

pit' v liudei bombami, prabil'noiu osadoi, bolee pochtennaia forma? Boiazn' èstetiki est' pervyi priznak bessiliia! . . . Nikogda, nikogda iasnee ne soznaval ia etogo, kak teper'" (Dostoevsky 1973, 400).

5. Cf. the first chapter of Delany 1988, where the author introduces his own memoir with a discussion of the problem of the Reality of the imaginary for the autobiographer, often in spite of the reality of what is historically observable.

6. Translations from *Pornografia* are my own.

7. To avoid, or perhaps to exacerbate, the confusion that Gombrowicz intends, I will call the character Witold and the author Gombrowicz.

8. In the Hamilton translation, Waclaw's name is changed inexplicably to Albert.

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16 || Returns to the Impossible

The Search for Home in the Prose of Gustaw Herling

Włodzimierz Bolecki

IN THE DUTCH town of Delft there stands today, relatively unscathed by the ravages of time, a cluster of houses that were immortalized in a seventeenth-century painting by Jan Vermeer. Though this in itself is ample reason to keep the now famous town in pristine condition (indeed, a matter of life imitating art), it is hardly remarkable, for there are many older abodes in almost every city and town in Western Europe. Such is not always the case as one travels further east. In Poland, for instance, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, not only houses, but also entire cities, along with all traces of their culture, were wiped off the map—the result of three centuries of war and plunder, beginning with the invasion of Poland by Sweden in the seventeenth century.

Furthermore, in Western Europe the development of civilization had a prevalently urban character, particularly since the advent of the Industrial Revolution. By contrast, Poland had always been primarily an agricultural country. In Western Europe the basis for social growth was the bourgeoisie; in Poland it was the gentry and landowners. Also, in Western Europe literature and art were products of the bourgeoisie, while in Poland literature and national consciousness were formulated in the gentry's manors. This held true up to the start of the Second World War. Many outstanding Polish writers—Witold Gombrowicz, Czesław Miłosz, and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz—grew up in these manors. Thus the structure of Polish society defined its culture and literature. In contrast too to the bourgeois literary tradition of Western Europe, the Polish home meant not simply a concrete building, or a house providing shelter, but an entire estate consisting of the manor, the barn, servants' quarters, a repair shed, stables, as well as the vast tracts of land on which these domiciles were built. In the Polish language one word defines

this conglomeration: *domostwo*. At the same time, *domostwo* has even a broader implication: *dom ojców* (home of forefathers), or more precisely *ojcowizna* (forefathers' estate). *Ojcowizna*, in turn, stands for *ojczyzna* (fatherland), the place of one's birth. (In English the fusion of the words for *dom* and *ojczyzna* form *homeland*.)

During the latter half of the eighteenth century, when Western Europe began the process of modernization, both in society and industry, Poland as a state ceased to exist. This was due to the occupation of Poland by three neighboring countries: Prussia, Austria, and Russia. Thus, while Western Europe moved forward in its grand experiment, the Poles cultivated their memory of the past and of the lost fatherland both as a collective whole represented by the state, and individually, in the confiscation of private property.

In the Polish literary tradition of the eighteenth century (the first partition of Poland took place in 1772), the word *dom* functioned simultaneously as a catchall to describe a dwelling, the surrounding environment, the geographical region, and the state or country; hence the meanings of the private and political, of the individual and social, of time and space were conjoined. Therefore, in Polish literature, home—in the sense of the homeland—includes contemporariness and the past, people and landscapes, language and customs, and so on. Religion, which proved a bastion for Poles after the loss of the state, exercised an enormous influence on this broader understanding of *dom*. In the religious context, what is of particular importance was the biblical understanding of the home as both a spiritual entity and a community (of values).

A few selections from Polish literature would serve well in introducing the question of metaphorical meanings in the notion of the home as expressed in the writings of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński. The poet Franciszek Karpiński (1741–1825), in one of the most popular Polish Christmas carols, in one breath listed as synonyms the words *ojczyzna* (fatherland), *dom nasz* (our home), *majętność cała* (the whole estate), and *wioski z miastami* (villages and towns). Kazimierz Brodziński (1791–1835), in his poem “Do starych” (To the old ones), wrote, “Świat był domem—dziś dom światem” (The world was home—now home is the world). In the nineteenth century, the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) played a particularly important role in establishing the metaphorical meaning of the home (“dom”) both in the sense of

kraj (country) and *pejzaż* (landscape). In the Polish national epic, *Pan Tadeusz*, one of its characters, Jacek Soplica, in order to persuade Poles to launch an insurrection against Russia, says that one must “oczyścić dom” (clean house). In the poem “Do Niemna” (To the River Neman), Mickiewicz uses the phrase “Niemnie, domowa rzeko moja!” (Neman, you river of my home!). Another acclaimed Romantic poet, Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849), in his poem *Beniowski*, employed the phrase “Polish homes” to connote Poland in its entirety, while in his famous “Hymn do Boga o zachodzie słońca” (A hymn to God at sunset) he refers to himself as a pilgrim who does not know “rodzinny dom” (the family home) (Słowacki, incidentally, was born after the last partition of Poland). Another important Romantic poet, Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821–1883), described Poland in *Quidam* as “wielki dom” (a great home).

During the years when Poland was stripped of its identity, appearing nameless on the map, “dom” was also represented by the Polish language. Artur Oppman (1867–1931) wrote in one of his lyrics, “Mowo polska! Ojczyzno i domie!” (Polish language! Fatherland and home!). This meaning of home, memorialized in Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, was still quite popular in the twentieth century, in particular, in the émigré literature. The best known usage of this meaning can be found in one of Julian Tuwim's (1894–1953) poems, in which he equated two notions: “ojczyzna-polszczyzna” (fatherland-Polish language).

The biblical expression “z domu niewoli” (from the home of enslavement) was given new coinage when Józef Korzeniowski (1820–1869; Joseph Conrad's father) applied it to his exile to Siberia, where he was deported by the Russian authorities for his participation in the preparation for the 1863 uprising against imperial Russia. Later, the phrase, used as a citation, appeared in Juliusz Żuławski's work, as well as the title of Beata Obertyńska's famous memoir about Polish prisoners in the Soviet Union during World War II.

Maria Konopnicka (1842–1910), a Polish woman poet from the Positivist period, defined Warsaw in her poem “W Warszawie” (In Warsaw) as “dom ducha” (the spiritual home), while in another poem she wrote, “budujemy ojczyźnie dom wolności i siły” (we are building for our fatherland a home of freedom and strength). In *Wyzwolenie* (Liberation) by Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907), the main protagonist in his Shakespearean monologue confesses that “dziś jest we własnym domu” (today I am in my own home). The moralistic meaning of the home was employed by Gabriela Zapolska in her play

entitled *Moralność pani Dulskiej* (Mrs. Dulska's morality) in the expression "brudy swoje prać w domu" (to wash one's dirty laundry in one's own home). Most recently, the critic Jacek Trznadel alluded to this meaning of the home in the title of his book *Hańba domowa* (Domestic disgrace), which he dedicated to the participation of Polish writers in the sovietization of Polish literature.

There are hundreds of such examples in Polish literature. They belong to those aspects of Polish literature that, perceived from the outside and ahistorically, are unintelligible. In this context, Herling-Grudziński's writings give special problems to his critics, especially when they confront his *Dziennik pisany nocą* (Journal written at night). Seemingly, it is a text devoid of literary elements. However, like Gombrowicz's *Diary*, to which Herling's work has been frequently compared, its literariness is deeply hidden and—as in many Polish modernist works—subordinated to the narrator's very personal point of view. In the following chapter, I intend to explore both the symbolic meaning inscribed in the seemingly neutral descriptions and reminiscences, and the unity of landscapes and the mythology of the family home (in the sense of homeland).

Old Stories and Descriptions

In his commentaries on his own works, Herling often uses the type of chronicle narration, which includes a translucent and concise style, stories drawn from real rather than invented events, histories deciphered from ancient scribbles or legends, and, occasionally, somebody else's literary or nonliterary works. In other words, Herling recalls the traditional art of storytelling in which the preciseness of a word, the distinctiveness of the storyteller's role, the sharpness of events and personalities, and above all, the clarity emerging from the story, all turn out to be not only the basis of the narrative art but the writer's artistic and philosophical axiology. *Inny świat* (A world apart), *Dziennik pisany nocą* (Journal written at night), and all his short stories—from "Skrzydła ołtarza" (The wings of the altar) to "Zima w zaświatach" (Winter in the world of the dead) and "Schronisko lunatyczne" (Hostel of lunatics)—exemplify many of Herling's commentaries to his own works as well as his remarks on the contemporary art of storytelling.

Herling, the chronicler, the commentator, the diarist—author of pre-

cise, intellectual discourses—overshadows a quite different writer: Herling the storyteller, hidden in shadow, a writer fascinated with ancient history and stories about the secrets of human destiny. This Herling is overshadowed because the stories are not the only stable element of his prose. It is composed of descriptions, especially those of landscapes, which seem to be at first merely narrative pauses in the text: gasps for air between episodes of a story, or, as in *Journal Written at Night* (*JWN*), between commentaries on his readings and political issues or reports of conversations.

It seems obvious that the conventions of a traditional story, to which Herling refers with pleasure, have after all a reserved right to characterize the background for the action, the landscape, the time of day or season. Hence Herling the chronicler or Herling the traveler does seemingly nothing else but fulfill this "narrative duty." He does that with a pious devotion to detail and a sensual feeling for the most delicate changes of smells, colors, and sounds. His descriptions, often metaphorical, seem sometimes to be fragments of the clearest literature, poetic "ornaments of beauty." Comparisons are Herling's favorite stylistic device, bringing additional meaning to his descriptions. They are potential interpretations, comments, and discourses that in a metaphorical shortcut add meaning to the world we look at.¹

The descriptions of cities and towns, valleys and hills, the landscapes of Umbria, Tuscany, Rome, and Naples, walks in Abruzzo, descriptions of the Bay of Naples, and above all the landscape of Dragonea serve as narrative pauses in Herling's stratified and multilevel discourse.

Landscapes

If we read all of Herling's works, including the *Journal*, as a many-layered literary piece, then these seemingly random and disinterested descriptions of walks or landscapes reveal themselves to be not only a stable poetic motif of his prose but also one of the keys to its hidden meanings and secrets. This is the subject of my research, and I will quote extensively from his writings to illustrate this facet of his work.

Orvieto, Todi, Assisi, Gubbio, Perugia.

There is a place on the route to Todi where one can pull over and bid farewell to Orvieto from afar. On the other side of the valley, on a hill, the

morning fog outlines the city's contours. Rose air currents sharpen the lines, and, in turn, feather them into the sky. A herd of sheep with jingling bells moves across the valley, and horses feed on a green meadow beside the path. A row of trees marks the stream's course. Above the scattered houses, columns of smoke spin and wobble. There is something unreal, dreamy, slow, and that is how I will remember the whole of Umbria, a bordered region where time lingers, stops, and then moves on again with laziness. Except for Perugia and Assisi, where tourists and pilgrims congregate, other cities are asleep.

I own a few novelties and additions to this small trip to Umbria besides the confirmed impressions or those refreshed in another piece. It happens that the most important is the process of viewing or, even more, its beginning. (*JWN*, April 20–25, 1975, 105).

With characteristic precision, Herling constructs separate descriptions. The observer's position is very clear and allows him to specify almost perfectly his positioning in the landscape; there are the foreground and the background; one can see even the distances between separate objects observed by Herling. One can see the conscious perceptual activities of the observer, who does not subordinate his sensual fascination with the object even while he expresses his admiration. But the sensuality of Herling's descriptions are more intellectual than expressionistic. Hence they engage nature actively; they are not receptive or passive. The landscape as described by Herling never dominates the observer, nor becomes autonomous: descriptions of landscape in Herling's writings constitute a rare example of keenness for the subject in Polish literature.

Landscape in Herling's prose is not, then, an object that captivates the observer, but rather a kind of perceptual, intellectual, or continual "reading" task. This landscape has something in which the observer notices a barely perceptible characteristic or value, or even a meaning that requires interpretation. In this passage, Herling's landscape is like a great book, language, or text, all common motifs in literature for centuries.

We entered silence whose deadness constituted a form of stillness of time. Landscapes not only have their own language but also their own cadence, as in a piece of good prose based on an individual and unique enunciation of words. Here, as we were approaching Subiaco, the landscape's cadence was like the pulse of bated breath. (*JWN*, January 8, 1983, 234–35)

Landscape in Herling's prose "exists and enchants," but most of all, it has meaning and symbolism. Let us take as an example the description of "a

morning walk with four stops from Dragonea to Cava dei Tirreni," which Herling ends with a characteristic point:

Tino di Camaino, a famous Sieneese painter of the eleventh century, would have called the four stops on the four-kilometer walk from Dragonea Day and Night. Following the style of the illuminated manuscripts of the abbey [where di Camaino is buried] a wise miniature painter could have enclosed in four small pictures the Figure of the World so helplessly and confusedly spoken about in the philosophy books. (*JWN*, July 17, 1984, 56)

Hence, according to Herling, in four stops during an ordinary tourist walk someone could notice "four pictures of the Figure of the World," which is a subject for metaphysical, ontological, and even theological reflections. Therefore the description of a landscape has something that is absent from the landscape itself and that belongs solely to the sight of the viewer. We are a step away from a biblical differentiation between those who look but do not see and those who see even though they are not looking. But in Herling's prose there is a third variant of this motif: to look in order to see more than the eyes take in. To view, in Herling's prose, means to paint as well.

In Herling's narration, descriptions of landscape are accompanied by descriptions of landscapes from paintings by Turner, Corot, Piranesi, de La Tour, and other masters of landscape painting. Herling values in their works what he writes down himself in the reports from his tourist walks, namely the intellectual or sensual margin over the observed object or the whole landscape, what in nonhuman nature is a mystery, a psychological and spiritual value, or an "unspoken speech."

"Landscape painters (no pejorative connotation) calm the storms in people's hearts by contemplation of a landscape. Turner"—Herling calls him earlier "the great drama writer of the landscape"—"reminds a person of his insignificance and fragility in the face of nature" (*JWN*, January 5–10, 1984, 19).

Baudelaire made it clear in his sketch on Corot's painting: "If one can put together the composition of a landscape with the structure of a man. . . ." One can, although not as Baudelaire, who was fascinated by the "anatomical harmony" of Corot's landscapes. I saw Corot's exhibit in the Orangerie twice in June, and each time I had the same impression: that he painted landscapes like a portrait painter who is in love with his live sitters and possessed by a fever to enter their "souls." (*JWN*, July 20, 1975, 116–17)

Someone said about [Vermeer's] *The View of Delft* that it is "a still life of a city." He probably meant the hollowing out of a still object in search of its soul. Or the joining of calligraphic precision with the abstraction of an ideal image. To capture and keep forever this one and only brief moment that allows us to see the awakening of life in inanimate matter. . . . Vermeer had distilled from lusterless commonness the clear essence of eternity. (*JWN*, June 19, 1986, 199)

For Herling to describe a landscape is to construct meanings, while to see is to give sight a meaning, to search the depths for the hidden, unseen limits of reality. The description of landscape in Herling's writings is not only a constructive element of his prose but also a constructed element. It is a narrative figure that arranges the meanings (sometimes hidden) of the writer's story. Commentaries on the phenomena of observation, viewing, and contemplation in his narration frequently give cause for reflection. In his narrative writings the sensual powers of viewing and the intellectual powers of reckoning are the two sides of the same page of the mind.

In his comments to Alberto Moravia's novel *The Voyeur*, Herling writes ironically:

To live with eyesight but without thinking . . . Such a principle leads indeed to the metamorphosis of the art of storytelling into the boring obstinacy of storytelling at all costs, even when one has nothing to tell except for a detailed and circumstantial recording of viewed reality.

I cannot imagine good prose—novel or short story—without a certain, major or minor, sensation of mystery and ambiguity of existence, or without the gift of seeing being unequal to the ability of looking. The danger lies in a rough-hewn explicitness and the fear of the unknown and seemingly inscrutable. The man who looks thoughtlessly, whose "sight school" replaces imagination and intuition, takes from the art of narration its deepest reason for being. (*JWN*, May 20, 1985, 128)

Next, we find in a microstory on the "eighty-year-old antiquarian and erudite V." a commentary quoting both the antiquarian's words and the writer's own point:

Having taken my hand in his, with calm vision [he] clings to the view that spreads from here . . . To contemplate is to feel with one's rigid, cold fingers the same long-inflicted wounds. When we die, we thank God at least for

having created us mortal. And we look and look, not knowing where this terrible pain still is coming from. Probably only the pain is clear and real in old age, like the pain of old eyes, washed with tears that cannot be stopped, staring at the remnants of a vanishing world. (*JWN*, November 15, 1976, 185)

Landscape and Memory

What, in descriptions of Herling's landscapes, constitutes the beginning of new meanings?

A few years earlier during a stay in Munich, in a period of alcoholic escapades from one pub to another, I found myself one April evening in the courtyard of a large old apartment house, a mammoth—such courtyards surely do not exist anymore—filled with the acrid smells of soups, fresh-baked bread, beer and cheap vodka, the yelling and swearing of the janitor, the squabbling of tenants, children's shouts, the familiar uproar of Warsaw's prewar Pańska or Żelazna Streets. (*JWN*, January 5–10, 1984, 16–17)

First is a story of walks in Munich, then a description of an apartment house, of smells and sounds coming from the courtyard, and in the end an unexpected point that establishes a bridge between this picture and the coloring of Warsaw streets as remembered by Herling in his youth.

Herling's description of the viewed landscape becomes a modifier of memories. Looking ahead becomes going inside oneself; a trip in space becomes a journey in time: the observer's eyes, looking at the outside world, are replaced by an inner sight or, as it used to be called, the eyes of the soul. But I am getting ahead of the next analysis—this inner sight completely directs the given functions of most of Herling's descriptions.

For someone who was raised amid ponds and rivers and has been living at the seashore for thirty years, looking at a countryside river before sunset is as if one's inner sight has been reversed. Old pictures, shaking off a long trance or lethargy, emerge slowly. There are a few horizons, shaded by sand dunes and clumps of osiers, white-rose smoke orchids stuck in the most distant one. Then the pallid rose color gets denser and enters into a thick red; silence also thickens and one can only hear some distant, dull, echoless calling. (*JWN*, June 16, 1984, 50)

In this fragment of *Journal Written at Night*, the pictures of memory are immersed in a long lethargy and rest there asleep, absent, and still; only the landscape, gazed upon by an observer, gives them an impulse to exist. The continuity of the real pictures and those of memory seems to be felt physically. The former are the reverses of the latter, penetrating one another according to the mechanism of a literary or film metamorphosis. It does not suffice to say that the real landscape calls them to life because in their existence there is another secret power of excessive existence, which is their own powerful energy, a power that vehemently seizes the speaker's consciousness. The stylistic animation of these pictures, which suddenly "crawl out" of memory's "lethargy," is particularly suggestive in Herling's description and creates, it seems to me, a characteristic counterpoint to his description of Italian landscapes. Herling the traveler and observer reigns over the viewed landscape with his "outside eye," whereas Herling the writer, preserving the memories aroused by the landscape, seems to totally obey the overwhelming power of pictures that "crawl out" of memory. If in Herling's prose the observer and the traveler decipher the hidden meanings of the real landscape, and even impose them on the landscape, then memory imposes on and dictates to the speaker its own pictures. The creator of the real landscape's meanings is, at the same time, surprised by the power of his own memory's pictures.

Besides the mechanism of metamorphosis, which allows a smooth passage from forms just seen to shapes already entered into memory, landscapes or objects viewed by Herling also liberate a mechanism of sudden evocation. In prose this is, of course, a Proustian motif. It is no longer about a landscape but about a certain object, situation, smell, or color that evokes, almost magically, memory's pictures from the most profound depths:

How does the power of Proust's madeleine work? Our memory stores still pictures that resemble faded photographs. The madeleine makes them alive at once, as a stone thrown into the still water or the film effect when an interrupted scene is continued. Standing on a bridge, leaning over the balustrade, I closed my eyes, my heart was beating. Landing-stages on the Tiber in postwar Rome, music coming from the old gramophones, dances on shipboard, jumping into the water on hot days, cheap and acidic barrel wine, warming up, happiness. Yes, happiness. We already knew we would not return, that it was the beginning of emigration and exile, but it was an authentic happiness after years spent on prison board beds and in military

tents. At dusk we would go to *villino* in the Prati district, K. would do the shopping on the way, sometimes we would sit in the tavern Gallo d'Oro. (JWN, May 13, 1984, 39)

And here there are two other stories recalled according to the laws of Proust's madeleine. In the following passage, Herling creates a literary myth that shifts the meanings of the world observed with an "outside eye" to the sphere of symbolic meanings, to the mythical area of memory and private cosmology:

The Eolian Islands off the shores of Sicily. . . .

The first Pearl drawn out of the darkness is Stromboli . . . The second is Panarea, the journey's aim . . . There is no electricity on the island and in the evening they put an oil lamp on the table. What are the oil lamp stories about? Mine are about the moment between childhood and early youth. The things we see, uncover, feel "at the threshold" belong to our most secret mythology. Poetry consists perhaps in our trying as adults to give back to things and feelings the uniqueness they possess only at first touch. What we call evocation, retreating in time, is an attempt to see the world anew and again, for the second time, in its pre-designed form. So in the little house on the pond there was no electricity and in the evening the World of First Elements would be created. A word meant more than a sign. Pond, Meadow, Forest, Windmill, Love, Hate, Fear—almost all clear categories, "in themselves," as gates to regions where the human foot has never stepped. It is later that "reality" opens and pushes clairvoyances, naive symbols, magical spells somewhere down deep. And the whole adult, mature life misses this singleness, uniqueness, clarity, mystery of sight that happens without words until its irrevocable disappearance. Irrevocable? Returns sometimes happen to great writers, the creators of myths. (JWN *Panarea*, June 24–July 2, 1977, 209–11)

But every one of us, deep in the bottom of his memory, stores his own small history, the more vivid, the deeper one goes into childhood. On the way back, we stopped at the sources of the River Sele. Green water with mud, thatch, shrubs on the bank. For the full picture a boy with a fishing rod is missing; a boy sitting in the bushes with his fishing rod, staring for hours at a still float, excited at the sight of young pike jumping out of the water from time to time or of a school of bass that makes a wave swell. Dry and edgy clod in the larynx. (JWN, July 7, 1976, 178–79)

These are two of Herling's most self-revealing commentaries in which he uncovers the sphere of the writer's mythology. The literary heritage of these

passages is rich, as Herling recalls Leśmian and Schulz, and elsewhere, Czesław Miłosz.

Memory and Dreaming

Dreaming—or the ambiguity of sensations in a state of limbo between consciousness and dreaming—constitutes an intermediary sphere between reality and memory in Herling’s writings. This sphere is filled with the vagueness of reality’s contours, with an obsession with returns to some of its elements, with the uncertainty of memory’s origins, and most of all with the sensed effacement of the border between what is really seen and what is only remembered, recalled from memory but apparently relived with consciousness.

On May 26, 1978, Herling asks himself, “Am I preserving, after many years, Capodimorte’s painting or just a dream about it?” (*JWN*, 255). Three years earlier he had written:

A linguistic dream, I cannot name it in other words. This sudden entering (more precisely: running) into the landscape of childhood and youth is a frequent motif in dreams, although in the case of emigrants it has a special aftertaste. The novelty was that I entered my dream not alone but in the company of my foreign friends and all of a sudden, by a dike in S., all of them began talking to me in Polish. (*JWN*, March 4, 1975, 99)

The sensation of unreality of what is real and of the impossibility of shifting into the past, together with the overwhelming power of pictures that “crawl out” from a lethargy of memory, changes in Herling’s writings at times into a state of almost “controlled dreaming.” That way, what used to be specific in the past changes its status. While a fact from memory has caused “a clod in the larynx” and a faster heartbeat, a fact from the frontier between dreaming and consciousness becomes a nostalgic feeling of unreality, a mental escape from the world that hurts more as it’s emptied of what constitutes the living memory of the observer.

Wandering around Rome, shortly before midnight, I arrived in the Prati district. Soon after the war we moved into a *villino* owned by a retired conservatory professor. We could use the room we rented and a little glass

tower on the roof where K. used to paint. In the evenings we would often stop by for a glass of wine at the Gallo d’Oro, located on a neighboring square near the Tiber. The villino with the glass tower is still there, although the professor’s nameplate no longer hangs on the gate. Nobody on the square remembers the wine tavern “Under the Golden Cock.” Had it been here? No, it had never been here. Maybe in your dreams, Sir. *So lo ha sognato, caro signore.* (*JWN Rome*, July 26, 1971, 65)

The mystery here is clarified by Herling’s note, made a month later.

Before we left for Naples, I would draw my sister out to talk about our home neighborhood. I circled around the Dark Pond, and closing my eyes I would see with an absolute clarity the alder dike, tufts of water lilies, rushes near the meadow, floodgates and a sluice, the shallow brook circling our house, and huge larches standing near it. Does it matter that most of this picture has disappeared, that the pond has been drained and harrowed, and had I troubled a young man about the dark waters of my childhood, he would have muttered in reply, shaking his arms, “Maybe in your dreams, Sir.” The reality of childhood is not as fragile and loose as the reality of adulthood. Lucky is he who can preserve it forever in a description. I envy Miłosz his *Issa Valley*. (*JWN Shafuza*, August 21, 1971, 70)

The Mythology of the Home

Herling’s descriptions of Italian landscapes are saturated with details of nature and architecture, they vibrate with various colors, puzzle with their great number of emotional shades and meanings given by Herling the observer. Meanwhile, the writer’s mythological land, emotionally much more compelling than the Italian landscape, is composed of clusters of memory’s pictures. On the one side, Herling evokes the dazzling variety of Italian nature and culture, while on the other side there exists an ascetic world reduced to the magic names from his homeland: Alder Dike, Dark Pond, Water Lilies, Shallow Brook, Little Orchard. What did the objects preserved in them really look like? What happened in these images from the past? What is their “fatal power” about? The answers to these and other questions should be drawn from various of Herling’s prose works, separated by anywhere from ten to twenty years. Questions are most frequently broken off, hung, paused—as if

they were finishing with words an earlier thought but never said aloud. In any case, this effort would be undertaken in vain, for there is no answer to these questions in Herling's prose. There is none because the landscapes of childhood cannot be resurrected.

I could quote Proust's chapter on the madeleine, especially the comparable sentence on "drops that bear the heavy construction of memories," but in my case it is not about a comparison. Yesterday, imprisoned by a thunderstorm in a cottage owned by a peasant I am acquainted with, I relived in the raindrops' music on the tiles the birth of evocation. But the passing time gradually destroys the "construction of memories": it used to be a composition of pictures and scenes in motion, of sharp facial features, voices removed, yet alive; now it seems to be a cluster of dead, still photographs, matte, mute, and stained all over. Whose face is this? Whose arms are these and what is this person saying? Where does this path lead? Why is the river silent and disappears in the darkness? Where do shrubs grow? Who is in the group of people on the dike? Was the forest of the first love behind this cloud of smoke?

With my eyes closed I did not feel the fire parching from the hearth but a piercing pain. (*JWN*, November 23, 1976, 186–87)

Even though the motif of Proust's madeleine from *À la recherche du temps perdu* is recalled, different rules govern the evocations of memories in Herling's prose. In Proust there is no piercing pain with one's eyes closed or dry, edgy clod in the larynx. That's why Herling indulges in a subtle struggle with Proust in all the memoirlike fragments of his prose. According to Herling, there is no general memory, or memory in general, identical to everything experienced. Its contents—emotional contents, for example—differ for each person since memory touches, for each, a reality of a different shape. In Herling's prose, pictures that recall Italian landscapes from memory's lethargy toward life belong to the memory of an immigrant, an exiled man, a wanderer, a pilgrim.

And it is not simply memory of the inevitable passage of time in any place but rather memory of the catastrophe of history. It is no longer about contemplating the past or evoking the paradise of childhood but about the secret meaning of individual existence, the roots of one's own destiny and how to determine one's identity. The passing of time is distancing in space as well. Hence memory in Herling's prose is not a contemplation of the past

or of lost time but a kind of fever, whereas the journey into the depths of one's personal past is a kind of emotional illness. "Proust contemplates past time and never the passage," notes Herling and adds polemically, "No, not passed time! Time resembling a temperature graph hung by the bed of a hospital patient" (*JWN*, February 7, 1978, 240–41).

I wondered last year what moved me the most in Dragonea, what (I would have said) allowed me the day after the arrival to "give peace to my nerves." There are two things: one is when just after midnight Casa Rossa is immersed in darkness and the drawbridges linking it with the world seem risen in the skies and dogs bark persistently on the other side of the canyon; the other is the dawn behind the Mountain of the Cross—drowsy yet triumphant. Now I know why. After my mother's death, for a few years, this was how my days would begin and end in S. I commuted on a train to school in K.; in springtime I would leave the house at dawn, it would set in during my forest walk and explode with brightness upon my reaching the railway station, after having seen the train's smoke behind the hill in R.. At dusk I would return to S. and collapse in sleep. I would wake up after midnight to do my homework. Our house was immersed in darkness, cut off from the world, and dogs' barking came from the other side of the pond and the river. Is it then this way that in Dragonea I catch a still-existing piece of my shadow in the past? So do these matte remnants move me and allow me to take a deeper breath? (*JWN*, July 23, 1974, 72)

This is the source of the intensity of emotional experiences and descriptions by Herling the landscape artist. In Italian landscapes the writer notices with his "inner eye" the land of his childhood. He knows that no efforts of his memory will give him back the past. However, the effort of the "outside eyes" so openly focused on the Dragonea's landscape or the waters of the Bay of Naples seems to overcome the shapes of reality. The more precise their description, the more intensive the experience of their colors, smells, game of lights and shadows, the more clearly delineated from their sharp picture the presource of all emotional experiences described by Herling: the Alder Dike and the Dark Pond near the house in S.

I crawled out of the house in the evening and rolled down the steep lane to the sea. Even the benches usually occupied by prostitutes waiting for clients were empty. Lights on Posillipo and upper Naples turned on like a spider's net. A few sailboats pinned like children's toys to the bay's flat surface.

Twenty-two years in this city neither beautiful nor ugly, which I have never liked or hated, but felt indifferent. Thirty-eight years ago, I lay on the grass in what used to be our orchard and listened to the murmur of the brook flowing from the dike. Two weeks later, a distant explosion of a bomb came from Skarzysko and reached me in the same place. This much has been left and must be carried further on: “the dark love of the unhappiest of lands.” (*JWN*, August 15, 1977, 216)

Four years earlier, Herling had explained why only “this much”—“only” or “so much”—“must be carried further on”: “One dies or at least disappears without love for places marked by a supposedly narrow horizon” (*JWN*, May 14, 1973, 216). This “narrow horizon” in Herling’s memories constitutes the “orchard” and the “murmur of the brook flowing from the dike,” “the alder dike,” “shrubs by the pond’s shores,” “forest.” Nothing more.

Polish literature is full of mythical lands of childhood. For at least two hundred years Lithuania has been made to come alive by Mickiewicz; Ukraine by Słowacki, Stempowski, Haupt, Vincenz, Iwaszkiewicz, Odojewski; Wilno by Miłosz and Konwicki; the Great Lithuanian Principality by Józef Mackiewicz—I could name many more such private motherlands, and the list of the writers who described them would be infinite. Herling’s prose—in the measure I have reconstructed it here—belongs indisputably to this literary tradition.

However, the mythology of the land of childhood as created by Herling has a place of its own in this tradition. Maybe Miron Białoszewski’s room with his wardrobe, table, and the “Mount Carmel” of a pillow create an analogy to universal measures of the “narrow horizon” of Herling’s mythological land of his childhood.

The motif of the “land of childhood years” that I have recalled here, which may seem incomparably big when contrasted with the narrow horizon of Herling’s memories, is entirely immersed in Mickiewicz’s formula: “I see and describe since I am longing after you.” All writers—pilgrims, exiles, immigrants—have repeated this formula. Seemingly, Herling does nothing else. However, out of the three dimensions of Mickiewicz’s formula, Herling keeps only two: “I see” (that is, “I recall”) and “I am longing after you.” The third, “I describe,” is missing from Herling’s narrative prose on the land of childhood. Its absence marks the distinct character of Herling’s writings.

Traditionally, this motif sets up the epic character of the memories of

the land of childhood, due to the broadened role of description. I probably do not need to restate here what the epic character of this motif is in the works of Mickiewicz, Miłosz, Mackiewicz, Vincenz, Odojewski, or Haupt. It is enough to say that it is composed of the most minute detail of nature and objects, descriptions of traditions or social phenomena, as well as of the whole story of remembered events. We will not find anything from this documentary epic passion in Herling’s works. There are no visual details of the homeland or details of short stories. Yet to accuse Herling of not knowing how to write an epic description of a landscape or tell a story from the past is unthinkable.

However, instead of a description of the land of childhood, we have only an evocation of still objects; instead of sensuality of detail, only signs of the author’s being moved. Only one explanation comes to mind: in lieu of the detailed descriptions of the land of childhood, as would be required by Mickiewicz’s mode, Herling describes the landscapes of contemporary Italy with extraordinary precision.

Now it is fitting to return to Herling’s confession that I quoted earlier in the text: “I envy Miłosz his *Issa Valley*.” Herling does not envy Miłosz the Nieważa Valley (the real name of Issa) for his remembrance of his own Dark Pond, but rather for his ability to preserve the memories from childhood in an epic way. It is not solely about the memories, but about the narrative way in which they are presented. I am recalling here the most important, it seems to me, theme in all of Herling’s work: the theme of silence and indescribability, the theme of the sphere that is beyond the rule of words.²

Reality

Let us leave the myths preserved or created by the author’s memory. Herling saw his family’s home and the Kielce region for the last time in October 1939. What does this minute land really look like—this “local motherland,” this *Heimat* the writer has been looking for so intensively for nearly fifty years in the pictures evoked during his Italian wanderings?

The pond there does not exist anymore, drained and harrowed after the last war, during which the Germans had ordered to cut down the Alder Dike

but these are not the only reasons that the old photograph, very “poetic” according to the conventions of the epoch, has a mythological touch (or after-taste). During my childhood and early youth the Dark Pond was a kind of “infatuation,” “amazement” typical for that age. Frankly, it had remained until recently as the only clearly visible point in the gradually misty nostalgia. One misses the source of the first commotion, revelation, and initiation, the scene of the first love encounter, even though one knows well that both the source and the scene have been buried and swamped. After some time, nostalgia becomes one of many habits one can no longer verify. That is, it becomes ordinary, fades, and whitens from loss of blood and takes on the characteristics of a plant in an herbarium or of a butterfly pinned on velvet in a glass case. It exists and becomes tender, time uses it up and at the same time preserves it in some strange way. The inner voice whispers, “You have something of your own, the remains of the roots.” Until the moment when a confrontation draws near. Like this photograph, picturing not a still-living past but an irreversibly dead and remote past. Frankly, I have just buried the Dark Pond thanks to this photograph sent to me by K. K. (*JWN*, April 23, 1990; in Herling-Grudziński 1990a)

Nostalgia for the “private motherland” resembles a butterfly “pinned on velvet.” This picture has already appeared in Herling’s writing: he saw the sailboats in the Bay of Naples pinned on the surface of water. Pinned, therefore momentarily immobilized—momentarily because only the pictures of the land of childhood had been imprinted permanently on the memory. Now even the nostalgia for them is only a dried exhibit of memory.

Is that really the way it is? Only the writer can resolve it in the subsequent narrative parts of *Journal Written at Night*, while a commentator on Herling’s prose can only note that this unwritten story about the Dark Pond, Herling’s Issa Valley, has been developing in the writer’s memory for several decades. It pulsates and waves with the high and low tides of memory and emotion. It may seem a paradox that only memory and not reality acts as the life-giving impulse of his prose. And it is memory, as we well remember, that rules completely over reality. So even though the sight of the Dark Pond photographs forced the writer to “bury” the pictures of “the remote past,” the landscapes of Dragonea, Tuscany, and the Bay of Naples can pull them out one day from memory’s “lethargy.” They “crawl out” without being asked because they are imprinted forever in memory like traces of insects in stone.

Eighteen years earlier Herling wrote:

I believe in the existence of myth-producing landscapes. After all these years I still can deceive myself, deceived by the memories of childhood, but I would swear that the Świętokrzyskie Mountains are such a fertile region in Poland. Isn’t it there where the Stone Pilgrim moves on his knees in a field by the road from Nowa Słupia? A melancholic reflection: I will remember him longer than the landscape he has grown into. (*JWN*, November 3, 1972, 169)

Herling has created out of the memory of the Dark Pond and the Alder Dike in Suchedniów a microcosm of private mythology. Out of the Stone Pilgrim he has created a macrocosm of human history, a symbolic summary of human destiny. He has found in both a formula for his own writing, the meaning and goals of literature. “Stories of initiation”—writes Herling in the margin of *The Death of Ivan Illich* by Tolstoy—“are composed and conducted from beginning to end in such a way that the reader could feel a ritual of initiation into a mystery. . . . Their form is a clear inquiry. And while writing my stories I have always missed this special form, almost humble in its narration” (*JWN*, August 11, 1985, 141). “While writing stories”—but also describing Italian landscapes and evoking the pictures of the Dark Pond and Alder Dike in Suchedniów—Herling was guided by this “dark love of the unhappiest land” “and this is the arrow the bow of exile lets out first.”

The narrative returns to the land of childhood in Herling’s works are like a palimpsest—one must extract them from underneath several layers of the writer’s postwar immigrant life. These returns to the impossible, as I call them, create Herling’s private mythology and utopia of youth. However, the stories published in recent years uncover yet another dimension of Herling’s memory of his childhood home: the vehement conflict with his father, the longing for his dead mother, and the drastic character of his initiation into the adult world all show a drama of young emotions, still unexpressed by the writer in his works.¹ This autobiographical character of all Herling’s stories, at times deeply hidden, allows us to see in them also (or most of all) the continuous search for the truth about oneself.

Notes

1. This function of Herling’s descriptions was noticed years ago by Barbara Skarga in her commentary on *A World Apart*: “By composing the facts and contrasting them

with others, by rendering experiences and atmospheres with shades of words, and even by a certain deformation of events, the artist extracts from them a deeper and by far more important meaning. . . . Herling writes: 'One could have been sure that the prisoner when drowning hadn't made a single move, quite the opposite, overtaken by the madness of starvation, he had poured into himself the useless ballast of boiling water and one night would have drowned to the bottom like a stone, and the day after the dawn would have thrown on the shallow waters of his board-bed his monstrously swollen corpse.' How rich this sentence is in information and how greatly put together. . . . One could lecture about it or write a dissertation. They both would be shocking due to the subject. And what kind of menace is brought by this succinct sentence" (1984, 176).

There are many more examples of comparisons that in Herling's prose become interpretative points of descriptions (or stories sometimes) and one can find them in *A World Apart* and other works. In this chapter I am interested solely in *Journal Written at Night* and not in the poetics of descriptions, but in the interpretation of one of their hidden meanings.

2. I discuss this motif in Bolecki 1997b.

3. See Herling-Grudziński 1998. I discuss the previous short stories by Herling in Herling-Grudziński and Bolecki 1997 and 2000.

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