

SUMMARY

FROM THE DARK

ON THE WRITINGS OF JULIAN STRYJKOWSKI

Julian Strykowski's oeuvre is inextricably connected with his life and this is why the book *From the Dark. On the Writings of Julian Strykowski* covers two orders: of biography and text, of history and interpretation. It consists of two interlinked parts. Part one is devoted, generally, to historico-literary issues, presenting the work of the future writer from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s, i.e. from the moment he appeared in the inter-war literary circles until the publication of his first important novel, *Głosy w ciemności* [*Voices in the Dark*]. It thus covers the least known period of Strykowski's life and work. Part two is interpretative and focuses on Jewish themes. The book is by no means a monograph; the author does not try to present Strykowski's entire life, nor does he attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of his works. Rather, it is a series of insights and comments.

The main conclusions from part one concern the date of Strykowski's press and literary debut as well as the quantity and quality of his journalism during and after the war.

The true introduction to the book consists in the genealogical and anthroponymic analyses described in the chapter entitled *Assumed Name, Own Name...* In Strykowski's case the question of identity and its loss (signalled by a change of the first name) is not only an existential problem but also an intratextual one — a very frequent and important motif in his writings. This onomastic sketch is a story of the search for archive data and information about the writer's real first and last names. Obtaining personal data, however, was not the present author's goal in itself. The goal was to reveal the motivation behind the choice of pseudonyms (treated as minimal texts that can be subjected to interpretation), and to study the structure and functions of the first and last names of the protagonists of Strykowski's novels. The pseudonym *Strykowski* would hide not only a very clear allusion to the writer's birthplace but also the consonantal root of his mother's last name: Stark. On the other hand, the first names Julian and Jerzy, used by Strykowski from the war period, would be a continuation of the family tradition of giving boys names beginning with the letter *J*, and an onomatopoeic reference (very common in the Jewish tradition) to one's own second name: Jacob. In the light of the phono-stylistic analyses presented in the chapter, the pseudonym chosen by the writer appears to be a paronomastic image of apostasy which is at the same time a manifestation of attachment, a figure of the writer's dual fate which could be expressed by the ancient — only slightly paraphrased — formula *cognomen etiam omen*. The author's reflections on pseudonyms are combined with an analysis of the structures of first and last names of

the protagonists of Strykowski's novels. When naming his protagonists, Strykowski used basic rhetorical techniques of phonetic transformations, which enabled him to oscillate constantly between fiction and reality, truth and fabrication, Polish and Yiddish or Hebrew.

The next chapter, *A "Momental" Translator and Reviewer*, is a reconstruction of an unknown pre-war period of Strykowski's work as a critic and translator. The author examines, first of all, Strykowski's collaboration with a popular Lviv daily, "Chwila" ["Moment"] — a Polish language Jewish newspaper with moderately Zionist sympathies. It was "Chwila" that in 1928 published Strykowski's first and only pre-war critical article which has been found so far. It was an analysis of a story by Awigdor Hameiri combined with reflections of the 23-year-old reviewer on the condition of new Hebrew literature. This chapter also includes an analysis of Strykowski's translations of a dozen or so novels: from Hebrew, Russian and French. *A "Temporary" Translator and Reviewer* is also an attempt to present identity-related anxieties of a student of Polish literature at the Jan Kazimierz University in Lviv and a budding translator, his vacillation between Zionism on the one hand and communism on the other: in 1930 Strykowski translated — which is quite surprising — an anti-Stalin grotesque by a certain Yussipun, while already in 1932 he became a translator of Henri Barbusse and at the same time a declared supporter of the communist party. However, Strykowski's biggest achievement as translator was his translation of Louis Ferdinand Celine's *Death on the Credit* in 1937. Other substantial works he translated included Leonid Leonov's *The Capture of Velikoshumsk* in 1948. The last work translated by Strykowski was a set of Biblical and Talmudic aphorisms which were published in the year of his death. In a way, Strykowski's literary life started from translations of secular Hebrew literature and ended with translations of holy Hebrew books. To conclude, we could also say that translation work was just a minor episode in the writer's life, though we should note that, in fact, the entire prose of the author of *Głosy w ciemności* is simply built on the principle of translation. The uniqueness of Strykowski's Polish is a result, among others, of his frequent use of calques in a deliberate artistic attempt to translate vivid idiomatic expressions from Yiddish directly into Polish.

The next study, *A Novelist in the "World of the Young"* consists of two parts, the first bibliographic and the second — methodological and interpretative. The first part deals with the difficulties in finding Strykowski's literary juvenilia. Three of such pre-war stories by Strykowski have so far been found. These are *Dwie kawki* [*Two Jackdaws*], *Purca* and *Dramat w piwnicy* [*Drama in the Cellar*] written for young readers. They were published in a Warsaw weekly for children and young readers, "Młody Świat" ["Young World"], a Jewish publication with assimilatory leanings. Published in April of 1938, *Dwie kawki* was most likely the writer's literary debut. These three childhood stories bear some resemblance to the later *Głosy w ciemności* or, for instance, the story *Syriusz*, but at the same time they are very different, because they are totally devoid of the Jewish element and are written purely from the Polish perspective. This attempt at expressing the writer's own experiences, at translating, in a way, the Jewish world into the Polish world,

was not very successful. The stories published in "Młody Świat" are not yet artistically mature. They are, however, worthy of note. This is not only owing to, e.g. a possibility of stylometric comparison that would allow us to follow the evolution of Strykowski's writing technique which he himself described as mystic realism. According to Thomas Stearns Eliot, literature is like a living whole. Every newly written work assumes its place within it and, at the same time, it transforms it, reorganises it. The emergence of the initial element in Strykowski's oeuvre enables us to spot the links between his works, links that so far have not been noticed. And it draws our attention to the issue of intertextual relations. The second part of the chapter *A Novelist in the "World of the Young"* is a search for proper methodology and terminology that would make it possible to provide adequate descriptions of the relations between works of one author. Theoretical reflections on the auto-intertextual and auto-biographical nature of Strykowski's texts lead to an analysis of specific texts, to a demonstration of functional and phonetic links between such works as: *Dwie kawki*, *Leśny spacer* [*A Walk in the Woods*], *Echo* and *Sarna* [*A Roe Deer*]. And between *Dramat w piwnicy*, *Syriusz* and *Milczenie* [*Silence*]. Two literary strategies discussed here — fictionalisation and biographisation — reveal Strykowski's output as full of intertextual games, constant grappling with his own legacy but also own biography, which is always subjected to various shifts in literary texts (often also in discursive texts), is always adapted to the requirements of a specific plot and never provides direct information about the writer's life.

The chapter *A "Red" Reporter and Journalist of "Free" Poland*, which closes the first part of the book, describes Julian Strykowski's journalistic work between 1939 and 1954. In it, the author analyses documentary writing about factories, propaganda pieces and theatrical reviews which Strykowski published in a Lviv communist daily, "Czerwony Sztandar" ["Red Banner"] between 1939 and 1941 as well as political articles, film reviews and theatrical sketches dealing with the problem of realism in art which were published in Moscow in the "Wolna Polska" ["Free Poland"] weekly between 1943 and 1946. The chapter also explores Strykowski's collaboration with the national press from 1946 till 1955, when the writer's ideological involvement practically ended. The works analysed in this chapter include an unknown play entitled *Dziedzictwo* [*Legacy*] which has never been published in its entirety and which has survived in the form of a recording and a script for a radio programme.

The second, interpretative part of the book comprises four chapters all of which deal with Jewish topics and the Jewish sacrum. *A false messiah* is a study of one topos. It is an attempt to capture Strykowski's oeuvre in one literary image, an image of messianic temptation, and to present the author of *Przybysz z Narbony* [*The Visitor from Narbonne*] in the context of a broadly defined Jewish literature and Jewish theology. This comparatist perspective allows us to note that Strykowski engages in intertextual dialogues with the Judaic canon of holy books and also with contemporary Jewish literature. He tackles issues intensely debated by the post-war Jewish philosophy and theology (we can compare Strykowski's writings with works of such thinkers as Emil Fackenheim or Martin Buber, or, generally speaking, with the so-called philoso-

phy or theology after the Holocaust). The false messiah is a category that unites all the main thematic threads of Strykowski's prose: Galician, Biblical, homosexual and communist. It is a constant feature of the writer's imagination, its unifying force, its leitmotif. It is also a category that encompasses the basic topics of 19th and 20th century Jewish literature: the questions of faith and exile, poverty, persecution and the ultimate restoration of the state. That is why Strykowski, while being a Polish writer, is also a Jewish author. These are issues discussed in the essay introducing the second part of the book and entitled *A Polish and Jewish Writer?*

In Strykowski's works the false messiah topos appears on various levels of text organisation, usually as a structural element of the plot: temptation is used to start a novel's conflict, but can also play an auxiliary role as is the case, for instance, with the communist novel *Bieg do Fragala* [*Run to Fragala*] or the Biblical trilogy about Moses, David and Judas Maccabaeus. The false messiah motif was often used by the writer to expose communism as an illusory hope or to expose totalitarian systems in general, systems that ruthlessly exploited the Utopian hopes cherished by human nature.

The messiah motif leads us to the fundamental topic of Strykowski's writing — fight between good and evil - and to the presentation of the relations between human beings and the Creator (often through a dispute with God). The chapter *Re-Visions of God* explores the images of God found in the writer's novels, and establishes the framework for this fundamental subject: situated somewhere between the image of an overbearing dwarf who is a product of human fears and desires (like the demonic Jahu from the play *Sodom*) and the image of impersonal Law, a strict and implacable Code (this, in turn, is JHWH from *Odpowiedz* [*Response*], a God who is difficult to love but also impossible to oppose). The dominant vision is a portrait of a deity who is an absolute whole, good and evil, with the emphasis laid, however, on fear, darkness, silence and injustice. The quest for a milder version of Judaism leads the writer towards Christianity. Strykowski's characters who have evangelical personality traits include Amos from the novel *Judas Maccabaeus*, though, ultimately, the horizons do not merge in his oeuvre (as they do in, e.g. Roman Brandstaetter's works). Christianity viewed from the perspective of his entire output seems to be the greatest temptation — to abandon the tradition of the forefathers, though the postulate of remaining faithful to the Jewish nation is the writer's fundamental inner commitment.

The story that collects and sums up the religious intuitions is *Sarna, albo Rozmowa Szatana z chłopcem, aniołem i Lucyferem* [*A Roe Deer or a Conversation between Satan, a Boy, an Angel and Lucifer*], a modern morality play. This late work (from 1992) contains a new vision of God: in addition to a distant God of space, who is nameless, silent and invisible, we can notice a God-in-the-world, who suffers and is close to human beings. Such an interpretation becomes possible thanks to references to Talmudic and Zoharic tales as well as Hasidic legends and the Kabbalistic-Hasidic worldview.

The bibliographic part of the book comprises annotated bibliography of Strykowski's works (from 1928-2010) and of literature on the subject (from 1952— - 2008).

Translated by Anna Kijak