

Translated by Miłosz Wojtyna

“The broken silence of generations”: Twentieth-century Inheritors of Peasant Culture

Stanisław Czernik, of all writers, can certainly be called a happy poet. He must have been very well aware of that himself, and could expect, even in the face of general oblivion, to be remembered at least by his own hometown. And such a prediction would be by no means incorrect – Ostrzeszów, the main town of the Cat Mountains, remembers quite well all those who deserve it. Czernik, the author of *Snowstorm*, is a good case in point – Ostrzeszów has a street and a library in his name, and a section in the regional museum devoted to his life and work. More importantly, perhaps, more than forty years after his death, the author is still the subject of a heated debate among students, authorities, and some resident writers, who are, as Czernik himself noticed, the salt of the local earth. The dispute is continued by biographers: *Oficyna Kulawiak*, an ambitious local publishing house, has just released a comprehensive biography of the poet.

Which is a sensation. Hardly any other writer born at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Iwazkiewicz, Buczkowski, Witkiewicz, Gałczyński among them) has so far received the careful attention of a biographer. To my greatest delight, it is rumored that Hanna Kirchner is just now working on the final draft of her book on Nałkowska.

Stanisław Czernik – His Life and Work (Polish: *Stanisław Czernik. Człowiek i pisarz*) is a well-researched and edited, impeccably printed and illustrated biography of the artist so much celebrated by his local community. And it must have been the community itself that Wiesław Przybyła, a biographer from Łódź (where Czernik was perhaps slightly less celebrated), had in mind when he designed the popular form of the book that makes an extensive use of simplification, but at the same time rejects some of the high ambitions of scholarly style, biographical revisionism, and insistence on new readings of the author’s *œuvre*. An unhurried narrative pace, open feelings with regard to the subject, apt use of quotations from poems and photographs from different periods of Czernik’s life – the material clearly follows an assumption: “Czernik... was always the same – neither a politician, nor an ideologist; he was simply a man of letters” (Przybyła 126).

Although the publication is indeed of a popular character (much of it directed *ad usum delphini*), the assumption, only partly followed throughout the book, seems

profoundly wrong. It stands against the image of the activist that Czernik established in his regional "Land of Poets". A poet, novelist, short story writer, and essayist, Czernik never considered writing to be his profession. Reading his memoirs (Czernik 31–32) we realize how much of the money earned on teaching he spent publishing poems (not only his own). This must have frequently brought his family to stark poverty, which is not something anyone as reliable and serious as Czernik himself would risk for a whim. These things you do with a broken heart in the name of ideas and some superior aim of, as it happens, a frequently political nature. Therefore I cannot agree here with the ever-so-nice biographer, who simplifies the image of the protagonist and reduces him to a proud relic of the local artistic world. No, Stanisław Czernik was definitely not "simply a man of letters". On the contrary – he was a zealous ideologist, engaged, insistent and determined to fight and put to work the ideas he believed in. His writings of all kinds – poetry, essays, and magazine articles – and the material presented in Przybyła's biography clearly point to something the biographer seems not to notice – the "man of letters" followed a deeply imbued sense of duty. He never ceased working on the tasks that he had set for himself or that had been set for him – not by a political authority – but by fate, origin, and ancestry to which he referred quite obsessively, trying to explore them with his imagination, his only tool for genealogical study. These tasks he always carried out diligently, with a patience and a calmness that surpassed all members of his cultural circle.

To understand and clearly see the essence of the brave, long-term project embarked on by the newly-graduated Czernik, we need to at least take a quick look at some general background to his activity by looking into the more distant past which affected very strongly the situation Czernik found himself in. It needs to be remembered – an unwelcome reminder now – that the Sarmatian Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, taking so much pride in its democratic system based on an extensive network of liberties – was also a country of the dramatic oppression of the peasantry. In antiquity a slave was allowed to buy a slave for himself; in Russia (where serfdom, as we commonly believe, was the most pitiless) noblemen attempted to create a caste of peasant intelligentsia, however strange this can seem now. But for a Polish Sarmatian nobleman, peasants – Polish only by language, not by citizenship or commitment to some patriotic idea – were human manure. Or rather manure as such, with no residuum of humanity.

Thanks to legends, tales and family stories spread by word of mouth, the first generation of what formed in independent Poland a peasant intelligentsia, Czernik's generation, remembered all this quite vividly. For the most radical of them, the Second Polish Republic was no more than "a country of noblemen", opposed to what they

wanted to build as “a country of peasants”. Full of hatred for the tyrants (here the words of the anthem that the Polish Peasant Party only recently gave up, seem proper: “Glory to thee, noblemen, for our fetters and slavery”), they, at the same time, were ashamed of their ancestors and, more than that, they despised them for the fact that Polish peasants, unlike their Ukrainian counterparts, never started a mutiny. It was not only the leftist futurist poet Bruno Jasiński who praised the leader of the Galician slaughter; poetic praise was offered to Szela also by Stanisław Piętaś:

“bridles broken, horses neigh to the wind
Until Szela stands in the window of white bungalow.
Tall, gorgeous, all huge.
Wobbling crown of rubies and gold
A pair of daring eagles, blue shade
dragged sidelong the clank of his red chains.
When he walked among the sleeping army, roe deer
Stopped, staring to the brightness, sounds of animals
Stopped. Wind glazed and steamy
of clouds carried the love song of a grey falcon” (Piętaś 5).

A history of injustice that the Galician avenger, so much hated by the privileged, wanted to take compensation for, underlay the still fresh wounds of peasant strikers and anti-*Sanacja* demonstrators in the twentieth century, who received no warm welcome from the armed forces of the state. The general mood of the situation was becoming more and more radical, when police actions claimed new victims. A historian offers the following account:

“The 15 August 1936, for the first time a Peasant Activity Day, was celebrated with the motto ‘Poland will no longer be a farm of the *Sanacja* elite. The people wants to decide on the state and has a perfect right to do so’.

[...] during the peaceful celebration of Peasant Activity Day, which commemorated the important role peasants played in Poland’s struggle for independence, the police killed 19 peasants. Army and police forces pacified 27 villages near Zamość, and in Żukowo (county of Hrubieszów) 5 peasants lost their lives. In total, 800 people were arrested, deprived of their houses and possessions. A Special Congress of the People’s Party worked out a new strategy for their struggle against the *Sanacja* regime. The Congress authorised an Executive Committee to organize a strongly political peasant strike in case the demands put forward by the party were not received with due attention” (Gmitruk 134).

A Polish equivalent of the French *transfuge* is difficult to find. Dictionaries define it as “1. Soldier, who went over to the enemy’s lines; 2. dissenter, traitor [of party

or doctrine], dissident” (Dobrzyński 862). It is even more difficult precisely to translate the term *transfuge culturel* coined by a French sociologist Annie Ernaux: “cultural dissenter; traitor of culture” (Ernaux 149). In this context, it would be more apt to say: “soldier who in a cultural battle went over to the enemy’s lines”. Or perhaps it would be simpler to translate *transfuge* into Russian – as its strong, well-established *Перебежчик*.

The thing I am driving at is that if a Polish peasant who, hypothetically, could get any education better than a rudimentary one, had wished to pursue a career in literature, before 1918 he would have had no chance to function within his own, that is, peasant, culture. Willy-nilly he would have had to *transfuge* himself – forgive the clumsy but meaningful neologism – into the culturally dominant majority. But when hardly any peasant could get decent education of higher level, before the Great War this kind of *Перебежчик* was also a rarity. One of them, however, made quite a name for himself – Stanisław Helsztyński, or rather Stanisław Skorupka, was a son of an affluent peasant. He renounced his family name after a conflict with his father, abandoned his peasant past to make a career as Shakespeare scholar (a classic *transfuge culturel*) and author of some rather mediocre historical novels (ironically, his uneducated father made a greater success with his memoir, which, with its rich use of dialect, is now considered a masterpiece of the genre (Skorupka 1967)).

Stanisław Helsztyński was born in 1891, which means he received his education when the people was still changing into a nation. A peasant elite was being born with great pain; notions of equality and cultural emancipation were still to be clearly formulated. Although Helsztyński could consider himself a member of a whole generation of creative intelligentsia, this very generation had only a tiny chance to build up its peasant identity. Self-definition is essentially an endless process based on uncertainty, questioning, hesitation, and conflict. Writers one generation older than Helsztyński made this a reason for unbearable suffering. Painfully aware of their peasant fate and history, as well as of the separateness of peasant culture, they thrashed about feverishly between an internal imperative of faithfulness to their origins and a temptation to join the mainstream of national culture. In the 1930s, young writers of rural origin assumed different strategies – aware of their peasant identity, they struggled to defend it and got confused about the right tools to write of problems never addressed before. Marian Czuchnowski devoted himself totally to the service of ideas. Janusz Kryszak writes: “This author of quite extensive literary output, including both poetry and prose collections, and numerous critical and political articles in magazines, enjoyed not only some recognition as a writer, but also as a rebel, a mutineer with a radical spiritual stance and ideological consistency” (318).

The writer worked on the literary and the political stages – the latter both openly and illegally. Acting for the Peasant Party he maintained a rapport with the Communist Party of Poland, which inevitably resulted in most severe persecution.

“In 1934 Czuchnowski published a theoretical sketch *New Culture* – a concise summary of a whole list of subjects important for peasant writers, who at that time worked in difficult circumstances of class struggle. At that time Czuchnowski edited and more or less directly influenced three ideological magazines *Wieś – Jej Pieśń* [Village and Its Song], *Nowa Wieś* [New Village], and *Nurt* [Current]” (318).

For Czuchnowski literature makes sense only when it becomes a tool of struggle – for social justice and the principles put forward by radical peasant movements.

As fiercely as Czuchnowski, Stanisław Młodożeniec also worked against the inferiority complex of the peasant intelligentsia dominated by high culture. The poet, frequently associated with futurism, combined pride in his origin with a fervent desire to increase the social awareness of the peasant people. The following account clearly shows how strongly the poet was devoted to the matter.

“He invokes for us a horizon for peasant poetry, for the prose of land and sun. Poetry which encompasses all the villager’s acts, desires, and plans. There is no section of rural life which cannot become a subject of literary creation in the hands of peasant poets. The great poets of the nation used to be spiritual leaders at moments of crisis; now a peasant poet strides into the domain of literature to become a spiritual signpost for the rural crowd on their historical excursion. With the spark of his feeling, he aims to set fire to all members of this crowd, to melt them into one body of rural desire and feeling. He attempts to fill the rural community with power necessary for introducing justice into the fundamentals of rural life” (Kowalczyk 2) .

Młodożeniec claimed that a radical turn towards the peasant and the village was necessary for the revival of national culture, so much oppressed by aristocratic epigones. He called for a new cultural order, and for progress that could be born only out of a major turn that would refresh and revive the nation morally, and would annihilate all “the sick heritage of gentry mentality”. For the author of *Futuro-scales* and *Futuro-landscapes*, it was important to reach as wide an audience as possible with his poetic message; the word itself, taken from the revolutionary content of a mass gathering, was becoming more important than an experimental poem published in an avant-garde magazine. Hence the musical character of many of Młodożeniec’s poems, as well as his interest in poetical performance of group recitation: “Like organ-grinders, we will enter town markets and village surroundings (...) gramophone and radio will give us a hand” (Młodożeniec 7).

In a competition in radicalism, another poet of rural origin joined Czuchnowski and Młodożeniec. Julian Przyboś was definitely less interested in political struggle, but more insistent, or even aggressive, in his fight against “the heritage of gentry mentality”, as Młodożeniec put it. Concentrating on literature, he ruthlessly condemned his immediate ancestors, the poets of *Młoda Polska*. In a notorious pamphlet *The Louts of Poetry (Chamuły poezji)* he aggressively criticizes the work of Jan Kasprówic and Emil Zegadłowicz. A consistent avant-gardist, an invincible, emotional poet, Przyboś called for a revolution; but unlike Czuchnowski and Młodożeniec, he wanted it to be poetical, not political.

Marching with the slogans of modernity, he was trying to annihilate tradition, reject metaphysics, and the cult of the past. He praised, in turn, the constructive progress of civilization. Interested in industrial developments, he rejected the glorification of nature. “The cult of nature is a relic of barbarism”, he claimed. “If all cults express lack of self-confidence, the cult of nature is a surrender of faith in human organization in the face of the chaos of things” (Przyboś *Człowiek nad przyrodą* 217–218).

In the same article he added: “An aeroplane is more beautiful than a mountain when it takes a pilot above the highest peaks, when it elevates a man above nature in the spiral movement that marks the work of human mind and will” (217–218).

Jerzy Kwiatkowski, a celebrated Przyboś scholar, comments on this issue in the following way: “Work and technology – these for young Przyboś are two deities, his Castor and his Pollux, inseparable. Work – in a group, technology – modern. Both in the service of the highest deity – Industrial Civilisation” (vii). It was this civilisation that was supposed to build the new village; similarly, it was to be the main inspiration and main subject of modern poetry.

In comparison with these three violent mutineers, Czernik, the peaceful, reasonable, and hesitant poet praising the agrarian motifs of ploughman and his plough (not pilot and his aeroplane), seemed, like Kasprówic and Helsztyński, yet another candidate for recognition as a cultural “transfuger”. His tendency towards compromise with the literary establishment was not expressed in declarations, but in acts, still more meaningful. He hesitated long, that is as sure as anything. But hesitation seems his permanent state, indecision part of his character. He looked for and meditated about... something. Anxiety and fear never left him. This seemingly stable man appears to be the most emotionally insecure representative of his generation – a gypsy camping in sleepy hollows far away from the village of his origin. As he admitted once: “for fifteen years I lived with my suitcase literally under my head, moving from one place to another every year” (Czernik 26).

But it was this hesitant, fragile, reserved man who came not only to be the greatest influence on his own generation of peasant poets, but also to be considered their spokesman, or – forget all negative connotations of the word – ringleader.

The decision he took after long hesitation (“I dreamed about ‘Land of Poets’ for years, so it did not jump fully armoured like Pallas Athena from the head of Zeus, but was a result of long preparation and reflection” (Czernik 29)) seemed symptomatic of something completely different. “Land of Poets” was born thanks to an agreement between Czernik, a young teacher at a school in Ostrzeszów, and Jan Iwański, a squire from the neighbouring Mikorzyn (who is mentioned in Czernik’s memoirs as “the notary” – an expression uncritically repeated by the biographer). We have only some indirect knowledge about the content of this agreement between a poet-landowner and a poet-peasant – twelve issues of their writing immediately reveal an eclectic style, a warehouse variety that served different tastes and chased different fashionable poetic personages. Czernik belatedly became aware he had got into a dead end, that he had been running “a dead eclectic magazine” – these are his own words – and resorted to an even more daring act, which left numerous observers in absolute awe – he breached the contract with the patron, taking onto himself the responsibilities not only of editor, but also of publisher. From now on, no one could accuse him of any tendencies towards cultural transfiguration – of mixing water with fire. Even if he felt temptations of this kind, the decision was irrevocable. “The Land of Poets” became an organ of authenticists; authenticism – as the editor claimed – became “the essential backbone of the magazine”.

Thus something important happened – more important than all the concepts and theoretical, organizational projects put together by Czuchnowski, Młodożeniec, and other fighters for peasant welfare and literature. This occurrence was a breakthrough of a sort. Because the magazine originated in its locality, “The Land of Poets” had a very precise identity; its editor reached a sense of duty and responsibility (including financial burdens that meant poverty to his family). But a lot was at stake. The ringleader procrastinated for a long time, but finally took the risk and devoted himself totally to his mission. To put it a bit pompously, he raised the banner of authenticity.

Authenticity, a poetic movement in Polish interwar literature, represented by authors of the 1935–1939 magazine “The Land of Poets”, asserted the “uniformity of artistic and life truth”; poetry was to treat as its subject only the private experiences of the writer, justified by and founded on his spiritual biography, expressed in a direct and natural way, without the deforming aid of literary conventions (*Literatura polska* 12).

The general literary establishment received Czernik’s conception, formulated around the word “authenticity”, with reluctance, if not open antagonism. Authenticity

– well-known critics claimed (Irzykowski and Skiwski among them) – is one of several catchy, but vague concepts which promise more than it can really offer. The word itself contains a lot – it is very difficult to decide what is authentic and what not. How are we to measure the truth and honesty of feeling, impression, or dream? Is truth to life experience the only possible source of poetry? Is not the product of this drily treated muse doomed to failure? And the poet – holding his rules of authenticity – in order to organize his own experience, is he to get poetic material by provoking a fight in a tavern and then working on it with greatest authenticity? These are the questions asked by mockers of different sorts. “Beware of authenticity!” – wrote Irzykowski himself. It was too late. Young poets were already using new words of greeting: “Long live authenticity!” (Ożóg 83).

One of them, Jerzy Pietrkiewicz, in his meaningfully titled novel *Po chłopsku* (*The Peasant Way*), made a declaration: “Those who fell in love with authenticity, will never return to the factories of realism, in which long days of work produce only mud and boredom. Those who fell in love with authenticity are able to comprehend the mystery of legend and, gaping at planets of fantasy, will regain the great speech that they had forgotten at birth” (Pietrkiewicz 132).

The title of this novel was controversial and defiant – rural people were called peasants, but themselves rejected this label – they preferred no identity rather than that one. The word peasant (*chłop*) still evoked strong associations with the Russian disgraceful *холоп* – meaning a slave, a stooge, a lackey.

Irzykowski’s authority was enormous – a vast majority complied with his opinion. Only a handful of young, poor people, very often only trying their hand at writing (students, teachers, or failed priests) rejected this negative opinion. On their behalf Jan Brzoza, the author of *Children* (*Dzieci*), tried to pose the question: “What is authenticity?” “We know only that it originates in a transformed image of the world, a world shaken by economic and social crises. These stormy processes allowed us to see the true image of things, sometimes disgusting, perhaps a bit stripped of beauty – but concrete, undisguised, and irreducible” (Brzoza 73).

A tiny group of emigrants or exiles from crisis-stricken villages saw Czernik’s project not only as a chance to express their dissatisfaction with a hostile reality, but also to advance socially and artistically, to achieve a degree of dignity, cultural independence, and identity. The central aspect of Czernik’s idea – to make one’s own life an artistic asset – opened new broad horizons for them. They immediately started to believe they were not some impoverished relatives or *холопаму* of the allegedly international, refined, proud, and self-righteous luminaries of high culture, but also inheritors of a long cultural tradition originating in pre-Christian times. It was Czernik who might have used

the expression “peasant culture” for the first time. To all similar to himself he granted freehold of this culture, which he associated with the most universal values. A person became a user and carrier of this culture by birth – had it coded in, imprinted in his mind and consciousness. Thus, if they wanted to call themselves authenticists, they could not reject what was the most authentic in all of them. Cultures are not categorised into good and bad ones, but into those that better or worse serve their users. It is difficult not to respect a culture that brought up innumerable generations of peasants and led them through the suffering of life? – asked the editor of “The Land of Poets”. Elsewhere he sneered:

“In a country where cattle are as worthy as wheat, coal and salt, poetic thought, touching upon various local motifs, neglected the cow. Horse, greyhound, eagle, falcon – these were the typical motifs. Everyone who would have dared to introduce the cow into poetry would have risked ridicule and rejection by the »serious critics«, who would have been quick to call him a vulgar shepherd, a barbarian” (Czernik 71).

Lawmaker and ringleader, Czernik, the poet of Ostrzeszów, showed outstanding talent and strong character. For other writers of the group, he was an inspiration rather than a mentor. Never petty-minded about the idea of authenticity, he would not bicker with anyone about the conceptual part of it. He did not want blind followers. *Au contraire*, he warm-heartedly sowed the idea among enthusiasts willing to continue his work – also in other forms, less compliant with the original assumptions. Thus authenticities gained numerous forms: the authenticity of Stanisław Piętaś had little to do with the authenticity of Jan Bolesław Ożog or Jerzy Pietrkiewicz. Przyboś, though he had abandoned his avant-garde aeroplane dreams and renounced some of his early poetry, still had his reservations. He replied to Czernik’s call by introducing some potato flower to his poetry: “Look, a potato bush bloomed in this oversight/into a lily” (Przyboś *Z zakrętu z drogi nagłej* 23).

Years later the youngest representative of the group, Pietrkiewicz, recalled his conversation with Stanisław Pigoń: “At some point Pigoń picked up my, as I see it now, fortunately phrased opinion that we had practically spoken for the first time after generations of silence. Yes, indeed – Pigoń agreed – this is the point, the broken silence of generations, the accumulating silence” (“Większa rzeczywistość...” 80).

They spoke for the first time, they spoke first. Onto the way shown by Czernik in the small town of Ostrzeszów, others followed. The peasant current in Polish literature was established. “Regions”, a literary quarterly, was created. But that is another story.

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