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An Exotic Journey and a Turn to the Inside: Non-Fictional Narratives between „Orientalism” and Intimism.

Małgorzata Czermińska

Przeł. Benjamin Koschalka

Małgorzata Czerwińska

An Exotic Journey and a Turn to the Inside: Non-Fictional Narratives between "Orientalism" and Intimism

For today's readers of Polish non-fiction literature, the publication of Bronisław Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* might seem like the proverbial pebble that started the avalanche, although the author had no such intention. I am thinking not of the debates triggered in 1967 by the publication of the English translation of Malinowski's extremely personal notes, which incidentally concerned his journey to the islands of the South-West Pacific. An especially lively reaction, sometimes with shades of consternation, was caused by the fact that at some points in *A Diary* Malinowski displayed a somewhat different attitude to the natives from that evident in his anthropological works. Readers were shocked by certain "colonial" gestures made by the anthropologist in his description of relations with the natives of the Trobriand Islands.¹ What I am more interested here, though, is a situation that came to light only after the full version of the Polish original was printed

Małgorzata Czerwińska, professor in the Institute of Polish Philology at the University of Gdańsk. Head of the Division of Contemporary Polish Literature, Head of the Committee of the Literary Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. In 2001 – 2006 head of the International Committee of Polish Studies. Author of the following books *Czas w powieściach Parneckiego*, *Autobiografia i powieść czyli pisarz i jego postacie*, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt – świadectwo, wyznanie i wyzwanie*.

1 Kubica, Grażyna, Introduction to: Malinowski, Bronisław, *Dziennik w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu [A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term]* (intro. and ed. G. Kubica), Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2002, esp. pp. 26-35.

(2002). With this book, we are forced to entirely revalue the whole tradition of Polish modern non-fiction prose. But rather than an avalanche, it might be better to invoke the image of a pebble thrown into the water, from which larger and larger circles radiate.

It is clear even at first glance that *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* can be read in at least a few ways: in the context of intimism, essay-writing and travel writing. Firstly, without doubt it became one of the most interesting personal journals in Polish autobiographical literature. Secondly, from a different point of view it rightly became part of "Modern philosophical essay-writing in the Polish literature of the first half of the 20th century." This is at once the title of a book by Andrzej Zawadzki,² who was responsible for including Malinowski's work within the sphere of interests of Polish literary studies – and this still at a time when it was only known in its shorter, English-language version.³ Thirdly, it has a place in the stream of Polish non-fiction literature linked with experiencing travel. And this is the aspect that I shall be looking at. I would also like to note that I am thinking of journeys not in a metaphorical sense, but only actual, distant ones, involving an encounter with an entirely different culture, an alien landscape and radically changed climate. In this sense, the personal journal of the founder of modern world anthropology is also part of the tradition of recording experiences of the exotic in Polish literature.

If I can return for a moment to the aquatic metaphor to depict the reception of autobiographical writings, the effect of the circles on the water was consolidated by several other stones being tossed with the publication of the Polish translations of several parts of Mircea Eliade's extensive autobiographical writings.⁴ There is no space to develop at length the comparison of the personal notes of the two authors, but I cannot fail to mention the Romanian scholar's youthful *Indian Diary*, as to read

2 Zawadzki, Andrzej, *Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna w piśmiennictwie polskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku*, Kraków: Universitas, 2001.

3 Malinowski, Bronisław, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, London: Routledge and Paul, 1967. Excerpts from the Polish original from 1908–1913 edited by Grażyna Kubica began to appear in 1998 in the magazine *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa*.

4 In order, the following were published: *Zapowiedź równonocy. Pamiętniki 1 (1907–1937)*, trans. and annotations Ireneusz Kania, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1989; *Świętojańskie żniwo. Pamiętniki 2 (1937–1960)*, trans. Ireneusz Kania, Kraków: Oficyna Literacka. Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1991; *Religia, literatura i komunizm. Dziennik emigranta*, trans. Adam Zagajewski, London: Puls, 1990; *Dziennik indyjski*, trans. Ireneusz Kania, Warszawa: KR, 1999; "Wędrówki włoskie," in: Eliade, *Przyczynki do filozofii Renesansu. Wędrówki włoskie*, trans. Ireneusz Kania, Warszawa: KR, 2000; *Moje życie. Fragmenty dziennika 1941–1985*, trans. Ireneusz Kania, annotations R. Reszke, Warszawa: KR, 2001.

it sensitises us to many of the aspects of Malinowski's *A Diary* from his time spent on the islands of the Western Pacific. While there are obvious differences in the texts that are crucial for interpreting them, the reader of intimate journals will notice interesting analogies in the depiction of the self-portraits of the two diarists, especially if the main biographical information is used as a frame.

Here we have two extremely talented, ambitious young scholars embarking on global scientific careers, both from Central and Eastern Europe, and led by professional reasons to spend several years in the tropics. Both are working with a passion: one conducting ethnographic research, the other spending hours studying Sanskrit and Indian philosophy. Both reproach themselves for succumbing to their passion for reading novels. The pair of them short-sighted, at times a little helpless in everyday life, rather neurotic, with tendencies to varying degrees of self-analysis, clutching erotic phantasms in their imaginations and recording their sexual accomplishments. Sometimes they dream of finding true love in the future, but fail to accord the same seriousness to the women they actually associate with as to themselves. Both are perceived by the natives simply as Europeans, and at times have an uncomfortable sense of the complexity of their European identity that they find hard to explain to others. They remember that theirs is the "worse" part of the mother continent, lying, as Maria Janion would later put it (for such a divide can still be felt in the 21st century) east of the West and west of the East.⁵

Malinowski and Eliade's diaries both surfaced on the Polish literary scene in a period when the title of best author writing about the Third World was deservedly held by Ryszard Kapuściński. His reportages on Africa, Latin America, Iran and the Asian regions of the former Soviet Union, as well as his recollection in *Travels with Herodotus* of erstwhile travels to India and China, in a sense formed the canon of writing about cultures from other continents. They were also responsible for the popularity of postcolonial thinking in the Polish consciousness much sooner than this theory entered our academic discourse. For Kapuściński, the growing role of the personal element, the increasingly clear manifestation of autobiographism in his books, and the evolution of his methods from journalism to creative writing (while retaining the key characteristics of reportage) must have made the idea of writing a book inspired by the accomplishments of Malinowski seem the most logical consequence of his creative path. Based on the increasing frequency of references to the works of the great anthropologist in Kapuściński's works

5 Janion, Maria, "Polska na wschód od Zachodu i na zachód od Wschodu," *Teksty Drugie*, 2003 no. 6.

in his final years, we can imagine that a book contrasting *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* and *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* with the lives of today's inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands, and thereby referring to *A Diary in the Strictest Sense*, could make for fascinating reading. After all, Malinowski's position as a diarist, sometime close to that of Eliade the protagonist of *Indian Diary*, is in many respects the polar opposite of that taken in Kapuściński's reportage. Yet the place of the book about the Trobriand Islands, along with his other planned one, about the town of his childhood Pinsk, remains on the long shelf of unwritten or lost works, like Karol Szymanowski's *Ephebos* or Bruno Schulz's *Messiah*, works of which only legend remains.

Of course, Malinowski and Kapuściński's narratives do not function in a literary vacuum. There was something before, will be something after and was something between them. Polish travel writing has already been rather well researched and described, from Old Polish itineraries to contemporary reportage and essays, so it would seem that there is little that remains to be done here. But we ought to distinguish in the tradition a certain set of texts as a specific background for the two authors, who resemble two summits culminating at distant points in a long mountain range. We should also consider several characteristics of this group of works. First, they are records of actual journeys – present is experience (in the traditional sense) – forming part of the author's biography. The travel does not have to be a continuous trip, but can also be a long stay in one region. However it must – and this is the second important feature – be a stay in a space that is considerably distant and different from the narrator's home world. There must be a sense of otherness of landscape, sometimes scarcely palatable different customs, and a radically dissimilar climate (tropical or far North) that proves a tough challenge for the newcomer from a moderate zone. Third, we should ask of narratives borne out of encounters with such a different world how the newly arrived traveler reacts to the challenge made to his own identity. Fourth, these texts together demand to be asked about categories of postcolonial criticism – but paying close attention to the historical context in which each author was writing. We should ask to what extent they can be regarded as co-creators of Western "Orientalism," described in the late 1970s by Edward Said. If so, what version of it do they present, and do some not go beyond this horizon; to what degree and why? The genre of these texts is immaterial, however; it matters not whether they are travel letters, descriptions, reports, poems, memoirs, diaries, reportage, essays or anything else. In fact, "mixed genres" are common, making such distinctions difficult. To sum up: we are talking about accounts (irrespective of the generic conventions that authors apply) from actual travels, to distant, "exotic" lands, where the traveler has a clear sense of the separateness of his own cultural identity, and in the

interpretation of which we invoke categories of postcolonial criticism, while also referring to historical circumstances.

Chronologically speaking, we can start from the second half of the 19th century, say from Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Listy z podróży do Ameryki* (Letters from America, 1876-1878) and *Listy z Afryki* (Letters from Africa, 1891-1892), assuming that this was a typical example of a writer employing entirely Eurocentric thinking. In the works of later authors, the self-evident nature of this point of view slowly began to erode. Poland's myriad traveler-writers, today less well remembered, included Waclaw Sieroszewski (whose subjects included Siberia, Ceylon, and Egypt), Ferdynand Goetel (Central Asia and India), Aleksander Janta-Polczyński (Japan and other Far Eastern countries, Central Asia), Ferdynand Ossendowski (Central Asia and the Far East, North Africa). Gombrowicz's *Rio Paraná Diary* and several other passages from his *Diary* concerning Argentina should also be reread in this respect, as well as the books of Jan Józef Szczepański (Spitsbergen, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas). The younger generation of writers also figure, including Mariusz Wilk (the Russian Far North), Ignacy Karpowicz (Ethiopia) and Olga Stanisławska (the countries of Western and Central Africa). A further factor linking this collection of texts is the presence of sometimes repeated literary references that the traveler-narrators use to interpret and generalize their observations. The main readings they have in common are Conrad, who crops up on a number of occasions starting with Malinowski, then Malinowski himself, and most recently Kapuściński. The last of these has now become a great in the field, somebody not only to be admired, but also from whom one can, and even ought to distance oneself. Each author also has his or her own set of cited writers.

Something that is extremely interesting in stories about exotic travel is the matter of how the traveler-narrator presents himself. And this is not just in a journal that is as consciously and deliberately intimate as Malinowski's. If we read the tales of other travelers through the prism of his text, it is easier to glean the personal traits they display, even if these are concealed behind descriptions of landscapes or events. Traveler-writers display a whole range of strong feelings (or perhaps sometimes expose themselves with them, rather than display them), such as curiosity, fascination, astonishment, fear, experience of loneliness, empathy, perception of the oneness of human nature, terror of foreignness, horror at cruelty, disgust and revulsion. Significant, albeit not always easy to read, are sensory expressions, images of the writer's own body (and those of others), especially in the tropics, where nudity and openness to exposing the body to the elements play a much greater role than in a moderate climate. On top of visual sensations, the impressions experienced by other senses – smell, hearing and touch,

attacked with surprising intensity in the strange environment – prove unexpectedly intense. Moreover, gender – the writer's own and that of others – is a significant issue in these narratives, albeit often in an implicit way. But this goes beyond the stereotypical phenomenon of the male traveler's patriarchal perspective accumulating and strengthening due to the contemporary colonial perspective of the white European.

From this point of view, Olga Stanisławska's *Rondo de Gaulle'a* (De Gaulle Roundabout, 2001) is particularly interesting. The status of the traveler revealed in this text comprises many different aspects: she is a woman, she is white, traveling alone, a journalist of a European newspaper, but from a country that is by no means a European power. Furthermore, she has something of an itinerant style of travelling, like a vagabond from a picaresque novel, and the risk of unexpected danger sometimes rears its head. Stanisławska also tries to convince her readers that on top of the risk, her status and the type of travel adopted by her bring with them cognitive possibilities that could otherwise not be obtained. This means a certain fluctuation, both existential and social, between assimilation and distance. The accusation is levelled at her that her work as a reporter, describing the fate of the people she encounters, makes her a "thief" of the lives of others, but she retorts that she is not stealing anything: "This is my life." She becomes able to identify with a certain social group more closely than is possible for other members of the same African society, for example when she is invited into a space and activities that are the sole preserve of women celebrating their joy at the birth of a baby, where even the father, let alone other men, cannot participate. In other situations men invite her, as a journalist and foreign guest, to participate in meetings which the local women do not attend. At another point, when secretly observing the love dance of the Goran people, she depicts her sudden experience of absolute alienation: "The men – suddenly I became ashamed to talk to them. The women – everyone was dancing. So I became an outsider, non-existent, among people, only a shadow."⁶

Ignacy Karpowicz, in his 2007 book *The Emperor's New Flower (and Bees)*, constructs his identity as a traveler-narrator in a place where various possible lines of identification intersect, but where it seems most important to endeavour not to get stuck in any of them. The narrator knows that it is impossible to get away from them, and does not want to break free from them entirely anyway. He therefore refers to them and uses style to struggle with them. His perspective, grotesque, parodic and also humorous, crosses

6 Stanisławska, Olga, *Rondo de Gaulle'a*, Warszawa: Twój Styl, 2001, pp. 89–90. Cf. also: Tabaszewska, Justyna, "Podróznicy i kolonizatorzy. Współczesne strategie opisu Afryki," *Teksty Drugie*. 2006 no. 1/2.

with signals of entirely serious erudition. The traveler also utilises his own origins. His arrival in Ethiopia is not from nowhere. Rather, he comes equipped with his regional experiences, as a person from the Białystok region, and the tradition he belongs to is helpful, for example, in penetrating the exotic religious folklore of the Ethiopians and understanding the relations between the Christians and the Muslims there. He tends to accept his own youthful masculinity, and does so not without a little pride. Yet he also studiously eschews the conservative patriarchal style, albeit with a touch of self-deprecation. I would interpret the polemic with Kapuściński's *The Emperor* that acts as a subtext as the young writer expressing his own place in tradition, as well as a generational gesture. Karpowicz seems to be saying: Kapuściński is the 20th century. At the beginning of the 21st century Africa has changed. And Poland has too – as well as the Pole travelling in Africa, a different entity from thirty years ago.

Inextricably linked with the formation of the self-portrait is the sense of how it is perceived by others. I daresay that the Polish experience of travel in the 19th and 20th centuries was characterised by a slightly obscured view and lack of certainty as to the place that the Polish newcomer occupied in the exotic world. The straightforward division into the white colonizers from Europe and the colonised natives is not entirely sufficient. A great deal depends on the kind of Europe that the person arriving in the exotic world left behind. Until the end of the First World War, the Polish traveler journeyed the world with the passport of an invading state, unable to forget his enslavement. An example is Sieroszewski, legally a citizen of tsarist Russia, but actually an enemy and rebel of the state, twice exiled to Siberia. One incident from his journey to Ceylon illustrates very well the conflict of mutually exclusive identities and mutability of place faced by the Polish visitor confronting the colonial order in place on the island.⁷ Owing to the increasing political tensions between England and Russia prior to the war between the two countries that would finally break out in 1905, the British customs officer is restrictive in his treatment of Sieroszewski. This wins the Pole the favour of a native colonial-hating Ceylonese. This liking does not stop the local from extorting money from the traveler, but this is played out in an economic, not political context. After all, the poor native has no choice but to make money from the richer European tourist – even if this tourist is not a member of the hegemonic oppressor nation. Sieroszewski does not fall back on the colonial stereotype of the moral superiority of Europeans,

7 Sieroszewski, Wacław, "Cejlon" and "Aleksandria," in: idem, *Dzieła*, eds. Lam, Andrzej, Skórnicki, Jerzy, vol. 20: *Varia. Reportaże i wspomnienia, publicystyka, wiersze*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1963.

as later, describing a similar, and even more dangerous adventure he had in Egypt, he stresses that he fell victim to a group of Alexandrian Greeks, and was helped by a policeman who was Turkish, and therefore Asian and a Muslim.

Bronisław Malinowski's Austrian passport made his life in the Antipodes more difficult. Since the imperial powers in Europe were at war with one another, the scholar, an Austrian citizen, is severely restricted in his movements within the British colonies in the Pacific, even though as a Pole he does not identify with the Habsburg Empire, of which he is after all also a victim. And an even more interesting and complex situation is presented by Ferdinand Goettel in a reportage from India from the early 1930s.⁸ The dividing line between the English colonizers and the independence-seeking Indians is portrayed as being unambiguous. Though the Poland the traveler leaves behind is now independent, he remembers vividly the struggle with the occupants, and makes numerous mentions of his empathy for Gandhi's movement. On several occasions, he writes directly of analogies between what he knows from the traditions of recent Polish efforts for independence and what he is now observing in India. He criticises the colonizers and attends a huge rally to admire the Mahatma speaking to the crowds. And it is here that he notices that his own situation involves a bundle of contrasting identities that bring forth strong and unsettling sentiments. He notices that in an innumerable crowd he is the only white man, and observes gestures that he takes as a clear sign of aversion towards himself. He therefore leaves the exposed place: where he was able to watch everything going on, but where he also stuck out. Ultimately, he prefers to mix in with the crowd, and even, after explaining to those standing next to him that he is not British, manages to be friendly with them. Yet he is still unable to entirely free himself from a certain discomfort caused by the fact that his appearance marks him out as different from the others. This is reminiscent of Kapuściński's accounts from several decades later of being asked in Africa about where his country's colonies are, and being forced to explain at length to the disbelieving natives that his country was itself colonised by other whites. Goettel follows events at the rally of Gandhi supporters with interest and sympathy, fascinated with the man who is a leader of a great independence movement. His comments on the position of India's white population, whom he was able to observe earlier the same day, are critical, and even contemptuous. So cocksure were they in their conviction as to the indestructibility of British rule, so incapable of understanding the

8 Goettel, Ferdinand, "Podróż do Indii," in: idem, *Dzieła wybrane*, eds. Polechoński, Krzysztof, Sadowska, Ida, Urbanowski, Maciej, vol. 1: *Pisma podróżnicze*, ed. Sadowska, Ida, Kraków: Arcana, 2004, pp. 172-190.

gravity of the coming changes, that they were boundlessly indifferent to the events taking place in their city.

At a certain point, though, something happens that Goetel depicts as a sense of conflict on a different plane of identity – now no longer political, but sexual. Gandhi’s microphone stops working, forcing him to interrupt his speech. As the wait for repair is taking a while, the Mahatma takes his charkha and calmly begins to spin. The traveler from Poland cannot bear the pressure of such a contradiction to the masculine ideal of the freedom fighter. While he does not go into the details of discussing spinning and weaving as occupations that have been key symbols of womanhood since ancient times, this distant association is clearly playing on his mind. For all Goetel’s admiration for Gandhi and fascination with his charisma, this image of the leader of the nation with female trappings in his hands is too much. At a stretch one can imagine a man in the country with a distaff, he writes, the leader of a nation with one is another story.

The comparison of the hegemon with its subject is straightforward with the great colonial powers. It is a much more complicated story in the central and eastern part of Europe. If we analyse the “Orientalist” discourse of over three decades ago led by Edward Said in his classic founding text of postcolonial criticism, we can find marginal indications that for the British, American and French scholars studying the Orient, Slavic cultures were not even on the edge, but rather entirely outside the borders of the Western world. In the late 17th century, the encyclopedia *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697) discussed “such widely divergent histories as the Mogul, the Tartar, the Turkish, and the Slavonic.” In the 19th century, either artists (like Goethe on the basis of his *West-Eastern Divan*) or scholars (if they were a “Sinologist, an Islamicist, an Indo-Europeanist”) were called Orientalists. In the mid-20th century (1959), the “British government empowered a commission ‘to review developments in the Universities in the fields of Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African studies.’” The nations of “Asia and Africa or of Eastern Europe”⁹ tended to be mentioned in the same breath.

Said reveals this in passing, without commenting on the view of Slavic cultures and the situation of Eastern Europe in European-American “Orientalist” discourse. Only in the last decade have there been efforts to present post-Yalta relations in the Eastern bloc in terms of Soviet colonial hegemony towards the countries of the Second World, before reaching back into the past to describe certain chapters from the histories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and interwar Poland in terms of the country’s relationship

9 Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, New York: Random House, 1978. Quotations respectively from pp: 64, 51, 53, 275.

with the Ukrainians, Byelorussians, and Lithuanians.¹⁰ Which categories of postcolonial criticism can be transferred to interpretation of intra-European relations (including Russia), and in which situations are the differences so much stronger than the similarities that analogies turn out to be rather distant, with the consequence that a different conceptual net needs to be created to describe the various hegemonic models?

The attitude of Polish travelers towards non-European cultures is also part of our cultural self-identity. Tales of exotic travels always contain important confrontations with the categories of domination and subordination, and even when they occur in far-flung corners of the world this is always with the memory of what remained in Europe. In the history of our part of the world, who really is/was the perpetrator of the oppression, and who was the victim? How does the context of the memory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's erstwhile power, its decline in the partition era, the policy of the interwar governments towards national minorities, the terror of the Second World War and the oppression of the Soviet system in the satellite countries before 1989 endure and evolve? Does a collective memory in which the experience of "some you win, some you lose" lingers on, i.e. a perspective of a kind of cognitive swing, open up chances (and not immediate guarantees) of an epistemological perspective that is more open than in societies that have been stable in their development and expanded victoriously? On condition that this interchangeability of the situation of the hegemon and the victim does not become a breeding ground for cultivating two collective complexes: superiority for some, inferiority for others. How are strictly individual modifications of collective mentality displayed in travel accounts when the narrator makes him-/herself the prism through which we view the world?

Ewa Domańska wrote: "Emotionally I am on the side of the victims, but intellectually I see many problems in the methodological directive of 'the cognitively privileged status of the oppressed,'" concluding that:

Instead of applying the interpretational matrix offered by various methodologies and theories used by new humanities to Polish research material, it is worth distancing ourselves from them. Their instrumental application leads to conclusions that are to a greater or lesser degree

10 Cf. e.g. Thompson, Ewa, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood, 2000); Fiut, Aleksander, "Polonizacja? Kolonizacja?," *Teksty Drugie*. 2003 no. 6; idem, "Wokół 'jądra ciemności,'" in: *Poszukiwanie realności. Literatura – document – Kresy. Prace ofiarowane Tadeuszowi Bubnickiemu*, eds. S. Gawliński and W. Ligęza, Kraków: Universitas, 2003; Skórzewski, Dariusz, "Postkolonialna Polska – projekt (nie)możliwy," *Teksty Drugie*. 2006 no. 1/2; Surynt, Izabela, "Badania postkolonialne a 'Drugi Świat.'" *Niemieckie konstrukcje narodowo-kolonialne w XX wieku*," *Teksty Drugie*. 2007 no. 4.

foreseeable. [...] Polish methodology and theory of humanities regarding Western achievements of thought as inspirations, rather than as a “tool box” ready to analyse and interpret our own material, has much to do in this respect.

I have no doubt that Polish accounts from exotic travels offer excellent research material, and a careful interpretation can be a useful field of experience for reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of using the categories of postcolonial criticism.

Translation Benjamin Koschalka