. My distant aunt. Behind her Mrs. Bachman, a seamstress, who was called ‘Zygmunt Stary’, as I suggested in the period when I watched regularly Matejko’s *Fellowship of Polish Kings*”. (*Leszno* 99, VIII 9)

“*Bitwa pod Grunwaldem* hang over the sofa. A big copy with glass in the frame. Once the glass got broken and a piece of it got stuck at the bottom of the painting, above the frame, I always associated it with a Teutonic knights’ banner and with prince Witold on the horse. And I do not know if it is Witold, or someone else, who sits facing his horse’s tail. There was a damp patch on the ceiling, a big one, complicated. Even more interesting than *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem*, although even less comprehensible”. (*Nanka*, VIII 16)

- Matisse Henri I 117

- Mehoffer Józef V 282

"Labyrinth underground, this is a labyrinth. Eternal source. Eternal source of joy. Such a humongous source. Flooded with people. Beyond Aleje they are sitting where they can, near a bank, a tavern, on little terraces, on benches, on vases, some in the sun, some in the shade. One woman with green eyelids, tilted backwards for sunbathing, as if in sweet rush, a pond, Mehoffer, so much mood and laughter, one pair of eyelids in search of warmth". (*Raj* [Paradise], V 282)

- Michelangelo Buonarroti V 71. See Leonardo da Vinci, V 252
- Murillo Bartolomé Estéban V 51; IX 137

"—on these different paintings there is no excess. For example, Murillo's *The Angels' Kitchen*. The angels wash pots for monks, about half a metre above the floor, according to the human scale". (*Nadzwyczajnosteczki* [Superflagalistics], V 51)

- Raphael Santi I 38. See Leonardo da Vinci, VIII 43
- Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn IV 9; VIII 159, 164

"The Prodigal Son (of Rembrandt) has all painting problems in his heels.

Lu." (*Cytaty* [Quotations], IV 9)

"—Sometimes when you look from a distance it is nice, you come closer...

—Yes, I approached one painting, and from close-up so blue, but what lines. The colour is packed, and from a distance...

Le:

—That's how Rembrandt did it. From close-up you see these clear separations as colours, as if carved.

—Yes, yes, I know, I remember how I was surprised by it, as did contour lines.

—They wanted to come close with their noses to the painting, but he whisked them away". (*Traf* VIII 159)

"—So, only a few painters knew how to do both. Rembrandt later used only chiaroscuro. Impressionists used the light.

—And who did both? El Greco?
 —Van Goes, and van Eyck, some of the Dutchmen”. (*Traf* [A Blind
 Chance], VIII 164)

- Renoir Auguste VII 206;
- Renoir Auguste VIII 167. *See* Bonnard Pierre

„Pod kwiaciarnią na przystanku
 dwie młode pod parasolkami
 czekają, gadają, pada,
 te same
 zawsze
 jak u Sterne’a jak u Prousta,
 u Renoira.”

[Near the florist’s at the bus stop
 two girls with umbrellas
 they are waiting, talking, it is raining
 the same
 always
 as in Sterne
 as in Proust
 in Renoir.]

(*Jazda autobusem do Anina po mszy* [A Bus Ride to Anin after
 the mass], VII 206)

- Ribera José de VIII 159
 “—Ribera used to repel me with his bulkiness. This crucifixion
 of Andrew, body amaranthine
 —a horrible naturalist
 —wrinkles, such as young boys-torturers have from anger. I have
 looked at the saint’s legs. What is this? Little hairs? One close
 to another? I put on my glasses and checked and it was a tiny web
 of cracks”. (*Traf*, VIII 159)
- Stabrowski Kazimierz VIII 166
- Stwosz Wit (Stoss Veit) IV 269

"On a different chest of drawers a list of holy masses. When and in whose intention?

—A few times in the intention of Macoch. This Macoch?

—Sure—Le. replies.—It wasn't so long ago. In Cracow they once had a mass in the intention of Veit Stoss. In the Catholic Church all the dead ones are not far away". (*Cała noc u Matki Boskiej*, IV 269)

- Szczepkowski Jan IV 271
- Terborch Gerard IV 24
- Titian VIII 159; IX 137

"I:

—A Venetian doge of Titian with a bag full of money surprised me. There are no glazes like in this *Entombment of Christ* in the Louvre. —Because the one in the Louvre was painted later. He used glazes when he was old. Rejected the earlier ones. Started making corrections. People didn't like it. They used to say "The old man has gone bonkers". (*Traf* VIII 159-160)

- Toulouse-Lautrec Henri de I 168
- Trzcńska-Kamińska Zofia VIII 148, 163
- Turner William VIII 154
- Utrillo Maurice V 71-72
- Velázquez Diego I 412
- Weiss Wojciech VIII 167. *See* Bonnard Pierre
- Witkacy *also known as* Witkiewicz Stanisław Ignacy IV 12
- Wyspiański Stanisław II 185; III 17; IV 243; V 5; VIII 55, 108-109; *OtM* 296, 297

1. The game of accounts?

Białoszewski's writings are all woven out of meetings with people. Is it worth putting these meetings in some order? And classifying them? And if so, how? It is impossible to describe everything. An interpreter of Białoszewski's poetry is confronted with a daunting task: he would like to research at least so much that he could honestly state that he has extended knowledge about his author of interest even by a tiny bit.

An attempt to build an index of people in Białoszewski's writings is a task methodologically peculiar and gruelling: because of the plethora of materials and problems with the choice of criteria for ordering them. Therefore, why bother? Will we know more about anyone's writings if we learn about the frequency of people's appearance; people of one special type? Is a pedantic count of individuals a mark of research helplessness? An attempt to create one's own order in the space already researched and named?

Although I was aware of some dangers awaiting the potential creator of such an index, I decided to go several times through ten volumes of *Utwory zebrane* [Collected Works]. (I also took into consideration the text entitled *O tym Mickiewiczu jak go mówię* [About this Mickiewicz as I Speak of Him] not published in these volumes)—searching for figures connected with culture (understood in the wide sense). I did it, knowing that it had not been done before, suspecting that no one would attempt to do it in the future, being convinced that indexes (I personally start reading books from indexes) not only could make approaching the broad and complex spaces of works of a given writer so much easier, but that indexes can become an important interpretative tool. This project is at the same time one of the possible ways of coping in a holistic manner with some specific and concrete aspects of Białoszewski's writings. An unusual structure of my work, with the index at the beginning, not only stresses the index's role as a research tool, but it also shows the steps of my research process.

I selected five categories within which the index could be considered complete. This index is not, of course, a dictionary or a thesaurus, although it has some features of a thesaurus—a large body of quotations. These five categories are as follows: painters, composers, Polish writers, foreign writers and—in the index of a different type—God, saints and figures known from the Bible. It seems that artists from the first four categories were for Białoszewski an absolute cultural canon.

I decided to look for answers to the following questions: who, out of artists, was most important for Białoszewski, who was important, who was an inspiration for him, whom did he regard highly, and

whom not so highly and why. And finally, without whom could Białoszewski not live on a daily basis, and without whom could he dispense with easily. The very fact of counting episodes in which different protagonists appear may lead to surprising conclusions, presenting Białoszewski in a very different perspective.

So, it turns out that the admirer of cultural peripheries put Bach before all other artists.

The eulogist of rubbish appreciated Leonardo da Vinci more highly than a heap of rags.

A member of an avant-garde and a poet in his own right, he did not cross out the literary tradition, but takes a lot from Shakespeare and Mickiewicz.

2. Leonardo and faces from Matejko's paintings

It seems that Białoszewski's education in painting started with a copy of *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem* [Battle of Grunwald] by Matejko, which was placed over a sofa. And although the young Miron's critical reflection on this painting had the character of simple, childish images ("once the glass got broken and a piece of it got stuck at the bottom of the painting, above the frame, I always associated it with a Teutonic knights' banner and with prince Witold on the horse. And I do not know if it was Witold, or someone else"³), his artistic impressions were drawn more by a "big and complicated"⁴ damp patch on the ceiling. Białoszewski interest in painting (as well as in damp patches) lasted a long time. And it really never went beyond childlike illumination and surprise as the reaction to paintings.

In a manner similar to the episode from childhood when the destruction of the copy of the painting led to a feeling of surprise and an impulse to a concrete analysis (why one of the figures sits on a horse against the norm—"facing [...] the tail"⁵). Later, in Białoszewski's adulthood, in his contacts with paintings a small detail

³ *Nanka*, VIII 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

(for example, alleged hair on a saint's legs from Ribera's painting or El Greco's angel with turkey's feathers) would become an object of interest, a reason for questions, and would lead to a more general reflection on art.

Białoszewski knew a lot about art (and the art of painting in particular) but, apparently, he was not an expert in this field. He was a careful (and at times brilliant) observer and aficionado. He himself was keen to ask questions ("Who made light and colour? El Greco?"⁶). He addressed these questions mostly to Le. (his main guide in the world of painting) and was concerned with the technical problems of individual artists ("El Greco hit with the white colour like crazy"⁷, "That's how Rembrandt did it. From close-up you see these clear separations as colours, as if carved"⁸, "[Titian—J.F.] used glazes when he was old. Rejected the earlier ones"⁹) and shared with him his concrete reflections: "Ribera used to repel me with his bulkiness"¹⁰, "a Venetian doge with a bag full of money surprised me"¹¹, "I stopped to look [at Gioconda—J.F]. It's not old crap"¹².

Le., who himself was a painter, knew his craft inside out. He sometimes acted as a university lecturer, who "collects conclusions". "—Not black, red. Not stubborn, but mild, very mild. Not primitive but crafty. Less Byzantine, more Leonardian. Beautiful as a woman. A straight nose, full lips, with a thin white line as a new moon... Sad and smiling. A Polish Gioconda"¹³. Le, whose own interests in painting were also centred around more prosaic themes, explained that:

⁶ *Traf*, VIII 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ja i Artur S. w Paryżu, Szcz.*, V 73.

¹³ *Cała noc u Matki Boskiej*, IV 276.

If a painter had not liked male nudes, it means that he liked babes. And when it is a male nude, then it means that it is something. If he has two of them, then it is even better. David has so many naked boys. It turns out that he liked boys. A simple test. Weiss only babes. Bonnard not a single male nude. Renoir? O, yea. I should have started with him, only babes, and when he painted a son, Coco, he turned him babe-wise. These are the simplest of things.¹⁴

In both cases Le. listed many observations, which were like summing up of his lectures: about a painting of Madonna, about the 'nakedness' of various painters. Białoszewski listened as a humble student and asked additional questions like an inquisitive one.

What is surprising about these conversations about art is the specific language of description of painterly impressions. Neither Białoszewski as a listener, nor Le. as the one who explains, refrains from blunt and crude ways of formulating truths about paintings. We have already quoted Le's remark about not the very subtle ways in which El Greco applied white colours, and that the famous painting by Leonardo was, in Białoszewski opinion, "not old crap". Could such phrases have been used by an art historian during a lecture or in a research paper? Probably not. And would other writers while writing about their contacts with art have used similar phrases?

Zbigniew Herbert, similarly to Białoszewski, was keen to observe with attention seemingly trivial details of artistic creations of man, and wrote, for example, about one Dutch painter about whom "anecdotes were told how he spent the whole day painting brooms and brushes, each bristle separately"¹⁵ (Białoszewski scrutinized in a similar manner one of Ribera's paintings: "I have looked at the saint's legs. What is this? Little hairs? One close to another? I put on my glasses and checked, and it was a tiny web of cracks"¹⁶). Herbert, however,

¹⁴ *Traf*, VIII 167.

¹⁵ Zbigniew Herbert, *Still Life with a Bridle*, transl. by John and Bogdana Carpenter, in *The Collected Prose 1948-1998*, ed. by Alissa Valles, Harper Collins, New York 2010, 198.

¹⁶ *Traf*, VIII 159.

used more aloof and elegant language: “Dou was a sought-after, constantly fashionable painter. Warm, somewhat sweetish colour, a masterly play of light colours, immaculate, precise drawing”¹⁷.

Białoszewski’s descriptions were not so ‘literary’. They were more like short, technical reports from artistic experiences, of finding new, intriguing details or interpretative ideas about various artists and works of art. He was not, after all, writing art essays, and his remarks and associations about painting scattered across his works were just one of a few indispensable elements of his writing.

Although both poets were so different in describing their artistic experiences, their contact with art was similar. According to Herbert:

A brief bus trip gives absolutely no sense of what a Greek temple is. One must spend at least a whole day in the ruins to understand the life of stones in the sun. They change with the time of day and year. In the morning the Paestum limestone is gray, at noon—honey, with the sunset—scarlet. I touch it and feel the warmth of human flesh. Green lizards run across it like shivers¹⁸.

Białoszewski, who did not always have equally comfortable conditions for sightseeing, during a one day visit to Greece, when “participants of the package tour returned to the ship for lunch”, goes back and “visits Acropolis for the second time, this time privately”¹⁹. He also was not content with a short slalom around Ancient buildings. He wanted to climb the Areopagus and see everything closely once again. He moved slowly “on slippery, very slippery steps”²⁰. And similarly to Herbert, he not only carefully watched the colours of his surroundings changing during the day, but also felt the presence and “warmth of human bodies” in these majestic and seemingly cold

¹⁷ Zbigniew Herbert, *Still Life with a Bridle*, op.cit., 198.

¹⁸ Zbigniew Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, transl. by Michael March and Jaroslaw Anders, in *The Collected Prose 1948-1998*, ed. by Alissa Valles, Harper Collins, New York, 2010 op.cit., 25.

¹⁹ *Obmapywanie Europy*, IX 206.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

walls, and felt an invisible connection with the people who climbed these steps centuries ago.

Was it the fathers of the city who made these steps slippery, these philosophers, Platos and Socrateses? And if it was not them, how did they go up? How did they sit on these cold stones? Probably they were good at it²¹.

The ancient monuments stopped being a fragment of landscape trodden by hundreds of tourists every day. Ancient walls returned to life.

Both poets were focused on a slow, and if possible, full meeting with visited places and paintings. They both wanted not only to admire the mastery and precision of admired works of art, but also to learn who many centuries ago would sit on the steps of the Areopagus, and who walked between the columns of the temples in Paestum.

They both preferred to sightsee on their own: Herbert was irritated by a guide who in "passionless voice gives the temple's dimensions with an accountant's accuracy"²². Białoszewski noted: "One of the elderly ladies [...] also wanted [...] to do some extra sightseeing. She even wanted to join me and I somehow have come to terms with it"²³. They both also preferred tours not described in tourist guidebooks. And they both tried to describe the works of art they met in writing. However, how "can we describe joy created by a work of art in a way which is quiet, precise and at the same time solidifying emotions?". Herling-Grudziński believed that Herbert managed to achieve this: "No 'ohs!' and 'ahs!', no banalities of the sentimental tourism type, no colour postcards, no obligatory itineraries and sighs"²⁴. Was Białoszewski also successful in this area?

²¹ Ibid.

²² Zbigniew Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, op.cit., 19.

²³ *Obmapywanie Europy*, IX 206.

²⁴ Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, «Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie» Zbigniewa Herberta, in *Pisma zebrane*, vol. 9: *Wyjścia z milczenia*, Warszawa 1998, 332-333.

A careful observer of art never goes with his head down, while a careful observer and a writer in one can tersely and professionally comment even on the speckled (by amateur artists) carriages of the New York subway: “We enter a train speckled with drawings. We pass another one, which looks identical. I ask my guide if it was one amateur painter who painted both trains. It turns out that it was done by children. It used to be allowed to scribble both inside and outside. It is true; carriages are also speckled inside. Now it is no longer allowed”²⁵. This detailed account is only seemingly neutral, because at this very moment Białoszewski accurately remarked that “the unity of style is the result of the same technique used by everybody”²⁶. This type of creativity was part of reality, and therefore it was a subject worthy of description. Białoszewski described it with cool distance and expertise.

So, Białoszewski encountered art at least on three planes. For him an indispensable condition of speaking and writing about art was personal inspection (“I walked closely to one painting”²⁷, “I have put on my glasses and I am checking”).²⁸ In order to share his impressions and propose an interpretation of a given work of art Białoszewski conversed with Le., and recorded these dialogues:

Le. considers two displayed copies of El Greco”.]
 —El Greco is the best. Original. And he painted as he wanted. This angel from the Annunciation has the feathers of a turkey. She is a typical Spanish woman. How is this angel supported?
 —On a cloud, slightly above the floor. She threw her needle-work and scissors.
 —O yes, obviously. This angel is looking not at her but at his own hand.
 —And the Holy Spirit is more in the background, but between them he has left a vapour trail, like a plane²⁹.

²⁵ *AAAmeryka*, IX 221.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁷ *Traf.*, VIII 159.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

These dialogues are only seemingly recorded 'on the spot'. After all, they often summed up more general reflections on art, its functions, and even on its importance to humanity:

—And the Holy Spirit [...] has left a vapour trail, like a plane. If it was not for painting, then... then... what would humanity be worth?³⁰

Moreover, meetings with individual works were for Białoszewski often just pretexts to meetings with other authors or other art aficionados. Białoszewski's readers, however, were surprised when they discovered that this mechanism, with similar frequency, also worked the other way round.

Apart from *Battle of Grunwald*, which intrigued Białoszewski when he was a boy, it was Matejko's cycle *Poczet królów polskich* [*Fellowship of Polish Kings*] which was also important for him. This collection of portraits which Białoszewski looked at over and over again became for him an important cultural context, which entered his consciousness to such an extent that people in the streets seemed to him to be figures of Polish kings.

A change of trams underground. I enter this scrum of people. It always serves me well.
Oh, Bolesław Śmiały...
He stopped by the wall. Blue eyes, hair like Piast kings and princes, pert nose and spiky, and this glance and surprise and Matejko³¹.

And a patient in hospital in a bed next to him looked like Bolesław Chrobry.

Long haired, eats more than others, because he is quite buxom, was a boxer. He has not only chubby locks, but also a moustache. Going in two streams to the end of his head. Half ways through they are

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ *Po krzyku, po tomiku*, V 6.

like hair pretending to be a moustache. I woke up this morning and looked at him
—Matejko’s Bolesław Chrobry, yeah...³²

Anyway, even when Białoszewski was a child, “Mrs. Bachman, a seamstress [...] was called ‘Zygmunt Stary’, as I suggested in the period when I watched regularly Matejko’s *Fellowship of Polish Kings*³³.”

Associations with a painting by Matejko (this time with *Kazanie Skargi* [*Skarga’s Sermon*]) are also created by a description of a priest giving a sermon “above the crowd [...], with tipped and outstretched hands”³⁴ on the day of St. Joseph.

Białoszewski’s imagination was so soaked with painting that even strangers he saw in passing appeared to him to be like people from paintings. Matejko was not the only painter with this affect. To describe well people coming to visit his neighbour in hospital Białoszewski used ‘Leonardo’s’ categories:

Mr. New had two family visits. Two middle-oldish women, two children, a youth a bit from Leonardo da Vinci, with locks of hair, an angelic sharp gaze mixed with an impish smile³⁵.

Women seen through a window of a bus “near the florist’s at the bus stop/two young ones with umbrellas”³⁶ bring associations with impressionist painting (“the same / always /as [...] / in Renoir”)³⁷. A warm and lazy afternoon in the centre of Warsaw brings associations with Mehoffer’s paintings:

Beyond Aleje they are sitting where they can, near a bank, a tavern, on little terraces, on benches, on vases, some in the sun, some in the shade. One woman with green eyelids, tilted backwards for

³² *Szpital*, VI 25.

³³ *Leszno 99*, VIII 9.

³⁴ *Święte obrzydzenie*, V 161.

³⁵ *Szpital*, VI 51.

³⁶ *Jazda autobusem do Anina po mszy*, VII 206.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

sunbathing, as if in sweet rush, a pond, Mehoffer, so much mood and laughter, one pair of eyelids in search of warmth³⁸.

So we can see that compulsive visits to museums, browsing through art albums, detailed analyses, amazement, questions and inquiries about paintings he was watching, were not enough for him for full contact with art. It is only when he met other people that Białoszewski's imagination was stirred, and old portraits, compositional patterns and decisions of painters undertaken centuries ago were alive once again. So, can we say that painting helped Białoszewski to get into fuller contact with the other?

If we asked the same question about Gombrowicz, then the answer would be 'no'. The very visit to an art museum was for him a form of mental torture:

Yesterday I went to Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes with N.N., having succumbed to his promptings. The excess of duties got me tired even before I started watching, we went from a room to a room, we would stop in front of one painting and then moved toward another³⁹.

Could we imagine Gombrowicz climbing the Acropolis twice on the same day? When he was persuaded by a friend, Gombrowicz fulfilled the obligatory itinerary from a painting to a painting showing little enthusiasm: "I was breathing with apathy which was tinged with colours of abhorrence, aversion, rebellion, anger, absurd"⁴⁰. Anyway, Gombrowicz seemed to be more interested in watching other visitors:

Apart from us, about ten people... who were coming closer, looked intensively, moved back..., the mechanic aspect of their movements, their quietness made them look like puppets, and their faces were nondescript in comparison with faces on paintings⁴¹.

³⁸ *Raj*, V 282.

³⁹ Witold Gombrowicz, *Dziennik 1953-1956*, Kraków 1988, 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Spectators facing paintings of Titian or Murillo, in the opinion Gombrowicz, are not connected practically in any sense with these pictures, and their faces do not resemble faces painted three hundred years earlier. “A student of a school of fine arts”, “a woman who doesn’t know what to do with time”, “several aficionados”, “people who have come from afar and are sightseeing in the city⁴² (similar people, and we could even imagine not only similar, but even the same people who were described by Białoszewski) are not similar to Matejko’s faces from *Fellowship of Polish Kings*; they do not carry Renoir’s umbrella and do not have Leonardo’s smiles.

According to Gombrowicz, the contact with painting influences people in a rather destructive way: “I have to cope again with the face of art which extinguishes faces of living people”⁴³. While watching any ‘face of art’ together with Białoszewski he could shed light onto these faces in the least expected moments.

⁴² Ibid., 40.

⁴³ Ibid.