

REVIEW ARTICLE

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CONVERSATIONS WITH GUSTAW HERLING-GRUDZIŃSKI

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Włodzimierz Bolecki. *Rozmowy w Dragonei* [Conversations in Dragonea], conducted, edited and prepared for publication by Włodzimierz Bolecki. Warsaw: Szpak, 1997. Pp. 382.

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Włodzimierz Bolecki. *Rozmowy w Neapolu* [Conversations in Naples], conducted, edited and prepared for publication by Włodzimierz Bolecki. Warsaw: Szpak, 2000. Pp. 356.

The two books noted above contain records of conversations with Gustaw Herling-Grudziński conducted by Włodzimierz Bolecki in July 1995 in the writer's summer house in Dragonea, and between July and October 1999 at the writer's home in Naples.

Włodzimierz Bolecki is a member of the Institute of Literary Research [*Instytut Badań Literackich* - IBL] of the Polish Academy of Sciences, a historian of literature, literary theorist and critic, an expert on Herling-Grudziński's work, an author of numerous publications devoted to the writer's literary output, as well as his friend. In short, he is an ideal conversation partner of "his" author. The idea for these conversations arose towards the end of the writer's life; *Rozmowy w Dragonei* appeared in 1997; *Rozmowy w Neapolu* appeared in 2000, the year of his death (Herling-Grudziński was born in 1919).

From 1955, Herling-Grudziński lived in Italy. In 1946 he co-founded, with Jerzy Giedroyc, the Paris-based *Kultura* and subsequently was one of the leading representatives of the literary circles associated with that monthly and the *Instytut Literacki* [Literary Institute] in Paris, the publisher of Herling's writings. After many years of the writer's absence from his mother country, where he belonged to a narrow - even elite - group of émigré writers persecuted by the communist censorship with special avidity, numerous editions of Herling-Grudziński's works finally appeared in Poland. They immediately gained enormous popularity and *Inny Świat* [World Apart] (the first English edition appeared in 1951), which made Herling-Grudziński the precursor of the so-called gulag literature, has even become compulsory reading in schools. The success of Herling's writings, "discovered" by the audience in his mother country only after the collapse of communism in 1989, had been prepared by publishing houses of the so-called "second active and beyond the reach of the official censorship since the mid-1970s. However, it is only after the 1989 turning point that his works started to be read on a wide scale. Herling-Grudziński's literary output has since become the subject of numerous conferences, critical publications and doctoral dissertations. The writer himself visited Poland several times and was awarded *honoris causa* doctorates three times: by Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. The writer's collected works [*Pisma zebrane*], edited by Zdzisław Kudelski and prepared by Czytelnik, now one of the most prestigious publishing houses in Poland, have been appearing since 1994.

These circumstances allow one to better understand the initiative of the writer and his interlocutor, when the popularity of Herling's works reached its apogee, to provide a forum for the writer himself to speak out. Herling would relate to numerous opinions on his output as a whole and on specific works, counter those opinions which, in his view, distorted his intentions, correct

what he thought was wrong interpretations, etc.

Each of the conversations in *Dragonea* and *Naples* concentrates on one of Herling's works, analyzed in detail and interpreted by both interlocutors. Although the scenarios of the conversations had probably been established earlier, they are characterized by a large degree of spontaneity, which makes them very attractive reading. They are full of digressions and associations, often unconnected with the main topic.

The twenty-six works discussed in *Rozmowy w Dragonei* include Herling's short stories, starting with the first, that is, *Książę niezłomny* [The Steadfast Prince] (1956), which deals with the role and duties of the Polish emigration; the above-mentioned *A World Apart*; literary and artistic essays; and *Dziennik pisany nocą* [The Journal Written at Night], which is not only or not exactly a writer's Journal as typically understood, but rather a chronicle of the contemporary world. Herling recorded these keen observations from 1970 to his death in 2000 and published them in *Culture* in systematic installments. The writer considered this work extremely important, as evidenced by an apparently casual remark, which may surprise many of Herling's readers and admirers. "[*The Journal*] fulfills all my literary ambitions."

Rozmowy w Neapolu is devoted to another nineteen short stories, which Herling continued to write almost until his death. After the publication of the book, Herling published only one story, *Podzwonne dla dzwonnika* [Deathknell for a Bellringer] and the final parts of *The Journal*, which for some time appeared in the Polish daily *Rzeczpospolita* [The Republic] on a regular basis. The volume is concluded with a conversation entitled "How short stories are born," which in a way constitutes a coda to the whole composition.

This reviewer's present sketchy discussion of the content of the two Volumes cannot provide a full account of their enormous value for those who would like to better understand both Herling's works and the writer himself. The latter includes his life history, typical of the Polish émigrés after World War II, as well as his personal life, a subject by no means avoided during the conversations. Sometimes the openness with which the writer discloses personal details may even be shocking to the reader, accustomed to a Herling unwilling to talk about himself and protecting his privacy. *The Journal Written at Night*, as the reading audience soon realized, stands in sharp contrast to Witold Gombrowicz's *Diary*, which is an eruption of egotism. At the same time, what are, for lack of a better term, referred to as Herling's short stories give an impression of overtly autobiographical works, full of easily verifiable allusions to the writer's life. The author himself, incidentally, suggests that specific events should be treated as true, based on his own experiences. This, of course, is a mystification: in claiming that he cannot, unlike other authors, invent plots but rather takes them from his personal experience, Herling is a master of a writing technique due to which the boundary between truth and fiction becomes completely obliterated. Until the very end, he keeps the reader in suspense as to whether the events described really happened or whether they are merely a product of the reader's fantasy. In this respect, *Rozmowy . . .* is very interesting because in private Herling enjoys much more freedom in talking about himself, in revealing often intimate matters, never to be disclosed otherwise. However, he does that as an author of literary works, saying between the lines that his life in these conversations serves as the material for the works, interesting only inasmuch as it can be useful in understanding them. For instance, the heart attack which Herling suffered in 1988 was apparently a strong enough personal experience to be mentioned in a few works. Yet, it only constitutes an element of the literary construction and becomes dissociated from the author's biography. One might say that the implied agreement between the author and the potential reader to treat facts as elements of fiction obtains also in this case. The apparent accumulation of personal matters is controlled by the requirements of the literary work in an inconspicuous but unquestionable manner.

Herling introduces the reader into the details of his literary technique; much attention in the conversations is paid to the matters of "the writing backstage," always intriguing to the reader but inaccessible via the finished

product. Without much pressure from the interlocutor, the author readily mentions the circumstances in which a particular piece was born, as if to supply as much information as necessary for the reader to understand the text in a given place and time. Then he shows how long a way it is from an idea to its realization, what technical writing problems a writer has to deal with in the process. At the same time, however, Herling is fully aware of the fact that even the most meticulous analysis of the origin of a given text cannot be a substitute for its interpretation. Outspoken on from where he drew ideas for his works, patient in presenting the circumstances obtaining when the writing process began, with what technical problems he was faced and what thoughts would arise in his mind at the time, Herling changes into a different person when under the skillful questioning by his interlocutor he must assume the role of an interpreter and critic of his own texts. The ease and effusiveness yield to hesitations, assumptions and speculations, as if the last word belonged to the reader. When Bolecki offers his own interpretation of a fragment of a given text, which in this case pertains to the protagonist of *Pieta dell'isola*, Herling says: "I like this interpretation very much (vol. 1, p. 162), which suggests that he leaves room for interpretations other than his interlocutor's or his own. The writer often explains his original intentions; he never explicitly states, though, whether and to what extent he has been able to realize them! Indeed, the final effect may be a surprise even to himself.

Let us ask at this juncture whether these collections of conversations might not deprive the reader of the rare pleasure of reading works of literature whose main characteristics are understatements, silence and ambiguity? Bolecki notes at some point that "in the poetics of your short stories silence and understatement play an important structural role. They function as nodes in which the essential meanings of the whole stories converge" (vol. 1, p. 164). The writer agrees with his interlocutor and answers: "Any attempt to leave no room for doubt would mean a destruction of the text's sense" (vol. 1, p. 164). As can be seen, the author's commentary on his own works has clear-cut boundaries. Even if one can say much about the texts, it is unrealistic to say everything: the most important aspects, in spite of the abundance of detailed explanations, must remain underspecified. During the conversations, Herling by no means strives to add anything he did not have the time, could not or did not want to say in his literary works. He approaches but never touches on what should remain a secret and a mystery, by which he provokes the reader to re-read a given text. The result may never be definitive. The writer's interlocutor is his ally in this respect: although active, Bolecki never tries to force Herling into giving the ultimate verdict.

A still different matter are Herling's explanations concerning frequent allusions in his texts to events which, thanks to such "footnotes," became more transparent and allow the reader to understand the author's intentions better. If these rather detailed explications receive so much attention, it is because of the importance of the factual layer of Herling's writings, the layer which cannot be fully understood without his additional comments. Even though he claims to be "an enemy of realistic narration," Herling strives to remain faithful to facts if knowing them is necessary for the reader to understand a given piece. Even here, however, the reader is free to draw his or her own conclusions.

At this point I would like to explicitly state something which perhaps cannot be easily deduced from the remarks above, namely, that the conversations are far from the popular type of interviews with writers. As products of mass culture, such interviews are primarily designed to provide the context for rumors and sensational statements, as well as to strengthen widespread opinions and stereotypes. Herling and his interlocutor are far from this attitude! Literary parallelisms to the conversations might include Johan Peter Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*, characterized by the same

bond between the interlocutors, the same gravity and simultaneous lightness in their treatment of the subject matter, the same range of topics, from public ones to patently personal. Indeed, it would be difficult to find another book in which the author's commentary to his or her own works would be equally rich; it would be difficult to find an interlocutor whose aim would be not to conduct one more interview with a writer but to carry out a conversation in the sense implied by the Polish word *konwersacja*: a long leisurely exchange in which both participants are equally engaged, even though one of them is the author, whereas the other "only" a critic. Had it not been for the competence of the latter, as well as for Bolecki's personal, friendly relationship with Herling, the conversations would never have become what they are: a literary work of art *sui generis*, one which evokes the best traditions of the genre.

As has already been mentioned, the organizing principle of the conversations is the chronological "survey" of Herling's works, the chronology being violated in a few cases. Except for *A World Apart* and *The Journal Written at Night*, the "surveys" are longer than the actual works they deal with. Slightly edited, they might serve as in-depth prefaces or afterwards to the texts proper. But even this comparison seems somewhat inadequate. Having read the two thick volumes, one cannot help feeling that they constitute something much more than a simple, even if extensive and erudite, commentary to literary works. Rather, they contain texts parallel to the works, texts which present the overall conception, image or idea of the works. The nature of the relationship of this conception to the final product, the relationship of the work *in actu* to the work *in potentia* is a question worthy of consideration, especially nowadays, when the concept of a finished work of art is questioned so frequently. The form of the work with which we are presented, and which we are used to treating as final, in the light of these "commentaries" proves to be merely one possibility from among many. If the writer devotes so much attention to the technicalities of the writing process, it is mainly in order to show what pressures he had to face as the author, what ideas he had to abandon when the text began to develop according to its own logic without relying on the author as to the choice of devices to match the logic. Those who cannot imagine a writer without a label will find it difficult to decide: is Herling a modernist or a postmodernist?

Among the potential readers of the two volumes may also be those interested in the writer's views on various questions frequently rather distant from literature. Such readers will not be disappointed: they will find an extensive treatment of issues which always preoccupied Herling. These are, for instance, an insightful analysis of the twentieth century totalitarianisms and their impact on the minds of individuals and whole societies, the phenomenon of communism, which he always treated with special attention, the long list of modern civilization diseases, which deprive culture and art of spiritual values and commit artists to the influence of ideological malefaction. (Incidentally, Herling's analyses of the communist ideology earned him the name of one of the best experts in the field. It is regrettable that his knowledge and experience were ignored in the West for so long.) With time, Herling pays more and more attention to the problems of the human existence, of faith, of civic, and suffering. Obviously, the issues did not fail to capture his imagination earlier; nor is it the case that the problems of the contemporary world faded into oblivion at a later stage of his life. However, it is in the later period that Herling gained the reputation of a metaphysical writer. This area of intellectual inquiry receives in some of his works a very extensive treatment, but in a less conspicuous form it is present at all times.

Therefore, admirers of Herling as a writer possessed by politics, from which he would gladly have escaped, will find in the volumes exquisite observations and comments on such topics as his attitude to "PRL (People's Republic of Poland), both in the sense of the authorities and the society, his attitude to the Polish emigration, of which he was a part himself, to politics, especially in the countries he considered colonized by the Soviet Union, or to the West. Others will recognize in him the familiar polemist, a man of unshaken principles, who always used the same high criteria in all judgments, especially judgments of writers with broken moral backbones (incidentally, Herling never changed his critical opinion on Miłosz's *Captive Mind*, whose

author offers a different diagnosis of the writers' involvement in communism). An enemy of PRL, a high-principled émigré but a sober realist, someone who up to a certain point identified himself with the Paris *Kultura*, with which he cooperated for many years in an unhumble manner, an uncompromising anticommunist and expert on the Soviet Union - in the light of the conversations with Bolecki, this familiar portrait of Herling-Grudziński seems to recede more and more into the past. The new social and political developments, such as the collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe, the end of the polarization of the world into two antagonistic blocs, the end of the Soviet hegemony, the first years of the Third Republic of Poland, the emergence of which took Herling somewhat by surprise, a surprise he openly admitted - all these events forced the writer to change his perspective, to view many of these matters from a slightly different angle. Yet, he never abandoned his principles for the sake of a compromise which would betray the values he cherished so much. Therefore, the books are worth reading in order to learn what were Herling's recent views on the contribution of the Polish emigration to Poland's politics and culture when the word *émigré* was no longer current, to find out how he had to take into account the new situation in Russia, how uneasy he felt about the situation in Poland, a new state which after the collapse of communism was full of surprises.

As the co-author of the conversations, Herling reveals the same talent which in a more disciplined manner also surfaces in his writings: the talent of a story-teller aptly expressed by the specifically Polish word *gawędziarz* with all its positive connotations, rather than the French *causer*, which would sound too foreign. Bolecki realizes that the conversations are a rare occasion to hear the writer speak the way he wants, unhurried and free to say anything, stimulated with suggestions which seems important to him at a given moment. But is it interesting also to the reader? That does not matter, as it is the writer who primarily comes to the foreground. The aim is to let the writer speak, to avoid restraining his thoughts, to delicately curtail unwelcome digressions in order to make sure that the conversation is on the right track. The conversations resemble the Old-Polish *silva rerum*: they are full of digressions, marginal comments, associations, often seemingly diverging from the main topic. If, however, one takes a holistic view on the whole undertaking, all these digressions appear to be far from accidental. For example, encouraged by his interlocutor, the writer tends to underscore the analogies between his works, reveals repetitive motifs, topics identifiable in various circumstances, etc. Great writers are such due to the greatness of the obsession which propels the creation of their works. Admittedly, stressing the repetitious may be superfluous, but without it we would not be able to capture the integrity of the writing. We would not be able to appreciate the fact that, in somewhat figurative language, the writing constitutes one extended text characterized by an idiosyncratic, unique structure, a "text" subjected to its own necessities, hiding its own mysteries. Various "units" of this "text" are linked by a network of mutual relationships and correspondences; or maybe it is more appropriate to say tensions or sometimes even contradictions.

Enough of the metaphor, what is the conclusion? The conclusion is that these great and unique conversations allow one to capture the oneness of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's writings, characterized by immense seriousness, integrity and cohesion; writings whose author is an outstanding literary figure in Polish literature and one of the greatest in the twentieth century.