

SYLWIA PANEK

Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu*

“Clarity is a Fiction Made of the Fabric of Chaos”: Irzykowski Against *Nonunderstandableness*

Abstract

The paper deals with a famous critical controversy of Poland’s interbellum period, the polemic about what Karol Irzykowski called “nonunderstandableness,” stirred up by his article *Niezrozumialstwo* (1924). Begun on the pages of the weekly “Wiadomości Literackie”, the controversy continued in other periodicals in essays by eminent writers and critics of the time (including T. Peiper, J. Przyboś, S. I. Witkiewicz, J. Ujejski, J.N. Miller, J. Hulewicz and J. Brzękowski) until the outbreak of the World War II. Its importance in the history of the nation’s literary criticism between the wars consists not only in that it promoted the category of “nonunderstandableness”, which has since then become an essential “figure of the reading” of the literary texts of that period (W. Bolecki), but also in Irzykowski’s penetrating campaign employing this category, which diagnosed and exposed the recondite affinity of the literary aesthetic principles and strategies of Young Poland and the later avant-garde. The aim of the paper is to explain Irzykowski’s attitude within this controversy: (1) to identify the personal and abstract, explicitly and implicitly named targets of his attack; (2) to place the category of “nonunderstandableness” within the system of the writer’s opinions from the area of literary criticism; and (3) to interpret the paradoxical manner in which he conducted his critical dispute.

* Zakład Antropologii Literatury, Instytut Filologii Polskiej
Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza
ul. Fredry 10, 61-701 Poznań
e-mail: spanek@amu.edu.pl

On Sept. 21, 1924, “Wiadomości Literackie” [“Literary News”], the most important literary magazine of pre-war Poland (No. 38), published an article by Karol Irzykowski, an eminent and influential literary critic, entitled *Niezrozumialstwo* [Nonunderstandableness]¹, which stirred up the most famous critical controversy in the nation’s twenty years of the interbellum. In its later issues, the same weekly printed responses by Jerzy Hulewicz, Maria Jehanne Wielopolska and Jan Nepomucen Miller as well as Józef Ujejski in his commentary to the essay *Jasność i ciemność* [The Lightness and the Darkness] by Cyprian Kamil Norwid, which was first published in the context of this polemic; another opinion in the dispute was a brief article in the daily “Głos Narodu” signed with the pseudonym Witr. The originator referred himself to these responses in the article “*Inter augures*”. *Słaba odpowiedź osaczonego zrozumialca* [A Weak Retort from a Harassed Understandable One]. Beside the contributions to the interwar dispute about “nonunderstandableness”, one must also take into account Irzykowski’s essay from the period of Young Poland *Niezrozumialcy* [The Ones Guilty of Nonunderstandableness] (originally published in No. 8 of the periodical “Nasz Kraj” in 1908), to which the writer alluded in his later article, and not only by its title, but also as subsequent publications which referred to the dispute of 1924 and thereby continued it, most significant ones being three commentaries by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz in “Przegląd Wieczorny” from 1927 and essays by Jan Brzękowski, Zenon Drohocki and Włodzimierz Pietrzak printed respectively in “Goniec Krakowski”, “Zwrotnica” and “Przegląd Współczesny”. A much later development of Irzykowski’s contestation of the non-communicativeness of literature was his cycle of essays *Wycieczki w lirykę* [Excursions into Lyrical Poetry] published in the weekly “Pion” in 1934–35, which constituted a dispute with the poetry of the avant-garde.

The dispute about “nonunderstandableness”, one of the most influential polemics in Polish literary criticism between 1918 and 1939, and in particular its originator’s views concerning the permissible and/or desirable border between the understandability and nonunderstandability of a literary text, have been studied by eminent Polish literary critics. Thus, Ryszard Nycz (1997: 155–190) construed it within the framework of the self-

¹ Since both “niezrozumialstwo” and “niezrozumialec” (*infra*) are neologisms, they are translated with a word that has not been recorded in English dictionaries. The Polish terms were coined by means of suffixes which carry strong derogatory connotations.

establishment of the identity of Polish modernism, considering the characteristics of Irzykowski's idiolect (observable, e.g., in the dispute about "nonunderstandableness") as an argument in favor of the claim that the border between the periods of Young Poland and the twenty years of the interbellum is now becoming blurred. Włodzimierz Bolecki (1996: 331–336) dealt with it in order to assemble a terminological base for his experimental model of Polish prose of the interbellum. Markiewicz (2011: 44–52) — a scholar indomitable in his disclosures of the contradictions between Irzykowski's declarations and his practice of literary criticism — exposed the obscurity of the critic's reflection on "nonunderstandableness" and the ambiguity of the latter, crucial term as well as the necessity of identifying the various types of "nonunderstandableness" rather than merely detecting this vague quality of literature. And finally Kazimierz Bartoszyński (2012: 319–327), commenting on Markiewicz's interpretation, underlined the relationship of Irzykowski's reflection on "nonunderstandableness" with his thoughts in the area of literary criticism, and in particular with his comments on the metaphor, which occur in many articles by him. Accordingly, Irzykowski's above-mentioned comments, mainly referring to Tadeusz Peiper and Julian Przyboś, two luminaries of the Polish avant-garde, place the dispute about "nonunderstandableness" in the very centre of the Polish avant-garde breakthrough within the nation's twentieth-century modernism².

The above brief summary of the scholars' points of view demonstrates that when they addressed the dispute about "nonunderstandableness", it was in order to: (1) identify boundaries between periods, essential for an insight into the history of Polish literature (Nycz); (2) pinpoint the essential characteristics of the development of the Polish prose (Bolecki); (3) assess critically the *œuvre* of the famous polemicist (Markiewicz); and (4) show the origins of the reflection on the poetical idiom of the avant-garde (Bartoszyński), which after many years flourished in Polish literary criticism, inspired, among other factors, by Irzykowski's writings (cf. Sławiński 1965).

The present article is meant as another contribution to scholars' judgment of the dispute about "nonunderstandableness", an essential development in the history of literary criticism in Poland. By her interpretation of the dispute, the author wishes to expose the intentional ambiguity of Irzykowski's concepts, which in her view is not a shortcoming of his propositions, but instead constitutes their strength, and to demonstrate that when opposing "nonunderstandable" literary output, Irzykowski, rather than going up against its authors, underlyingly pursued an epistemological reflection on the proper subject matter of art and its actual representation³.

By recounting in a comprehensive manner this fascinating controversy, which involved several significant literary magazines and a dozen excellent authors, and whose many contentions seem to have remained valid until now, a number of important tasks may be

² This alludes to the title of Joanna Orska (2004). Irzykowski preferred to believe that there had not been an avant-garde breakthrough, as the "nonunderstandableness" of the avant-garde — in his opinion — merely copied the faults of the Young Poland's literature. For Irzykowski's proof of the dependence of Peiper's program on the modernism before the World War I (cf. e.g. Zaleski 2000: 37).

³ Irzykowski's statements within the dispute about "nonunderstandableness" of literature are interpreted by Maria Gołębiewska (2006: 77, 148–149).

fulfilled: (1) to identify the personal and the abstract, explicitly and implicitly named targets of Irzykowski's attack; (2) to place the category of "nonunderstandableness" within the system of the writer's opinions from the area of literary criticism; (3) to interpret the paradoxical manner in which Irzykowski conducted his dispute, simultaneously and without contradicting himself approving of and condemning the avant-garde formal devices which hinder the communicative role of the text; (4) to describe and assess the logic of Irzykowski's and his adversaries' arguments; and (5) to reveal the philosophical background of the polemic — mainly falling within the area of the theory of cognition — and to place it within the context of the differences of *Weltanschauung* which justify various critics' approaches to the study of literature, or perhaps within the context of the ethical guidelines which they advocate. The present author shall focus on the first three tasks and principally strive to characterize the motives of Irzykowski's disapproval of the non-understandability of the avant-garde literature (which, in his view, was a defect of the Young Poland's snobbery of the form) and to discuss the content and the mechanism of the critic's argumentation. His opponents' reasoning may be perused on another occasion.

A Terminological Clarification

In the present account of Irzykowski's struggle against "nonunderstandableness", a certain terminological clarification seems essentially necessary. It is necessary to distinguish, after Bolecki (Bolecki 1996), between "nonunderstandableness" and "nonunderstandability". Indeed, when one considers Irzykowski's commentary from the time of the Young Poland on "the ones guilty of nonunderstandableness"⁴, it is hard to demarcate the border between one and the other; conversely, in his articles after the World War I, Irzykowski distinguished between the two terms (as he indicates his usage of them). Accentuating this difference may be useful for interpretations, as it allows for a prefatory systematizing of the writer's comments. Thus, in his post-World War I articles, "nonunderstandableness" described — fairly consistently — what Bolecki (1996: 332) calls a "communicative situation" where the reader perceives a text as unintelligible, while "nonunderstandability" was Irzykowski's term for features of the text (its form or genre, Irzykowski 1976a: 72, 73) which in various ways condition and produce this situation.

As Włodzimierz Bolecki summarizes and explains the foundations of Irzykowski's opinions, there is, in particular, a difference between "reading", or combining the various components of a text (thus, e.g., Irzykowski states that pieces by Stefan Napierski are "inaccessible" because "having read the first four lines, one cannot go on" — "nothing adds up"; Irzykowski 1976a: 73) and "understanding", or a conceptualization of the

⁴ In his essay from the period of the Young Poland *Niezrozumialcy*, Irzykowski does not contrast "nonunderstandability", or a quality of the text, with "nonunderstandableness", or its effect on the reader; instead, the critic discusses the dual nature of "nonunderstandability": (1) "inherent in the thing" (i.e. "obscurity"), and (2) described as "a difficulty" or "a sense of subjective fatigue" (Irzykowski 1980: 469). These connotations of the term "nonunderstandability" indicate that the critic referred it either to the content which transcends the literary text and relates to a subject existing prior to the text (as well as to the meanings ascribed to the subject, which the text assimilates beforehand), or to the act of perception, requiring a cognitive effort. Furthermore, the often-quoted phrase from *Niezrozumialcy*: "nonunderstandability is our daily element" (Irzykowski 1980: 475) — suggests that in 1908 Irzykowski meant this term as referring to more than the literary text and used it to describe (in the context of the above quotation) the condition of social consciousness resulting from the fact that any understanding (cognition) is only illusory.

meanings of a piece. Therefore, “reading” makes a text essentially accessible, preceding “understanding” both chronologically and logically (accordingly, some pieces are non-understandable although intelligible: “In a way, one may mentally walk across and along them feeling as if one were among closed crates with treasures. If one does not understand, one knows what one does not understand”; Irzykowski 1976a: 73).

This assumes that “nonunderstandableness”, a result of a violation of the rules of intelligibility of a text, based on “nonunderstandability”, a quality of the text itself (“thickets and swamps which one must bypass or over which one must jump because it is impossible to wade through them; usually the thing to do is just to turn back”, Irzykowski 1976a 67). The 1924 article *Niezrozumialstwo* claims that “nonunderstandability” implies a communicative impossibility of the emergence of literature’s and literary meanings and senses.

Consequently, “nonunderstandableness” is in the critic’s idiolect (mainly in *Niezrozumialstwo*) an accusation and an insult, regardless of whether it is a symptom or a result of snobbery or a prank (Irzykowski 1976a: 75), haste (Irzykowski 1976a: 68) or a futile formal experiment (Irzykowski 1976a: 75), inspiration (Irzykowski 1976a: 70) or paranoia (Irzykowski 1976a: 74, Irzykowski 1980: 81). *Nonunderstandability*, which brings about “nonunderstandableness”, is produced primarily through semantic inadequacy of the phraseology (“the author could not find proper words”, NS 73; “the author picks up any words and sentences at random”, Irzykowski 1976a: 68) and/or unauthorized categoric and normative associations of words and phrases as well as flagrant syntactic errors, all of which combine to fashion the form of the utterance in such a manner that it becomes impossible to construe its meaning.

As a result, “nonunderstandable” texts do not “add up” (Irzykowski 1976a: 73) or may not be “summarized” (Irzykowski 1976b: 215), the mood eclipses the exposition of the subject (Irzykowski 1976a: 70), the elements of metaphorical phrases are extremely distant and arbitrarily selected, and the combinations of words and scenes based on the author’s cryptic associations, inaccessible to the reader (Irzykowski 1976a: 69, 75).

Is “Nonunderstandability” Merely Defective Art?

At the same time one must remember that in spite of his censure of this “nonunderstandability” (as the base and source of the undesirable “nonunderstandableness”), Irzykowski also mentioned the “refreshing” effect of “nonunderstandability” in his essay from the time of the Young Poland (Irzykowski 1980: 466), and in the one from the interbellum he confessed, on the authority of Hebbel, that “mystery is the source and core of poetry” (Irzykowski 1976a: 73) and declared: “I understand and recognize the right and charm of nonunderstandability” (Irzykowski 1976a: 72) because “a certain tension of nonunderstanding must exist between the author and the reader, as it constitutes after all a premise of understanding” (Irzykowski 1976a: 84). His Young-Poland essay actually concludes that “nonunderstandability” is a quality of any valuable literary piece (cf. Irzykowski 1980: 477). Nycz summarizes Irzykowski’s investigation as follows:

It would be only a slight stylistic extrapolation of his argumentation to say that if it is a prerequisite for any valuable literary piece, or for any literary work of art, to be to a certain degree “difficult” or “nonunderstandable”, then a piece which is entirely understandable, *eo ipso* is not a work of art. (Nycz 1997: 168)

Irzykowski further complicates the issue of "nonunderstandability" by advancing theses, which clarify each other but are also mutually exclusive. On one occasion he states that it is impossible for a text to be thoroughly and absolutely nonunderstandable⁵, and on another, when discussing Norwid's image of a word as a bullet and comparing it to "a line projected into the infinity" (Irzykowski 1976a: 85), he refuses it the right to be ultimately understandable because a word (a name) "may not take on the entire ballast of the truth" (Irzykowski 1976a: 86). The related motif of the utterance being extended between meaningfulness and meaninglessness recurred in Irzykowski's critical writing. Shortly before the publication of *Niezrozumialstwo*, during his polemic against the Futurists, when objecting to the defense of nonsensical speech which he discovered in the latter's program, Irzykowski argued: "After all, one may not speak pure nonsense; speech always contains vestiges or ruins of a sense" (*Futuryzm a szachy* [*Futurism and Chess*] (1921), Irzykowski 1976a: 102). — and concluded:

Futurism must *return to sense*, because nonsense has turned out to be too cramped. If one wishes to communicate the irrationality or meaninglessness of living, one must have recourse to a tool borrowed from reason, a tool incomparably more dangerous than nonsense. (*Likwidacja futuryzmu* [*Dismantling Futurism*] 1924, Irzykowski 1976a: 157)⁶

Language and Speech

Irzykowski's arguments in favor of the literary utterance being extended between understandability and nonunderstandability, or between meaningfulness and meaninglessness, are related to the issue of the assessment of a literary utterance as a linguistic utterance, an issue raised in his scrutiny of "nonunderstandableness". Thus, the latter investigation ought to be considered in the context of the subject matter of the limitations of language⁷, a theme which continually reemerged as a primary concern of his writing, and within the system of the critic's views (which he obviously applied to the debate in question) a modernist's distrust of the word ought to be recognized — the word being an inefficient tool of both the lyrical subject's expression of himself and of the description of the external world, and thereby thwarting the utopian hopes of both expressionist and realist literature.

Let us note that even the early experimental novel *Paluba* [*The Hag*] (1903)⁸ constitutes an account of a process where "words begin to gain the upper hand over thinking" because their origin has been forgotten: used intentionally to describe the world, in fact they make up "a consequent world of phenomena" where "errors appear as facts". Accordingly, the novel expresses a belief in the inevitability of an entanglement in language, the latter mediating in people's contacts with both the inner and the outer world. Furthermore, the novel recounts the author's increasing awareness of the active role of language as a factor which fashions the image of reality, and affects and transforms the results of

⁵ "Whenever you try on purpose to be nonunderstandable, you will not succeed completely" (Irzykowski 1980: 479).

⁶ Here and elsewhere the italics are by the present author.

⁷ Nycz 1997 also emphasizes this subject in his study of Irzykowski's investigation of "nonunderstandableness".

⁸ On Irzykowski's approach to language in *Paluba* (cf. Pawłowska-Jądrzyk 2001, Franczak 2007: 69–178).

cognition. To put it as broadly as possible, *Paluba* highlights the non-authenticity of the relationships between the word and reality as well as between the word and the subject, and both in its plot and in the authorial comments illustrates the referential and expressive imperfection of language.

In his essay *Niezrozumiały* Irzykowski again considers the subject matter of language, arguing that the “material” of literature is “speech”, i.e. language understood not as a static system of signs whose meaning results from the relations of concepts and their referents, but instead, to use Ludwig Wittgenstein’s term, as a set of “language-games”, i.e. a complex of linguistic practices governed by its users’ practical purposes, practices which are subject to historical contextual developments and which acquire a communicative efficiency through social conventions. His above-quoted remark addressed to “a non-understandable one”: “whenever you try on purpose to be nonunderstandable, you will not succeed completely” — is further explained:

You will not because the material which a writer uses is *speech*, and it is a social process. By “speech” I mean not only the vocabulary but also a lexicon of the concepts, ideals, orientations, values and conversations which are current in a certain epoch and a certain society.
(Irzykowski 1980: 480)

He adds later on that the essence of speech is not its reference to objects, but its socially evolved ability to construct meanings, since speech is not an alphabet of words only, but also of ideas (cf. Irzykowski 1980: 480), “a corpus of judgments, assessments and critical reviews”.

Irzykowski’s approach is to consider speech as the essential substance of literature, its stuff and “material” (“This is the material in which an author forges new values and from which he takes his form and style”, (Irzykowski 1980: 480), the medium which suspends a literary text between the phenomena of non-understandability and understandability, which accordingly the critic deems complementary. This is because the essential linguistic nature of literature implies both its necessary understandability (language is communication, and therefore “reverberation is a prerequisite for any art”) (*Futuryzm a szachy*, Irzykowski 1976a: 96)⁹ and its non-understandability (according to a modernist, language is speech and does not represent a subject or a so-called outer reality). Irzykowski puts it as an aphorism, whose diagnosis of the function of speech resembles Wittgenstein’s diagnosis of language and philosophy: “We are closed as if in an aquarium; human speech consists in bumping our noses against its walls”.¹⁰ This is because for him speech, like language for Wittgenstein, is to a large degree “the limit of our world” (“we are *closed* as if in an aquarium”) and is the effect of “bumping our noses”; both for Irzykowski and for Wittgenstein it is also the testimony of bumps (“*bumping* our noses”) “that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language”.

⁹ Elsewhere in the same essay Irzykowski specified “reverberation” as a prerequisite for aesthetic impression.

¹⁰ Cf. the appraisal of the value of philosophy in *Philosophical Investigations*:

The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery. (Wittgenstein 1986: 48, § 119)

Irzykowski's Method

Therefore, one must take into account — pursuing the course of Ryszard Nycz's remarks — the paradoxical nature of Irzykowski's method (Nycz 1997: 166)¹¹: the critic disassembled the original dichotomy of understandability and nonunderstandability, within which the former (understandability) has a positive value, and the latter (nonunderstandability), a negative one. Incidentally, Irzykowski also considered these notions in a changeable relationship of "precedence": on one occasion (in *Niezrozumialstwo* of 1924) — on an epistemological and communicative plane — he referred to "understandability" as the primary phenomenon ("what is understood by itself"), while calling "nonunderstandability" a parasitic element, an aberration and an exception from the correct rule; elsewhere (in *Niezrozumialcy* of 1908) — on an ontological plane — "nonunderstandability [i.e. chaos] is our daily element", and understanding is a secondary consequence, defined as a result of control over the former.

Based on the dichotomy of understandability and nonunderstandability, Irzykowski in fact treated it instrumentally and overcame it instead of disassembling it (like Wittgenstein overcame the ladder that one must throw away after one has climbed up it), and eventually formulated his thesis of the non-eradicable "understandability" or "nonunderstandability" of any literary text. Thus, he replaced the dichotomy with his proposal of measuring the relative "nonunderstandability" of a linguistic utterance according to its intention and function.

What Is the Point?

Thus, Irzykowski's campaign was ultimately directed only against the "nonunderstandability" which often results from a careless creative process, "a lack of skill and technique" (Irzykowski 1976a: 85), and in fact amounts to unintelligibility, or a manner of writing which makes it impossible to identify the senses of sentences, "the pragmatic relations within a work of art", and — most importantly — does not "expand the content", does not result from the difficulty of the subject matter or a need for formal experimentation which is subordinate to the cognitive function of art, but instead produces a pretentious arty-craftiness, counterfeit effects and ornaments. Furthermore, it disregards the necessity of "making concessions to clichés" (Irzykowski 1980: 471) consisting mainly of the reader's speech, defined as "the alphabet of his words and ideas" (Irzykowski 1980: 480). Thence, the "nonunderstandability" which Irzykowski chastises, usually stems from the fact that "authors do not have a sufficiently intense social and public life" (Irzykowski 1980: 481) and assume the role of aristocrats of the spirit.

Irzykowski's list of ways in which the above happens within a literary text comprises:

1. syntactical defects of utterances: e.g. Stanisław Brzozowski's faulty sentence structure (Irzykowski 1980: 470–471); the "wild syntax", and the resulting grammatical nonsensicality, of Stanisław Wyspiański's sentences (Irzykowski 1980: 469–470); the futurists' relinquishment of the syntactical order (*Likwidacja futuryzmu*, Irzykowski 1976a: 156–157; *Dźwiękos krytyki. S. Flukowski, „Kołysanka bokserska”* [A Critical Dialogue: Stefan Flukowski, 'A Boxing Lullaby'] (1935), Irzykowski 1999: 641–642); or the mannerism of

¹¹ Nycz mentions a "deconstructive" logic of the critic's arguments.

- the poetry of Julian Przyboś, who “likes to revert syntactical relations” (*Niezrozumialstwo, metafory i kto nie będzie rozstrzelany* [Nonunderstandableness, Metaphors and Who Will Not Be Shot], *Wycieczki w lirykę* VII, Irzykowski 1999: 645);
2. the elliptical nature and the snobbery of omissions: e.g. the dainty laconism of the style of Stanisław Lack, an author who submits “only the pure conclusions of thinking while suppressing the traces of his thought processes” (Irzykowski 1980: 473); the miserliness of Jan Brzękowski, who “elides his intentions”, mainly due to a pusillanimous “fear of interspersing the whole with certain prosaic circumstances: who, with whom, where or whither” *Niczygo nie zrozumieć — wszystko przebaczyć?* [*To Understand Nothing, to Forgive All?*] (*Wycieczki w lirykę* III, Irzykowski 1999: 408, 412); Tadeusz Peiper’s “metaphorical short circuits”, which “do not produce an effect because the poet has stowed away the intermediate elements and makes us guess at them” (“*Noli jurare, domine Przyboś, in verba Peiper*”, *Wycieczki w lirykę* IV, Irzykowski 1999: 468–469); or “the pronominal mannerism” in Bogusław Kuczyński’s style, which makes it impossible to determine “who, with whom and to whom” (*Proletariacki Casanova. Bogusław Kuczyński, Kobiety na drodze* [*A Proletarian Casanova. Bogusław Kuczyński, Women on the Road*] 1935, Irzykowski 1999: 530);
 3. the cult of the ambiguity of the utterance and a “condensation” of the content, which is a caricature of complicationnisme (cf. e.g. *Zgiełk i ścisk tzn. walorów* [*The Tumult and the Throng of the So-Called Values*] — *Wycieczki w lirykę* I, Irzykowski 1999: 382–383; *Noli jurare, domine Przyboś...*, Irzykowski 1999: 469; *Niezrozumialstwo, metafory...*, Irzykowski 1999: 646.);
 4. the misuse of words, resulting from an ignorance of their implicit meanings (cf. Irzykowski 1976a: 68; *Niczygo nie zrozumieć...*, Irzykowski 1999: 408);
 5. unclear relations of words and sentences with their referents; the consequence is that on the elementary plane one “simply cannot understand what is the matter”, e.g. in *Bolesław Śmiały* [*Bolesław the Bold*] by Jerzy Hulewicz (cf. Irzykowski 1976a:80) or in Brzękowski’s poetry — the critic discusses a passage of the latter’s “where we do not have the subject of action and we do not know the situation” (*Niczygo nie zrozumieć...*, Irzykowski 1999: 410);
 6. founding a text on the author’s arbitrary associations, which replace causal and logical relations on the plane of the plot or the imagery, making it impossible to reconstruct the sequence of events or to identify the structure of a represented vision or scene, e.g. Peiper’s (Irzykowski 1976b: 79) and Brzękowski’s (*Niczygo nie zrozumieć...*, Irzykowski 1999: 410) “private associations”;
 7. “an abstract filtering of thoughts”: failing to quote specific instances which would illustrate synthetic argumentation (a tendency of Brzozowski’s and Lack’s, cf. Irzykowski 1980: 473);
 8. basing a text on the author’s emotional rather than intellectual motivation (thus, Przyboś “wallows in visions, premonitions, feelings and tremors of emotion”) (*Jeszcze raz: ucieczka w kontekst* [*Once Again: An Escape into the Context*] — *Wycieczki w lirykę* V, Irzykowski 1999: 526);

— and finally

9. indefinite contexts; Irzykowski believed that it is the context that usually determines the meaning of an utterance.

The “nonunderstandability due to the lack of a clue” was before World War I Irzykowski’s reproach against mysticism, and in the interbellum he updated it as an argument in his polemic against the avant-garde. Thus, in the 1930s, a sequel of sorts of his campaign against “nonunderstandableness” was the apostrophic passage addressed to Peiper and Przyboś in an essay from the cycle *Wycieczki w lirycę* published in *Pion*:

(...) there is no context in your work, gentlemen. This is what is the matter and this is what I accuse you of. There is no context or it is as if there were none, because it is unintelligible and inaccessible, it cannot be brought to the surface or made use of. (...) What does the avant-gardists’ context look like? Not only is it scant, but above all it is designed in such a way that one nonunderstandable point should explain a second one, the latter a third one etc. — all these points explain one another, but the total is very obscure. (...) These poems are like equations with several variables where x refers itself to y , y to z etc. Obviously, such an equation may have a number of solutions. (*Noli jurare, domine Przyboś...*, Irzykowski 1999: 468–469)

Defined in this way, “nonunderstandableness” results in — as the critic’s conclusive argument states — a cognitive shallowness of this type of literature, which appeals primarily to emotions, both on the level of the text (“the mood”) and the projected style of reception (“the impression”). Irzykowski condemns such literature, detecting its characteristics both in the conventions of the poetry of Young Poland and in its continuation (as the critic perceptively identified and explained) — the cult of the form and the irrationalism of sorts current among the avant-garde after World War I.

Who Is the Enemy?

If one were to catalog the targets of Irzykowski’s censure, they would be divided into three categories.

In the first place and most obviously, Irzykowski addressed his polemic against “nonunderstandableness” to specific people mentioned in his article from 1924: the poets of *Zdrój* (a literary biweekly published in Poznań and its group of authors) — the brothers Witold and Jerzy Hulewicz, and Jan Stur — and also Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Emil Zegadłowicz, Jan Nepomucen Miller, Stefan Napierski, Jan Brzękowski and Jerzy Mieczysław Rytard, as well as Tadeusz Peiper and Julian Przyboś, to whom he referred at a later date; moreover, the critic mentioned the past authorities whom his contemporaries deemed proponents of “nonunderstandableness”: Stanisław Wyspiański, Tadeusz Miciński, Stanisław Brzozowski and Cyprian Kamil Norwid.

Besides, and probably the most importantly for Irzykowski himself, he addressed his protest to a certain current in the theory of literature: the aesthetic theories and “false doctrines” (Irzykowski 1976a: 72) which “obliquely justify a vulgar nonunderstandability”. For various reasons, the critic meant thereby the following literary phenomena of the period between the World Wars: the futurist theory of juxtaposition (cf. Irzykowski 1976a:75), Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz’s theory of the Pure Form, Peiper’s theory of the metaphor, Henri Bremond’s theory of pure poetry (*Jeszcze raz: wycieczka w kontekst,*

Irzykowski 1999: 526) and Brzękowski's theory of integral poetry (*Awangarda i pogarda* [*With Avant-Garde and Contempt*], *Wycieczki w lirykę II*, Irzykowski 1999: 397 ff.; *Niezrozumialstwo, metafory...*, Irzykowski 1999: 646). On this plane of his polemic, Irzykowski in fact attacked all the conceptions and views of art which, without referring to the rational interpretation of the meaning of a literary work of art and to the analysis of the text, an instrument of its reception, emphasize the cognitive non-verifiability of literature and commit blackmail by means of a concept of the understanding of art which privileges the non-verifiable and subjective impression. Actually, in his 1934 essay *Niczego nie zrozumieć — wszystko przebaczyć?* from the cycle *Wycieczki w lirykę* the critic presents an interesting classification of such modes of reading, repudiating three methods of determining the meaning of a literary piece: the one that places the meaning of a piece outside it and identifies the subject matter of the understood text as a result of the reader's creativity; the one that also does not consider the meaning of a text as its property, but instead as the result of contexts surrounding the communication; and the post-Young-Poland method, which reduces understanding to impression ("one need not understand, it is enough to feel the mood") (*Niczego nie zrozumieć...*, Irzykowski 1999: 407). Importantly, by repudiating the three modes of reading Irzykowski clearly undertook a polemic against three definitions of literature implied in the former three: two definitions which stress the non-autonomous nature of a literary work of art and try to identify its meaning either in the reader's creativity or in a beam of what Culler 1976: 1380 was later to call "discursive space", and the third one wherein literature records the mood of emotion (this also typically presupposes the non-autonomous nature of a literary work of art, since the meaning is placed in the lyrical subject's expression as created by the author). Irzykowski, who strongly believed in the autonomy of a work of art and its purpose of conveying a text, could not accept such definitions of literature.

Finally, the third level of Irzykowski's dispute about "nonunderstandableness" was its sociological plane, which the author himself stressed. Namely, his polemic was directed not only against the qualities of certain literary styles but also against the social acceptance of a literary hermetism, a paradoxical tacit pact between authors and readers (sometimes with critics as intermediaries) which stipulates a lack of communication, against the irritating atmosphere of tolerance for any "nonunderstandableness" without any attempt to specifying its sources and functions, against the convention, mannerism or fashion of "the green diarrhea of associations", "the cutting of logical knots", "the quest for wild metaphors", and finally against the blackmail and terror aimed at those who demand that literature made it possible to summarize the images and situations which it depicts. "It is my belief that promoting paranoia to the rank of a poetic method amounts to mistaking a game of associations for a game of the imagination" (Irzykowski 1976a: 81), declared Irzykowski defiantly, confronting those who, as he phrased it by means of an ironic colloquialism, offer a game of "huckle buckle beanstalk where the hider informs the seeker how near he is to the object by telling him: 'cold, freezing, Siberia, cold, getting warmer, hot, burning!'" "It is time", he wrote, "that the avant-gardists, the modern ones gave up the blackmail made up of their claim that who does not understand their poetry, nay, who wants to understand it, or 'translate' it, does not have a poetic soul" (*Niezrozumialstwo, metafory...*, Irzykowski 1999: 647).

Conceding that to understand a piece is "not to reduce it to a trivial maxim", making it clear that "the point is not to *replace* a poetic image with a non-poetic sentence, but, having submitted it to the process of understanding, or *having translated* it, to *return* to it, i.e. to *the original*, and then to appreciate it" (*Niezrozumialstwo, metafory...*, Irzykowski 1999: 644), and refuting the allegations that he wished to trivialize the sense inscribed in a text, the critic still insisted that the essential meanings be communicative and therefore asserted the readers' (recipients') right of analysis which — in his view — was denied them in both the expressionist doctrines and practices of Young Poland and — in another way — the formalist tendencies after World War I.

"Nonunderstandability" and the Task of Literature

This denouncement of "nonunderstandableness", exhibited as a cognitively futile mannerism of the artists and the readers, was nevertheless accompanied by an equally vigorous campaign for "nonunderstandability" as a prerequisite for a valuable literary piece, resulting from "the difficulty of verbalizing new apparitions", phenomena which have not been described before and "only now are emerging from the chaos". As early as in his essay from 1908, Irzykowski mentioned a "refreshing nonunderstandability", which at the time he discovered in the current of the interest in the self which supplemented naturalism or in Arno Holz's "consistent naturalism" (which he called "the cinematography of the soul" and "the periscopic manner") and which he described as a new form "through which the world around us and in us becomes alive, rises from the ashes of triteness and turns understandable again" (Irzykowski 1980: 467).

In order to determine the intention of Irzykowski's treatment of "nonunderstandability" as a new, more difficult artistic form, one must consider the function of this category within the system of the critic's beliefs pertaining to the nature and purpose of literature and the methods of achieving the latter aims. Several years later Irzykowski wrote: "What the struggle against nonunderstandableness meant for me (...) was not a cheap trick of a grumpy critic who wishes to pick up a quarrel (...) but a part of greater needs and plans" (*Dopisek późniejszy [A Later Postscript]* from 1934, Irzykowski 1976a: 89). Let us now investigate the critic's "needs and plans": What is the new artistic form and what is its essential object of reference? What position does it take up relative to the extra-literary reality and the established tradition? What is its actual contribution to the achievement of the cognitive aims of art which Irzykowski postulates? And what is the epistemological context of the critic's reflection?

As early as in his 1908 essay from the period of Young Poland, Irzykowski recommended that works of literature be studied on the plane of the theory of cognition:

Nonunderstandability is our daily element; the world everywhere around us is a chaos in which we do not drown only because through heredity, tradition and upbringing we have developed a set of instruments and signs which let us grasp or "understand" it. We keep our boats on the surface of the ocean, we explain one variable with another, and this is called "understanding". (...) We have organized a conspiracy against chaos, agreed that a certain area of chaos has been explored, drained and understood, and does not raise doubts any more. (...) Thus, understanding is merely a condition of appeasement or comfort. (Irzykowski 1980: 475–476)

As one can see, reflection on the nonunderstandability of the text has since the time of Young Poland constituted for Irzykowski the starting point for further deliberation on the theory of cognition, resulting in a corpus of beliefs concerning the status of cognitive judgments and the general mechanisms of understanding. At the same time, the category of “nonunderstandability” gained a universal dimension in Irzykowski’s conception, defining not only the qualities of the text itself, but — on the plane of the critic’s cognitive philosophy — also the chaotic reality which is the subject matter of cognitive reference. As early as in his essay from the time of Young Poland, Irzykowski shifted the weight of the interest of the theory of literature into the area of epistemology, thereby — which must be emphasized — remaining faithful to the peculiarity of his intellectual method. Just as in his reflection on “nonunderstandableness” he intrepidly annihilated the original dichotomy of the “nonunderstandability” and “understandability” of a text, establishing the relative nonunderstandability of any communication, it was also Irzykowski’s intention on the level of the epistemological thinking to complicate the modernist dichotomy of “truth” and “fiction” (elsewhere “clarity” and “chaos”: “clarity is a fiction made of the fabric of chaos”, Irzykowski 1976a: 76) and to defend the proposition that cognitive judgments are conventional (which Irzykowski did not interpret as “relative”).

Thus, according to Irzykowski, the truth (which is how the present writer calls what according to the above quotation results from understanding) has a practical dimension. His statement quoted from “Nonunderstandableness” testifies to his belief in the pragmatic, evaluating aspect of cognition and to an awareness of the creative and constructive nature of cognitive judgments.

Such a Nietzschean rejection of a truth independent of needs and wants and free of presupposed assumptions and values determines — in Irzykowski’s view — the conventional nature of cognition. Nevertheless and importantly, the same conventional nature of theoretical concepts does not render them meaningless, even if they fail to describe the world unambiguously. This is because their meaning is contained in, among other factors, their evaluating function, in the fact that they order the world.

In his later writing, Irzykowski often stressed this necessary practical aspect of cognition (“understanding”), demanding that practical consequences of thinking be deliberately developed and applied as the keystone of action focused on the merits of a case. And yet, such an approach to cognition does not make the critic’s attitude a relativistic one. After all, as early as in *Paluba* he mentioned “the narrowing of the field of the truth”, in this way exposing the constructive rather than anarchical nature of cognitive processes which lead to an ultimate *dénouement*, and in his *Walka o treść* [*The Struggle for the Content*], written after World War I, his metaphor of the truth was a rotating, multiaxial sphere, visible from various sides at various moments, and the most significant method of contemporary philosophers he considered not a devotion to the results of thinking but the noting of certain “aspects”, “accents”, “paradoxes” and “various directions” of thinking (Irzykowski 1976b: 62). The idea of a sphere as a metaphor of the truth reappears in the critic’s other pieces. Thus, e.g., considering the issues of perfidy and blackmail, Irzykowski wrote:

Any opinion about a man, a book etc. is a sphere that rotates, sometimes in one direction, sometimes in the other, showing different images of its surface. The more sensitive one is, the fairer one wants to be, the more aspects of a circumstance one sees, perceiving it as a dialectic phenomenon. (Irzykowski 1999: 565)

In his numerous epistemological deliberations, Irzykowski defended the concept of the truth as a process; e.g. in *Uroki naturalizmu* [*The Charms of Naturalism*] he confesses frankly that he prefers the truth not as an expression but as "a complex incident"; rather than the result of thinking construed as a judgment or a system, the truth was to him an "activity" of sorts. Simultaneously, his concept of the truth as an effective process opposed Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński's "easy and fashionable relativisms" or Leon Chwistek's relativism, which he denounced. In *Walka o treść* he actually declared: "To Pirandello's ideology of relativity, I oppose the principle of the multiformity of complication" (Irzykowski 1976b: 241) because "any judgment is also relative, but what matters is that the judgment should approach the truth" (*Trzy odpowiedzi Antoniemu Słonimskiemu* [*Three Responses to Antoni Słonimski*] (1926), Irzykowski 1999: 172).

Irzykowski's concept of the truth¹² as a process, a multiform sphere rather than a judgment makes it impossible to describe specific thoughts and theories within the distinction between the truth and fiction; thoughts and theories remain suspended between these phenomena, containing the unavoidable element of both cognitive profit and conventional distortion. Still, the cognitive profit may and should be reaped through creativity; it exists within poetry, or — more broadly speaking — within art, contained in the positively valued nonunderstandability of the communication.

In the year when he published *Niezrozumialcy*, Irzykowski wrote: "The poet organizes the chaos and disorganizes the cliché, asks new questions of old answers and produces new issues which go toward new answers — he descends to the sources of theories" (*Walka z mechanizmem* [*A Struggle against the Mechanism*], Irzykowski 1980: 430).

Thus, a writer's task is cognitive activity of a pragmatic nature and with a side effect of assessing, activity focusing on the primitive chaos which constitutes an ontological assumption of sorts (the "hood-like reality" of *Paluba*), and this task is carried out through the overcoming of prior forms and methods of recording (clichés).

Consequently, the novelty and the cognitive value of art requires that a poet take up a certain position relative to both the chaotic and concealed face of the world, which has not yet been locked up in concepts and which is given in experience, and to the conventional means of its presentation, the clichés of daily reality, "a consequent world of phenomena" (*Paluba*), "the stock patterns of putting reality into words", (literary) conventions and fashions. Irzykowski argues that the essence of cognitive revelation in art, which makes up the source of its innovativeness, is a transformation of tradition rather than a disregard for it¹³ (for the latter he reproached avant-garde movements, and particularly the futurists), formal experimentation, complication and continuous refinement of the nuances of the earlier manners of the description of reality, which produces "a more difficult artistic form" that appropriates new contents. He started to frame his concept of innovativeness based on tradition ("disorganizing the cliché") rather than a disregard for the latter as early as in the period of Young Poland (*Walka z mechanizmem* [*A Struggle*

¹² A more extensive discussion of Irzykowski's views on the truth is found in the present author's earlier book; the present paragraph reiterates some of its conclusions (cf. Panek 2006: 43–69).

¹³ Cf. the excerpt from *Walka o treść*:

Originality, if an artist possesses it, exercises its rights regardless of any external influence, because it covertly transforms influences; thence, one need not worry about it and pamper it excessively — that would be an imitation of originality, the very error that one wants to avoid. (Irzykowski 1976b: 14)

against the Mechanism] and *W kształt linii spiralnej* [In the Shape of a Spiral Line]); after World War I, it provided a foundation for his dispute with the avant-garde, and principally with the futurists' assumption of originality as a result of the rejection rather than complication of previous artistic achievements.

The positively valued “nonunderstandability” of a literary text (“it was not my intention to scare away nightingales”, *Inter augures*, Irzykowski 1976a: 82) testifies to and stems from the originality of literature as discussed above; it consists in “somebody daring sail in his own boat in the sea of chaos and return with a new catch” (Irzykowski 1980: 477). This explains why in the same Young-Poland essay the critic stated: “any valuable work of art which contributes something new, must feature an element of nonunderstandability” (Irzykowski 1980: 477) — and postulated: “Let a work of art be nonunderstandable, or difficult, in the sense of exploring as much previously unknown territory as possible” (Irzykowski 1980: 478). Eventually, long after World War I he concluded the polemic in his final postscript from 1934, where he stood by his arguments from the turn of the century: “Nonunderstandableness (...) defends the dignity of poetry. (...) It is like mulch that allows a bush to survive winter” (Irzykowski 1976a: 89 — the postscript from 1934).

Conclusions

Irzykowski's polemic against literature's tendencies towards uncommunicativeness demonstrates that contrary to appearances, the critic's main intention was not to destroy or solely to assess artistic achievements and programs, but primarily to attain the ideal of criticism as creative activity — what much later, inspired by the practice and the theoretical program of the author of *Walka o treść*, the excellent modern classic Janusz Sławiński was to call the postulative function of literary criticism (*Funkcje krytyki literackiej* [The Functions of Literary Criticism], Sławiński 1998). This is because in Irzykowski's view, the essential and most ambitious aim of a critic's activity is to draw up literary programs, to formulate the postulates of new art and to indicate the ways of their accomplishment. Irzykowski projected such art in his campaigns, including the one against nonunderstandableness, and his guiding principle was the idea of an intellectual art, an art whose chief aim is cognition, the revelation of new aspects of reality through a complication of the mental conventions of its record. Such art would be presumed, heralded and projected by literary criticism, which is poetry “in another state of aggregation”. If, however, poetry — as we know — is “the emotional condition produced at the peaks of thinking”, then, understandably, it is “art among other things, but not exclusively” (*Fryderyk Hebbel jako poeta konieczności* [Friedrich Hebbel as a Poet of Necessity], Irzykowski 1980: 147).

The cognition which Irzykowski discussed from so many aspects, which takes place in poetry and by its means, occurs — as he knew — in language (“a thought is not whole until it has crystallized in words”, Irzykowski 1980: 482), and language, in turn, is a sociological reality, speech — a social contract, a collection of conventional images. Therefore, cognition unavoidably operates in a communicative context, which in literature brings about a tension between “understandability” and “nonunderstandability”, a collision (or even a conflict, cf. Irzykowski 1980: 475) of an individual content, an author's “insight” into reality with the general patterns of cognition and the convictions present in “speech”, a collision which “may turn out to be a compromise or a victory” (Irzykowski 1980: 482), but always requires from the writer “concessions to the cliché”. Namely, art expresses

a novel, individual experience of a section of the chaotic world, but "expression must be distinct from the expressed thing. (...) Expression is in a way the relinquishing of the full chaos, a voluntary demotion, the selection of a single narrow alley. It is clarity". The critic goes on: "And *clarity is a fiction made of the fabric of chaos*. (...) The fiction is what matters, because it is a superior value" (Irzykowski 1976a: 76).

What, then, is the subject matter of art? What is the "fiction made of the fabric of chaos"? It seems that according to Irzykowski, an observant critic, it is the object of the author's experience obeying the laws of communication; as a phenomenologist would put it, it is *the reduction of an object to an objective sense present in the words communicated to others*. The content of a work of art is a construct, an effect and an expression of the author's personal experience, but it is always placed on the plane of the laws of communication. It is so because — in Irzykowski's opinion — language conditions and brings about the externalization of private, intimate meanings. When the intersubjective content of a subjective experience transcends the individual, it is due to the faculty of externalization which the non-private word possesses, the word which awards a universal nature to the content of an individual's experience. Attaching a positive value to this process, Irzykowski imposed certain cognitive and ethical requirements on poets. His essay on nonunderstandableness from the period of Young Poland concludes: "to write is to make oneself understood" (Irzykowski 1980: 481), because, he adds, "poetry presages future human relations" (Irzykowski 1980: 481). In his controversy with Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz after World War I, he reiterated his earlier views even more plainly:

understanding, tolerance and agreement¹⁴: this is what the fate of the world depends on. (...) The old cliché about gulfs between people may be rightfully used only by those who try to narrow them. (*Inter augures*, Irzykowski 1976a: 89)

With his conception of art, the critic demanded that literature be placed simultaneously in the spheres of both epistemological and anthropological postulates, which is "inconceivable to those who consider the word as a mere toy masquerading as artistry, who wish to turn poetry into an oasis free of responsibility" (Irzykowski 1980: 482). Thus, Irzykowski opened up new vistas of literary criticism through identifying the possibilities and obligations of art which is being extended between "understandability" and "nonunderstandability" in the process of the formation of the individual and its identity by means of a cognitively oriented communication with others.

przel. Przemysław Znaniński

¹⁴ "Rozumienie, wyrozumienie i porozumienie", three words derived from the same root.

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