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**THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE CANON AND
A PROPOSAL FROM DISTANCE (TERESA FERENC)¹**

1.

When writing today about the canon of Polish literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and locating the poetry of Teresa Ferenc within this canon, I am not going to take the beaten track of this canon's revision and revitalization. I will not be modernist or modern because I will not ignore values and tradition. Will I be conservative in not appreciating the modernist cracks of the strategy of shocking? I would like to extend the notion of the canon and add to it an attitude I call intention of affirmation and authentication. And which is 'based on' the choice of the most important things (from the perspectives of culture, literature, poetry and existentiality) of things which are important these days. I do not appreciate some of today's methodologies, because they neglect things which are the essence of works of art, which pronounce paper journalism and internet texts equal with literature, and they want to make fun of me, to weaken me, to disregard me; a reader who looks for 'seriousness of consolidation'.

I know that the 'canonicity' of a work is constructed out of diverse, often conflicting aspects and forces. But as there is no reason to exclude any of them, there is still, in my opinion, a place in the idea of the canon for 'authorial relict,' with decisions and intentions. I have

¹ This essay is an extended version of an introduction which I have written to a volume of selected poetry of Teresa Ferenc (Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen).

in mind neither naive biographical circumstances, nor the irritating pride of artists, but the antecedence of the authorial intention of 'being an author' (a writer and a poet), which would be located not so much in relation to different fashions, with which modern readers approach texts, but also in relation to a certain stable norm, which limits writers (even scandalmongers, barbarians and 'banalists'), although it also gives them a lot of freedom.

We know that we are in a great crisis. I can even make a solid footnote on authorities 'on' boredoms, dispersions, flickering, cuttings, mimes, etc. However, nothing has happened in the world or in culture which would lead to a situation when an author—and only an author!—is to insult in earnest the sense of culture, literature (and poetry within it) if s/he has decided to be an author, and in particular, a poet. S/he may be disgusted or bruised, may herald the end of the world and art, may be vulgar or rely on comic strips, well—s/he may even be a carcass after his/her own death (after all the author is dead...). However, when s/he writes down a word-sign and reveals it as a message, then s/he tells in her poem a myth, writes the world in verses, breaks conventions with assonances and amorphism. S/he is the author and stands removed from a non-author or a co-author, striking a pact with his/her readers, viewers or listeners. S/he undertakes a special responsibility not only for starting discourse, but also for emotions of evocation, truthfulness of references, sincerity of imagination. S/he will be, even though manhandled and mocked, the elect one, the sage among the quiet, mute and blind ones. And nobody, even the most inspired of post-interpreters, will relieve him/her of this obligation.

O yes, the language of poetry and generic classifications have already changed a few hundred of times, so many times we have funded onto ourselves and onto the world new scales of evil. The canon, however, has been very good at coping with barbarians, boredom and rat-heroes. Simply, the canon has had to absorb our banal and horrible matters, and nurture and anoint our subsequent affects and defects. It has kept in its domain the ones who have been verified by time, that is by successors. Readers? Rather not, it is authors, who pay homage to the cognitive alertness of their predecessors not only

in the manner of odes, but also of pastiches, although often of not the best quality. What has turned out to be constant and precious in art is not the concept of beauty/goodness/grandeur/simplicity, but a specific seriousness of 'preaching' and 'pedagogy', which we should not, on any account, equate with political and sociological leadership. I consciously refer to authors—be they Sebyła, Bursa, Honet or Tkaczyszyn—as preachers and pedagogues. I choose these roles for them in a manner which becomes more persistent the louder I am told to equate gibberish with the message, and to dilute identity in mythologies of modernity, to deconstruct Humanities and to acquire a taste for what is behind the fence, in the closet, in colonies and in animals.

Someone might say that the author killed by modernism returns with 'old poets'. I insist that the author has never left us. Because where and why should s/he abdicate if s/he wishes to keep punching the keyboard? And I repeat, it is the reader who has failed, including the so called professional reader, when the personal promotion was put in the limelight of art. The reader who, out of Rilke, Mallarmé, Friedrich or Wittgenstein extracted phrases which they had never written, phrases which today are considered to be 'correct' ideologically and who forced words into Krynicki or Białoszewski they had never written down.

The Canon is created by seriousness and requires seriousness. Of course, I do not have in mind the seriousness of grandeur or of rhetoric, of giving final verdicts about values according to a certain religious, moral or aesthetic paradigm. While writing about seriousness, I have in mind the serious effects of actions undertaken by an author in the moment when s/he, out of all costumes, choses one, the specific one, entangled in *remote contexts*. I have in mind the seriousness of choice—*about the decision to tell about the most important of important things*.

Therefore, I am not concerned much about authorial attitudes, poses and games, which arguably bring key advantages and are, regrettably, allowed in the global network. I will not be breaking hands or pens while discussing the technical capabilities of contemporaneity,

because I myself use them, albeit not very skilfully. However, as a reader, I go further. And I am waiting. Waiting until the author and his/her critics come to their senses, stop and look at themselves, and see ‘something’ which is still important in the matter which they have made public. Firstly, I am waiting for the moment when a fashionable author wants once again to look at her composition and admit that s/he created it. That, after some years, s/he will put this poem into a cycle of poems with so strong a backbone that cunning critics will not be able to transfer it into their main lines of interpretations. Secondly, I am waiting till a critic (including a professional critic), while publishing notes from notes, makes a footnote in which s/he refers to a book of a scholar of Polish literature whose seminar s/he once attended and says loudly that this scholar was not a coward when s/he used words about tradition, truth and values.

I will therefore not complain about incidents, that a distinguished and honoured poet, some five years after his *début*, has already published a volume of collected poems, because such haste blemishes his (not my) biography. I do not want to ramble on about how the so called writers and the so called critics every year put “an exquisite diagnosis of contemporary man” in a new methodological mould, because such rigmarole will be added to their (not my) sum of didactic achievements. I will select for the canon—just like that—the poems of Honet, of Szlosarek, of Świetlicki or Polkowski. I will select poems with which they have surprised me (and I am also a contemporary person, after all) when they found some widening or transcending manner of pronouncing the world. The world—as always—is not benevolent to an individual. However, there is nothing in this horrible and hurtful world (here I am repeating what I have already stated) which would justify messiness, haste, resentment. And none of life’s circumstance or ideological trends justify considering the necessity of poses/mythologies/icons.

These days I do not appreciate the word ‘canon’. I prefer to speak about literature, poetry which is *more important* today, about works,

which—somehow—become absorbed, transferred, 'taken care of'. Probably, a few decades from now they will have to be re-read and revised under the influence of some novelty (maybe by then it will be a non-European one?), but they will certainly not be subjected to tricks of re-writing, montage, 'synonimization' which make the existing words void. The more important texts will be transferred and 'taken care of', because the memory of people who read (therefore, they see multiple meanings, not their arbitrariness) will note their strength and pre-empt the ideas of those who manipulate the methodologies and norms of contemporaneity/correctness.

For the canon it does not matter if the validity (credibility, guarantee, appreciation) is based on the classical norm, or on the avant-garde impulse. The canon, after all, applies to a wider scale and its role is to stabilize the disorder of synchrony. However, for the canon it still matters that an autonomous author really *takes responsibility for the message*, that an autonomous recipient really sees in the authorial voice an analogon of her own intuitions and situations—if both of them are willing to add the same footnote to a given text, they will verify the real content of words and pictures. Words and pictures are also a costume, one of many, but it cannot be cumbersome or incoherent with thoughts and emotions. Because the canon is the pact, *a peculiar axiological contract*, which is to bring advantages beyond this/that milieu, fashion, novelty. This advantage is not small, because it is personally connected with identity.

I will not dodge here from an old fashioned reflection: poetry thematically uses what has already been, 'before' what is happening 'in' and 'between', but existentially poetry begins and gets stronger 'after': trauma, crisis, boredom, abomination, grief, shame, exposure, etc. Poetry, in contrast with versed journalism of attitudes and emotions, will not fit in the shadow between things, in the idiom of silence and pantomime. Poetry, in contrast to writing verses about the crises of today, requires light, voice, things, the world. Therefore, the canon should be established after emotions and fashions, otherwise an author and her friend, a critic, are bound to end up in a confessional box, or maybe even a pillory. Someone should keep

reminding us all the time that we already went through such a period; what is left after it is a shame of these people who, while writing about literature and while establishing its contemporary canon (extended through centuries and for centuries), wanted to follow the argument expressed by sages of economics, sociology or political sciences, who founded our existence and emotions ‘from scratch’.

The canon always means seriousness, although it is so easy to insult and mock it. For me—in the canon of Polish contemporary poetry—it is the seriousness of Czechowicz and Białoszewski which is crucial. And behind them—Wittlin, Liebert, Wat, Sebyła, Iwaszkiewicz, Miłosz. To a ‘smaller extent’ (not a very fortunate phrase) Różewicz and Gajcy. In a different and smaller way: Wojacek, Świrszczyńska, Grochowiak. And, of course, Krynicky, even though he still writes. However, I do not see any possibility to debate today about a place in the canon for Świetlicki or for Szłosarek, because I know their ‘idiom’ and I know that they are bound to turn a few more times in the wilderness of axiological lack of seriousness. Fortunately, no one has given me the authorization to decide on the great, not so great, or other canons. I will not do much on my own, and my judgements are of little value because the canon, as an axiological contract, requires a pact, which cannot be hurried. Therefore, if I were to put the poetry of Teresa Ferenc in the canon of Polish contemporary literature, I would need the support of the community of readers, I would need their *agreement on real value beyond the fashions of today*. However, I would like to formulate and write down my arguments (as the canon requires them!). I refer to the centres of these arguments as to the *first things* of important poetry. Important because it reaches for something which is *important in some part of the world* and in being between heaven and earth. Such poetry teaches and changes—but for me it means that poetry deprives me of conjectures and convictions, makes me someone different not through enriching but through impoverishing, belittling, a chance to be oneself ‘from before’ writing.

2.

Number one: Teresa Ferenc differentiates poetics which are hers and which are not hers, which have been introduced to subsequent volumes and to the authorial re-editions. In the styles she remembered from the early recitations from poetry lessons in school she distinguished the language of, among others, Kochanowski, Tuwim, Leśmian, Baczyński, Herbert, Wojacek, Kamińska, Twardowski. She appreciates Mieczysław Jastrun.

And Zagajewski—from the youngest ones. At the beginning of her career as a poet she chose their poems in such a way that they would fit 'her voice'. Was it so, then that the values of her own poems, their grammar, the style of her own cycles and volumes were decided by intuition, emotions, empathy? Probably yes, because poetry's domain is always private and subjective. Some reduce it to emotionality, others to poetics or metalanguage. With Ferenc it is first of all the *differentiated uniqueness of imagination*. And imagination is the first thing in poetry. Of all poetry, although I suggest that divisions of poetry into 'encouraged' and 'stony'; into mimetic and rhetorical, should be replaced with the question about the credibility of imagination, about the effectiveness of its metaphysical and ontological functions.

Number two: in the case of Ferenc, her writing was most influenced by *authenticity: memory of events*, another first thing of each poetry. Poetry had the power to oppose them when they were evil, which one could not comprehend and survive. It also had the power to support them when they were good and could be experienced, and therefore continue with their existence. It could offer more to a wounded individual because it united arts and languages, and above all, because it brought benefits in real life. It made the burnt and executed land of Zamość valley habitable.

Number three: I have no doubt that Ferenc belongs to poets who treat writing poems *very seriously and eagerly*. And that is why she speaks of cultivating, nursing, nurturing, picking out of poems. Because poetry—all poetry!—requires *careful* toil; it must be tended like a field in order to give crops. The flow of time and life events wean out indifference. Poetry has the means to show and report lack

of indifference. In the conversation with Henryka Dobosz, published in *Ogniopis* (*Firescript*, her largest collection of poems), Ferenc speaks about the meaningful absence of some aspects of her biography, for which she still has not found a proper form. She also speaks about the closing of circles, thematic and linguistic frames of poetry made out of one piece. And about the fact that her poems somehow precede consciousness. They are consequences of life, but at the same time they are a mysterious ordering of a multiplicity of events. Mysterious because ‘structuralized’. They do not have to be religious to have the power and sense of a prayer. They do not have to be metaphysical to announce the existing world and its speaking beings.

Number four: this poetry is characterized by *durability* of motives, pictures, phrases—one of the best methods to cope with small and grand memory. The next method is *devotion* to detail, to the smell and taste of the ‘shape’ of everyday life. Yet another method is *uniting* strong motives in even stronger cycles of threnodies, psalms, erotic poems. After all, not a single Ferenc poem which opens new themes or a new stylistic is accidental and makeshift. Not a single poem, in the moment when it is transferred to a new volume, will be reversed or negated. The poems, written in their wholeness, which the aggressive researchers of today want to subject to new attractions (traumas, post-memories), show that poetry after the Holocaust does not have to celebrate the void of superfluous questions, as it is also knowledge. And the source of knowledge. It is light. And expression. It teaches. It should not hurt. And only then poetry is truth.

Number five: this is *complete* poetry in which the form and the content are united in the *embrace of art*. “The content sprinkled with ash”, “the content burning words”—here we have everything a reader of a Ferenc poem should see. Reading, s/he may follow the poet’s biography to the last inhabitant of villages near Zamość and ascertain the destruction of this world. However, I see a slightly different sense of these words. If the content is the burden of these horrible recollections, experience, events, ash would be not only the end of flames, but also the saving power of punctuation marks, rhetorical tropes, *lyrical distance*. For a long time, as a reader, I have

been repeating that the truth of emotions is not an adequate truth in a poetic event. Emotions open up a poem, but it is not in emotions that a poem is finally anchored and strengthened. Poetry 'removes itself' in order to reach behind itself and understand what really was, has been, and is going on in this world.

Number six: poetry after the Holocaust does not reject its crucial obligations. Experience is a word which refers to something which was 'experienced', survived, and will not be obliterated. The poetry of Ferenc is immersed in the *non-obliterated truth* of Job, Syrach, the "Song of Songs". Pieta, Magnificat—and so many other events and words from the Bible. At the same time what is important in these poems is the true and important tissue of banal things, which are here and now, and they speak. This is the tissue of the earth, particularly of the earth. In this poetry metaphors of eternity are always close to man.

Number seven: the understanding of great things and understanding of tiny beings. In best poems of Ferenc there is no difference between these two obligations. The poems of Ferenc *unite seriousness of simplicity with seriousness going beyond the earth*. They place holy speech in naive songs. They unite banal and handy vessels with the mystery of infinity. They unite universal senses with the rough surface of the matter which potters used. One's own personality and one's own body become in this poetry a way of communication with the autonomous world of things, plants and animals. It is them which are domesticated in the little corner of our world, but also safely nested in the layers of former pre-beings, and speak about things really more important and indestructible in culture. We—Ferenc repeats in her poems and poetic cycles—know nothing, while they know. Our ignorance, our intellectual poverty, is both a blessing of fragile life and a value in poetry, which reaches for the real world, which exists in reality.

Number eight: these poems show that there still exists in the world a tiny space in which it is possible to live after the Holocaust, crisis, destruction. Ferenc says: "I am happening on the shore", "near the sea, forest", in the place "where life is born". "Existence after" is

not an interpretative metaphor. This is a concrete thing which cannot be changed or destroyed by any interpretation. The most important *experiences/concretes* in this poetry are the ones which have made existence possible. Experiences of home, trees, mother, tenderness are by Ferenc referred to concrete time and space. A saved space in the world, the first and last space on the map of life and the map of poetry will not conquer old age and death, but it proves the power of love and the power of forgiveness. This is a value which in our hard times a poet cannot dispense with.

Number nine: Ferenc's poetry abhors a vacuum and does not celebrate "no world". It is also not enough to write that Ferenc's poems get strength from memory and trauma, fulfilling the vacuum and synonymous with it. We need to carry on this idea: in this poetry the memory of events and things reached for what is *still* concrete and beautiful, *what is approachable thanks to trust*, to one's eye's pupil and one's hand. What has not been seen and touched will not be remembered, will be nothing more than a void in existence not worthy of poetry.

3.

Ferenc's poems, including the ones which must enter the canon of Polish lyrical poetry of the twentieth and twenty first century: "Dzikie madonny" ("Wild Madonnas"), "Wiśnio, wisienieczonek" ("O Cherry, O Little Cherry"), "Matka w jesionowych drzewach" ("Mother in Ash-Trees"), "Psalm z Marią" ("A Psalm with Maria"), "Psalm o starych kobietach" ("A Psalm about Old Women"), "Poezja jak wzrok Boga" ("Poetry as God's Sight"), "Sochy" ("Wooden Ploughs"), "Psalm o tej która ocalała" ("A Psalm about the One Who Was Saved"), "Ucieczka Izaaka 1943" ("Isaac's Flight 1943"), "Matka w skrzydłach ołtarza" ("Mother in the Wings of the Altar"), are not collections of obvious words about everyday objects, but they are also not a list of metaphorical and generic concepts. Moreover, Ferenc's poetry is not limited by the so called female diction. It has a role in making authentic experiences even clearer as a material of poetic expression. The poet takes the truth of poetic words from

the experienced and understood truth. Not only pictures, but also individual words are not accidental in Ferenc's poetry.

When there was too much pain, the words of poems burnt the Zamość valley to the ground. Sometimes, particularly in her last poems, they lit this valley with an aura of forgiveness and peace.

The most important attitude which man owes to his life among other beings is defined by Ferenc with the strongest word in poetry: love, which is the synonym of mercy. Out of 'new loves' to the world, people, trees and things, an attitude of a dialogue is born; the dialogue with the husband, with the earth. Water, air, fire, the mother and God. The conversation changes these poems in songs, prayers, psalms, threnodies, elegies, lamentations. They are not contaminated with the mythology of so called modernity, and that is why I would like to confront them with the stylizations preferred today. Therefore, having read Ferenc's poems, I contrast clatter and boredom with voice, silence with words, cycles and genres; nullity with seriousness of what is remembered in order to be transferred from the poet's memory and then transferred to my memory.