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PROFESSOR BOGUMIŁ WITALIS ANDRZEJEWSKI: HIS LIFE, SCIENTIFIC ACTIVITY, AND POETRY

Abstract

In this essay the figure of Professor Andrzejewski is shortly presented under his two embodiments: as an Africanist and as a great Polish poet who was creating abroad but almost always referring to and thinking about his beloved fatherland. Describing his professional activities only the most important factors have been taken into account like forging Latin script for Somali and his special attitude towards the treasury of the Somali oral literature. Some chosen episodes from his life are illustrated with fragments of his poetry in a rough English translation. The undersigned has personally experienced magnanimity and friendship of Professor and deserves him a lot in developing his scientific career and in acquiring editorial skills.

One day, when Mr Yahie Haji-Ali, President of the Andrzejewski Foundation disclosed the idea about the organisation of this session and called me „close friend of Professor”, I felt extremely honoured but was somewhat embarrassed. Although I had read, known and admired some of his publications in the field of the Cushitic languages and literatures, I met him for the first time, and enjoyed his company only in December, 1980 when the Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Warsaw appointed him to be one of the reviewers in my habilitation process. Then, at the beginning of 1980-ties, together with the late Professor Witold Tyloch, we undertook a painstaking work on edition of the *Literatures in African Languages*,¹ patiently and tirelessly supported by his wife – Sheila Weekes. We used to spend all the summer days making corrections, unifying texts and improving editorial habits of many authors coming from

¹ B.W. Andrzejewski, S. Piłaszewicz, W. Tyloch (eds.), *Literatures in African Languages: Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys*, Cambridge University Press – Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 1985.

different continents: Africa, America and Europe. At 10 PM we were obliged to leave our company, as the University gates closed at that time, and we were gently reminded about this by our *alma mater* wardens. All this time Professor was my dearest mentor and master, and I felt myself, and continue to feel as his humble and benighted student who has learned from him so many things.

Prof. Bogumił, commonly known as Guś (from Boguś, a diminutive form of his name) was the leading world authority on the languages and oral literature of the Somali and Oromo peoples living in the Horn of Africa: he introduced their remarkable poetry and other literary genres to the world literature. He was a passionate enthusiast of studying language in its living socio-cultural context.

Prof. B.W. Andrzejewski was born in Poznań in 1922, two years after the „miracle by the Vistula river”. He came from a lower middle-class family.² His father owned a wholesale firm of the raw skins, and his mother, before she got married, had earned her living as a clerk in a big Russian factory. Young Guś was proud of his parents who struggled so bravely with the existential difficulties and tried to maintain the family in the hard times of the world economic crisis of 1920-ties and 1930-ties. With the passage of time, he ridiculed in his poetry the pseudo-intellectuals who despised the hard working people of the lower strata. Two traumatic events have especially drawn his attention: the visit of the debt-collectors from the Treasury Office and the premature death of his beloved mother. The later misfortune has been sadly commemorated in one of his earliest poems.

Guś began his education in a private school but soon – due to the shortage in the family budget – was forced to leave this „educational hothouse” and continued the learning in a public school. Having been physically rather a weak boy he was prosecuted by some of the local school hooligans. It was so until he managed to gain – in a skilful way – the sympathy of their leader. It is in the Berger’s gymnasium in Poznań that he began the next level of education. In the years 1937-1939 he went to a gymnasium in Zakopane, and then to the Oswald Balzer secondary school (*liceum*) in that township.

After the Nazi invasion of Poland B.W. Andrzejewski was arrested by Gestapo but in some miraculous way (the details are not known to us) was set free. This episode of his life has been referred to in one of his poems:

Mnie także aresztowano w sprawie niebezpiecznej
I oto wychodzę na ośnieżoną drogę, nie zastrzelony,
Nawet nie dotknięty szpicrutą i batem,

² The details of Professor’s life have been taken from the collection of his poems „Urywki z własnego życiorysu retuszowane piórem pawim” (Fragments of my own life story adorned with a peacock’s pen), in: Bogumił Andrzejewski, *Podróż do krajów legendarnych* (Journey to the Legendary Countries), Agawa, Warszawa 200, pp. 110-124.

Z groźnego gmachu, nad którym syczy bandera Trupiej Czaszki.³

Also I was arrested due to a dangerous matter,

But look, I come out on a snow-bound way, not shot dead,

And even not touched by a riding-whip or a boot,

Leaving gloomy edifice with a hissing banner of the Cadaverous Cranium
on its top.

In September 1940, at the age of 18, Guś escaped from the native country, making his way through Slovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, and reaching the Palestine, where he joined the Polish army (Independent Brigade of the Carpatian Shooters) under the command of General Władysław Anders. During this perilous journey he was arrested several times, and escaped from an interment camp in Hungary by walking for 12 hours at night through the snow storms across Lake Balaton, which was frozen over at that time:

Mróz skuł w lód węgierskie łądomorze, otumaniał

Pułap niebieski nocną wirownicą śniegu,

Wiatrowi dał ostre wszystko przenikające igły.

Idzie dwóch ludzi po zamarzniętej wodzie,

Trzymają się kurczowo poręczy lśniącego kompasu,

By ich wicher nie zepchnął z wytyczonej linii marszruty.

W worku niosą cukier i wódkę, driakiew na jady zabójcze

Przeraźliwego zimna, na nagłe spazmy zmęczenia.

Idą ostrożnie, wyteżają wzrok w białej ciemni,

By czasem nie wpaść w szczelinę pomiędzy krami jeziora.⁴

The frost forged ice out of the Hungarian land sea and raised clouds

Of the nocturnal snow whirlpool on the heavenly ceiling.

Wind was given sharp all-penetrating needles.

Two men tread the frozen water,

They desperately hold on to the handrail of a shiny compass,

In order not to be driven by wind out of the demarcated itinerary.

In sack they carry sugar and vodka, which are remedy for killing poison

Of a shrilling coldness, and for sudden convulsions of tiredness.

They get on cautiously and strain their eyes in the white obscurity,

In order not to fall into a fissure between the lake's ice-cakes.

His war experiences in North Africa abounded in many dramatic events. During the siege of the Tobruk fortress he was wounded and then almost lost his life when a mine exploded close to him and his companions:

Pchaliśmy wózek ręczny z pociskami i wodą,

Ręczny, bo silnik ciężarówki przyciągnąłby od razu

Spadochronowe pochodnie. Koń znowu by chyba zdechł

³ Cf. Bogumił Andrzejewski, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

W takich piaszczystych warunkach.

Zrobiło się nagle jasno i jasność trwała długo przed wzrokiem,
Chociaż miałem zamknięte powieki, a równocześnie wokoło
Było zupełnie ciemno, jak potem mi mówiono. Nie było odgłosu,
A jednak to pono był minowy wybuch.

[...] Dwóch [z nas pięciu] zostało na stałe niedaleko miejsca,
W którym rozleciał się wózek. Dolot tam nawet nietrudny.

Jeżeli polecisz, dyżurny anioł na cmentarnej wartowni

Powie ci dokładnie, gdzie można ich znaleźć.⁵

We were pushing handcart with missiles and water,

Handcart because the lorry's motor would at once attract

The parachute torches. Horse would probably die

In such a sandy conditions.

All at once it cleared up and the light reigned long over the eyesight,

Although I kept my eyelids closed, and it was

Completely dark around, as I was later said. There was no sound,

But it apparently was a mine explosion.

Two men stayed for ever close to this place,

Where the cart flew in pieces. It is easy to fly there.

If you fly, an angel on duty in the cemetery guardhouse

Will tell you exactly where they can be found.

B.W. Andrzejewski was extremely humble by nature. He avoided any attempts to be promoted to the rank of an officer. However, his war service was of great significance because it allowed him to establish first contacts with Arabic. He was fascinated with the language of the admirable Muslim culture. He also had a chance to learn English as he took correspondence courses from the Wolsey Hall. After the war had ended, he was admitted to the University of Oxford, where he studied English thanks to a scholarship from the Newman Association. In 1946 he married an Englishwoman, Sheila Weekes, who always was ready to sustain him in his scientific career and in the life difficulties. In 1947 B.W. Andrzejewski graduated from the University of Oxford: this event was commemorated in his poetic output:

[...] Idę zamyślony

Przez wojenną ciżbę, jeszcze właściwie żołnierz,

A już oxfordzki student, choć tylko w dalekim

Korespondencyjnym kolegium: I chociaż mi mowa angielska

Jeszcze chrzęstem słowiańskim szeleści.

Już mnie urzekli zupełnie wyspiarscy wieszczę.⁶

[...] Thoughtful I am going

⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 74f.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 75.

Through the war squeeze, in reality still a soldier,
And already an Oxford student, although in a remote
Correspondence College: and although the English speech
Still rustles for me in the Slavonic crashes,
I am already fully bewitched by the island great poets.
Kiedyś myślałem, że moją almatą będzie Warszawa.
Tak się stało jednak, że oxfordzka alma-mamka
Karmi mnie swoim witaminowym mlekiem,
Tak jak kiedyś rzymska wilczyca, gdy ratowała porzucone bliźnięta.⁷
Once I thought that Warsaw will be my alma mater.
However it happened that the Oxford alma wet-nurse
Feeds me with her vitaminized milk,
As once the Roman she-wolf was doing when saving the abandoned twins.

In the years 1948 and 1949 B.W. Andrzejewski studied linguistics and Arabic at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. In 1948 he began his involvement with the Somali language and remained devoted to the Somali people and their tongue for over forty years. He played a crucial role in creating the Latin script for the Somali language. C.R.V. Bell, the Director of Education in the British Somaliland Protectorate had set up a project to develop a script for Somali and chose Guś to work on this. After training at SOAS in phonetics and linguistics he undertook an initial work on Somali with Cali Sheekh Mahamed Jirdey and Anthony Mariano. In the course of his research he went to Sheekh in the Protectorate, with his wife Sheila, and established very close and fruitful collaboration with the famous Somali poet – Muuse Xaaji Galaal.⁸ With him he began detailed research into the Somali language. The resulting report on phonology of the language was accompanied by a recommended script based on the Latin alphabet. The resistance from religious leaders to the Latin script (they called it *la-diin*, it is ‘devoid of religion’) caused that the script was not introduced as a national alphabet until 1972. However, Andrzejewski’s proposal contributed to a later work on writing Somali, and its many features are to be found in the final writing system, one developed by Shire Jaamac Axmed.

The popularity and success of this „instant literacy” was a great satisfaction for Guś. The literary activities in Somali started to flourish, which resulted in numerous novels, plays and other literary genres. Their authors sought help with Andrzejewski who encouraged their efforts with enthusiasm on his sporadic visits to Somalia and at SOAS. Every his appearance in Somalia

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁸ Cf. Ruth Finnegan, Martin Orwin, „Introduction”, *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 23, 1, 2011. Special issue: *Carried by a Mystic Wind: B.W. Andrzejewski on the Somali Passion for Poetry and Language*, p. 1.

was announced by the radio stations, which nicknamed him „The-One-Who-Is-Not-Often-With-Us”.⁹

After returning to the United Kingdom, B.W. Andrzejewski was employed in SOAS as lecturer in Cushitic languages and continued to work on Somali. In 1962 he gained PhD degree in the field of the Somali grammar.¹⁰ He commented upon the PhD procedure in one of his poems:

W pokoju jest cisza ciepła i podniosła.
Obok mnie siedzi dwóch biskupów, nadzorców językoznawczej wiedzy,
Dwóch profesorów w zwyczajnych ciemnych ubraniach bez tóg.
Za oknem zimny wiatr z północnego wschodu porusza
Gałęziami drzew wzdłuż spokojnej, bocznej ulicy Londynu,
Szumi zupełnie niepomny uroczystego momentu.
Ci dwaj zwracają się do mnie i podają mi ręce.
Wyświęcają mnie, długoletniego postulanta nauk ezoterycznych
Na doktora Świętej Filologii sub specie africanitatis.¹¹
Warm and sublime silence reigns in the room,
Close to me two bishops are sitting, inspectors of the linguistic knowledge.
Two professors in ordinary dark suits, without gowns.
Beyond the window the north-eastern cold wind sways
Tree branches along the quiet London byway,
And it rustles wholly disregarding this solemn momentum.
Those two men address me and shake my hand.
They ordain me, an old postulant of the esoteric sciences,
They make me doctor of the Holy Philology sub specie africanitatis.

In 1980 B.W. Andrzejewski became Professor in SOAS. Two years later he had to retire due to the severe reform launched by Margaret Thatcher government. He continued, however, his research and editorial work at his home in Harpenden, which was always overfilled with hospitality and a creative atmosphere.

Professor Andrzejewski had a masterly command of Somali, and – to a lesser extent – of Oromo, with a great repertoire of proverbs, jokes, folk-tales and poetry. This allowed him to understand both traditional clan elders and the westernised intellectuals. He broadcasted frequently on the Somali service of the BBC radio, with which he collaborated for several years. Somalis were commonly known as great radio enthusiasts and listened to it in bush as much as in towns. Thus, his name – though difficult to pronounce – became widely

⁹ Cf. Jerzy Pietrkiewicz, „Poeta Doctus” (The Learned Poet), in: B.W. Andrzejewski, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

¹⁰ His PhD thesis was published under the title *The Declensions of Somali Nouns*, School of Oriental and African Studies, London 1964.

¹¹ Cf. B.W. Andrzejewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 80f.

known in Somalia, In 1982 he was the first foreign scholar to be awarded the Somali Star order by the government in Mogadishu.

Ruth Finnegan and Martin Orwin are of opinion that the Somali literary experience of Professor Andrzejewski, „with its various and changing genres and its sensitivity to language and imagery adds further weight to our growing recognition of the complexity and wit of oral forms and of the arts of peoples otherwise hidden to the elite worlds of Western scholarship but deserving of equally serious study”.¹² They go on saying that „Goosh’s writings exemplify the rewards of delving deeply, and with appreciation, into the literary accomplishments of a people in their unique cultural and historical settings, with their pride in language, their sophisticated verbal genres, their notable awareness of memorization and text, and their poetic framing of warfare, struggle, pride, love, suffering and learning”.¹³ Professor Andrzejewski was charmed with Cushitic languages and ridiculed severely all those who considered them to be underdeveloped and primitive:

O, jak piękne dźwięki wykształcili nasi bracia z pustyń i puszczy
W swych rozlicznych mowach! Słuchasz, a tu biją
Metaliczne samogłoski, mocne jak z gardzieli spiżowego wołu,
Harmonizują w całych pasmach rzutów jak pojednania ech po burzy,
Dźwięczą spółgłoski, podwójnie zwarte jak szeregi tancerzy...
Nieprawdą są europejskie podróżnicze głędy, o słów ubóstwie,
O kalectwie składni, o braku abstrakcyjności pojęć
W podzwrotnikowych językach. To tylko prostackie uproszczenia
Ludzi zbyt leniwych, aby się podjąć prawdziwie badawczego trudu,
Aby przepłynąć na drugą stronę semantycznego Styksu.¹⁴

Oh, how beautiful sounds were forged by our brothers from deserts and wilderness

In their various speeches! You hear the beating
Of the metallic vowels, strong as those from the throat of a bronze bullock,

They concord in full series like reconciliation of echoes after the storm.
Consonants jingle in a doubled grip like the rows of dancers.
There is no truth in the wish-wash of the European travellers
About the scarcity of words, syntactic lameness, and lack of abstract notions

In the subtropical languages. It is a coarse simplification
Of the lazy people, who do not take the trouble of a true research,
To reach the other side of the semantic Styks river.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 1f.

¹⁴ Cf. Bogumił Andrzejewski, *op. cit.*, pp. 77f.

It is universally recognised that Professor Andrzejewski's writings have enormous comparative and theoretical interest. They were published in the period when the oral-formulaic theory was held. According to it, unwritten literary forms were seen as following the pattern of „composition in performance” and using the store of oral formulae, without fixed texts or permanent authorship.¹⁵ However, Professor Andrzejewski revealed how Somali poets used to spend many hours and days composing their alliterative poems before the performance took place: they used to follow the Somali practice of exact poetic memorisation and the recognition of the unwritten poetic copyright. Professor Guś was not trying to replace oral-formulaic theory model with some counter-theory. He rather stressed the existence of many different genres of Somali literature and the differing process and conventions by which they were constructed: improvisation occurred too, and it not always followed the classical alliterative model.¹⁶

Professor Andrzejewski's interest was not confined to Somali oral poetry but encompassed the accelerated growth of written, broadcast and theatrical genres. Having contributed to the creation of the Somali script and with his experience of the BBC Somali service, he became sensitive translator of the Somali poetry, novels and plays. Thus he himself was intimately involved in the traditional oral and written literary process.

Professor Andrzejewski was also gifted poet composing in Polish. His poems were mainly published abroad: therefore they are not sufficiently known in his fatherland. However, in the Polish migratory communities they enjoy great popularity. In the Polish edition of his creative writings one can find an interesting assessment of his literary output. Czesław Miłosz, Polish Nobel Prize winner, appreciates Professor's own poetic style, which is difficult to insert into the trends and schools of the Polish poetry. He continues saying that Andrzejewski's poetry is authentic and very close to the author's life experiences.¹⁷ To some extent his poetry is „a playing of a linguist”. Miłosz concludes: „It seems to me that the image of the contemporary [Polish] poetry can not be complete without Bogumił Andrzejewski. He was not a follower of anyone. His literary contribution is very personal and independent, maybe because he did not want to be a professional poet.”¹⁸

Prof. Bogumił Witalis Andrzejewski remained a faithful son of his native country. Since the 1970-ties he has been paying frequent visits to Poland, experiencing its ups and downs. He was invited by the Committee for Oriental Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences to give lectures. Invaluable was

¹⁵ Cf. Ruth Finnegan, Martin Orwin, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹⁷ Cf. Czesław Miłosz, „Poeta w Lemurii” (The Poet in Lemuria), in: Bogumił Andrzejewski, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

his advice and support for the Polish researchers studying African languages. He took an active part in their doctoral studies and post-doctoral procedures. As mentioned above, he was extremely involved in the work on preparation of *Literatures in African Languages*, published by Wiedza Powszechna and Cambridge University Press.

The first symptoms of his incurable sickness began to appear at the beginning of 1985. However, it did not change his habits. It did not influence his interest in the Somali culture. He liked to meet his colleagues in the Regent's House and for hours to discuss with them on serious and less serious problems. In the final years of his life, when the illness reduced his strength and energy, he managed to catalogue and photocopy all his unpublished manuscripts and he sent one set of them to one of his former students, then working at the Indiana University, thus guaranteeing for posterity precious literary relics of the collapsing Somali state.

Professor Andrzejewski died in London on the 1st December 1994, just before the midnight.