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“My Gaze as Sharp as a Pin / Penetrates the World”: The Colourful Dailiness in the Poetry of Zuzanna Ginczanka

Words connected with seeing, watching, and observing often appear in the poetry of the author of *Chińskie bajki o La-Licie* (*Chinese Fairy Tales of La-Lita*). “My gaze as sharp as a pin penetrates the world”¹, the poet writes as many as three times. The phrase appears for the first time in her manuscripts in her juvenile poem titled *Zmysły* (*Senses*)². Ginczanka did not include this work in her poetry book and decided not to make it public in any other way. She wrote a comment on the margin: “to be used elsewhere”. The cited fragment of the poem was used in the subsequent years in *Sea Hunt*³ and *Fizjologia* (*Physiology*)⁴.

It is of particular importance to see the second instance of using the quoted phrase. The female subject, talking with the sea in the poem, raises the topic of epistemology in simple words, speaking about her ways of getting to know the world; these ways are closely based on senses, particularly on sight, hearing and taste⁵. “The full bay of events / I’ll catch in a net

¹ Translation by Marek Kazmierski. Other quoted poems in the translation by Marek Kazmierski include: *Sea Hunt*, *Grammars*, *Purview*, *This One Thing*, *Pride*, *Declaration*, *Of Centaurus*, *Process*, and *Seafaring*. The remaining quotations and titles in English were translated from Polish.

² Z. Ginczanka, *Zmysły*, [in:] id., *Wiersze zebrane*, ed. I. Kiec, Warszawa 2014, p. 200.

³ Id., *Sea Hunt*, [in:] *ibid.*, p. 277.

⁴ Id., *Fizjologia*, [in:] *ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵ Cf. I. Kiec, *Oskarżona. Zuzanna Ginczanka o poetach i poetkach*, [in:] *Ginczanka. Na stulecie Poetki*, eds. K. Kuczyńska-Koschany, K. Szymańska, Kraków 2018, pp. 15-18.

of senses”, she says in order to later give the information about what she sees, hears, and tastes. The fisherwoman seems to be content with the extent to which she got to know the world through senses. “I know, what I know, I know”, she repeats several times.

The phrase “my gaze as sharp as a pin penetrates the world”⁶ can be found at the beginning of the poem and this time, in contrast to the two other quoted examples, it was not divided into two lines after the word “pin”. In the original, the stress falls on the last word and on the adjective “sharp” on the onset of the following line. The focus is placed on the activity of “penetrating the world”, in which both the process of perception and the world explored with the sight play an equal role.

This phrase also shows a possibility of becoming rooted in the reality owing to visual perception. Pinning to the world seems to suggest the willingness to integrate with the world, to become its part. A similar message is conveyed by the poem titled *Panteistyczne* (*Pantheistic*)⁷, suggesting that the whole world is constructed in a similar way. Nature is composed of the same elements as a human being is. Also the God turns out to be part of nature:

Jakże trudno wytrwać
w równowadze
płacząc nogi po drodze
o cudy
i nie oprzeć się pewnie o
boga,
który wiatru mi natrząsał
i ptaków –
wplynął we mnie życiodajny bóg
krwią czerwoną,
co płynie bez trudu,
choć nie zjawił mi się żaden
głos
w gorejącym
i ognistym
krzaku.

How difficult to persist in balance
floundering legs on the way
on miracles
and not lean firmly on
god,
who shook me wind
and birds –
the life-giving god flowed into me
with red blood
which runs with no effort
although there was no
voice
in the burning
and fiery
bush.

I am interested in the sources of favouring the sense of sight in Ginczanka’s poetry. This text is aimed at preliminary research concerning this issue. The layer of sound is also important in her works, yet, as opposed to poetry by Charles Baudelaire⁸, with whom Ginczanka shares the inclination to use synesthesia, all the other senses in her poetry are, to my mind, subdued to

⁶ The original in Polish reads: “Oczami jak agrafkami / ostro wpięłam się w świat”. In his translation, Marek Kazmierski additionally uses alliteration to achieve this effect of sharpness. [translator’s note]

⁷ Z. Ginczanka, *Panteistyczne*, [in:] id., *op. cit.*, pp. 180-183.

⁸ Cf. I. Kiec, *Oskarżona...* (pp. 27-28) for an interesting reference to the works by Baudelaire in Ginczanka’s poetry.

sight. The poet seems, for all that, to be aware of the insufficiency of human senses. The lyrical subject in her poems tries to get to know and understand the world even though it does not always turn out to be fully possible. The most dramatic statement on the imperfection of human cognition may be found in the poem titled *Sea Hunt*. It is all the more powerful as it is uttered by the sea, having a dialogue with the fisherwoman and questioning human capabilities⁹:

on the shore you speak of nets
bind senses with bindweed,
you might as well try to fish for fowl or for any other birds –
how does the cold moon seem?
and do smell the depths of me?
How in senses, as thin as dreams
will you catch
the angels
herds?¹⁰

Disbelief in the perfection of senses does not exclude, however, one of them. It comes as a surprise that it is sight that is favoured, as it is traditionally regarded as 'masculine', intellectual – as opposed to 'feminine' senses, i.e. focused more around the touch. This recognition turns out to be important, especially in the context of the increasingly popular custom of reading the works of the poet of Rivne from the perspective of feminist criticism¹¹. To my mind, in this case the category of 'feminine' writing does not exclude the domination of the sense connected with seeing the world¹². I suppose that it is possible to point to at least three hypotheses that justify the reasons for the "sight-centrism"¹³ of Ginczanka's poetry.

The first one would be associated with the poet's ironic gesture towards the world surrounding her. Gincburżanka, as she was called, had to fend off oppressive peeping many times; therefore, in her poetry she somewhat 'defiantly' favours the sense which placed her under constant scrutiny. This technique allows one to transform a weakness into a strength, reverse the roles and make a transition from being the object of observation to becoming a subject observing the world.

⁹ In the aforementioned study, Kiec interprets the conversation with the fisherwoman with the sea as a clash of the androcentric world of literature (the sea) with the convention of 'feminine' writing (the fisherwoman). To my mind, however, the sense of the conversation of the fisherwoman with the sea may be also interpreted in another way, namely as a dialogue concerning the capabilities of human cognition.

¹⁰ Z. Ginczanka, *Sea Hunt*, [in:] id., *op. cit.*, p. 279.

¹¹ Cf. A. Araszkievicz, *'Wypowiadam wam moje życie'. Melancholia Zuzanny Ginczanki*, Warszawa 2001.

¹² What is more, one of the researchers defines Ginczanka's poetry as "sensual-somatic-intellectual understanding of the world". Cf. L. Marzec, *Młoda na zawsze*, [in:] *Ginczanka, Na stulecie Poetki...*, p. 107.

¹³ Cf. M. Jay, *Kryzys tradycyjnej władzy wzroku. Od impresjonistów do Bergsona*, transl. J. Przeźmiński, [in:] *Odkrywanie modernizmu. Przekłady i komentarze*, ed. R. Nycz, Kraków 1998, pp. 295-330.

She was beautiful, but it was tainted beauty. "Queen of Wrong Looks". First in the 1930s passers-by turned their heads with admiration when they saw her in the street. Then during the occupation and the black 1940s she tried not to leave her hiding places but if she had to go out, she hid her beauty beneath a wide hat brim. Extraordinary, phenomenal face, broken, tragic biography; magnetic, underrated poetry¹⁴.

The words of Agata Araszkiewicz, describing the figure of the poet, sum up in an excellent way one of the problems which Ginczanka had to face. Her Semitic facial features made her pay attention to her appearance so that it is not too conspicuous, particularly at the time of the worst wave of anti-Semitism. It was difficult for the poet to avoid glances and comments, which were often inappropriate, but also hostile. There are anecdotes showing Eryk Lipiński and Józef Wittlin teasingly suggesting the staging of rape from the painting titled *Susanna and the Elders*, in which the role of the eponymous female would be performed by Ginczanka¹⁵.

Ginczanka's corporeality also attracted the attention of Witold Gombrowicz, whose words are cited by Maria Stauber:

[...] from now on I call you Gina. You are an ideal woman to me, incarnation of femininity, the queen of our table. This is why I give you a very feminine name Gina and here is the crown I put on your head¹⁶.

Despite the fact that she was beautiful, Ginczanka must have been dreading her Semitic appearance. One solution allowing her to run away from the current problems consists in turning to memories in her works. With regard to her youthful years spent in Volhynian Rivne, the greatest emphasis in Ginczanka's poetry is put on the landscapes she remembered¹⁷.

Evoking the nature of Rivne is probably connected with her escape to the world of youth, which could have been a safe haven for her. Sexuality may not have been aroused at that time and the poet did not have fear the looks of men surveying her feminine figure¹⁸.

In her youth, Ginczanka did not know the fear resulting from her Jewish origins. Returning to the landscapes of her childhood may create an illusion of the feeling of safety, which the poet lacked in the reality full of anti-Semitic attacks¹⁹.

¹⁴ A. Araszkiewicz, *Tajemnica Ginczanki. Wykluczające centrum języka polskiego*, "Czas Kultury" 2014, no. 1, pp. 98-99.

¹⁵ M. Stauber, *Musisz tam wrócić. Historia przyjaźni Lusi Gelmont i Zuzanny Ginczanki*, Warszawa 2018, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁷ It could be quite interesting to see the effects of comparing this poetry with that of Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna, particularly with the works included in her collection of poems titled *Słowik litewski (A Lithuanian Nightingale)* from 1936. Such an analysis, however, would exceed the volume of this draft.

¹⁸ In my considerations, I follow the trail indicated by Lucyna Marzec, who writes about the youthfulness and girliness of Ginczanka's poetry as well as her constant fear of awakening sexuality. Cf. L. Marzec, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-118.

¹⁹ It is symptomatic that there are poems in Ginczanka's output which refer to her Semitic origins. Apart from figures of Jews evoked directly, for instance the poems *Kulistość*

Those attempts to take refuge might also have a creative aspect, since sinking into words could give a sense of authorship, which is not provided by the poet's here and now. This is my third hypothesis concerning the reasons for favouring the sense of sight in Ginczanka's poetry. It is possible that the exposure of perception processes that are characteristic of her poetry results from the special inclination of the poet towards the Polish language, which – as Jarosław Przeźmiński said²⁰ – carries a trace of sight-centrism as one of the Slavic languages.

There is a possibility that Ginczanka, immensely fascinated with the Polish language, instinctively senses some mechanisms inherent in the language. Works devoted to the author of *Of Centaurus* often stress Ginczanka's choice to be a Polish poet. Not a Jewish poet or a poet writing in Russian. As Maria Stauber writes, "Ginczanka spoke Polish, wrote in Polish and felt, above all, a Polish poet, she wanted to create Polish culture"²¹. Izolda Kiec stresses, in turn, her conscious choice of a Polish gymnasium specifically: "Zuzanna herself decides to learn Polish. Out of four gymnasiums in Rivne – Jewish, Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish, Zuzanna chooses the last one"²².

In her poems the poet observes individual words. In an important autothematic work titled *Grammars*²³, she writes:

(-: and to relish words is such joy,
to cherish, to sip them like wine –
to hold, to lift them up, to view in a light divine).

The multitude of evoked colours is an interesting value of the world depicted by the poet. Names of colours are interwoven into metaphors. The subject speaks of a "grey plate of earth"²⁴, a "golden pumpkin of the sun", or "beautiful apples of red days". Izolda Kiec made a very accurate observation, saying that it is synesthesia that dominates in Ginczanka's poetry²⁵.

(*Sphericity*) and *Ballada o Żydziaku* (*A Ballad About Abbie*) contain occasional references to the Biblical history of the Chosen People. One of more interesting examples of such a reference is the poem titled *Egzotyka miłości* (*Love Exoticism*):

Whether on the desert of the prophets – Biblical,
whether on the desert of the Sahara – African,
whether on the desert of longing – of spring,
whether on the desert of despair – nobody's,
– I wandered with looseness and emptiness,
yellow sand and days without caress
in the silence of muffled acoustics
forty days and forty nights.

Cf. Z. Ginczanka, *Egzotyka miłości*, [in:] id., *op. cit.*, pp. 198-199; Id., *Kulistość*, *ibid.*, pp. 139-140; Id., *Ballada o Żydziaku*, *ibid.*, pp. 95-97.

²⁰ J. Przeźmiński, *Z perspektywy Martina Jaya, czyli o tym jak 'przymknąć' oko*, [in:] *Odkrywanie modernizmu...*, p. 333.

²¹ M. Stauber, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

²² I. Kiec, *Ginczanka. Życie i twórczość*, Poznań 1994, p. 36.

²³ Z. Ginczanka, *Grammars*, [in:] id., *op. cit.*, p. 263.

²⁴ Id., *Uczta wakacyjna*, *ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁵ I. Kiec, *Ginczanka. Życie i twórczość...*, p. 98.

Colour is often hinted through *synthesia*. Individual senses melt into a poetic metaphor, bringing unusually interesting vivid images. One of such metaphors can be found in a fragment of the poem titled *Purview*: "Boiling blood bursts a song of anguish clear"²⁶. This phrase, apart from containing the information about transmitting the message through the song, conveys an extraordinarily sensual image in which the dominating hue is bloody red. The corporeality of this poem is additionally stressed by associating writing with suffering.

An excerpt from a poem titled *This One Thing* is the most interesting fragment of Ginczanka's poetry, pointing to her sight-centrism and stressing the role of painting techniques, types of paints, their thickness or dilution:

Oh watercolour mornings, thick oil painted noons,
dreamy pastel evenings and nights etched with coals!²⁷

In a way, the world turns out to be similar to a painting. It appears as a landscape, which is not – to my mind – without significance. A painting or a picture has an impact primarily on the sight, and Ginczanka's poetry turns out to be a creation of such landscapes, this time with words.

The important role of colour can also be indicated by the frequency analysis of individual words or whole phrases concerning hues. I analysed the book of verse titled *Of Centaurus* with regard to indications of concrete colours. In seventeen poems, there are as many as fifty-six expressions connected with shades of colours. The analysis includes both individual words describing hues, often forming epithets (e.g. "blue eyes", "black night", "grey old winters" – from the poem titled *Pride*²⁸) as well as metaphorical expressions that bring to mind justified associations with the given shades (e.g. the expression in which the day "turned black" – from the same poem; or the metaphor from *Grammars*: "Cats' eyes that spring forth lakes, emerald pools deep enough to drown"²⁹).

It seems necessary to stress that the results of the frequency analysis were largely affected by the unequal number of expressions concerning colours in individual poems. In some works, such as *Sea Hunt*, I counted as many as eight expressions which were of interest to me, while in the case of poems such as *Declaration*, it is difficult to find expressions which would connote associations with hues. These poems which are connected with concrete poetic images abound in the phrases in question. However, they are not present in more abstract works, i.e. those that reflect on the presence of man in the world:

I know the calling of hips,
the boundless silence of peace,
which I caress with my lips

²⁶ Z. Ginczanka, *Purview*, [in:] id., *op. cit.*, p. 258.

²⁷ Id., *This One Thing*, *ibid.*, p. 268.

²⁸ Id., *Pride*, pp. 253-254.

²⁹ Id., *Grammars*, p. 263.

while still warm
from waking.
I'm not any other thing than a wise kind of beast,
not any other thing than a human care taking³⁰.

It is worth analysing whether the colours present in Ginczanka's poems changed after she had moved from Volhynian Rivne to Warsaw. The cities differed radically in the 1930s. Ginczanka's focus on the sensations of sight could suggest a hypothesis that moving to Warsaw and changing the surroundings will result in changes in the hues dominating in poetic images. This assumption turns out to be incorrect. It may be due to the fact that the author of *Of Centaurus* does not devote a lot of attention to the city. Her subsequent poems are still full of descriptions of landscapes. The colours are dominated – which is equally characteristic – by hues of nature: shades of red, azure, yellow, and white. These colours are a recurring theme in all the poet's works, from juvenile poems printed in *Echa szkolne* (*School Echos*), manuscripts from the 1932-1934 period, the collection of poems titled *Of centaurus*, to her last poems, i.e. those written in 1942.

Despite her constant contact with the Skamander group, the poet remained faithful to her penchant for nature and she steered clear of setting her poems in the urban space³¹. If it does appear in Ginczanka's poem, urbanistic landscape seems to be a digression. The poem titled *Process*³² is an excellent example of not yielding to the aura of delight with the city, which was characteristic of the Skamander group and Kraków Avant-Garde. The poem comes from the *Of Centaurus* volume and so it was published during the poet's stay in Warsaw. The work describes the eponymous process of the formation of the world. The last stage of genesis is, according to the lyrical subject, a process opposite to that of Biblical creation. The poet writes that "flesh / in the end / became word", as if suggesting a continuation of the process of genesis in the human use of speech.

The world surrounding the human being, the space changed by them, is depicted in this poem only in the last strophe. The earlier energy of the world seems to be depleting. In the previous fragments, nature was capable of creating new spaces. Water was separating from "the earth of birches and ferns". The creative power of nature accumulated in the picture of an erupting volcano:

Cretaceous,
Jurassic,
Triassic
soil layered along certain rings –

³⁰ Id., *Declaration*, p. 274.

³¹ I skip satires and epigrams in my analysis due to their separateness from other poems of the poet as well as their frequently journalistic character. It is worth mentioning, nevertheless, the fact of publishing poems in the Warsaw-based *Szpilki* magazine, and the acquaintance of Ginczanka with the writers of the interwar period.

³² Z. Ginczanka, *Process*, pp. 251-252.

Miocene assaults in majesty sure of beating all-comers and kings.
 And there is a tear between water
 and the earth of birches and ferns
 – and god can see it is good even when his back becomes turned.
 Azote is boiling in lava,
 lava is cooling like wax,
 mountains
 are climbing
 mountains,
 a thunderous, lumbering attack,
 carbon enriches the earth with black battles 'tween coal and tar –
 – and it sees that it's working out fine
 for damp reptiles and dizzy stars³³.

The contrast between the past and the present becomes visible the moment the human being is mentioned in the poem:

Once beneath redolent cherubs a proud rhododendron did rise,
 tall horsetails did tower and climb as grand as any New York.

In my opinion, the word “once” is of great importance here, suggesting the passage of time, a painful change, a loss.

In Równno, Brest and Konin
 married ladies
 in the nights do sigh
 as policemen
 do dirty work
 committing
 passionate
 crimes.

The image of wilting daisies³⁴ contrasts dramatically with the earlier fragments of the poem, which dealt with the creation of the world. The lyrical subject seems to show that together with the advent of human beings and their settling in towns, *Homo sapiens* stops and destroys the free life of nature. The aforementioned image of wilting daisies contrasts with the vision of huge horsetails which “once” existed. It should be stressed here that in her poem Ginczanka gives names of only small or medium-sized towns, skipping the modern world of Warsaw. It would be hard to delight in a big-city landscape even if one sees the restriction of the creative powers of nature in small-town scenery (“squares” are essential here: *ordo artificialis versus ordo naturalis*). On the other hand, the mention of committing passionate crimes

³³ Ibid., p. 251.

³⁴ The image of the daisies is lost in translation. The same happens with “squares”. Cf. The Polish original: “W Koninie, Brześciu i Równem / na skwerkach / stokrotki więdną / i policjanci / po nocach / ślubne / małżonki / miłują”. [translator’s note]

may suggest the participation of a human being in the process of ongoing changes. Two human beings are capable of giving a new life. This interpretation of the poem points to a certain paradox: a human being destroys nature, but at the same time is part of it and takes part – like the nature itself – in the process of genesis.

As I mentioned above, the colours in the poems from later periods remain similar to that from the 'Rivne period'. The way of presenting colours changes, though. In place of epithets pointing directly to a given colour (examples from Ginczanka's early works could include, for instance, "azure cristal"³⁵ or "grey hours"³⁶), it is also possible to encounter phrases such as "arc sealed with tar"³⁷, or one about cats' eyes that are "emerald pools"³⁸, i.e. phrases that suggest colour only.

The permanency of poetic images and colours in Ginczanka's work, despite the fact that the poet moved to Warsaw, inspires reflection on the issue of the affiliation of Ginczanka with the Skamander group. The minimal presence of urban landscapes definitely makes her stand out from among other authors who gathered in Mała Ziemiańska, a coffeehouse in Warsaw. The researcher is faced with two solutions to this dilemma: either the poet's literary output is separate, or the ideas about the Skamander group should be reformulated and Ginczanka should be included in this group. I suppose that the first option is more justified, but I would like to leave this issue open and provide the readers with some substance for reflection.

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³⁵ Id., *Myśli przez błękitny kryształ*, p. 71.

³⁶ Id., *Spleen*, p. 99.

³⁷ Id., *Seafaring*, p. 260.

³⁸ Id., *Grammars*, p. 263.

SUMMARY

The aim of the paper is to present preliminary research results on the sight-centrism of the poetry written by Zuzanna Ginczanka. The author of the article draws attention to a paradox: it is the sight that is favoured in Ginczanka's poems, and sight is traditionally perceived as 'masculine', intellectual, as opposed to 'feminine' senses that are more focused on touch. One of the more important features of sight-centrism in Ginczanka's works is the observation of hues which may be found in the world. The paper investigates whether colours in this poetry change after the author of *Of Centaurus* moves to Warsaw. The consistency of poetic imagery placing the human being in natural landscapes rather than the urban space forces the researcher to reflect on the affiliation of Ginczanka with the Skamander group.

Keywords

Ginczanka, poetry, sight, colours, Skamander, nature, city

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