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*"ALWAYS HUNGRY FOR ONE'S NEW SELF, LIKE
A CRANE WITH ITS NECK EXTENDED INTO THE
FUTURE" – BOLESŁAW LEŚMIAN 1877–1937*

The concept of the exhibition and Leśmian's main idea

This exhibition on Bolesław Leśmian was commissioned by the Senate of the Republic of Poland to celebrate a double anniversary: 2017 marked 140 years since the poet's birth and 80 years since his death.

The main idea behind the exhibition was to showcase the many contexts of Leśmian's life: his family, private life, friendships, travels, and participation in literary life. The exhibition was also the first public forum showcasing a number of the latest achievements of the field colloquially known as 'Leśmianology'.

First of all, the issue of the poet's year of birth has finally been resolved. Until recently, several dates had been considered possible. Thanks to the discovery of the original record of Leśmian's birth, by Prof. Dorota Samborska-Kukuć of the University of Łódź, however, it is now unequivocally clear that he was born in 1877. A copy of the birth certificate went on public display for the first time at the exhibition.

The accurate reconstruction of the poet's genealogical history has also yielded further discoveries. More is now known above all about the role played by Leśmian's ancestor Antoni Eisenbaum in the assimilation of the Jews in Poland. It also transpired that another of the poet's illustrious relatives and descendants of Eisenbaum (in addition

to Antoni Lange and Jan Brzechwa) was Henryk Elzenberg, the philosopher and spiritual teacher of Zbigniew Herbert.

Other important exhibits included copies of Leśmian's manuscripts; this was the first time they had been reproduced on such a scale. The exhibition also retold the remarkable story of how the manuscripts were saved by Leśmian's widow, Zofia Chylińska, and his daughter, Maria Ludwika Mazurowa, who took them from the conflagration of the Second World War and protected them throughout their time in the German camp in Mauthausen, and later during their odyssey across Europe and South America. Eventually the poet's literary papers were deposited at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Austin, where they remain to this day.

Although the exhibition focused chiefly on biographical aspects of Leśmian's life, issues related to his artistic work were also an important facet of the display.

Leśmian was not only a poet. He was also a researcher of myths, which he successfully transformed into prose stories. He also wrote dramatic texts for the theatre. For a short time he was even a theatre director. Furthermore, he wrote many press articles and essays, which testify to his extensive philosophical education.

However, these many and varied activities were all subordinated to one creative idea, his own vision of the poetic word. This poetic idea was expressed in his essays and is an immanent feature of his poetry. It is philosophical in nature and can be articulated in the question:

What does it mean to exist?

Or, in a broader sense:

How it is to exist?

And, most fundamentally: *What are the forms of this existence?*

Leśmian's answer is that existence is fluid, so that beings appear for a moment, only to disappear almost immediately.

Of course, it is easy to recognize Henri Bergson's influence in these meditations. But that is only half of the truth. Leśmian was indeed inspired by Bergson, but it was not the Frenchman who supplied his first food for rumination. That was Georgy Ivanovich Chelpanov. Leśmian regularly cut classes at his high school (*gymnasium*) to listen to Chelpanov's lectures at the University of Kyiv across the road, and thereafter became his student. Chelpanov taught Leśmian to treat perception as something that operates within time and space. The sense of these two dimensions allows us to perceive the constant transformation of everything.

And this is how his second philosophical dilemma arises. While the first is ontological, this latter is epistemological:

What allows us to state that something exists?

If the creature is not stable, how do you know it?

These questions are Bergsonian again, but Leśmian's answer has more to do with symbolism. It is well known that the most problematic issue in symbolism is the concept of the symbol. In fact, it is not the symbol that is of greatest significance but the language. Leśmian first encountered symbolic ideas at quite an early stage, but he became better acquainted with them in Paris, where he came into contact with the Russian symbolists.

According to the symbolists, reality is not knowable, and language does not help in coming closer to it. In fact, language obscures reality even further, because it is an attribute of the intellect and it inevitably falsifies the true state of things by simplifying them or recasting them as stable and material. So the symbolists invented the idea of a 'language within a language', an illusion of creating a completely new language. The novelty and otherness of Leśmian's poetic code, which has always been so arresting to both his contemporaries and today's readers, is rooted in precisely this desire to find a way of speaking that will allow what was hitherto, and otherwise, inexpressible to appear, through words.

Thus his poetry explores the idea of autonomy of language, but not to the extent that we experience in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé or Paul Valéry. Leśmian is not nihilistic; he remains spiritual even though his spirituality is not rooted in any specific religion. It is a spirituality of his own, created out of ideas sourced in equal measure from Christianity, both Catholic and Orthodox, Judaism, and oriental sources – Arabic, Hindu and Buddhist.

Obviously, much of its interpretation depends on the scholars themselves: some highlight the element of Slavic mythology, while others perceive an underlying motif of Jewish origin, as in the excerpt from the poem about the shoemaker who wanted to offer God a pair of shoes and attempted to measure God's foot, even though the name of God is unencompassed. This is a paradox typical of Leśmian's self-contradictory way of thinking. He liked to provoke and he loved the play between the literal and the non-literal. One of his favorite poetic devices was the juxtaposition of abstract and concrete: the notion of God is quite abstract, but it loses all this abstraction when discussed in terms of shoe size.

The fundamental categories of Leśmian's inexpressibility are therefore on the one hand its epistemological elusiveness and on the other its ontological indeterminacy, which are treated as two ends of the same continuum. Where the problem lies – whether in the indefiniteness of the object or in conceptual inefficiency – is not resolved here, and no lasting cognitive conciliation is possible. However, this does not prevent a poetic depiction of indeterminacy and elusiveness. The phenomenon of indeterminacy and elusiveness may produce momentary fulfilment. Leśmian's word formation and phraseological transformations are evidence of such momentary expressions and illuminations. Many of his inventions of this nature were created precisely to reflect some ephemeral and unique phenomenon. Sometimes this causes the effect, so typical of Leśmian, of determination of an incomplete, specific indeterminate.

This vagueness reveals that in this poetic world things move so fast that noticing the first association, which brings them only part-way out of their indeterminate state, as it were, must often suffice.

This permanent ambiguity, however, displaces the drama of cognition. In Leśmian's poetic world this takes place between two poles: between the experience of the impossibility of comprehending what is felt and sensed – and consequently eludes verbal expression – and the actual states of instantaneous epistemological satisfaction.

It seems that the most important terms signalling Leśmian's inability to know anything for certain and, as a result, to find the right words, are silence and muteness. Leśmian's treatment of silence and muteness proves that the poet saw these attributes as qualities inherent in the primal state of existence of all things, a pre-verbal existence, and in this untouched originality the most real state. To his mind, however, simply because things are inexpressible does not mean that one should be silent. First, as has been shown above, this necessity of silence can be revealed and suggested by words. Secondly, what cannot be said can be conveyed in many other ways, especially after a literal announcement that this is the case.

At this point the specificity of Leśmian's concept of poetry becomes most clear. He was aware of the existence of the inexpressible sphere and – like Mallarmé – treated poetry as 'speech on the verge of the impossible'. But his poetry did not seek to be – in the words of the French symbolist – 'a silent poem, only from white'. Leśmian harnesses this inexpressibility, gives it the opportunity to come out, and forces it – in harmony with expressiveness – to speak. The basic rule

organizing this poetry can be reduced to the dialectical interaction of negativity and positivity, which permeates each of its levels. Absence, impossibility, and deficiency always have a constructive function here. A lack of knowledge, ambiguity, or uncertainty are not only expressed, but even reported and established as the principle by which that expression is developed. Indeterminacy is not the end but the beginning of the talk about the indeterminate. Recording successive manifestations of elusiveness proves to be the only way to consolidate a fleeing object, and its indeterminacy itself is considered to be its proper essence. In many cases both the lack of knowledge manifested by the subject who cognizes and the elusiveness of the perceived object paradoxically not only do not thwart poetic utterance, but even generate new modes thereof. And thus poetry gains surprising fulfilment in Leśmian's work.