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Miron Białoszewski: Radical Quest Beyond Dualisms

Polish Studies - Transdisciplinary Perspectives

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Preface

Miron Białoszewski's Radical Quest beyond Dualisms is an innovative and challenging work of literary scholarship that examines Białoszewski's artistic praxis as a certain philosophical proposition. It differs from the earlier critical approaches to the writings of this extremely important and original Polish poet, prose writer and dramatist in as much as it attempts for the first time to examine his mature poetry (1975-83) from a non-dualistic perspective. Specifically, the writer's radicalism is approached in terms of the radicalization of the postmodern worldview (i.e., a holistic, nonjudgemental and antihierarchical approach to reality), and his originality is explained by the fact that he is successful in his art in providing a positive (not merely deconstructive) proposition within the new postmodern paradigm and consciousness. Drawing upon such theoreticians as Gilles Deleuze, Richard Rorty and Todd May, and literary critics such as Anna Sobolewska and Stanisław Barańczak, I examine Białoszewski's attitude toward language in order to explore and better understand the poet's idiosyncratic artistic experiments and his "unorthodox" worldview. The poet, I argue, disregards binary oppositions. He approaches life and reality without any universal method, and his attitude is holist and antiessentialist.

This is a 200-page book that challenges a number of boundaries and scholarly stereotypes (especially in the areas of Białoszewski studies, Slavic Studies, Polish poetry, comparative literature and cultural studies) by showing that Białoszewski's artistic and life attitude was (neo-)pragmatist and anti-essentialist, and his impact upon Polish literature was truly unique and original. The study is solidly grounded in Białoszewski's texts and it also fills a major gap in existing scholarship: despite the fact that it is commonly acknowledged that Białoszewski's place in Polish literature was unique, and there have been several monographs on the subject of his writings written in Polish (e.g.: Stanisław Barańczak, *"Język poetycki Mirona Białoszewskiego"* 1974; Anna Sobolewska, *"Maksymalnie udana egzystencja. Szkice o życiu i twórczości Mirona Białoszewskiego"* 1997), he remains a largely undiscovered writer (and practically unknown to the Western world), and the puzzling qualities of his texts seem to escape critical grasp; hence interpretations of his attitudes as expressed in his writings often appear insufficient and seem to miss important aspects. In my study, I propose a new way of looking at his texts, a new interpretation and methodology which is helpful in explaining the philosophy behind the originality of his writings.

The study demonstrates in detail, for instance, how Białoszewski's radical approach to poetry evolves into a consistent life-writing and life-philosophy (life-writing-philosophy). In the poet's mature poetry, the context is identified as life and not as reality (contrary to many of his critics, who examine his works

as an expression of the relationship between the poet and the world). This questions the validity of one of the main oppositions used by critics to describe Białoszewski's project, namely maximalist-minimalist dualism. Finally, Białoszewski's writing is described as his life project; a project which is neither primarily aesthetic nor primarily social, and which is primarily not a search but a research, since it has no pre-established goal to reach except for being continued.

Białoszewski's Radical Quest beyond Dualisms makes a long overdue contribution to present Białoszewski, one of the most original and important among postwar Polish poets, to English-speaking readers. It also suggests new avenues of investigation for scholars working at the intersection of philosophy, semiotics, cultural and literary studies and, as such, will be of interest to a wide range of specialists in a number of disciplines, including literary criticism, Polish literary studies, comparative literary studies, and cultural studies. Specifically, it shows how the framework and theories developed by Western thinkers and philosophers associated with the postmodern discourse (e.g., Deleuze, Rorty) can be successfully applied to the artistic praxis of an Eastern-European poet, thus illustrating their validity and certain applicability, not to say universality. While *Białoszewski's Radical Quest beyond Dualisms* is rigorous in its scholarship, it is written in a clear and engaging manner and will be of interest to a more general intellectual readership. Essentially, it is a philosophical story about a development of a very interesting and original worldview of a major Polish writer, who approaches the world through his conjunctures, incorporates unpredictability and chance into his method, and whose writing is first of all about making connections. On a more universal level, it is a study of the interaction and mutual influences between text and reality, between text and life; a complex unity composed of many forces and relations that can be described but not represented.

Introduction:

Miron Białoszewski's Life Writing Philosophy.

Who is Miron Białoszewski? Why is he important? What is so unique and original about him and his writings? The introduction lays out the framework and the context for the exploration of this writer's life writing philosophy. First, it presents the background against which the poet's development took place. It presents his biography focusing on some radical decisions he had made in his life. It also presents his poetry within the context of his contemporaries (e.g.: Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska, Tadeusz Różewicz, Zbigniew Herbert), stressing his unique approach to art. Then, it presents Białoszewski's poetry within the context of its own internal dynamic development, and in the context of critical reactions to his art. Finally, Białoszewski's writing is described as his life project; a project which is not a search but rather a research, since it has no expectations about its results and remains open to new possibilities.

Part One.

Beyond Representation or Traversing the Platonic Split: Antilogocentric Białoszewski.

In Part 1, I examine Białoszewski's antilogocentric approach and the impossibility of representation. The artist's language is defined as being contingent in which case the meaning is formed only after the production of sentences. According to this view, metaphors do not reveal the hidden order of reality but force the subject to recontextualize his positions and grow from the experience. I claim that according to Białoszewski there is more than one way of representing reality, and there is no universal language to express reality's essence. Consequently, I define one of the main aspects of Białoszewski's literary practice in terms of his rejection of representation as a stable and essential relation. This is exemplified in his texts through his traversing of the made-found and subject-object splits among others. I argue that it is so because he is an antiessentialist and he is not interested in the stable relations of representation, but instead remains within the network of accidental and causal interactions. This is highly significant for his literary practice because his approach to language forces him into antimetaphysical positions.

Part Two.

Beyond Visual Reality or Traversing the Cartesian Split: Białoszewski – the Participating Observer.

In Part 2, I argue that the poet's antilogocentric attitude and his acknowledgement of the continuity between the subject, language and reality enable him to view himself as a part of reality, and not as separate from it. Moreover, the poet does not conclude that there are no relations between language and reality from the fact that language is unable to faithfully represent it. For the writer's subject, the lack of representation only means that there is no translation between the verbal and the non-verbal, but there are still mutual influences between language and the non-linguistic world. In other words, the subject sees himself in the position of participating observer, not merely an objective one. His participatory attitude is manifested in his poems where he traverses the dualisms between the part and the whole, form and content, spoken and written, etc. In traversing these oppositions the poet attests to the non-finality of the epistemological search as well as to the contingent nature of reality. In the subject's view there is no pre-established order governing reality and reality must remain permanently unstable.

Part Three.

Beyond Metaphysics or Traversing the Kantian Split: Impossibility of Metaphysics.

In Part 3, I argue that Białoszewski's sensibility should not be regarded as 'metaphysical' only on the basis that it is maximalist in the sense of being non-re-

ductive and non-exclusive. In the case of this poet, it is rather a matter of “conjunctures,” of “fuzziness,” of “unobviousness,” of “weak thought.” And Calinescu defines “weak thought” as “a typically postmodern mode of reflection that is in direct opposition to ‘metaphysics’ or ‘strong thought’ (a thought that is domineering, imposing, universalistic, atemporal, aggressively self-centered, intolerant in regard to whatever appears to contradict it, etc.)” In my view “conjunctures” and “unobviousness” are in direct opposition to “strong thought” and “metaphysics.” The poet is not “intolerant in regard to whatever appears to contradict” his thoughts, and remains open towards the Other all the time. I believe that this way of approaching life enables him to become “a guard of reality,” instead of becoming its “master” or its “servant.” Thus, in this part I claim that Białoszewski views the Self not less causally, accidentally and mechanistically than reality itself. Hence, he sees metaphysics as an unwanted sentiment. My approach in this part is twofold. On one hand, I continue to describe the consequences of Białoszewski’s attitude towards language and reality on his literary praxis, claiming that such an attitude must exclude metaphysics. On the other hand, I attempt to explain ‘metaphysical aspects’ of Białoszewski’s texts (as identified, for example, by Stala or Sobolewska) within the non-metaphysical framework I develop in Parts 1 and 2.

Białoszewski’s Radical Quest beyond Dualisms: Concluding Remarks.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize basic characteristics of Białoszewski’s radical approach that evolves into a consistent life writing philosophy, and place the poet in the larger context of Western philosophy and art. In his writings there is always present an irreducible multiplicity of relations, an irreducible singularity of arrangements, and the scope of connections and influences is unpredictable. In short, in the poet’s writings the context is identified as life and not as reality, a realm that is much larger than previously assumed, and almost entirely unknown and undiscovered, since it remains outside of language for most of the time. My book analyzes Białoszewski’s writing as his life project of blurring the boundaries between his life and art, and transgressing any encountered opposition or dualism; a project which is primarily about life in language which is the only reality known to the subject.

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Editorial notes:

Page numbers following Białoszewski’s texts refer to his *Utwory zebrane*. [Collected Works]
Vols. 1-10. Warszawa: PIW, 1987-2000.

All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.