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Some Aspects of Cross-Cultural Intertextuality as Seen through the Polish "Rewriting" of Emerson and Whitman

The basic assumption of this paper is the thesis that Emerson's and Whitman's writings have long been present in Polish literature and, more in particular, that fragments of their texts were creatively incorporated by Polish writers and poets into their own texts as a voice of "another culture" that could redefine and reshape "our culture." This long-lasting presence of American texts in Polish literature (together with a characteristic emphasis on their "otherness" but, at the same time, "sameness") offers a unique opportunity for discussing possible reasons, ways, and meanings of intertextual practices in different epochs and literary conventions. In order to illustrate the variety of intertextual references closely related to the mechanisms of reinterpreting national culture I have chosen different Polish writers and poets who not only incorporated references to American essays and poems in their own texts but also, somehow, responded to one another. It is also possible to identify the common denominator of their references, which can be specified as a romantic belief in the power and creative force of an individual and the romantic notion of the poet as the incarnation of collective strivings of the people. My analysis attempts to answer some simple but fundamental questions: how can we decide upon the originality of intertextual references, and where are (if there are any) the limits of the creative incorporation of "the other" into "our own" both in poetical and in cultural terms.

I would like to begin with Adam Mickiewicz, a dominant figure of Polish romantic poetry and a symbol of the Polish romantic mode of thinking. As a

professor of Slavonic literature in the College de France (1840-1844), Mickiewicz was the first European man of letters to introduce Emerson's *Essays* to continental Europe. He called Emerson the "American Socrates" and quoted his essays many times during the third and fourth courses of his lectures. Mickiewicz, a poet and a professor then, was desperately looking for a confirmation of his own ideas; hence the phrase "an American philosopher speaks about it in the other hemisphere" is repeated more than once. Mickiewicz wished to prove that Western civilisation was wrong in forgetting about the *soul and nature*, and to show that these sources of human knowledge were still present in Slavonic culture. The notion of *intuition* as primary and superior to *intellect* was particularly close to Mickiewicz's own ideas. Both Emerson and Mickiewicz emphasised the very criterion of individual independence: modern man should not be — as Emerson put it in "The Over-Soul" and Mickiewicz "retold" in one of his lectures — a man of a doctrine. Yet, Mickiewicz's conviction of the coming role of the Slavic nations in general and of Poland in particular was a point of disagreement with Emerson. In the last lecture of the fourth course, Mickiewicz once again spoke highly of Emerson's thoughts, but he underlined that the American philosopher did not see that not all people or all nations were able to reach the highest point of moral evolution. For Mickiewicz only the Slavic nations possessed enough courage, trust in intuition and spirit to change the world. On the one hand Emerson was an ally from a distance, a philosopher who enabled Mickiewicz to confirm his own conceptions and make them more universal, on the other hand Emerson was a thinker who did not suit completely with Mickiewicz's conceptions (particularly his ideas of national messianism) because he belonged to "another culture." What is most interesting, however, is the way in which Mickiewicz applied certain techniques to present Emerson's views as similar to his own and, at the same time, as different. When he wished to emphasize their sameness, he incorporated exact quotations from Emerson's texts into his lectures, occasionally even citing the original English version. When he was not able to find a suitable quotation, he used paraphrases that make identification of Emerson's texts quite difficult. In any case, talking in French to the multicultural audience of the College de France, the Polish poet felt obliged to inform his listeners about the source of his conceptions, the ideas he shared with the thinker from across the Atlantic (at that time completely unknown to the audience), and about the points of disagreement. While criticizing his foreign ally, however, Mickiewicz tried to explain Emerson's inability to reach the ultimate conclusion due to the

difference between his distant world and culture and "our" (i.e., Slavonic) mode of thinking.

I would like to focus on one particular example of intertextual practices which was employed by Mickiewicz in one of his lectures and later became of crucial importance for Polish literature. Having analysed a poem by the Polish romantic poet Stefan Garczyński, Mickiewicz asserts that Emerson, quoted several times previously, says "the same" about "the world of books and systems." As a proof of his comparison Mickiewicz gives a quotation from Emerson's "History" in his own translation. Though the sense of the first sentence is repeated in two different forms in order to put emphasis on the need of action, the translation can be considered quite accurate.

Historia powinna przestac byc szpargatem; trzeba koniecznie wyjsc ze szpargałow. Historia powinna chodzic wcielona w kazdym prawym i miodrym czlowieku.... (Mickiewicz 471)¹

However, what seems to be the simplest example of presenting an opinion of the other through quoting him, becomes eventually a paraphrase in which Mickiewicz, using some elements of Emerson's essay, creates his own text in the shape of an appeal to his audience. In English translation it reads:

If you did not yet perform your Crusade and your French Revolution, hurry up! Otherwise you will not be able to proceed with today's generation. To build your own temple and to perform your own Crusade is much more than to read a description of a temple or a history of Crusades. (Mickiewicz 471)²

It is possible to find some passages in Emerson's essay on which Mickiewicz could base his call for action, but the words he used were certainly not Emerson's words translated into French (and then into Polish). Mickiewicz drew the ultimate conclusion from the essay, which was too theoretical for him. The French phrase written down by one of the copyists present at the lecture gives a good rendition of Mickiewicz's attitude towards the imperfections of Emerson's ideas. "Il le devine sans le connaitre" — Mickie-

1 The original text reads: "History no longer shall be a dull book. It shall walk incarnate in every just and wise man" (Emerson 142).

2 Except where otherwise indicated, translations into English are mine.

wicz once said and his "rewriting" of Emerson should be seen in the light of these words.

The story of intertextual relations begins right here. Later on the call to participate in a Crusade was quoted as the American philosopher's own phrasing, and the stranger from the faraway land became well known. One of the most representative examples of this process can be found in Stefan Zeromski's novel *Dzieje grzechu* (*The History of Sin*), published in 1908. The scene I wish to interpret takes place on board a ship sailing from Nice to Corsica on which a Polish girl in a difficult moment of her life meets a compatriot. The man attempts to talk to the girl and after a short meaningless conversation he quotes "a very wise old man, Ralf Waldo Emmerson [sic]" as having said: "historia powinna przestac bye szpargatem ..." (Zeromski 237). Actually, we are presented here with Mickiewicz's translation from Emerson's "History" and what used to be a quotation is turned into part of a monologue, in which the hero refers to Emerson's (in fact Mickiewicz's) words. After "retelling" Emerson, using the form of direct speech, Zeromski's hero quotes Emerson's words, which are printed in the novel as a quotation. Yet, the words we read between the quotation marks are nothing but Mickiewicz's call for action, which, as mentioned, was only loosely based on the wording of Emerson's "History," and was not presented as a quotation. Mickiewicz's text was incorporated into the hero's monologue in Zeromski's novel as a meaningful observation and Emerson was treated as part of a philosophical heritage, an authority who sounded familiar, without the connotation of speaking as "the other." Strangely enough, Emerson was not yet very popular in Poland at that time; he was rather on the verge of becoming popular in Polish culture: the neo-romantic renewal of his philosophy began around 1902 with the Polish translation of his essay "The Poet" and culminated at the end of the decade when the second translation of *Representative Men* was published.³ Thus, Zeromski could not refer to Emerson as a well recognised philosopher. Instead, he made him familiar by using Mickiewicz's well known notions and ascribing to him the features of "an old wise man."

There is one more intertextual technique used by Zeromski in the same passage of his novel, which seems to be in sharp contrast with the hero's monologue in question. While one representative of the other culture was introduced as a well known, perhaps somewhat anachronistic but undoubtedly significant thinker, the contemporary poet Walt Whitman was presented as a

new, fresh voice and, being truly "the other," as capable of changing our views on life. The way Zeromski incorporates Whitman's poem into his text is much different from the presentation of Emerson's words. When the girl is not convinced by Emerson's/Mickiewicz's call for action — she makes a comment (intertextual in itself): "I heard it once, I heard ...Words" and shows no emotional involvement — the hero starts to sing, and the girl begins to listen to him. As the narrator tells us, "he sang to himself a hymn by Walt Whitman, untranslatable praise of life, a sublime psalm torn out of human breast" (Zeromski 240). Then a colon is used and Whitman's original poem is given in italics, as a separate part of the text:

*Flood-tide below me! I watch you face to face; Clouds
of the west! Sun there half an hour high! I see you also
face to face,*

The narrator interrupts this sublime recitation by informing the reader that "the hero's eyes got filled with tears." Then the next part of the poem (still in English) is performed, the part which reveals the unity of the poetical "I" and the listener/reader's "you":

*Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt;
Just as you are one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd;...*

The way in which Zeromski's hero understands the poem (as the eternal voice of a poet who is one of us and is able to both create and incarnate the voice of the common people) is not only meaningful — in the very context of quoting a foreign poet in a foreign language — but also surprising in connection to Mickiewicz's reading of Emerson. "We all" — concludes the hero, who is a poet himself— "became the people"; and though he means all poets he specifies: "beginning with Mickiewicz." Then he paraphrases the quotation given above as Emerson's understanding of history:

We experience for the people today, even before they themselves start to experience, we experience Crusades and great revolutions— We experience for the people consciously. (Zeromski 241)

Having juxtaposed these two romantic voices of "the other," of an American philosopher read by a Polish poet half a century earlier, and of an American poet newly discovered by himself, Zeromski creates his own neo-romantic

ideal poet who is the voice of the people, who suffers in the name of the people and is able to listen to them. The scene ends with a confession — the girl reveals to the hero-poet the truth of her life. The grandiloquent tone of the scene, however, is balanced by a down-to-earth remark that the hero makes about the people on the quay in Ajaccio staring at the new arrivals. "Damn it! Kielce!", he says. Kielce is the name of a small town in Eastern Poland, obviously used here as the symbol of a provincial mentality. When the girl replies, "They are people, too. You wanted to experience for the people!", the poet giggles and the ironic distance saves the just born poet's status from disillusion.

The fascination of the powerful Whitmanian voice reached the highest point in the Polish literature after the First World War, which was, according to Czesław Miłosz, caused by revolutionary Whitman enthusiasts. That was of course an ironic remark, but it is not only harmless irony that connects Miłosz, Whitman, the Polish poet Julian Tuwim and history. As a very young poet Tuwim wrote two emotional articles about Whitman and employed some intertextual techniques in his early poetry, in which Whitman's "Song of Myself" was involved in many different ways. One poem seems to be particularly significant in the context of presenting the voice of the other culture and reshaping the Polish national tradition. Tuwim belonged to the first generation of free and independent Poland, and his poetry did not have to serve a cause. Polish romantic literature was deeply involved in the struggle for political freedom (as often appears from Mickiewicz's writings) and had to be transcended by new symbols and meanings. Whitman, a different romantic, seemed to have been particularly attractive. In one of Tuwim's early poems entitled "Poezja" ("Poetry," 1918), which was a poetical manifesto, we find some definitions of poetry clearly based on a line from the final part of "Song of Myself": "skok barbarzyricy, który poczuł Boga," "pierwotny, czippewajski krzyk", "barbarzyricy ryk" (Tuwim 281 -88)⁴ evoke Whitman's "barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." Next, in the same poem we find the following words:

But the passers-by should- also be free to live! The colossal
old man has said to them: Camerado!

4 The English translation of the two quoted passages is
by T. Eekman.

By citing Whitman's characteristic "camerado" and portraying Whitman as "the colossal old man," which echoes Zeromski's presentation of Emerson as "an old wise man," Tuwim indicates that a somewhat mythicised figure of Whitman is understood as part of the literary tradition, well recognised by now, though only one decade had passed since the voice of Whitman was heard in a Polish novel. As Zeromski's *Dzieje grzechu* had been seminal in Polish literature of the time, one passage from Tuwim's poem should be put in the context of Zeromski's poet reciting original Whitman. Tuwim's "Poezja" ends as follows:

You have already heard such a song: it arrived from across the ocean, in a magnificent flood
it gushed from the mouth of the grey-bearded bard. And I, in praise of the name of my
fatherland, graft foreign shoots on the Native Tree, on the robust Polish Oak.

Tuwim presents himself, his poetical I, as an offshoot of the Whitmanian tradition, "a magnificent song" for which there was no tradition in his own literary heritage. This naive declaration is in fact in sharp contrast with Tuwim's later poetry. His vitalism and optimism were not deeply felt, and his excitement with Whitman's poetry was not long-lived. However, this naive reading was continued in an unexpected and unwanted way. Whitman became the master of Polish proletarian literature as early as 1921, and later, under the communist regime, he was regarded as a precursor of socialist-realist poetry.⁵ In Miłosz's "Traktat poetycki" ("A Treatise on Poetry" 1957) we find a kind of a recapitulation of the socialist-realist understanding of Whitman's poetry:

They would like a new Whitman
who, in the mob of woodcutters and waggoners,
could change everyday deeds into the Sun. (Miłosz 1981, 214)

Miłosz revealed how dangerous the process of naive rereading and "grafting the voice of a stranger" on the "Native Tree" can be, and how poetical naivety can lead to political manipulation; or, to put it in other words, how every "rewriting" that takes only some elements of the poetical code into account

5 Tuwim himself used to write poems in the manner of Whitman in the early 1950s (e.g., "Ex Oriente"), as well as Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, another Polish poet, who made himself familiar with Whitman's poetry after World War I. For a detailed analysis of doctrinaire Polish poems in the vein of Whitman, see Skwara 324-27.

must be misleading in the end. Neither Whitman nor Tuwim were as optimistic as the rules of socialist realism required.⁶

This does not mean, however, that Whitman's voice stopped to be seminal in Polish literature. One of Miłosz's own poems, "Po ziemi naszej" ("Throughout Our Lands," 1961) begins with the following stanza:

Kiedy przechodziłem miastem ludnym
(jak mowi Walt Whitman w przekładzie Konrada Toma),
kiedy przechodziłem miastem ludnym,
na przykład kolo portu San Fransisco, liczac mewy,
myslałem ze jest miedzy mezczyznami, dziecmi i kobietami
cos, ani szczescie ni nieszczescie. (Miłosz 1981, 279)⁷

The poem opens with a line from Whitman, "Once I pass'd through a populous city," and quotes it in one particular Polish translation as indicated in the poem — ("as Whitman says in Konrad Tom's translation"⁸). Then the first line is repeated and the poet's own reflection takes its cue from here. The whole poem evokes a situation of being a stranger in the world. It involves too many motifs to discuss them here, but what is crucial for my argument is that the voice of "the other" was incorporated into the text as a familiar voice, a familiar sound, and part of a familiar heritage. That is what this particular translation of an American poet done in Poland before the Second World

6 In fact, having become a kind of "silent" poet Tuwim paid a high price for his doctrinaire poems, which is close to the poetic and life experience of another Slavonic enthusiast of Whitman: Mayakovsky. Having sacrificed poetry for ideology, the two poets died soon after.

7 In English, the poem reads:
When I pass'd through a populous city
(as Walt Whitman says, in the Polish version)
when I pass'd through a populous city
for instance near San Francisco harbor, counting gulls,
I thought that between men, women, and children there is
something, neither happiness nor unhappiness (Miłosz 1988, 148)

8 Actually, there is no translation by Konrad Tom of the poem in question. Neither Alfred Tom, mentioned in later Polish editions of Miłosz's poems, accomplished the translation. It is a quotation from a translation by Stefan Napierski (1934); see Skwara 103-104. The mistake is easy to understand when we consider that Miłosz, who was cut off from books in Polish, quoted the line from his memory.

War, that is in a free country, effects. Yet, in 1961, the country is not free any more, the poet is in exile, in the homeland of another poet whom he remembers as part of his own tradition. Thus Miłosz "re-passes" through a populous city, which in the poem happens to be San Francisco, trying to find the meaning of "something among men, children and women," something that cannot be defined, being "neither happiness nor unhappiness." Paradoxically, the whole situation evoked by the first stanza of the poem may be fully understood only by Polish readers, to whom the poet addresses his text, beginning with a quotation from an American poet and referring to several international symbols and figures (Pascal, Mozart, Cabez), but which is written in Polish. Perhaps the idea of global literature and global communication is an illusion we cherish, whereas in-depth communication is possible only within a particular culture?

Having considered these examples of intertextuality we may conclude that the mechanism of incorporating voices of "the other" is stimulated by a search for sameness. In the earliest examples, one could observe that the voice of American culture was understood as the voice from a faraway country and its sameness was emphasised as simultaneously obvious and alienating. Later, the differences between the two worlds stopped to be the determining factor and the sameness of the voices from different cultures was taken for granted. This mechanism could probably be seen from a wider perspective: no matter how exotic foreign texts seem to have been at first, later they are experienced as part of world literature and discussed within the context of national literatures.

At the same time the fascinating phenomenon of global literature, "the sameness" of the thoughts and forms expressed in many languages, epochs and cultures is illusive to some extent. The romantic, visionary American writing quoted by Polish writers first of all says something about us; about something that can be translated but not fully understood by others. Miłosz, who spent half of his life in America and consciously chose Polish as the language of his poetry, is a good example here. The English translation of his poem "Po ziemi naszej" cannot express "the same," because Whitman in Polish translation does not say: "When I passed through a populous city," but: „Kiedy przechodziłem miastem ludnym." The creative assimilation of "the other" into "our" does not depend on the writers' or poets' ability of unifying alien voices with their own writing and culture, but rather on their ability of using the difference, the ability of creating one's own voice out of an alien one; only then intertextual practice can become influential and enrich national

culture as well as, by some kind of retribution, influence and enrich global literature — even when the voice of "the other" is not "properly" understood, which often seems unavoidable. Paradoxically, when a writer tries to present the alien writing as fully comprehended and understood and attempts to speak with the same voice — as happened in Tuwim's case — he usually fails as an artist. This seems to be the most obvious but also the most ignored feature of the contemporary attempts at global understanding.

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