

Polish reality versus the American Dream. Miron Białoszewski experiences the United States of America

Ewa Mikula

Miron Białoszewski started his two-month-long journey to the United States of America in October 1982. The main cause of the trip was receipt of the Alfred Jurzykowski Award but actually the writer simply decided to take an opportunity for visiting a new place:

Przyjechałem tu po nagrodę polonijną. Mogłem ją odebrać przez bank. Ale mnie kusilo. Potem straszycło. Ale wstyd było cofać jazdę¹.

Fear turned out to be unnecessary. Białoszewski pulled himself together in new realities and he made them subjected to him. The initial confusion caused by lack of language skills and also by problems with counting the value of a currency was quickly relegated to the secondary status. And although after returning to Warsaw the writer claims: 'it is even more comfortable to be sitting in a bus and looking at Nowy Świat because those are well known views'², the thought about the US does not leave him at all, it stays with him in memories and as records and souvenirs which he has brought with him to Poland.

The story of his journey to the US starts [familiar to the beginning of the *Obmapywanie Europy*³ (*Mapping the Europe*)] with a description of the flight. Białoszewski is surprised by the littleness of the Earth, he tries to recognize Boston but it turns out to be impossible – the blinding sun only let him see 'millions of small houses'⁴. When he finally arrives to New York, he is picked up from the airport by Polish friends⁵ of him and taken to the hotel located in Manhattan. Yet in the hotel the writer tries to 'domesticate' the alien space and make it somehow similar to Polish reality:

1 Białoszewski M., *AAAmeryka*, [in:] *Obmapywanie Europy. AAmeryka. Ostatnie wiersze*, Warsaw 1988, p. 59.

2 Ibidem, p. 122.

3 Ibidem, p. 7.

4 Ibidem, p. 58.

5 In New York Białoszewski's guide was Lech Michalski, polish actor working as a cab driver.

Brązowy hol. Święty Józef z gipsu. Portret papieża. Cisza. Jak w Sieradzu. Jazda windą na siódme piętro. Pokoik z tradycyjnym wyrkiem. Na ścianie Serce Jezusa. Roleta w oknie. Wychodeczek. Prysznic. Staję w oknie i patrzę. Domy wielkie, ale cicho i pusto. Jak w Przasnyszu⁶.

A change of perceiving New York takes place on the next day when Białoszewski goes outside, on the streets of the city. The number of shops, diversity of clothes and untypical appearance of pedestrians make the writer feels boggled. He starts to discover new reality in the childish way — he attempts to try everything, to experience each thing on, his aim is to verify if his former images of the US are compatible with the real view. Although Białoszewski, as always, ‘looks at the world objectively’ and ‘his every view is «the first view»’⁷, in this American case we have to do with an active, dynamic narrator. That fact has an enormous influence on the structure of narration which, on the one hand, is formed as a diary [*AAAmeryka* (*AAAmerica*) and *Tajny dziennik* (*The Secret Diary*)] and therefore is full of thoughts and digressions but on the other hand it is fragmentary. This fragmentation is caused by two reasons: firstly, Białoszewski had to make a choice from many experiences and memories, secondly, large amount of events and necessity of continuous relocation enforced that kind of carrying the narration.

While staying in the US one of the main Białoszewski’s activities was buying. Discovering the new reality in the childish way (mentioned in the paragraph above) is clearly visible here. ‘There will be something to buy and to carry’ — the author is glad when he sees a record store in which there is music from all over the world. He is buying nearly everything, from exotic fruit, which disappoints him with its taste, to products from sex-shops which can be treated as a symbol of American liberation. Immensity of goods and an easy access to them make the writer compare his new situation with the situation in Poland during the Material law. Białoszewski undoubtedly admires the western welfare, however we can feel a hint of irony in his words.

Kupuję winogrona, pomidory, mandarynki. Wszystko tu jest dorodne. Aż do nudności. Wiadomo, że w Ameryce sortuje się towar i odrzuca się to, co nieefektywne, że hoduje się nawet lyse kury, żeby były tłustsze⁸.

Such reflexion returns to him during shopping at the supermarket. At this time ‘ogonki’ (queues) in the shop becomes an excuse to consideration. The writes notices that in the US one has to stand in the line as well as in

6 Ibidem, p. 59

7 Sobolewska A., *Maksymalnie udana egzystencja*, Warsaw 1997, p. 75.

8 Białoszewski M., *AAAmeryka*, op. cit., p. 63.

Poland, however the reasons of queue arising are entirely different. Białoszewski is irreverently telling the story about American people habits: they go shopping and they are relaxed, they do not hurry, contrarily, they rest during the shopping as they 'have so much to choose from'⁹. Shop assistants potter because they want to be kind and helpful, that is completely different situation from that in Warsaw.

Another Białoszewski's interesting observation refers to differences between Polish and American way of clothing. He discovers those differences when he is forced to buy new trousers in the shopping centre before his reading. It turns out to be a major challenge. The narrator is disappointed as he thought that only in Warsaw 'there was a lack of trousers for untypicals'¹⁰. He is also surprised by the fact that all clothes in the American shops are 'too light' for an upcoming winter. Pyjamas, in turn, are just as those in Warsaw — 'prickly'. Those considerations about clothes leads the writer to a bitter conclusion that the world is going worse, in addition 'all around at the same time'¹¹.

In the shopping centre Miron-the traveler is amazed by the video arcade machines. Again, he impersonates a child who is unlocking the mystery. It is evident especially in the way of carrying the narration:

Trzeba tak sprytnie kręcić kierownicą, żeby unikać zderzenia, wymijać. Inaczej — zderzenie — prysk! — słycać karetkę pogotowia¹².

During the visit in a bank Białoszewski is looking for people who are paying out the money 'like machines' — 'they are pressing something and something is being filled by them'¹³. He is also confused and astonished when he is seeing a TV remote control for the first time while visiting his friends in Buffalo or when he is watching a sitcom and he is wandering where the laughing audience is. Białoszewski is clearly surprised by omnipresent American consumerism and also by banality of the American culture. He cannot be amazed at TV commercials which are broadcasted during the film:

Reklamy poznaje się po tym, że są jakby innym światem, wspanialszym. Ludzie na reklamach coś mówią do siebie, coś sobie pokazują, przeważnie świecącego, coś próbują i nagle wpadają w oczarowania, w uśmiechniętości, radosne byty, olśnienia. Kiedy potem po reklamie film wraca do siebie, to jednak ludzie po tamtych olśnionych wyrazach twarzy mają miny jakby zafrasowane¹⁴.

9 Ibidem, p. 67.

10 Ibidem, p. 79.

11 Ibidem, p. 80.

12 Idem, *Tajny dziennik*, Cracow 2012, p. 817.

13 Idem, *AAAmeryka*, op. cit., p. 67.

14 Ibidem, p. 85.

While being in the cinema, he is shocked by the floor coated with popcorn and garbage. He often calls titles of the action films which plot based on the one, simple scheme ‘of bashing, jumps and races’¹⁵. At the time when the writer was traveling to the US the condition of the Polish cinematography were not fine¹⁶. Revised after the Material law film groups were forced to make films remaining out of touch with reality, at the much about same time the western films started to appear on the silver screen. That was only the beginning of the entertaining cinema in Poland, therefore for the Warsaw viewer used to watch engaged, sententious films (for instance the cinema of moral concern) Hollywood productions would become an enormous shock¹⁷.

During the two-month-long stay in the US Białoszewski travels a lot — he stays in New York City, Chicago, Cambridge, he also goes for a trip to Niagara waterfall. Each localisation elicits in him the process of ‘domesticating’ reality. In Buffalo, behind his friends’ house, he sees bushes and a railway embankment on which there are children playing — just like in Warsaw. In Cambridge, in turn, he beholds Greek columns embellishing a part of campus. He is convinced that it is only a temporary decoration but it turns out that Americans are obsessed with ancient Greece and the columns are there permanently. Then, we have some signs of ‘Europeanism’ here. When the writer sees a gothic cathedral¹⁸, he is wondering how it is possible that it looks so authentically whereas it is “fake” gothic. He remembers that in England gothic was the majority art movement until XIX century, when cities of the ‘New World’ were growing. That is why Americans have managed to successfully reproduce typical elements of gothic. At Niagara waterfall Białoszewski tells his companions a story about discovering Niagara by monks, who were going along to christianize the Native Americans (Indians) and met the waterfall. He is surprised that no one has known this history. This particular example proves that for Białoszewski knowledge and concepts of new places are the second important element of learning new reality. Not only empiric cognition and perception matter but also an academic base, information from books. It is also worth to take notice of writer’s

15 Idem, *Tajny dziennik*, op. cit., p. 814.

16 Białoszewski recalls in his *Tajny dziennik* (p. 828), when Polish emigrants put him up to watch in the cinema Jerzy Skolimowski’s movie *Fucha* (*The Sideline*) because it was forbidden in Poland.

17 Lubelski T., *Historia kina polskiego. Filmy, twórcy, konteksty*, Chorzow 2009, p. 443.

18 The Cathedral of St. Patrick in New York City is the seat of the archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, and a parish church. It is also the biggest neo-gothic temple in the North America. It is located on the 5th Avenue, in the centre of Manhattan.

tendency to telling stories, which are ‘attached to the place’¹⁹. It is evident in Białoszewski’s narrations that localisation of the author becomes a stimulus to call stories.

‘New York City is affecting me — me at all, for many points of view — more and more, like a narcotic’²⁰ — that is what we can read in *Tajny Dziennik*. And indeed, although the writer took an interest in places mentioned above, New York City made on him the biggest impression. Staying in New York was for him a contribution to reflexion about an urban space. Białoszewski comes to the conclusion that ‘the idea’ of New York City reminds him a medieval town.

Ulice, które mi się wydawały z początku dosyć wąskie, a potem okazały się szerokie, właściwie są wąskie, bo nad nimi z dwóch stron sterczą ogromne ściany pionowe. Czyli ciasno zbudowane prostokątami średniowieczne miasto. Pośrodku — zamiast rynku — park. Miasto dzieli się na kwartały. Chiński, włoski, stary, bogaczy, średnich bogaczy. W dodatku niebezpiecznie jak w średniowieczu²¹.

Białoszewski organises reality not only with reference to cultural patterns like when he recognises similarities between Chinatown and Nalewki (a non-existent today district of pre-war Warsaw). He also uses a topographical orderliness of a space, which has been called a mathematical space by Mieczysław Porębski²². Another important aspect of learning the city’s topography (beside an attempt to inscribe New York into a topographical scheme of a medieval town) is a necessity to walking alone along the streets of Manhattan. The writer uses mnemonics which helps him to consolidate where the uptown and where the downtown is. At first he reminds that, as polish ‘dół miasta’, downtown starts with ‘D’. But it quickly turns out that even in Poland he could not remind what up and down of the city are. In that case he needs another association:

Uptown to uciekać z domu, czyli góra miasta, miasto ciekawsze. Downtown do domu, za domem cypel, tam się mniej jeździ. Nauczyłem się uciekać z domu²³.

19 Zieniewicz A., *Małe iluminacje. Formy prozatorskie Mirona Białoszewskiego*, Warsaw 1989, pp. 65–67.

20 Białoszewski M., *Tajny dziennik*, op. cit., p. 809.

21 Idem, *AAmeryka*, op. cit., p. 71.

22 Porębski M., *O wielości przestrzeni*, [in:] *Przestrzeń i literatura. Studia*, ed. Glowński M., Okopień-Sławińska A., Wrocław 1978, pp. 24–26.

23 Białoszewski M., *AAmeryka*, op. cit., p. 64.

When the time of describing the city map comes, we are not only given information about the system of the streets but also writer's opinion about that system:

Avenue — podłużne, street poprzeczne. Tych podłużnych jest więcej niż dziesięć. Za to poprzecznych zrobiło się przeszło dwieście. Idą gęsto, dzięki czemu nie jest nudno²⁴.

Right after that Białoszewki compares old bridges to old sewing machines. It is a sign of writer's reism (or concretism), well known since *Obrotły rzeczony* (*Revolutions of things*). Also the skeleton of a dinosaur in the Field Museum of Natural History elicits some associations — for the narrator it looks like a flyover in Saska Kępa (a part of Warsaw). The height of Niagara Waterfall, in turn, is compared to the Warsaw Hotel and Manhattan 'makes an impression of something encumbered with enormous furniture standing side by side'²⁵. It is hard not to notice that the capital of Poland distinctively influences the way Białoszewski perceives the world²⁶. The native city is for the writer not only the axiom allowing 'domestication of the reality' but also an issue which Białoszewski always looks for in his memory. New spaces make pre-war Warsaw *genius loci* always present in writer's consciousness as he feels it even while learning a new space (comparing Chinatown to Nalewki).

Stay in Buffalo confirms Białoszewski that the US are divided into surrounded by water Manhattan and 'antcities' which are everything beyond that water. Why 'antcities'? American metropolises 'diverse in their similarity, similar in diversity'²⁷ have a sedative impact on the writer, they seem to be something boring. They do not have a long, centuries-old history which is characteristic for European cities — this is a reason for which, as Białoszewski notices, Americans gladly visit the Old Land. However, New York City is different, it is closer to Europe. When the writer returns there after visiting other American states, he do not hide his joy:

Wreszcie zajechalem pod dworzec-cyrk w pępku świata. Wysiadłem bardzo uszczęśliwiony. Boston nie ciekawił mnie właściwie, wyczerpała się tam moja ciekawość i myślałem, że już nie wróci. Ale w miarę zbliżania się do Manhattanu ciekawość i podniecenie narastały²⁸.

24 Ibidem, p. 68.

25 Ibidem, p. 71.

26 Parafianowicz-Vertun W., „My mamy cudny”? *Życie w Warszawie, życie w Europie Środkowej*, [w:] *Tętno pod tynkiem. Warszawa Mirona Białoszewskiego*, ed. Karpowicz A. et al., Warsaw 2013, pp. 112–113.

27 Białoszewski M., *AAAmeryka*, op. cit., p. 95.

28 Ibidem, p. 111.

Białoszewski feels fine there. In the city of the cities where you can never be bored. New York prepossesses the writer by its multiculturalism and providing an easy access to every kind of goods. Even when he stayed too long in one of the erotic cinemas and he had to went back to the hotel alone in the dark, unsafe alleys, he had great fun. This adventure has become the source of an extensive description in *AAAmeryka* as well as in *Tajny dziennik*. What is meaningful, because of censorship which was still existing in the year of publishing *AAAmeryka* (1988), we can see a difference in number of intimate details in two mentioned descriptions. When the opportunity occurs, it is worth to call Białoszewski's 'zanoty' ('afternotes') from 19 November 1982:

Pytają mnie, czy co napiszę o Ameryce. Nie wiem, co na to odpowiadać. W końcu mówię prawdę. Że robię zapiski dziennikowe, nie do druku, a kilka numerów amerykańskich *Kici Koci* już jest²⁹.

What emerges from these facts is that Białoszewski decided to publish *AAAmeryka* later, after coming back to Poland. It can be said that American diary, which was released in the eighties (after writer's death but he had been prepared it to publishing³⁰), has been based on notes from *Tajny dziennik*. Both of works are orderly and censored (in some way), as it was mentioned above. The censorship, however, does not concern political issues but rather moral strands, which could disgust prim and proper readers. In the eighties New York City was a place of debauchery. The narrator continually visits porn cinemas and sex-shops — he does not have to look for them, he just encounters them at every turn. He narrates his experiences in detail comparing movies seen in different cinemas. He watches people and compares behavior of people representing different nations. Every visit on 42nd Street ends up with buying staff which is unavailable in Poland. Initially Białoszewski, accustomed to Polish mentality, is afraid that someone finds out his doings. Like he does not believe that Americans are liberal:

Wychodząc, chowam porno pod półkę z zapasowym kocem, komu by się chciało tam zaglądać, której sprzątacze? [...] Ale okazuje się, że tutaj raczej nie wtrącają się do tego, co się ma, tak jak w hotelach na całym świecie³¹.

Miron Białoszewski's experiences from visiting the US becomes also a contribution to his deep reflexion about Poland and Polishness. An impact

29 Idem, *Tajny dziennik*, op. cit., p. 831.

30 In *Tajny Dziennik* in the note made during the night of 19 to 20 January 1983 appeared information that Białoszewski had finished recording *AAAmeryka* (p. 852).

31 Białoszewski M., *AAAmeryka*, op. cit., p. 74.

of two very diverse cultures (different from each other in political but also mental way) let the writer look at his homeland from another perspective. The necessity of coping with a feeling of alienation on the one hand and boundless freedom dominant in the New World on the other hand, make the writer continually think of Poland and compare these two (American and Polish) realities. These thoughts comes to Białoszewski especially when he is spending time with other Poles. In the view of a difficult situation in the country most compatriots try to find out something about Polish realities. Each of them has his or her own point of view what causes that their concepts are usually wrong. They hassle the writer with questions about which is better: sending to family in Poland money or packages. They also try to entertain Białoszewski with Polish emigration art they also enquire about the art community in homeland. The writer is not pleased with these actions:

Ludzie by mnie wpakowali w polskizmy, w biblioteki, literatury, malarstwo współczesne, a ja chcę życia ulicy, Ameryki, tej Amerykańskiej³².

Not long after Białoszewski's arrival to New York, his Polish hosts take part in 'anti-Polish-government' manifestations. The writer does not want to attend them, he states that manifesting with them seems to be inappropriate as the needs help from a consulate when he returns Poland. However, from his diary we find out that his behavior was the result of his aversion to such actions and it had no political roots. He preferred another entertainment than pickets:

Zresztą co mi przyjdzie ze słuchania pokrzykiwań i gwizdów małej grupki Polaków. Najgłośniejszą krzyczała jakaś kobieta, niczym wczorajsza Murzynka o Jezusie. Zamiast to kontemplować, poleciałem do niedalekich sklepów porno i tam na oglądaniu pism spędziłem ciekawe popołudnie w Nowym Jorku³³.

Białoszewski watches the Poles he meets in the US and he divides them into two groups: emigrants, who have decided to stay in the US for life and 'under-emigrants' who cannot decide where to live because they are emotionally linked to Poland. While conversing with compatriots the writer finds out that they are not feeling well living abroad. Deprecating attitude to Poles has change in the US thanks to numerous emigrations of members of intelligentsia and also because of selection Karol Wojtyła for the Pope. However, Polish immigrants in the US often have problems with finding a good job and providing themselves and their families.

32 Idem, *Tajny dziennik*, op. cit., p. 828.

33 Ibidem, p. 804.

Białoszewski was shocked by number of compatriots he met behind the ocean (there were three emigration waves: after war, after 1968 and after 1980), he wrote: 'America is not another hemisphere of the Earth. It is the second side of Polish and Polish-Jewish medal'³⁴. The writer managed to observe relations between 'old' emigrants and newcomers — those mentioned as second ones were always asking those first ones for help. According to the narrator this situation is uncomfortable for people who have already got a foothold in new reality. They must continually fulfill their role of emigration guardians whose obligation is to find a job and a flat for newcomers. Poles often do not know English when they decide to leave to the US. As a result they feel alienated and have difficulties with domestication. Białoszewski sees these problems of Polish emigration in the US and he feels sorry for those people as he knows that the American Dream is very different from reality. At the same time, he does not understand why Poles are living their homeland since living abroad, behind the ocean, does not seem easier than living in Poland.

Pytam się, co nadzwyczajnego widzą w tym Bostonie. Ano, że zwykle miasto milionowe. Ale dlaczego ma być takie piękne. Ano, bo nad rzeką. Mówię, że w Warszawie jest też rzeka, i ciekawsza³⁵.

During the US trip, readings were a very important experience for Białoszewski. They were popular and they gathered appreciable audience. The first of the reading took place in New York City. This is how the writer evaluated it:

Nastrój jak w Warszawie albo jak w Teatrze na Tarczyńskiej i potem w Teatrze Osobnym [...]. Ja w świetnym nastroju, publiczność też. Wszystko się udaje. Nawet ktoś okazuje się oburzony na tego rodzaju wiersze. Wychodzi ostentacyjnie z Sali. Inni mówią na boku, że Białoszewski specjalnie go sobie zamówił, żeby było ciekawiej³⁶.

Another successful reading took place in Buffalo, in the house of writer's friends — Oluta and Elek³⁷. Guests gathered there continually asked for more and more poems and they did not allow Białoszewski to stop. This

34 Ibidem, p. 826.

35 Idem, *AA Ameryka*, op. cit., p. 105.

36 Ibidem, p. 80.

37 Teresa Mellerowicz-Gella (a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, she led an experimental classes in semiotics and lectured the history of art) and Alexander Gella (professor of sociology, illustrator, sculptor).

enthusiastic reception was undoubtedly very important for the writer and it helped him to pull himself together in foreign reality.

These meetings were often an opportunity to talk about Białoszewski's observations concerning the US. One of the conversations brought about consideration about the essence of traveling. People knew Białoszewski as a 'lying down poet' who led a kind of quirky life living in a hermitage and being visited only by devoted lovers of his talent. Many of them were surprised that he, 60-year-old man, decided to travel so far. It turned out that for Białoszewski these 'lyings down' were also a kind of travels, what is more, travels even better than real ones. Therefore, a way to Egypt, circumnavigating the Europe and a flight to the US were for the writer only a further continuation of a travel which had started earlier, in his room; they were, then, a kind of fulfilment for those 'lying' migrations and also satisfaction of writer's childish cognitive curiosity. As Tadeusz Sobolewski noticed: 'While circumnavigating the world, Miron always stays in the same place. His place. Good for contemplation'³⁸.

We can notice some analogy between writer's imaginations of the world known from *Obroty rzeczy* or *Mylne wzruszenia* (*False Emotions*) and his empiric experience caused by actual place changing. Each of his journeys (those 'small', taking place in the space of his flat or in the space of Warsaw and those big) are connected to an idiosyncratic kind of reflexion, which can be called, using the name created by the writer himself, 'examining using oneself'.

Days spent in the US becomes for Białoszewski a very important and meaningful experience. There he could be himself, he received freedom he would never receive in Poland. Polyphony of American street gave him a chance to live his life to the full. Although he did not like everything he saw in the US and there were many things which remained incomprehensible for him, he remembered this journey till his death because:

ten śmietnik świata
czasem piękny jest³⁹.

This is what he wrote about the US in one of his last poems.

38 Sobolewski T., *Człowiek Miron*, Cracow 2012, p. 93.

39 Białoszewski M., *W Ameryce jak gdzieś indziej*, [in:] *Obmaływanie Europy...*, op. cit., p. 127.

Bibliography

- Białoszewski M., *AAAmeryka*, [in:] *Obmapywanie Europy. AAAmeryka. Ostatnie wiersze*, Warsaw 1988.
- Idem, *W Ameryce jak gdzie indziej*, [in:] *Obmapywanie Europy. AAAmeryka. Ostatnie wiersze*, Warsaw 1988.
- Idem, *Tajny dziennik*, Cracow 2012.
- Lubelski T., *Historia kina polskiego. Filmy, twórcy, konteksty*, Chorzow 2009.
- Porębski M., *O wielości przestrzeni*, [in:] *Przestrzeń i literatura. Studia*, ed. Głowiński M., Okopień-Sławińska A., Wrocław 1978, pp. 22-32.
- Sobolewska A., *Maksymalnie udana egzystencja*, Warsaw 1997.
- Sobolewski T., *Człowiek Miron*, Cracow 2012.
- Tętno pod tynkiem. Warszawa Mirona Białoszewskiego*, ed. Karpowicz A. et al., Warsaw 2013.
- Zieniewicz A., *Małe iluminacje. Formy prozatorskie Mirona Białoszewskiego*, Warsaw 1989.