

THE MAGIC OF THE STORY: STENDHALIAN TRADITION,  
AS OBSERVED IN PROSE WORKS OF GUSTAW HERLING\*

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Gustaw Herling (1919-2000), eminent Polish writer, literary critic and essayist, resident in Naples after World War II, is commonly known as the author of *A World Apart*,<sup>1</sup> a memoir first published in 1951 with a foreword by Bertrand Russell. Its publication was a world-scale event due to Herling's shockingly realistic descriptions of Soviet gulags for political prisoners, which make this work highly valued even today. Herling also authored *The Journal Written at Night*, the intellectual diary he kept for the most part of his life. Extracts from this latter work, together with selected short stories by Herling, were published in English in a volume entitled *Volcano and Miracle: A Selection of Fiction and Nonfiction from The Journal Written at Night*.<sup>2</sup>

*The Journal Written at Night*, Herling's opus magnum, is comparable to the most eminent examples of diary writing in the world history of literature. The scope of subjects he discusses is unusually wide, ranging from social and political issues to questions concerning culture, in particular literature and painting, which were among the writer's main interests. In his journal, Herling reveals himself as an insightful observer of the intellectual currents of his age, but also as an inspiring thinker and a discerning and original literary critic. While he devotes much space to the discussion of works by other prose writers, such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Henry James and Franz Kafka, he also focuses on the problems concerning his own literary techniques. A special motif which often comes to the foreground in this context is reflections on the foundations of literary art, its sources, inspirations, and its inner

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\* Translated by Dorota Chabrajska.

<sup>1</sup> See G. Herling-Grudziński, *A World Apart*, New York, Roy Publishers, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> See G. Herling, *Volcano and Miracle: A Selection of Fiction and Nonfiction from The Journal Written at Night*, Selected and translated by R. Storm, New York, Viking, 1996. For more information see M. Jolly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, vol. 1, London-Chicago, Routledge, 2001, p. 424 ff.

determinants. Herling's intuitions, combined with his high literary culture and his broad intellectual horizons, are undoubtedly of universal significance.

In an entry referring to his own work, Herling states that, as a writer, he was formed in a particular way by George Orwell, but also by Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle) and Joseph Conrad,<sup>3</sup> who provided important literary inspirations for him. The literary forms he consciously chose and pursued were to a large extent determined by the work of the latter two writers. Herling emphasized that they had left an imprint on his short stories as well as on other forms of his artistic expression.

The present considerations will focus on an introductory discussion of this issue, in particular, on an attempt to identify and describe the nature of Stendhalian inspirations in Herling's works. Stendhal, a precursor of realism in literature, was frequently referred to by Herling, who shared his fascination with southern Italy, its unique local color and social life. In his *Journal Written at Night*, Herling confesses that reading works of this French writer and author of the famous aphorism: "A novel is a mirror that strolls along a highway," has always been an indescribable delight to him.<sup>4</sup> Stendhal's novella *Vanina Vanini*, part of his exquisite collection *Italian Chronicles* – says Herling in another entry in his journal – is a true literary gem, a twenty-pages-long masterpiece of prose fiction.<sup>5</sup>

Stendhalian inspiration in the works of Herling, too clear and too manifest to be overlooked in the general reception of his prose, has been frequently acknowledged by critics. However, the actual explication and scrutiny of this influence on Herling's prose leave a great deal to be desired, since, as often happens in such cases, numerous critical approaches lack a deeper reflection on the true nature of the observations being made. For instance, in the only monograph on Herling's literary techniques,<sup>6</sup> Stendhal's name is mentioned only once. Grażyna Borkowska, expert on modern Polish prose, was probably right in saying that the current state of research on the most significant qualities of Herling's prose, in particular on the various literary

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<sup>3</sup> See G. Herling, *Najkrótszy przewodnik po sobie samym*, Ed. by W. Bolecki, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2000, p. 90-92.

<sup>4</sup> See Id., *Dziennik pisany nocą 1971-1972*, Warszawa, Res Publica, 1990, p. 129 ff. (entry from June 21, 1972). I am using the Polish original of *The Journal Written at Night*, when there is no available English translation.

<sup>5</sup> See Id., *Dziennik pisany nocą 1973-1979*, cit., p. 196 ff. (entry from January 26, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> See A. Morawiec, *Poetyka opowiadań Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, Kraków, Universitas, 2000.

traditions which informed it, might be compared to “a puddle of water which is wide, but shallow”<sup>7</sup> (all translations are my own). On the one hand, critics frequently bring up the French writer’s name in the context of Herling’s output and point that taking Stendhal’s literary accomplishments into consideration is absolutely essential to the correct reading of Herling’s works. Yet, on the other hand, hardly any common points between the literary methods of the two writers have been established and no deeper analysis of Herling’s dependence on Stendhal has been attempted. The goal of the present paper is thus to reverse this trend and indicate the two most important elements of the parallel in question.

Traces of Stendhalian inspiration may be discerned already on the stylistic level of Herling’s literary works. While there is very much difference between the two writers, conditioned above all by the dissimilarities between Polish and French, which do not allow direct loan-words or blueprints of stylistic solutions, the dependence in question can be observed in the way both authors adopted a certain ideal for shaping narrative expression. On some occasions, Herling acknowledged his great admiration for Stendhal’s masterly narrative style and for his accomplishments in this respect. Without doubt, Stendhal’s prose, refined and purified to the borders of possibility, was considered by him an unattainable model to follow. While writing about Stendhal, Herling would observe that the French writer succeeded in the difficult task of giving the ideal shape to his prose, as well as in that of evading the trap of overly sophisticated narration which irritates the reader with its unbearable artificiality and apparent severance from the standards of natural speech. In his journal, Herling wrote:

Stendhal’s style: resistant to any temptation to use ornamentation, hostile to all kinds of ballast, scanty of adjectives, freed from the restraints of too rigorous an internal rhythm; this unmatched style was nourished by the 18th century prose, with a view, however, to its being parsimonious with regard to the expression of emotions rather than with regard to the communication of the results of reasoning.<sup>8</sup>

Herling emphasizes an uncommon paradox: the special literary value of the prose of the author of *The Charterhouse of Parma* originates from a skillful combination of two apparently contradictory tendencies which might be discerned in the style of his works. On the one hand, one may clearly discover in it an inclination to pursue prose that is consciously deprived of any

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<sup>7</sup> G. Borkowska, *Gustaw Herling-Grudziński: korzenie twórczości*, Warszawa, IBL, 1996, p. 121.

<sup>8</sup> G. Herling, *Dziennik pisany nocą 1973-1979*, cit., p. 196 ff. (entry from January 26, 1977).

means traditionally used to highlight the artistic value of the text and, simultaneously, consciously deprived of any means determining its emotional content by rendering real the sentiments expressed by the protagonists, who come alive and act as true characters of flesh and blood, torn by contradictory feelings and unexpectedly yielding to unforeseeable passions. On the other hand though, Stendhal's efforts to avoid such means do not result in strengthening the discursiveness of the text. Paradoxically, his prose does not become, as a result, more analytical, and its real value ultimately comes from the masterly presentation of intricate love tribulations as well as from perfectly and lively sketched psychological portraits. Thus Stendhal appears to have found his own style reconciling moderate sentimentalism with a specific dryness of form.

Such, at least, is Herling's interpretation of Stendhal's stylistic accomplishments; such are the sources of his fascination with the literary art of the French master of realism. A separate question, however, is to what extent Herling succeeded in implementing a similar stylistic ideal in his own works. He undoubtedly pursued the Stendhalian model, which can be seen in the way his particular texts are shaped: only infrequently does he resort to a discreet metaphor or introduce a functionally justified concentration of epithets, or other means enhancing the emotional dimensions of the narrative. Generally though, his prose is transparent and its mere linguistic form as such does not command the reader's attention. Herling consciously attributed function and meaning to other textual structures, in which he developed a considerable mastery, as can be seen, for instance, on the memorable pages of *A World Apart*.

There is, however, another and perhaps even more important and definitely more conspicuous Stendhalian inspiration manifest in Herling's output, and this one to a large extent shaped his entire work. In this respect, the influence that Stendhal exerted on Herling coincides with the latter's indebtedness to the already mentioned Joseph Conrad, excellent raconteur, familiar with the most interesting dock stories of his time, the author of the *Tales of Hearsay*.

While commenting on a piece from Stendhal's *Promenades dans Rome*, Herling described it as:

[a] typical Stendhalian 'hearsay' story, or simply one of the stories 'adopted' from a chronicler's tales and subjected to the procedure which has in itself something of reviving a dried and pinned butterfly.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, pp. 243-45 (entry from March 2, 1978).

Herling's remark is by no means surprising to those acquainted with the output of the author of the *Italian Chronicles*. In his renowned work *Stendhal et les problèmes du roman*,<sup>10</sup> Georges Blin, eminent French critic, wrote extensively on Stendhal as being a staunch advocate of the principle *facta, facta, nihil praeter facta*. In order to prove his claim, Blin even referred to facts from the biography of the French writer, pointing to some of his rather peculiar habits. For instance, while at work in his office, Stendhal would frequently insist on his customers to tell him all kinds of exciting and true stories. He was apparently so persistent that many of his clients indeed provided him with material for further literary work.

Interestingly, the principle quoted above as advocated by Stendhal might also be seen as Herling's own. The Polish writer frequently emphasized that, suffering from a lack of sufficient ability to create fictional plots, he must draw on stories coming from various external sources. As he himself explained, while writing fiction, he would usually resort to actual facts, draw on stories taken from old chronicles or on the colorful folk tales, not infrequently ones of the supernatural. Occasionally, he would also refer, while in a veiled way only, to his own lived experiences, as he did, for instance, in the short story entitled *The Hot Breath of the Desert*, in which he describes his stay in the cardiac intensive care unit after having suffered a heart attack.

Thus, in respect of attachment to facts, there is a clear resemblance between Herling and Stendhal. Ostensibly, it might seem purely accidental, given Herling's frequent self-reflexive statements in which he complained about the technical problems he experienced with inventing fictional plots. Yet one must bear in mind his open admiration for the Stendhalian convention of relating the hearsay, another form of which he saw in Conrad's works.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, on the basis of the entries from Herling's journal, one might go so far as to say that it was in that convention that he perceived the remedy for the fundamental malady of contemporary literature, the one essentially responsible for its crisis. Herling expressed his view of this issue in the following entries in his journal:

The novel is dead, this is certain. But what did it die of? Of an atrophy of the *Lust zum Fabulieren*. But why this atrophy? Because of the inability to see human fate in the only context that enhances the imagination of the narrator: in the context of mythi-

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<sup>10</sup> See G. Blin, *Stendhal et les problèmes du roman*, Paris, Éditions José Corti, 1958.

<sup>11</sup> Herling's literary art was also significantly influenced by Italian novellas, in particular by Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The traditional literary genre of novella had its roots (in respect of both its structure and origin) in the various forms of the oral transmission of frequently told hearsay tales.

cally developing history [...] Whatever the luminaries of literary criticism, mourning the novel lying in state, will come to invent, will ultimately boil down to the atrophy of taste, and so to the atrophy of 'plot making'.<sup>12</sup>

It would be absurd to speak about any stiff rules of the novel [...] And yet constructing 'human souls' detached from human stories, fiddling with the 'internal mechanics' of the characters while ignoring the 'external mechanics' of the action, ignoring the actually acting human beings, is tantamount to killing, in a novel, the essence of the novel, namely, the art of storytelling. The novel suffers from an atrophy of the sense, or rather taste, of the narrative.<sup>13</sup>

According to Herling, the only way to overcome this situation is taking a fresh turn back to pure recounting, and doing so despite the detrimental "temptation to fall back on description and analysis". Yet from where is the writer to derive narrative patterns? Herling would recommend using all kinds of chronicles as a source.<sup>14</sup> And, in his opinion, it is absolutely insignificant whether these will be dust-covered incunabula comprising historical chronicles or contemporary newspaper bulletins of current events. The important thing is that writers may extract from them specific narrative patterns which they will be able to use for the purpose of plot construction. Herling observed that the principle in question was perfectly embraced by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who would study carefully newspaper columns listing accidents, and do so with a view to collecting plots for his future literary works.<sup>15</sup>

The contents of the entries from Herling's journal discussed above strongly point to his deliberate and careful choice of narrative techniques. Even if it was the case that he did not have a sufficient ability to invent absolutely fictional stories and needed at least a real detail around which he might build up the plot, he considered this particular narrative technique as the only reasonable attitude in the face of today's general crisis of prose fiction, resulting from the fact that the center of gravity, in the case of the novel, has been shifted from presentation of events to delving into vacuous analyses and multiplying useless descriptions. In the literary controversy over the novel, Herling, as a writer, deliberately advocated pure plot-construction, thus assuming the role of a twentieth century chronicler and a tireless story collector.

<sup>12</sup> G. Herling, *Dziennik pisany nocą 1973-1979*, cit., p. 26 (entry from July 3, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 146 (entry from February 23, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, cit., p. 11 ff. (entry from March 6, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> See G. Herling, *Dziennik pisany nocą 1984-1988*, cit., p. 35 (entry from April 30, 1984).

In conclusion one might attempt to establish whether, in respect of the above discussed issues, Herling is merely an adroit continuator of a certain inherited tradition, or he can be considered as a creative contributor to the narrative art of the great masters of prose. Taking into consideration the entirety of his literary output, one may rightly claim that he successfully develops the Stendhalian convention of the hearsay and does so on three complementary levels.

Firstly, he consistently introduces the process of obtaining interesting stories into his fiction, making this process an element of the plot itself, in a way incorporating into his prose what in the case of Stendhal had a merely extraliterary dimension. Thus a typical plot invented by Herling follows a similar scheme: a character, as a rule identical with the author's narrator persona, finds out, in various circumstances, about an interesting event, a mysterious person or some puzzling facts. They appear interesting enough for the character to begin seeking and exploring whatever information is available on the subject. Thus the starting point of a typical story by Herling is the character's receiving some incomplete information which demands further inquiry. Not infrequently do these explorations and pursuits as such become the proper axis of Herling's fiction, while the plot structure assumes the shape of a palimpsest being gradually deciphered in the course of the story.

Secondly, Herling abandons purely realistic narrative, for instance, by introducing descriptions of the oneiric reality. It is significant though that his literary technique makes it difficult for the reader to draw a clear line between what pertains to the sphere of dreams and what is absolutely real. A characteristic example of such a strategy can be found in his story *Sny w pięknym Morodi* ("Dreams in the Beautiful Morodi"). Herling is certainly aware that this way of developing the narrative is not found in mature works of literary realism, to which he consciously refers.<sup>16</sup> In a self-reflexive comment, he states, somewhat provokingly, as follows:

I am simply against realistic narrative, as it is a gift only few have mastered, for instance Stendhal, Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky. I, in turn, do not have this talent and therefore I am a writer of what is 'in-between', of what pertains to another dimension – and such is the specificity of my short stories.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The term "realistic prose" is used here in the sense established in classic critical works such as I. Watt's *The Rise of the Novel: Studies In Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1957) or E. Deeds Ermarth's *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* (Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> G. Herling, W. Bolecki, *Rozmowy w Neapolu*, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Szpak, 2000, p. 13.

And thirdly, while in the case of Stendhal hearsay stories are subject to excellent analysis, with a view to revealing either a specific human type or mechanisms that determine human emotions, the mechanics of Herling's fiction seems different. His prose is focused instead on revealing the truth that human nature is virtually unfathomable, the short stories he authored expressing his successive attempts to hint at the mystery that underlies human existence. In this, Herling clearly defies the conventions. Instead of the solution to the riddle, his reader is offered a set of new questions and confronted with hypotheses that can be neither proved nor disproved, provided with dozens of various possibilities.

The above considerations strongly point that Herling succeeded in developing the narrative pattern he had derived from his great master Stendhal. In Herling's work, one may discern a mature and deliberate reference to this model, as well as an interesting attempt to modernize it so that it may provide the remedy for the fundamental malady of the fiction of today and be simultaneously a tool to reveal the difficult truth about human nature.