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A Double Voice on Latin Grammar, or a Gloss to Reflections on the Challenges of Cultural Pedagogy

Dwugłos w sprawie łacińskiej gramatyki,
czyli glosa do rozważań o wyzwaniach pedagogiki kulturowej

Abstract: The aim of the article was to demonstrate, referring to the arguments taken from the correspondence and essays of Jerzy Stempowski and Bolesław Miciński, that humanistic education (actually: humanistic formation) still can and should be the foundation of the educational process. The title “Latin grammar” functions here as *pars pro toto* of culture. Knowledge of classical patterns – attitudes, actions, creation, or destruction of social structures – enables communication and creates the basis for formulating projects of the future. The protagonists of the article remind us about the basic culture forming aspect of tradition – collective memory and individual attitude to it. They also point to individual responsibility as a distinguishing feature of the Mediterranean culture.

Keywords: Memory of the past, classical tradition, humanistic culture, permanence of models, ethics

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest wykazanie, w oparciu o argumenty zaczerpnięte z korespondencji i eseistyki Jerzego Stempowskiego i Bolesława Micińskiego, że wykształcenie humanistyczne (właściwie: formacja humanistyczna) nadal może i powinno stanowić podstawę w procesie kształcenia. Zawarta w tytule „łacińska gramatyka” oznacza tutaj *pars pro toto* kultury. Znajomość klasycznych wzorów – postaw, działań, tworzenia albo niszczenia struktur społecznych – umożliwia komunikację i stwarza podstawę formułowania projektów przyszłości. Bohaterowie artykułu przypominają o podstawowym aspekcie kulturotwórczym, jaki stanowi tradycja – pamięć zbiorowa oraz indywidualny do niej stosunek. Wskazują także na jednostkową odpowiedzialność jako cechę wyróżniającą kultury śródziemnomorskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Pamięć o przeszłości, tradycja klasyczna, kultura humanistyczna, trwałość wzorów, etyka

The justification of the Future is the Past – to such an extent that if the Future did not have its principles in the Past, it would not be the Future but a delusion.¹

August Cieszkowski, 1922, p. 29.

In his essay “Odpowiedź na list Francesca obywatela rzymskiego” [Response to the Letter by Francesco, a Roman citizen] written at the beginning of the war, Bolesław Miciński recalled a fragment of a letter by “one of his friends,” which contained a kind of consolation: “Do not worry about the future of culture,” he wrote, “culture will always prevail because humanity cannot find happiness without knowledge of Latin grammar”² (Miciński, 1970, p. 133). The friend who gave such mental support was Jerzy Stempowski. Evidence is provided by Miciński’s correspondence – first of all, his letter from May 1940, which is a prefiguration of the cited essay, and an earlier one – from February of the same year (Miciński & Stempowski, 1995, pp. 66, 86–91). The remarks included in the letters direct attention towards the system of values represented by their authors. It turns out that despite the distance (historical, environmental, socio-political) that separates contemporary readers from the era of wartime exile and post-war emigration, we can find there a lot of current diagnoses, questions, and forecasts.³

¹ Original version: “Bo uzasadnieniem Przyszłości jest Przeszłość – tak dalece, że gdyby owa Przyszłość nie miała swych zasad w Przeszłość, toby sama nie była Przyszłością – ale urojeniem.” Unless stated otherwise, all translations mine.

² “Niech się Pan nie troszczy o przyszłość kultury – pisał – kultura zawsze zwycięży, bo ludzkość nie może znaleźć szczęścia bez znajomości łacińskiej gramatyki.”

³ Andrzej Stanisław Kowalczyk, a researcher and editor of Stempowski’s writings (among others), described this issue very aptly: “We become citizens not only through one act of legislation or another, but above all through the style of companionship with others, the ability to talk, the gift of friendship. In the chorus of voices that come to us from the past, we immediately recognise voices of friends. Although they live in a utopian epistolary republic, they still have a lot to tell us about our fate and our everyday life” (Kowalczyk, 2006, p. 10).

The author of *Podróże do piekiel* [Journeys to Hell] was strongly impressed by Stempowski's aphorism on the importance of Latin. There, in turbulent times, he found a source of encouragement. Was it a literal understanding of the aphorism? Not at all, although even the literal one included inspiring suggestions of meanings. After all, knowledge of Latin opened the world of classical authors that for centuries made us recall the universal stories of human fate. Miciński himself reached for Virgil's *Aeneid* when he tried to "tame" – he: a war refugee in the twentieth century – the news about burning Warsaw, as well as for *Bucolics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when he wanted to recreate the recurring drama of the fate of refugees, exiles, wanderers. On the basis of an internal dialogue of texts (works of the aforementioned classics and his own reflections provoked by an authentic, unskillful letter by his six-year-old nephew) he created "Odpowiedź na list Francesca" [The answer to Francesco's letter] – an essay which is a poetic parable and an anti-totalitarian manifesto of a humanist. This is how one should read the appeal addressed to the young Italian to practice declinations and syntactic principles, with a particular emphasis on "[...] conditional sentences, so that there is no place for deception, for blackmail, for lies"⁴ (Miciński, 1970, p. 133). For Miciński, the order of the world becomes clearer owing to the knowledge of ancient texts.

In the letter to Stempowski preceding the essay, just after recalling the thesis about the unchanging significance of Latin grammar in culture, he doubted the latter and fearfully wrote about the future of the world plunged into a destructive war:

Do you not think, however, that humanity may forget about the existence of this source of happiness, that in search for happiness – restless, nervous – people will forget about the existence of Samolewicz's textbook? The thought that a spur was pinned to the huge boot in which Aeneas boldly entered the world of "sleepless dreams and nights" – the thought that a spur

⁴ "[...] zdań warunkowych, aby w nich nie było miejsca na oszustwa, na szantaż, na kłamstwo."

was attached to the boot in which Dante was walking through the afterlife, is not comforting.⁵ (Miciński & Stempowski, 1995, pp. 89–90)

It was the fabric of literary allusions that made it possible to adequately express one's attitude to reality which was becoming more and more alien. The patterns known from *The Aeneid* and *The Divine Comedy* became a reference point for the humanist in 1940. A point of reference, but not a solipsistic escape. "It would be so good," he dreamed in a letter, "if sitting on our balcony you wanted to help me rebuild my historical memory, and thus save me from distorting reality"⁶ (Miciński & Stempowski, 1995, p. 90). "Historical memory" as a possibility and source of saving humanity and culture in the era of the crisis of values is an ethical task. A way to rebuild the memory is to read the texts of the classics.

In the essay designed for printing, having discussed the problem artistically, Miciński decided to comment on Stempowski's aphorism in a different manner than in the correspondence. He wrote: "If you, dear Francesco, like all creations, are governed by the desire for happiness, repeat: *rana, ranae, ranam, rana, rana*"⁷ (Miciński, 1970, p. 133), which, together with the allegorical description of the child's activities (praise of writing with a pen as an expression of the creation of lasting values, a warning against practicing a rhythmic march as a threat to individual responsibility for actions, a warning against taking an interest in the globe as a danger of the emergence of imperial ideas) became a sign of

⁵ "Czy nie myśli Pan jednak, że ludzkość może zapomnieć o istnieniu tego źródła szczęścia, że w poszukiwaniu szczęścia – niespokojna, nerwowa – zapomni o istnieniu podręcznika Samolewicz? Myśl o tym, że do olbrzymiego buta, którym Eneasza śmiało wszedł w świat 'snów nieprzespanych i nocy' – myśl o tym, że do buta, w którym spacerował po zaświatach Dante przypięto ostrogę, nie jest pocieszająca."

⁶ "Jakby to było dobrze, gdyby siedząc u nas na balkonie zechciał mi Pan pomóc w odbudowaniu pamięci historycznej i tak uratował mnie od zniekształcenia rzeczywistości."

⁷ "Jeśli więc i Tobą, jak wszelkim stworzeniem, kochany Francesco, rządzi pragnienie szczęścia, powtarzaj: *rana, renea, ranam, rana, rana*."

difficult hope for – let us repeat – saving or rebuilding the world from the ruins, not only material ones.

Due to cultural references piling up in the text, “Odpowiedź na list Francesca” is a rather hermetic statement. The problem does not only concern the fact that the reader might fall under the illusion that, literally, proficiency in the grammar of the dead language brings a change in the world. Such an imaginary reader would either accuse the author of detachment from reality (since he “believes” in the power of secret formulas incomprehensible to the public), or would be immature. It should be remembered that it was Bolesław Miciński who wanted to prevent the “distortion of reality.” Therefore, “Odpowiedzi na list Francesca” should not be treated as a phantasmagoria, but it needs to be considered as a project – perhaps expressed too metaphorically, perhaps utopian in a common dimension, but definitely worth paying attention to, as it is aimed at preventing a cultural catastrophe. As a remedy for the evils of the world, Miciński suggests humanistic education based on freedom and responsibility of a conscious and creative individual. Patterns are provided by classical authors who described universal models of behaviour and events; unalterable models such as “Latin grammar [which, as an ideal object, – MK’s note] exist beyond time.” Thus Miciński accepted and proved the accuracy of Stempowski’s aphorism. Latin grammar was there not only a concrete tool for learning classical works but also *pars pro toto* of culture.

“There is no way back to the Roman Empire”⁸ (Miciński, 1970, p. 133), Miciński noted. Certainly readers of Latin works did not strive for the impossible return to the past. Too many things, bad ones included, have happened over the centuries. Stempowski himself, emphasizing the culture-forming significance of Latin, perceived its place in the modern world very realistically. In a nostalgic essay from the war years, “W dolinie Dniestru” [In the Valley of the Dniester], he wrote directly that this “humanists’ language” had dominated as an official language until it was replaced by French in the eighteenth century. Its role was later changed and limited:

⁸ “Nie ma drogi powrotnej do Imperium Rzymskiego.”

The authority of Latin did not survive the fall of the old Republic of Poland. In my days, Latin was still taught in gymnasiums in Ukraine, but it was already a dead language, devoid of its social rank. For Poles and Jews, who constituted the majority of students, Latin still served as an entrance ticket to the group of the so-called intelligentsia that played such a great role in the history of this part of Europe. It was only in the Soviet times when this last trace of Western influence disappeared from school curricula.⁹ (Stempowski, 2014b, pp. 10–11)

Having ceased to be the language commonly spoken by the nobility, Latin remained the language of the educated and those striving to reform the world – intellectuals, as well as a sign of connection with the common, Mediterranean and Judeo-Christian foundations of European culture. In later years, the essayist drew attention to the potential of magic formulas inherent in this increasingly jargon language, which – spoken according to established rules (grammar!) – create a sense of order and protected “from fear of chaotic situations, which evade mental operations”¹⁰ (Stempowski, 2012b, p. 11).

It is time, however, to reach for the text in which Stempowski used the figure of longing for Latin grammar. Just before the war, in July 1939, *Ateneum* published an extremely important essay containing a diagnosis of the political and social situation of Europe in the years 1938–1939. It also included the following words, relevant to the present considerations:

True barbarians usually consider themselves unhappy until they learn Latin grammar. “Why have we murdered so many people and accumulated so

⁹ “Autorytet łaciny nie przeżył upadku starej Rzeczypospolitej. Za moich czasów uczono jeszcze łaciny w gimnazjach na Ukrainie, ale był to już język martwy, pozbawiony swej rangi społecznej. Polakom i Żydom, stanowiącym większość uczniów, łacina służyła jeszcze za bilet wstępu do grupy tzw. inteligencji, która odegrała tak wielką rolę w historii tej części Europy. Dopiero w czasach sowieckich ten ostatni ślad wpływów Zachodu znikł z programów szkolnych.”

¹⁰ “od strachu przed sytuacjami chaotycznymi, uchylającymi się od operacji myślowych.”

much money, they say, if we are to be only ignorant barbarians, devoid of the light of Latin grammar?" [...] Having destroyed the world, the most dangerous revolutionaries realised the need to take over its cultural legacy.¹¹ (Stempowski, 2014a, p. 176).

In the perspective of the great time of history, the patterns developed by culture will always survive. Stempowski's knowledge of history could have authorised such a conclusion. He realised that "the barbarians who burnt Rome soon learnt Latin and claimed to be the heirs of the Empire"¹² (Stempowski, 2014a, p. 176). The modern era in Europe was thus built by the descendants of the barbarians who usurped the rights of heirs of cultural heritage. The past social order was destroyed but the cultural code, which proved to be durable and attractive, was resuscitated. Latin grammar was a medium but also a component of this code, and in the deep structure of Stempowski's message, it was a replacement of the system of signs of a "better" culture, valuable, worth aspiring to.

The reward for the effort put into learning and then more or less active participating in culture is an immeasurable, yet often the most important, sense of happiness. In the general human need for pleasure, then, there is hope for culture. After all, in a popular treatise on happiness, we read about people who affect reality in all times:

The third type are the men whose basic pleasure lies in the fulfilment of ambition. It is they who have been responsible for all the political and financial coups of history. In short, they rule the world. Their hands (and those of their heirs) have always pulled the wires of power and wealth.

¹¹ "Prawdziwi barbarzyńcy uważają się zwykle za nieszczęśliwych, dopóki nie nauczą się łacińskiej gramatyki. 'Po co wymordowaliśmy tylu ludzi i nagromadziliśmy tyle pieniędzy, mówią, jeżeli mamy być tylko barbarzyńcami, pozbawionymi światła łacińskiej gramatyki?' [...] Najniebezpieczniejsi rewolucjoniści po zburzeniu świata uświadamiali sobie potrzebę przejęcia po nim spadku kulturalnego."

¹² "Barbarzyńcy, którzy spalili Rzym, wkrótce potem uczyli się łaciny i podawali za spadkobierców Imperium."

Finally, the fourth type are those who respond to values. Their place in society and history is probably no less important than that of all the others. It is to them that art and scholarship owe their greatest debt and it is they who are the pillars of the moral life of mankind. (Tatarkiewicz, 1976, pp. 74)

Despite the belief in the permanence of the foundations of civilization – “Experience teaches that old civilizations have enormous power of resistance. Destroyed in their upper floors, in the elite layers, they smoulder like fire under the ashes for millennia”¹³ (Stempowski, 2014a, p. 157) – Stempowski knows perfectly well that the figures of culture pass. In his diary of mourning, that is, *Zapiski dla zjawy* [Notes for a Phantom], he even portrays himself as “a relic of the world swallowed up by the waves”¹⁴ (Stempowski, 2004, p. 68). Is it, therefore, possible, to draw conclusions from the analysis of his views and from the description of certain pedagogical experiences that could be useful in considering, for example, the challenges of pedagogy? Difficulties will be caused by the author’s anachronistic attitude. He not only *expressis verbis* emphasises his own belonging to past times, but also authenticates this opinion by constantly turning to the classical past, as if in accordance with the maxim *historia magistra vitae*.

Today, public media persistently repeat opinions that the world has changed radically, reality has been posing new challenges, our needs have altered, and, therefore, the content and the model of education has been transformed, too. It seems impossible to reconcile the two attitudes: considering innovative research hypotheses, such as the one concerning a new geological epoch encompassing the period of the past two centuries referred to by a significant name – Anthropocene; and constantly returning to the stories written in Latin about the life of wanderers, warriors, or shepherds. Are Stempowski’s preferences completely

¹³ “Doświadczenie uczy, że stare cywilizacje mają ogromną siłę oporu. Zniszczone w swych górnych piętrach, w warstwach elitarnych, tlą się jak ogień pod popiołem przez całe tysiąclecia.”

¹⁴ “przeżytek świata pochłoniętego przez fale.”

useless from today's point of view, irretrievably gone along with him? This is easy to contradict.

The classical tradition does not mean only plots which can perform ornamental or, let us say, therapeutic functions. It is, above all, a source of ethical paradigms, a source of worldview models. However awkwardly it may sound, humanistic knowledge enables human beings to live. Why? Because the conditions of life depend on the ability to predict the consequences of each action taken. Stempowski reminded us to refer the neopositivist scheme of reasoning (cause – action – effect) to elementary moral principles that constitute the foundation of civilization. Every decision is a result of a choice and will have consequences. Every person – artist, scholar, teacher, student – should know and remember this. Unfortunately, this kind of an awareness is shared by few – such a diagnosis can be found in Stempowski's essays: in "Chimera jako zwierzę pociągowe" [Chimera as a beast of burden], in "Esej dla Kasandry" [Essay for Cassandra] or in "O współczesnej formacji humanistycznej" [On contemporary humanistic formation] with fragments such as: "the laboratory people [...] fearing the utterance of value judgments [...] remained silent, obediently fabricating atomic bombs"¹⁵ (Stempowski, 2001b, p. 19). One could cite numerous similar examples.

Stempowski did not naively call for organizing protests against armament. Instead, he pointed out deeper causes of the problem. He directed particular attention to human deficit of reflection; to the inability to imagine various effects that a discovery or a constructed invention may have. Deep reflection requires time, whereas modernity means acceleration. Stempowski refers to this issue, too. Scepticism about "loud" novelties, designed to quickly and radically displace the old, is constantly present in his writings. While in the 1930s, when assessing the mutual influence of futurism and new industrial-financial elites, he made snide analogies such as: "Fast movement from place to place and haste have by no means been part of the elegant tradition. Although in the past

¹⁵ "lud laboratoryjny [...] w obawie wypowiedzenia sądu wartościującego [...] pozostał niemy, fabrykujący posłusznie bomby atomowe."

various rulers of Asian and European steppes boasted about the speed of their mail, they never delivered it personally”¹⁶ (Stempowski, 2001a, pp. 165–166), in the 1960s, when discussing the concept of acceleration of history, he argued that:

History takes the form of a narrative. [...] The subject of the narrative is the movable, the changeable, the unique in the fate of man. [...] In the life of a human group, nation, or commune, the immovable parts of the past and collective fates, which are not individualisable and thus do not have full expression in narrative forms, occupy incomparably more space. [...] The supposed acceleration of history would therefore be a phenomenon limited to the narrative aspects of the ongoing changes.¹⁷ (Stempowski, 2012c, pp. 59–60)

It should be added that he came to such a conclusion having previously referred to (this time) the Homeric epics. Once again, the cultural past provided arguments and made it easier to think about the present.

I think that it will be possible to summarise, and at the same time support, Stempowski’s attitude to tradition and novelty in the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer:

Often enough, the new is very quickly obsolete and the old appears as new. The quality of the new cannot consist in its newness, but rather in this: it does not become obsolete, not so fast or not at all. [...] Indeed, in the end

¹⁶ “Szybkie przenoszenie się z miejsca na miejsce i pośpiech nie leżały bynajmniej w tradycjach elegancji. Już dawniej wprawdzie różni władcy stepów Azji i Europy chwalili się szybkością swej poczty, ale nigdy nie rozwozili jej osobiście.”

¹⁷ “Historia ma formę narracji [...]. Przedmiotem narracji jest to, co w losach człowieka jest ruchome, zmienne, niepowtarzalne. [...] W życiu zespołu ludzkiego, narodu czy gminy, nieruchome partie przeszłości i losy zbiorowe, niepoddające się indywidualizacji i przez to nieznajdujące pełnego wyrazu w formach narracyjnych, zajmują nierównie więcej miejsca. [...] Domniemane przyśpieszenie się historii byłoby więc zjawiskiem ograniczonym do aspektów narracyjnych odbywających się przemian.”

we have to say that the milder the resistance that the new encounters, the quicker the new finds acceptance and the quicker it rushes toward obsolescence. (Gadamer, 2016, pp. 53–55).

Therefore, it seems that Jerzy Stempowski's apparently outdated thoughts are worth considering even today. It will be useful, nay! – currently very original and innovative, to return to the thesis about respect for selfless knowledge, that is, humanistic education. Undoubtedly, it may be beneficial to go back in an unprejudiced manner to the discussion about the canon of readings, whose knowledge enabled/may enable communication, and above all, provides models for behaviour in archetypal situations. Stempowski advocated an isolated model of learning and teaching, and in this respect he seems to be almost a patron of modern education.

Yet, Stempowski's relationships with his listeners, interlocutors, readers were often student-master relationships. He sought an intellectual partnership but always (according to the preserved testimonies) attracted people with his knowledge and wisdom, that is, he naturally became an authority. This "adulation," which could be given to the suddenly revised Stempowski by today's education reformers at all levels (and particularly at the tertiary level), must be disturbed by a certain remark that the author of *Ziemia berneńska* [Land of Bern] made in *Notatnik niespiesznego przechodnia* [Notebook of an Unhurried Wayfarer]:

My town has its own university, whose every professor probably publishes a book every few years, but I cannot imagine that a noteworthy manuscript could be written there. No one has enough free time for this. [...] Models of activity are scarce here, ready-made and resembling each other as products of the garment industry. All of them have the appearance of regulated labour, always leading to similar results and not designed for any invention. [...] Between work and inactivity a place is created for the world of fiction open to a great number of possible orders of values.¹⁸ (Stempowski, 2012a, p. 117)

¹⁸ "Miasteczko moje ma swój uniwersytet, którego każdy profesor wydaje zapewne co kilka lat jakąś książkę, nie mogę sobie jednak wyobrazić, aby mógł w nim powstać

At this point, by way of a comment, the Gospel can be quoted: “Whoever has ears, let them hear!,” especially now, when fascinated by new perspectives and bibliometric countability we can easily deviate from the main road and rapidly head towards the reality whose vision once terrified Stempowski – towards the model of the society of “termites or bees.” Meantime, while we still have a memory, let us repeat after Gadamer: “We should have no illusion. Bureaucratised teaching and learning systems dominate the scene, but nevertheless it is everyone’s task to find his free space” (Gadamer, 1992, p. 59). In spite of contemporary troubles, let us add that Stempowski found his freedom in tradition, in books. At the end of “Księgozbiór przemytników” [Smugglers’ Library], he wrote: “Whoever eats caviar always receives some caviar from God. [...] In the same way books are waiting everywhere for the reader to arrive”¹⁹ (Stempowski, 1984, p. 80).

jakiś godny uwagi rękopis. Nikt nie rozporządza na to dostateczną ilością wolnego czasu. [...] Wzory działalności są tu nieliczne, gotowe i podobne do siebie jak wytwory przemysłu konfekcyjnego. Wszystkie mają pozory uregulowanej przepisami pracy, prowadzącej zawsze do podobnych wyników i nieprzewidującej żadnej inwencji. [...] Między pracą i beczynnością powstaje miejsce na świat fikcji otwarty dla wielkiej liczby możliwych porządków wartości.”

¹⁹ “kto odżywia się kawiozem, temu Bóg zsyła zawsze trochę kawioru. [...] Tak samo książki czekają wszędzie na nadejście czytelnika.”

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