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“Do Not Throw Down the Glove Before Me, or You Shall Be Cold”. The Aphorisms of Karol Irzykowski

Abstract

The article discusses Karol Irzykowski as an aphorist, focusing on the discord between the critic's intensive practice of the aphorism and his scathing condemnation of the form of the aphorism, which in his opinion was an instance of simplified, apodictic thinking. The aim of the article is to attempt to explain what justifies the frequent use of the aphorism by a writer who did not appreciate this device; what shape Irzykowski's aphorisms took against the background of the tradition of the genre; and, finally, what is their function in his writing and what they prove. Irzykowski's skeptical attitude to this form of statement stems from his epistemological beliefs and provides both a basis for his modifications of the genre and the keystone of cycles of intertextually related aphorisms which the present author has identified in dispersed yet thematically connected pieces by this critic.

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Karol Irzykowski was an excellent maker of aphorisms. His witty adages, paradoxes and “electric discharges of thought” may be found not only in a section of the volume *Łżejszy kaliber. Szkice — Próby dna — Aforyzmy* (1938) which the author set apart for this purpose and in a subdivision of his earlier book *Czyn i słowo* (1913) entitled “Aphorisms on the Act”, but also in of all his work as a literary critic and diarist from the times of Young Poland and between the World Wars. After the writer’s death, selections of his brilliant aphorisms appeared in the volumes edited by Ludwik Grzeniewski (*Mysli*, Warszawa 1973) and Stefan Lichański (*Aforyzmy*, Warszawa 1975) as well as in a section of *Alchemia ciała i inne szkice oraz aforyzmy* edited by Wojciech Głowala (Wrocław 1996); the latter collection demonstrates how broad the subject matter of Irzykowski’s aphorisms was, transcending (like much of his other work) the areas of aesthetics, literary criticism and the theory of literature and bringing up sociological, psychological and philosophical issues.

The aphorisms by Irzykowski are not only maxims, paradoxes and miniature essays (the latter mainly in “Aphorisms on the Act”) which the author labeled as such and thereby considered a typologically autonomous genre of literature, but also penetrating quotations from his longer pieces of literary criticism; together with metaphors, neologisms and colloquialisms, aphorisms made up the critic’s polemical language. Thus, beside producing detached aphorisms, designed as formally independent, Irzykowski wrote in an aphoristic style, applying his witty, well-aimed phrases in critical discourse for a variety of purposes: provocation, attempts at capturing the essence of his or another’s view, parody or producing a mood of existential meditation. Therefore, one may and must speak not only of the aphorisms by Irzykowski but also of the aphoristic¹ as a skill which Irzykowski exercised and made a distinct subject matter, on which he commented in his statements on his own work and of which he was a theoretician. In order to portray Irzykowski as an aphorist, the most interesting is the discord between the critic’s intensive practice of the aphorism and his scathing condemnation of the form of the aphorism, which in his opinion was an instance of simplified, apodictic thinking. What justifies the frequent use of the aphorism by an author who did not appreciate this device? What shape did Irzykowski’s aphorisms take against the background of the

¹ The present author uses the term “the aphoristic” in a somehow different meaning than does Brygida Pawłowska-Jądryk in her article *Przeciw aforystyczności. Świadomość językowa w “Patubie”* („Teksty Drugie” 2001, No. 6). The latter scholar approaches the aphoristic as a quality of the language based on its claim to reference, while the present author, as an attribute of the (literary critical) style which abounds in aphorisms and adages.

tradition of the genre? And — which is perhaps the most important — what is their function in his writing and what do they prove? These are some of the present author's questions.

When considering Irzykowski as an aphorist, the present author unavoidably remembers a passage in Plato's *Protagoras*. In this early dialogue, Plato describes the origin of the far-famed canonical collection of inscriptions by seven wise men, at the same time specifying the stylistic peculiarity of aphorisms, which in his treatment stem from the intellectual tradition of the Spartan *paideia*. Its adherents were "lovers and emulators and disciples of the culture of the Lacedaemonians, and any one may perceive that their wisdom was of this character; consisting of short memorable sentences"². They represent the acme of philosophical and philological culture, which statement the author of the dialogue justifies in the following way:

If a man converses with the most ordinary Lacedaemonian, he will find him seldom good for much in general conversation, but at any point in the discourse he will be darting out some notable saying, terse and full of meaning, with unerring aim; and the person with whom he is talking seems to be like a child in his hands. (Plato 2010: 134)

This proverbial laconism, identified with the philosophical and philological perfection, turns "the most ordinary" and the "seldom good for much in general conversation" into wise men. A Spartan, in the general opinion feisty but not outspoken, in fact possesses a powerful knowledge, more effective than "valour of arms". What, then, is the value of the aphorism? Principally, it consists in the efficiency of persuasion. It is based, however, on an illusion of the truth: the person with whom such an expert aphorist is talking, *seems* to be like a child. This association of the illusion and the truth, of the surface and the essence, makes one doubt the disinterested intentions, the noble origin and the epistemological relevance of the maxim. Plato exposes the ambivalence of the aphorism and subtly suggests its price: persuasion and efficiency replace insight and depth. A linguistically "memorable sentence" may ridicule, when the listener seems to be like a child, or kill, when it is used to rule the world. By the same token, Simonides, a character mentioned in the dialogue, approached a polemical confrontation with an aphorism by Pittacus as a combat, considering the road to wisdom as a struggle where "he could overthrow this saying [...] as if he had won a victory over some famous athlete", a battle "with the secret intention of damaging Pittacus and his saying".

These associations with Plato come to mind when one reads the aphorisms by Irzykowski; may a statement of his which exposes the potential of violence and oppression of the language itself, suffice as a comment at this juncture: "Human speech is the weakest weapon, but has the most forms; if the arsenal of humanity's tools of killing were similar in all respects to speech, people would have murdered one another a long time ago" (A 39)³. As it will be demonstrated, Irzykowski believed that among the most efficient tools in the arsenal was the aphorism itself.

² The quotations from *Protagoras* are taken from an e-book edition: Plato (2010) *Protagoras and Meno*, trans. B. Jowett, Digireads.com Publishing, p. 33.

³ Quotations from works by Irzykowski are identified by means of the following abbreviations: A = *Aforyzmy* (1975); P = *Paluba. Sny Marii Dunin*, (1981); C = *Czyn i słowo oraz Fryderyk Hebbel jako poeta konieczności — Lemiesz i szpada przed sądem publicznym. Prolegomena do charakterologii*, (1980); WB = *Walka o treść. Studia z literackiej teorii poznania — Beniaminek*, (1976); S = *Stoń wśród porcelany — Lżejszy kaliber*, (1976); PRI = *Pisma rozproszone 1897–1922*, t. 1, (1998); PRII = *Pisma rozproszone 1923–1931*, t. 2, (1999); PRIII = *Pisma rozproszone 1932–1935*, t. 3, (1999); PRIV = *Pisma rozproszone 1936–1939*, t. 4, (1999); DI = *Dziennik 1891–1897*, t. 1, (2001); DII = *Dziennik 1916–1944*, t. 2, (2001); the number after the abbreviation is the page number.

Irzykowski as a Theoretician of the Aphorism

"The whole wisdom of the world and the whole truth is in aphorisms and paradoxes, and even in lies, because there is no truth; there is only dialectics" (DI 15), wrote an eighteen-year-old Irzykowski in his diary at a time when he was still learning to devise witty statements which sometimes took the form of an aphorism, a pun or a paradox. His views on both the truth and the value of the aphorism rapidly evolved. As a mature critic, he emphatically and outspokenly denounced the aphorism, which "shines and lies with its succinctness" (S 607), adding elsewhere: "How easy it is to produce aphorisms once one has grasped their form: the spurious generalizations, the artificial distinctions, the imitations of absolute self-confidence and occult knowledge. One reverses proverbs, clichés and customs, one works miracles with the word 'is', one encourages the impudence of the miniature" (S 610). He also voiced his ambivalent attitude to this miniature genre in a confession from the year 1934, commenting on his own return to the constructing of aphorisms in the mid-1930s: "I began to produce aphorisms again and to play with various combinations of images, obviously inspired by — among other factors — my interest in contemporary Polish lyrical poetry. I should not have berated these things earlier"⁴.

His changing attitude to the aphorism, developing from enthusiasm through sharp criticism into an eventual skeptical approval, testifies to Irzykowski's coming to terms with the epistemological background of this form of discourse. As we can see, aphorisms, their "spurious generalizations", their "artificial distinctions and the 'lies of their succinctness'", soon aroused suspicion on the part of the author of *Paluba*, a novel which exposes the coquettishly misleading nature of such terse sentences and the false ideas of the reality which they spawn. Whoever wants to attain the strata of the world "where it defies abstraction, eschews generalizations and shows itself to be hard to solve, desperate and exceptional" (P 151), searches for "a maximum variety of words", which in turn results from "a perfect awareness of their relativity", for a language which eschews generalizations, free of laconism and never conclusive, denouncing the convention of the aphorism as a dangerous factor which may make the reality trite. This adaptor of Ernst Mach's theory of elements, when attempting to comment on the "haggish reality", on nameless atoms exempt from the touchstone of linguistic categorization, points out the enemy of the meaningful relationship between words and the reality, which is *language* itself, with its array of inadequate notions; "if it were not an aphoristic exaggeration, one could put it nicely: the name is the tomb of the matter", he writes, and goes on to convince his readers: "Almost the same function as that of words, is fulfilled in our mental activity by whole sentences, *aphorisms*, clichés, symmetries, entire patterns of behavior, roles, issues, theories, proverbs and dualisms" (P 441; italics by S. P).

Thus, being a component of language, which, as Mach defines it, "constructs its rigid pictures of the fluid world" (Mach 1898: 192), and which, as Irzykowski himself puts it, "does not 'render' facts but instead is a collection of opinions and appraisals" (C 606) and therefore constitutes not a dictionary of words but "a dictionary of notions, ideologies and beliefs current in a certain epoch and a certain society" (C 480), aphorisms are symptoms of simplifications and stereotypes, which the critic condemns. Irzykowski's ambivalent attitude to the aphorism results from the conflict of the two forces within the author himself: On the

⁴ An entry in Irzykowski's diary (Sept. 27, 1934), quoted after: B. Winklowska, *Karol Irzykowski. Życie i twórczość*, t. 3, (1994), p. 17.

one hand, he was afraid of participating in stabilizing the unstable, in conventionalizing the haggish. Accordingly, he denounced — both in his statements dedicated to this subject and through his many years' abstention from the practice of this genre — the background of the aphorism, which is a pursuit of gnomic apodictic authority, as the aphorism's ambition to define things corresponds to the intellect's tendency to perpetuate stereotypes, which in fact results not in “breaking the shell of nomenclature”, but in constructing a “consequent world of phenomena” where “errors appear as facts”.

On the other hand, Irzykowski became increasingly aware of the facts that “it is not justified to depreciate the word” and that “the word is an act like any other”, because “a thought is not whole until it has crystallized in words” (C 482), and cognition and creativity consist in constructing a system of tools and signs by means of which we organize and “understand” chaos (C 475). Ultimately, as an aphorism of his has it, “we are closed in a fish tank; pounding our noses against its walls is human language” (S 598). Thus, Irzykowski considered the aphorism, which sustains the language's function of predicating on and ordering the world (through applying “generalizations” and “distinctions” according to the recommendations of the genre), a space of ambivalence, similarly to language itself.

Another factor which made Irzykowski critical of the form of the aphorism was his reading of the works of other writers. While in his youth, the future author of *The Hag* was fascinated by the aphoristic adages of philosophers (Hebbel and Nietzsche), in the period between the World Wars he openly voiced his irritation with Polish composers of aphorisms. Although at a later time he admitted that “Napierski's aphorism are the most valuable of his work,” he immediately added that “due to their verbosity, they cannot be read in larger amounts” (Irzykowski 1964: 393); “as soon as had come”, he recorded angrily the poet's visit in his diary, “he poured on me a plethora of smart phrases, which he had apparently prepared in his notebook”. It enraged him that Stefan Napierski attempted to “arrange his judgments in columns”, because, while “a bias is predetermined in aphorisms”, in the latter poet's case it was “uninteresting and arrogant” (DII 232), principally due to his steadfast faith in the tool (i.e., the very formula of the genre). Therefore, Irzykowski considered Napierski's aphorisms “a harmonious manner of combining the incomprehensible with conceit against a background of snobbery” (DII 235).

The impressive phrases found in Nalkowska's novels sounded equally pretentious to him. “Her *chutzpah* of a snobbish piano-tuner, which used to fulfill itself in descriptions of the nature, is now evolving toward philosophizing and taking the shortcuts of rounded aphorisms”, he convinces his readers (DII 481).

Less known authors of volumes of aphorisms through which Irzykowski browsed in the 1930s, also made him angry. In his 1936 review of a collection of aphorisms, a review under the sarcastic title *Dziki szczerus i jego naplematelny światopogląd*, he was critical of the author's questionable achievements. In his review, he was pained to identify the aphorism as the form “adequate to the modern mentality”, where the basic aspiration of the participants in culture is “to pin down and dry” (i.e., to pigeonhole, reduce and judge), and “the slogan of a simplified life gives birth to a simplified thinking” (PRIV 7). Thus, as the critic writes, the author of the reviewed aphorisms throws his truths like stones, due not only to unpleasant traits of the latter's personality (shameless audacity, gall and cunning) but also to the generic qualities of the aphorism, which — as Irzykowski added elsewhere — like the proverb “may annoy with its half-truths, but seldom offers observations or advice that are indeed refined, useful and helpful — advice at which only a solitary thinker may arrive” (PRIV 551).

Irzykowski's general conclusion about this miniature genre reveals the doubt of the intellectual from Julien Benda's essay: "an aphorism is treacherous; sometimes no trinkets may cover the absence of thought from it" (DII 209).

It was not a coincidence, then, that Irzykowski should be critical of the aphorism. His skeptical attitude to this form of statement stems from the epistemological beliefs of the author of *The Struggle for the Content*: Namely, the pitch of the aphorism, while sounding seducingly bright, does not conform to the concept of the truth to which Irzykowski adhered — the truth as a process of a gradual progression where the exposure of errors is the surest method of investigation⁵. Let us remember that Irzykowski conceived of the truth not as an expression but "as a composite event, a complex" (S 114). The truth may not be attained, it is not the result of thinking designed as a convincing, brilliant, accurate or even ambiguous sentence, but instead it is the image of a composite "rotating sphere" (WB 62) which continuously displays new aspects of things and phenomena. The truth needs study rather than revelation, it is based on insight rather than on impression, it respects wariness rather than faith in words. Conversely, the aphorism amplifies — instead of suspending — the function of language as predication; the expectation of brilliancy, inherent in the normative convention of the genre, appeals to impression rather than to study; and the desirable formal elegance of the aphorism corresponds to the shortcomings of Young Polish poetry which Irzykowski condemned for being a hoax rather than "a penetration of the shell of nomenclature".

As one can see, the aphorism not only does not fulfill the critic's wish that "phenomena which are unknown and nameless, which do not resemble anything" should have names "not similar to anything, wild and strange, unkempt and unpleasant, uncomfortable to use, but thereby also not eradicable with a coin" (P 391), but furthermore it also stabilizes the truth about such phenomena: While the truth is dynamic (as the sphere rotates), the aphorism is motionless ("If one likes the profile of an aphorism, one should not look in its face", S 601). Even the word, in which the aphorism trusts, opposes the rotating sphere of the truth, because it is — as Irzykowski explains polemicizing, while considering incomprehensibility, with Norwid's image of the word as a projectile — "a straight line, shot or risked into the infinity, the eternity, and therefore it may not be burdened with the entire ballast of the truth" (S 85).

According to Irzykowski, both the word and the aphorism participate in approaching the truth, but do not grasp it. The point is that the aphorism suggests, and does it in a cunning, because impressive, manner, that it expresses the truth. In the opinion of Benda's intellectual, aphorisms are among statements that "(1) while transcending the cliché and even opposing it, as the antithesis opposes the thesis, and thereby constituting a stratagem, nevertheless fail to consider the issue completely, contenting themselves with their initial triumph; (2) and then they turn annoying and arrogant, look for victims of their partial correctness — far from the piety and modesty typical of a truth which has been laboriously gained and which is aware of its last doubts, and especially of one's own truth" (PRIV 549).

It is so because, after all, the aphorism — as Irzykowski realizes — does not intend to offend the prevailing opinions. Instead, its purpose is to penetrate an issue which seems too shallow in the common opinion, and to investigate it⁶. It would be a maxim which defines the

⁵ For more on Irzykowski's concept of the truth cf. my book: Panek (2006) *Krytyk w przestrzeniach literatury i filozofii. O młodopolskich wypowiedziach polemicznych Karola Irzykowskiego*, Poznań, pp. 43–69.

⁶ This is why Irzykowski, in a polemic with Schopenhauer, defends the formula of the aphorism, which, while already "overcome" by the intellectuals, was nevertheless — in his view — useful for complicating the conven-

reality if it were not for its short form, with which it contends, and its obligation of wittiness. Obviously, however, it has a quality in common with the maxim⁷: the need of pronouncing a general and universal judgment about the reality. Its intention of issuing a challenge to the established patterns of thinking (which distinguishes the aphorism from the proverb)⁸ does not acquit it of its debatable and naïve ambition to grasp the truth about a phenomenon in an effective way in a dazzling conceit of a conclusion. The apodictic convention of the aphorism both testifies to its reaction against the accepted judgment which constitutes a negative reference for the aphorism (and is therefore overcome and rejected) and emphasizes its trust in the pertinence of the new judgment, which in turn is based, as the aphorist hopes, on a productively captured and expressed investigation.

Consequently, Irzykowski's criticism of the form of the aphorism resulted from his approval of only such cognitive approaches and descriptions of the world as associate the striving for the truth with the awareness of the non-finality of each judgment and the inadequacy of each utterance. The aphorism does not conform with these requirements. Irzykowski considered the belief in the insufficiency of the intellect and of the language as a means of producing positive predications to constitute a challenge to cognition, a process which the aphorism does not respect — a challenge consisting primarily in a toilsome operation of overthrowing the false, undertaken with a sense of intellectual and ethical responsibility. Thence Irzykowski's essential objection to the idea that with the aphorism, one declares oneself against the unwanted "spirit of heaviness". This is because "the spirit of lightness", the law and the strength of the aphorism, is after all the spirit of Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, with whom Irzykowski was at odds, and does not take into account the unimpressive — in that it is skeptical, focuses on processes and merits, and complicates the comprehension of the various facets of phenomena — epistemology of the author of *The Struggle for the Content*.

Why, then — one still asks — do aphorisms abound so much in the critic's work?

Irzykowski as an Aphorist

There are several useful applications of the aphorism which Irzykowski appreciated in spite of his critical attitude to it. As one considers the types of his aphorisms, one may identify the aspects of this form of which Irzykowski approved.

tions of collective awareness, because "it is a sophistication, a higher degree than the trite, curt popular judgment" (cf. PRIV 549–552).

⁷ At times, even dictionaries consider "maxim" and "dictum" synonyms of "aphorism" (cf.: "Aphorism, Maxim and Proverb" [in:] *Cassell's Encyclopaedia of Literature*, London 1953; S. Sierotwiński (1994), *Słownik terminów literackich*, Kraków; similarly; J. Krzyżanowski (1985) [ed.], *Literatura polska. Przewodnik encyklopedyczny*, Warszawa, where the entries "aforyzm," "gnoma" and "maksyma" refer to the coordinating entry "sentencja" ["dictum"]). Cf. also: the entries "aforyzm," "sentencja" and "maksyma" in *Słownik terminów literackich*, (1998), ed. J. Sławiński, M. Głowiński and T. Kostkiewiczowa, Warszawa and the chapter "Aforyzm" by A. Karpowicz in *Od aforyzmu do zjnu. Gatunki twórczości słownej*, (2014), ed. G. Godlewski, A. Karpowicz, M. Rakoczy, P. Rodak, Warszawa; cf. also: U. Eco, *Wilde. Paradosso e aforisma* [in:] *Sulla letteratura*, Milano Bompiani (2002), M. Krüger, *Studien über den Aphorismus als philosophische*, Frankfurt am Main, (1957), M. Kruse *Die Maxime in der französischen Literatur. Studien zum Werk La Rochefoucaulds un seiner Nachfolger*, Hamburg, (1960).

⁸ Cf. *Od aforyzmu do zjnu. Gatunki twórczości słownej* (2014: 30).

Let us exclude “Aphorisms on the Act”, which, despite the style of their reception intended by the author, coquettishly pretending to adhere to the tradition of the genre, in fact do not comply with its rules. Namely, they are truly miniature essays which — as Jerzy Kwiatkowski puts it — constitute drafts of or excerpts from treatises rather than aphorisms in the strict sense of the word (Kwiatkowski 1990: 369). At that stage, Irzykowski did not attain what he did in his aphorisms from *A Lighter Caliber*: crystallize and universalize his message. Furthermore, many of these statements of several or a dozen sentences — contributing to the cunning hoax — are indeed treatises “in a nutshell”, condensed versions of essays which Irzykowski had actually written and which made up the remainder of his book. Thus, they are summaries whose possible purpose may be to interest the readers in the subjects and to make them read the full-fledged treatises.

Both the aphorisms in *A Lighter Caliber* and those which other authors selected from Irzykowski’s longer pieces after his death, comply with the rules of the genre¹⁰, which define the aphorism as a very short statement with marked borders, autonomous (“self-contained”), conveying a maximum of the content in a minimum of words, whose characteristic is an emphasis of communication, based on utter precision or, conversely, on a maximum metaphorical nature, and projecting in its reception on the intellectual level, a sense of revelation, and on the emotional level, of aesthetic pleasure through its formal concept and linguistic dexterity. The aphorisms by Irzykowski, concerning a variety of subjects, may build up existential meditation:

Love is a mutual sacrilege (LK 551);

The quality of the internal monologue throughout one’s life is the character (DII 525);

The right to the old platitude about the gaps between people is only the privilege of those who think of closing them (S 90);

If the dream and the idea are compromised before the reality, then the reality is compromised before the idea (S 110);

- epistemological meditation:

The most terrible is a fool who is a little right (C 626);

Stupidity is also a way of employing the intellect (S 560);

If a fool plucks one by the beard, even ten wise men will not be able to comb it back into shape (S 558);

A fool may say more rubbish in five minutes than a wise man may guess in five years (C 71) (another version: “A fool may devise more hopeless riddles in five minutes than a wise man may solve in five years”; S 73);

⁹ Cf. Jan Jakóbczyk, *Szachły literackie. Rzecz o twórczości Irzykowskiego*, (2005 149–153).

¹⁰ Cf. the entry ‘Aforyzm’ [in] *Słownik terminów literackich*, op. cit.; the entry ‘Aforyzm’ [in:] G. Gazda, S. Tynecka-Makowiecka (eds); the entry “Aphorism, Maxim and Proverb” [in:] *Cassell’s Encyclopaedia of Literature*, (1953) London, *Aphorisme in: Grand Larousse encyclopédique*, v.1 (1960) Paris; *Słownik rodzajów i gatunków literackich*, (2006) Kraków; the entry ‘Aforyzm’ in *Od aforyzmu do zinnu. Gatunki twórczości słownej* (2014). Also cf. M. Głowiński, *Aforyzm i slogan* [in:] *Narracje literackie i nieliterackie* (1987), Kraków; F. Mautner, *Maxim[e]s, sentences, Fragmente, Aphorismen in Der Aphorismus. Zur Geschichte zu den Formen und Möglichkeiten einer literarischen Gattung*, hrsg. von G. Neumann, Darmstadt 1976, pp. 399–412 (F. Mautner, *Maksymy, sentencje, fragmenty, aforyzmy*, trans. M. Łukasiewicz (1978), „Pamiętnik Literacki” vol. 4); J. Culler, *Paradox and the Language of Morals in La Rochefoucauld 1973*, „Modern Language Review”, Vol. 86; K. Orzechowski, „Aforyzm”, „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, Vol. XVI, part 1; K. Orzechowski, *Aforyzm wśród małych form literackich*, (1998), Opole.

- and meditation in the realm of literary criticism (mainly projecting definitions of poetry and criticism):

If poetry is to be anything, it is the crown of thought, not a shelter for the poor in spirit (A 110);

A critic is a man who has sold his appetite (LK 584);

A critic is a Gulliver who carries Lilliputs in his pocket (S 584);

Criticism is poetry in another state of aggregation (S 222);

Polish literature has masterpieces, but no literature (S 18);

Culture is an exercise of the memory and of forgetting (S 646).

The aphorisms by Irzykowski continue the tradition of aphorisms (and the pan-tragic view of philosophy) of Friedrich Hebbel:

Beside the scrap of the present moment, the whole world does not exist (A 21);

If the fourth dimension is time, the fifth one will be death (LK 595);

- and Friedrich Nietzsche:

Ideals are a tool of blackmail and live due to it (A 49);

The most immoral thing is the cliché (A 49);

There are not any moral phenomena at all;

there are only moral interpretations of phenomena (A 40);

The paradox [coquetry?] is a truth that must pretend to be a lie in a society of the blind (S 580);

- authors whose work the critic knew and highly valued.

Some of Irzykowski's aphorisms follow the "closed form", whose impact consists in the well-balanced structure, the extreme clarity and precision of the vocabulary, the dazzling conclusion and the authoritative style (e.g., "Poetry is not what is written but an emotional state occurring on the highest levels of thought", C 366; "Poetry is not the gathering of gems for 'the treasury of national literature' but a continuous effort leading into the unknown", C 592; "In Poland, intuition is a national disease" (S 199); "It is disgusting, to what extent a man may honestly ingratiate himself", S 604; "Human predacity, taking the path of least resistance, manifests itself mainly as the desire to judge", C 623; "They say they agree. I don't like opponents who are never at home", S 567).

At other times, he applied the "open form", more esoteric, which pleases by its sophisticated ambiguity¹¹ ("There are tables with lame legs propped up with the Bible", S 549; "A critic is a poet, whose one side is hidden, like the moon's", S 552; "Clarity is a volcanic island", S 76; "To blow: To put out? To light up?", S 598).

¹¹ Cf. F. Mautner, *Maxim[e]s, sentences, Fragmente, Aphorismen* [in:] *Der Aphorismus. Zur Geschichte zu den 'Formen' und Möglichkeiten einer literarischen Gattung*. Hrsg. von G. Neumann, Darmstadt 1978, s. 300–301.

Occasionally Irzykowski used humor in his aphorisms:

The celebration of an anniversary: revenge of sorts by those who must honor someone (S 555);
To polemicize with someone who holds our former opinion — a funny feeling, as if one saw one's ex-wife's second husband (S 566).

Elsewhere he resorted to reflection or melancholy:

The old age: the whole body, the whole life becomes a growing tumor (A 68);
The point is not to avoid errors and sins, but how one feels and suffers among them (S 574).

All the aphorisms quoted above comply with the formal criteria of the genre, consisting in a semantic self-containment and a delineation of the limits of the utterance, but also transcend them as the author's system of beliefs develops, complicates, expands and comments upon them. This obviously happens when they occur within a longer piece, serving as the polemicist's ironic comment on the opponent's view, thus making up a simplified and caricatural version of the former's opinion, a provocative act of aggression or an interim conclusion which later on in the piece becomes developed, demonstrating how inadequate its original phrasing was¹². At the same time, a reader of Irzykowski will notice the same inadequacy in aphorisms which the author himself set apart as independent entities: a formally labeled aphorism is merely a component of the writer's system of beliefs, and when considered on its own, does not yield the entire palette of the author's intentions. As Stefan Lichański beautifully puts it in his introduction to a selection of aphorisms by Irzykowski: "An aphorism, even if it takes the form of an apodictic judgment pronounced emphatically and with a lordly gesture, remains nevertheless an attempt, a miniature essay. It is always a fingerprint looking for a hand, a footprint testing the path in the dark before it takes another step"¹³. Incidentally, this is probably the case of all aphorisms, which wish to find a development, expansion and response in the readers' reflections. Irzykowski's aphorisms, however, look for traces in other writings by the same critic, gaining real value and significance only when one considers them within the whole of his opinions. Within the framework of the postulates of Irzykowski's epistemology, they do not lose any of their ambiguity, but turn more precise, participating in the process of "the narrowing of the field of the truth"¹⁴. The essential purpose of their coming into being is not to shine outside their context, but to participate

¹² Some examples: "A metaphor is not a refined *appendix vermiformis*" (WB 48), in his polemic with Tadeusz Peiper's argumentation which derived the metaphor from a primitive animism; "The futurist rhyme asks one to admire it like an unemployed butler who at times plays the role of the master" (S 104), in his debate with the futurists' program; "A critic is a Negro made of a poet's shadow" (S 212), on the spirit of the Young Polish concept of the literary critic; "Nalkowska, that live notebook" (DII 190), to denounce her method of "packing" (DII 190), derived from the style of "the school of Żeromski"; "The absolute races through the world; one only has to catch it by the tail" and "A Gothic cathedral is closer to the absolute (by its entire height) than a carrot growing next to it" (C 387), aphoristic parodies of opinions by Zenon Przesmycki; "Naturalism has turned from a comfortable spectator into a miner and a diver" (C 467), an aphoristic testimony of the critic's appreciation of the participation of naturalism in the strife of the "incomprehensible" literature.

¹³ S. Lichański, *Introduction* [in:] K. Irzykowski, *Aforyzmy*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Cf. *Paluba*, p. 354.

in an actual communicative situation, whether it is a critic's polemic intervention against literature's unwanted phoniness or a discreet, implicit but obvious suggestion by Irzykowski that the reader should reproduce the whole of his evolving view on a certain subject, issue or phenomenon, within which view the aphorisms are applied only as temporary measures. Accordingly, a typology of the genre which has appeared in critical literature¹⁵, proposing a dichotomy between an aphorism as the last link in a long chain of speculation (aphorism as an efficient articulation of an idea) and, conversely, a "sudden flash of thought," may not be validly applied to Irzykowski's aphorisms. "A thought is sudden and explodes like a spark; an idea emerges like the day from the night and the dawn. The former dazzles, the latter illuminates"¹⁶, writes a theoretician discussing the two types of the application of the aphorism. He may be right, but nevertheless it is assumed in both types of the genre that the cognitive value of the aphorism consists in the word, in which it trusts and from which it takes its strength, in the word conceived of — as Irzykowski expressed it — realistically rather than expressionistically¹⁷. On the other hand, the strength of Irzykowski's aphorisms does not fulfill itself within their rhetorically suggestive and cognitively productive linguistic form, but transcends it towards the truth as a process, a movement of thought, for which the aphorism asks and which it assumes because "no truth may be told without borrowing something from the lie".

Thus, Irzykowski as an aphorist ultimately appears to be "a maker of new impossibilities" (S 557). His aphorisms — as S. Skwarczyńska observantly emphasizes — are "proud failures to admit his own truths"¹⁸, because "it is an aphorist's dream to give the reader flashes of rest and sudden leaps over the misery and slavery of thought (leaps, not flights)" (S 595).

Since such "flashes of rest" may not last long, in certain aphorisms they become immediately developed, in accordance with Benda's intellectual's conviction that "a court must rule in the majesty of the details" (PRIV 543).

In the present author's view, among Irzykowski's aphorisms, those that conform the most with his epistemological assumptions and intentions are the pieces which, beginning with a laconic, concise and impressive phrase, immediately continue to improve upon it — within the form of the aphorism. This is because they illustrate the movement of thought which Irzykowski respected so much: from effect to study, from destruction to construction, from brilliancy to precision. They take the form either of a *reversed* received opinion, commonplace association or a judgment which may be based on a proverb ("Where two agree, a third one is deceived", A 57; "A lie comes to the surface like oil; the truth falls to the bottom because it is heavy and hard", P 235; "Gordian knots are to be untied, not cut. If one cuts them, they grow back", PRI 606) or of an *expansion* or an improvement, where the comment develops the aphorism and brings in a desired complication. Thus, e.g., while the

¹⁵ Cf. F. Mautner, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Irzykowski ascribed such a conception of the word to, e.g., Norwid when he wrote: "Norwid conceived of the word realistically rather than expressionistically. [...] It seems to me that he imagined the word as a very greedy tool, and also in a way as symphonic, with several voices sounding in it simultaneously to reflect the multifarious nature of the truth [...] therefore he greatly enjoyed the comparison of the word to a sphere. But — to continue within the same image — it seems to me that rather than a sphere, the word is a straight line, shot or risked into the infinity, the eternity, and therefore it may not be burdened with the entire ballast of the truth" (S 85–86).

¹⁸ S. Skwarczyńska, *Szkiełce i felietony*, Warszawa 1937, s. 278.

proverb "it is better to lose with a wise one than to find with a fool" did not contradict Irzykowski's opinions, he immediately expanded it: "But the worst is to lose with a fool, which happens the most often" (S 550)¹⁹.

"Do Not Throw Down the Glove Before Me, or You Shall Be Cold"

Seven wise men made their maxims a gift of human wisdom to the God Apollo, who was unfavorably disposed to the mortals. Their adages constituted the offer of the human intellect, which in spite of its attempts did not reach the gods' truth. They were like the arms of the valiant Spartans, a form of combat against a partner who, confronted with speech "terse and full of meaning" turned defenseless like a child.

There are two levels on which Irzykowski's aphorisms resemble the aspects of the maxim illustrated in Plato's *Protagoras*.

Firstly, instead of articulating the truth through the ambiguity of their metaphors and the intelligence of their possible paradoxes, they only constitute instruments of approaching the truth. While testifying to a postulate of Irzykowski's epistemology which was assuming the existence of the truth as a condition of the meaningfulness of the human cognitive attempts, they simultaneously demonstrate that it is impossible to grasp the truth by means of impressive, surprising and brilliant sentences or phrases.

Secondly, the value of Irzykowski's aphorisms (as in the image of a fighting Spartan darting out memorable sayings and thereby turning his opponent into a child) consists principally in their rhetorical efficiency, of which the eminent critic made use in his literary polemics. When integrated into a piece of literary criticism, they are an excellent instrument both of ridiculing the opponent's point of view and of formulating and — due to the attractive form — "marketing" the author's own view, which soon, in later pieces, was to be edited, improved upon and made more precise, often by means of further aphorisms.

Because of this particular application of the miniature genre, one may speak of the inner intertextuality²⁰ of the critic's aphorisms, which have dialogues among one another similarly to the way in which his various pieces have dialogues through references and continuations. Thus, many of Irzykowski's aphorisms make up "hidden cycles" of common ideas displayed from various sides through self-paraphrases, self-comments and self-claims, all within the convention of the miniature genre. As an example, one may quote the sequence of aphoristic sentences written down when reflecting upon incomprehensibility:

To write is to make oneself comprehensible (C 481)

Reverberation is not the essence of, but the prerequisite to any art (S 96)

¹⁹ Some instances of the same technique: "Love is the longing for a witness," and the expansion: "but the witness is often deaf and blind." "You dreamt of the cap of invisibility and now you wear it all the time, invisible to others" (A 108). Similarly: "A stick in an anthill" — this malicious simile offers a persuasive illustration of man's easy triumph and cruelty. But try putting your hand there" (S 587).

²⁰ This is Edward Balcerzan's term which defines an evolving dialogue among works by a certain author. Cf. E. Balcerzan, *Pochwała poezji. Z pamięci, z lektury*, Mikołów, 2013, 257–262.

— a sequence which features additions to and self-revisions of the above sentences:

The secret is the source and the core of poetry (S 73);

Clarity is a fiction made of the material of chaos (S 77);

Incomprehensibility is the form through which the world around and in us becomes alive (C 466).

A series of aphorisms from the realm of epistemological meditation is visible, e.g., in the following statements on rationalism and irrationalism scattered through pieces from various periods of the critic's activity:

It is impossible to speak utter nonsense; it will always be a vestige of a sense (S 102);

If one wishes to express anything irrational, one must use a tool borrowed from reason (S 157);

A snobbish falsification of irrationalism is the worst rationalism (A 40);

Not everything derived from reason is wise, as stupidity also has its intellectual source in reason (S 139);

A bias does not preclude rightness (A 33);

False scales may also weigh well (A 33).

A series of aphorisms on tragedy includes the following statements:

Tragedy is an intensification of life, not its loss (C 233);

Tragedy undergoes a mimicry; exterminated in the form of lions, it takes a vengeance and returns in the form of bacteria (C 255);

Tragedy is life that has envied death its charm (C 233);

Tragedy is the limit of human strength, measured as the amount of effort to avoid tragedy (C 256).

Finally, among his "metaphysical" aphorisms are:

The reality is a verb, an event, an incident, a film rather than an image (S 116)

Let us put it aphoristically: there is no noun, there is only the verb (P 205)

The reality is as sharp as a razor. The reality is a system of wounds (S 114)

Life is a passive notion, used either by a ruthless optimism or by a resigned pessimism (PRII 604).

All the aphorisms in a cycle make up the horizon of a common idea, which in each instance Irzykowski construes differently. Although "theses often look like syntheses" (A 31), none of these sentences may be considered an ultimate phrasing of Irzykowski's intention, since the latter undergoes a continuous, at times even drastic, rephrasing, and acquires comments which complicate its meaning within the course of the critic's argumentation, within a particular polemic or within a series of pieces dealing with a certain issue.

Thus, e.g., in a series of articles contributing to Irzykowski's dispute on incomprehensibility, the communicative obligation of literature, emphasized in the recommendation to write in order to "make comprehensible," acquired a complex exegesis of the proposal that

creative literature balance between "incomprehensibility" as a condition of innovation and "comprehensibility" as a condition of the "legibility" of the text. The epistemological reasons of "rationalism" and "irrationalism" are shown in a different light in *The Hag*, in the contention with the futurists and in the program of "complicationism, meritorism and intellectualism" as the guidelines of Irzykowski's method of creativity. The critic's definitions of tragedy reveal their true meaning only in the context of his polemic against the cult of heroism, which he detected in the work of Żeromski and Orzeszkowa, and in his dispute with the anti-eudemonistic aspect of Stanisław Brzozowski's thought. Finally, his "verbal" definitions of the reality (which relate Irzykowski's maxims to Wittgenstein's theses making up the "ontology of facts") are — one must remember — enhanced with polemical counterarguments in the critic's comments²¹.

* * *

As we can see, it was impossible for Irzykowski to approve wholeheartedly of the aphorism as a closed form and an efficient, final, brilliantly dazzling and cognitively responsible medium of the expression of thought, as its epistemological background was unacceptable to him: its trust in the finally effective reference, obvious in its ingestion of the style of the maxim, as well as its postulate of the consent to destruction, a consent conspicuous, e.g., in the Nietzschean paradox (which the aphorism occasionally approaches) — unacceptable because, as the German philosopher ironically wrote, "whoever does not know how to lay his will into things, at least lays some meaning into them"²². In spite of many similar aphorisms both by Irzykowski and by Nietzsche, the author of *The Struggle for the Content* would not have written the latter, since, as he stated when polemicizing with the futurists, poetry "must return to sense, as nonsense has turned out to be too tight" (S 157).

Nevertheless, even one who ultimately renounces the cognitive value of the aphorism, is capable of using it, giving a fair warning to their opponents: "Do not throw down the glove before me, or you shall be cold" (S 567).

²¹ Cf., e.g., his statements: "Each liberty, if it wishes to become embodied in an act rather than suspend itself in a vacuum, must bind itself and turn into a slavery, whereupon it produces existential philosophies" (C 610); "It is unjustified to attribute fiercely a dynamic and non-final quality to the world [...]; the static and the final have a longer tradition and are more natural" (*Notatki z życia, op. cit.*, p. 268).

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Maxims and Arrows*, trans. W. Kaufmann, R. J. Hollingdale, No. 18.

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