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MARCIN ŚWIETLICKI—A CANONICAL POET?

1.

Canonicity is a separate, complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon, including a theoretical level, which requires particular considerations. Meanwhile, just for the sake of this essay, I would like to adopt a commonsensical understanding of this key term, which seems to be close to most general intuitions of literary scholars. Therefore, I will take, as a basic condition of belonging to the poetic canon, something akin to the silent agreement of the majority of mindful readers of poetry as to the place and role of a given *oeuvre* within wider literary categories (schools, movements, generations, periods). The agreement is grounded in two parallel, mutually dependent and at times convergent dimensions of literary life—professional criticism and general readership (taking into account its diminishing numbers). Up to a certain extent, although not automatically, we can attempt to measure canonicity, for example, with the number of copies sold, prizes received, critical articles published. And although I am not interested here in the issues connected with sociology of literature, I am forced to refer to the most basic descriptive categories characteristic for this discipline, to be able, at least, to establish a good starting point for further considerations.

Canonicity understood in this sense is not, of course, a well defined term and is intuitive in nature, which does not mean that we should not try to use it—at least provisionally, taking into account the disadvantages and limitations resulting from it. After all, we are in a situation which could be described as coercive, because we still do

not have a serious, systematic discussion on the theme of the canon of contemporary Polish poetry, particularly of the poetry written by poets whose *début* was in 1989 and later. The critical voices in this matter are mostly testimony to styles of reception; they present literature from an axiological perspective. However, they do it in a very selective way, very often removed from the integral values of literature. The lack of temporal distance is another obstacle, and also the fact that these poets are still creatively active. This is the moment of potential weakness in my essay, but this weakness does in an obvious way accompany all discourse about contemporary poetry.

2.

In the case of the poetry of Marcin Świetlicki we can probably assume today that in the longer time perspective it will not turn out to be one more unimportant incident. From today's perspective his poetry is an important phenomenon, and at the same time it is very popular. No matter what we think about it, Świetlicki is read and is awarded literary prizes. One debates with Świetlicki, one writes about him and quotes him and, last but not least, one sometimes speaks with Świetlicki's idiom. All this creates a situation when it is difficult not to discuss Świetlicki when we take into consideration the full panorama of contemporary Polish poetry, having in mind the fact that we should not overestimate his place and role in it. It seems that his poetry should not be omitted while debating a coherent canon.²⁰

It is worth, therefore, asking a question: as the issues of introductory and provisional acceptance of the potential canonicity of Świetlicki's poetry will not be discussed here, what does the question included in the title of this essay mean? While we search for an answer, we arrive at an interesting paradox, which, so it seems, has not been described so far, which I would like to make the key point of my considerations, and the meaning of which goes far beyond the direct

²⁰ See Paweł Próchniak, *Pokolenie przełomu (poezja po roku 1989)*, in *Idem, Wiersze na wietrze (szkice, notatki)*, Kraków 2008.

context of Świetlicki's poetry, and is maybe an interesting point in the debate on the reception of works of literature in general.

All readers of Świetlicki's poetry will discover, sooner or later, its clearly individualistic and, at times, anarchistic, character. This has been stressed many times by direct and unambiguous utterances of the subject who has not irregularly placed himself outside the borders of the community which is perceived as oppressive.²¹ Let us remind ourselves, for example, of the well known closing phrases of the poem "Chcenie" ("Wanting").

zmierzam do pracy, trzeba przejść przez morze
chcenia, aby do pracy od niechcenia dotrzeć,
tam telefony, chcą, bym
reprezentował literatów Wschodu,
wrócił, miał serce, dodzwonił, miał czas,
sumienie, bo chcą,
bo chcą chcieć, bo im się rzekomo należą,
leżą, patrzę w podłogę i nie chcę²²

At times this alienation culminates in a paroxysm of anger, as, for example, in an equally well known poem, "Nieprzysiadalność" ("Nonapproachability"), where Świetlicki consciously introduces the dirty aestheticism of vulgarity

Siedzę sam przy stoliku
i nie mam ochoty dosiąść się do was,
choć na mnie kiwacie.
Ja to pierdołę, dziś jestem w nastroju

²¹ *The first one to write in this context about Świetlicki was Marian Stala. See M. Stala, Polkowski, Machej, Świetlicki, Tekieli... Kilka uwag o nowych poetach, zapisanych jesienią 1989 roku, in Idem, Druga strona. Notatki o poezji współczesnej, Kraków 1997, 158.*

²² Marcin Świetlicki, *Wiersze*, Kraków 2011, 286. "I'm going to work, one needs to cross the sea,/of wanting, to arrive at work in an off handed way/there telephones, they want me, to represent writers/of the East, to return, to have good will, to phone, to have/time, conscience, as they want/as they want to want, because apparently I am owed to them/I lie/I look at the floors and I don't want."

nieprzysiadalnym.²³

I have been referring to well known examples for a purpose. Both recalled poems are similar not only because of the attitude of the lyric 'I', but also because of characteristic metaphors, recognizable and often mentioned (like „nieprzysiadalność”. (“nonapproachability”). The metaphor has accidentally become firmly associated with the poet, but it has also become a burden of a kind, because it has been repeated so often. The lyric 'I' in “Wanting” talks about it in a direct way:

[...] ponadto chcą, bym
 przysiadł się do nich, znów pada banalne:
 czy jesteś dzisiaj przysiadalny? dałbym
 wiele za to, by już przy mnie nie
 cytowano mnie, nie, to nie jest przyjemne.²⁴

In this way we come to the paradox which was introduced earlier. The attitude which is radically individualistic is approved of in the general reception. The need for isolation is conducive to some understanding between a sender and a receiver; what was to differ—a surprise, surprise!—starts to unite. A rhetorical gesture of cutting away from the 'literary coteries' (appearing, speaking, patting) unexpectedly becomes a more and more worn out mark of literacy.

This happens in the sphere of these poems, but, after all, the metaphor of 'nieprzysiadalność' (nonapproachability) is also a type of manifesto of an independent artist, of poetry conscious of its importance, but at the same time focuses on itself, removed from aphorisms. And again, such a goal is not confirmed in readers' practice. The more Świetlicki's lyric 'I' manifests his own uniqueness

²³ Ibid. 160. “I am sitting alone at a table and/I don't fill like sitting with/you, although you are/ nodding at me./I fuck it, today I am in the mood/nonapproachable.”

²⁴ Ibid., 86. “[...]Moreover, they want me to sit with/them, again the banal is spoken: Are you today/approachable? I would give a lot so that/they would not quote me in my presence, no, it isn't/nice.”

and his difference, the more often he is quoted, and put on banners of readers searching for lyrical emotions.

But, after all, it is not only rhetorical stunts and self-ironic declarations of the lyric 'I' which matter. Maybe it is more important that Świetlicki's poetry is not easy. It offers a lot of resistance to its readers, requires a specific type of attention, poetic sensitivity and acceptance of unique language, which directly leads to the poet's present situation, but is also, at times, deeply rooted in great cultural tradition. These two main intertexts function here at the same level, together drawing the limits of the world presented in Świetlicki's poems—it is only after their recognition that an adequate reading may begin. The reception of these poems is not made easier by the omnipresent and multi-dimensional irony, original metaphors and unusual linguistic experiments.

3.

Therefore, how is it possible that the poet who many times has pronounced his *desinteressement* to a basic pact with his readers, is at the same time so widely read and popular, in a way?

I consciously omit issues which are crucial here, issues of sociology of reception (what I have in mind, is, for instance, media popularity, promotional activities, issues of generations and *milieux*, presence in the public sphere, regular concerts of Świetlicki's band "Świetliki", etc). Undoubtedly, they play a big, maybe even a crucial role, and the reading of his poems is maybe secondary in this context. However, I am concerned with issues purely literary, the nature of his poetry, its internal mechanisms. And I am going to focus on them now.

Świetlicki's poetry stretches between two opposing polarities. I would define them as poles of quiet and loud speech. It is obvious that in between we have a whole spectrum of transitional, mixed forms, which could be presented in some future detailed research. Here, I will stick, however, to the general observations and the conclusions which might be drawn from them. The distinction into poles of quiet and loud speech is taken from intuitions included in Gadamer's essay "Are the Poets Falling Silent?", in which he explained why poetry written

these days is difficult, and wondered if its 'darkness' (Gadamer's description of apparent incomprehensibility) means that poets have lost the real ability to communicate with words things which are most important. The main point made by Gadamer is: it is not poets who fall silent; it is ears of the readers of today which are not sensitive enough to hear what they really have to say. The contemporary world is full of omnipresent noise and unlimited plurality of words; these two things are contradictory to the real way of communication. Poetry, in order to support sense, had therefore to change its tone, and adopt different, discreet and hermetic diction.

They [poets-G.M.] have necessarily become quieter. As the discrete messages are spoken quietly so that an unintended person cannot overhear them, so has the poet's voice become. He shares something with the one who has an ear for it and is sympathetic. He whispers something in his ear and the reader, nods finally, he has understood. [...] One who allows himself to be reached by their word, accomplishes thereby a verification. One certainly also understands that, in an epoch of the electronically amplified voice, only the quietest word still confirms the communality, and therefore, the humanity, which you and I find in the word...²⁵

Świetlicki's poetry is polyphonic, full of various registers and tone tonalities.²⁶ On the one hand, we have poems using catchy phrases, based on the poetics of aphorisms with clear semantic codas with a clearly drawn and readable structure of sender-recipient roles. It is usually such fragments which have a life of their own in the public sphere; they are often quoted, shared in different media and

²⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Are the Poets Falling Silent" in *Education, Poetry and History*, ed. by Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, transl. by Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992, 81.

²⁶ Jarosław Klejnocki also wrote about duality in Świetlicki's poetry (although in a different context). Jarosław Klejnocki, *Rock, czyli podwójny agent. Nowa poezja polska. Twórcy - tematy - motywy*, ed. by Tomasz Cieślak and Krystyna Pietrych, Kraków 2009, 359-368.

the internet. Let's take the first example, from the poem from the last volume, entitled "Trzeba pytać" ("One Has to Ask")

Czy muszę o siódmej rano na spacerze z psem
kupować Nowy Testament? I to na ulicy?
Dlaczego tylko Nowy? A gdzie Stary? Czemu
sprzedawcy Nowych Testamentów o tej porze nie śpią?
Czemu ponownie postponuję hurtownię?
I czy mnie kochasz?²⁷

But, alongside, there are also poems with a very different diction. These are poems which offer interpretative difficulties already on the level of the appropriate definition of their themes and basic reconstruction of the lyric 'I'. The metaphors used in these poems are difficult and unclear; the syntax is often elliptic. As an example, let us take the poem from the same volume "Piętnastego" ("The Fifteenth")

Umiem to zrobić, ale nie wiem,
jak się to nazywa.
Usłyszałem inhuman cry today in the night,
opening the gate.
All this is governed by a very sensible
book-keeper. There is a mole on an arm.²⁸

The question arises: is this polarity the result of the lack of consistency, a mark of variously defined weakness (as some would have it), or is it less or more conscious play of the ironic lyric 'I' with readers and their horizon of expectations. This is a pertinent question, and in order to answer it fully more research is needed.

²⁷ Marcin Świetlicki, *Jeden*, Kraków 2013, 7. "Do I have to, at seven in the morning, while walking the dog buy/the New Testament?/Of all places in the street?/Why only New? Where is the Old one? Why/ don't sellers of the New Testament sleep at this time?/Why do I snub the wholesaler again?/And do you love me?/"

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26. "I can do it, but I don't know what it is called./I heard an inhuman cry this night when I was opening/the gate./All this is governed by a very sensible book-keeper./There is a mole on an arm."

4.

In the meantime, however, I would like to turn these doubts around and for a while, in the manner of conclusion, look at this problem from a different side. Let us notice that such poetry becomes a specific reflection of the polyphonic nature of the world, which in front of our eyes for quite a while has been losing its immanent, centrally oriented attitudes. The communicative phenomena which are connected with these processes which Gadamer described in preclusive mode, in Świetlitcki's poetry become two parallel aspects of the same reality, coherent in its own sense. From this perspective, then, his poetry is deeply rooted in the painful experience of modernity. And, in my opinion, the commonality of this experience establishes a fundamental reading pact between the author and his recipients. Therefore, it is neither momentary fascination with catchy phrases from individual poems, nor dark, multi-layered poems deeply rooted in culture, but the polyphony mentioned earlier and variety of registers which are a true warranty of the real position of this poetry.