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PATHS TO THE TRUTH On the Key Value in the Works of Józef Mackiewicz

For Mackiewicz, the most important mission of literature was transmission of anthropological knowledge, that is, the knowledge of man, in particular that provided in the twentieth century, which abounded in new, often extreme or limit situations. According to the author of the “Road to Nowhere,” the literary ideal consists in writing which, on the one hand, is—like science—sensitive to factual detail and, on the other, remains close to man owing to the author’s use of his personal testimony, experience, and, above all, literary evocation of the world.

A motto repeatedly invoked in various contexts by one of the most outstanding Polish writers of the twentieth century states that “only the truth is interesting.”¹ It seems that if we associate this declaration with works representing literary realism, such as those authored by Józef Mackiewicz, the meaning of the quoted words is rather unambiguous. However, once we study Mackiewicz’s novels more carefully, it turns out that the question of truth in them is by no means obvious and that the truth the writer constantly pursues embraces several different elements. In this paper, I will try to outline these elements and then argue that, according to Mackiewicz, objective (natural), or even transcendent truth, while it may not be attainable, provides the necessary intellectual horizon for a proper creative approach.

THE TESTIMONY

Józef Mackiewicz was a prose writer and a journalist whose main genres of literary expression were reportage, novella, and novel. A vast majority of his output is connected with a specific place and time, namely, with Central and Eastern Europe (the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania) of the first half of the twentieth century. Mackiewicz was particularly interested

¹ Józef Mackiewicz, “Literatura contra faktologia,” in Józef Mackiewicz, *Wielkie tabu i drobne fałszerstwa* (London: Wydawnictwo Kontra, 2015), 334. The article was first published in the Parisian monthly *Kultura* (Culture) (1973, nos. 7–8). Unless stated otherwise, all translations are by Dominika Bugno-Narecka.

in the ways the so-called little homelands² developed and absorbed the new ideologies of the time, specifically the communist totalitarianism. Today he is considered among the most important anti-communist writers.³ However, Mackiewicz also analyzed—with equal keenness—the consequences of the German Nazism, as well as those of more particularistic (e.g., Polish, Lithuanian, and Belarusian) nationalisms.⁴

His output is largely based on personal testimony. Born in 1902, in St. Petersburg, Mackiewicz spent his childhood in Vilnius (which, at the time, was still in the Russian Empire), and, as a young man, fought in the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1919–1920. His writers's skills were shaped during the time he worked as a journalist and reporter for the Vilnius-based newspaper *Słowo* (The Word) who traveled to almost every corner of the north-eastern lands of the then Polish Republic (including the territories of today's eastern Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, and Estonia). In September 1939, after World War II began, he also witnessed Vilnius occupied by, respectively, the Lithuanians, the Soviets, and the Germans.

Thus describing the truth whose source is his own eyewitness testimony became one of the main tasks of Mackiewicz's prose. Occasionally he shows the events he witnessed in non-fiction texts, albeit ones not devoid of important literary qualities. An instance of such prose might be Mackiewicz's pioneering monograph on the Katyn massacre and his shocking reportage depicting the mass murder of Jews in Ponary near Vilnius.⁵ The two testimonies in question

² A little homeland is a place of residence, usually in one's childhood and youth, which profoundly shapes one's identity, especially the creative awareness of writers and artists. The concept of little homelands is particularly useful with reference to the inhabitants of Central and Eastern European countries, especially in the context of the twentieth-century Polish writers in exile. In addition to Józef Mackiewicz, patriotism related to a little homeland can be found, among others, in the works of Czesław Miłosz, Stanisław Vincenz, Jerzy Stempowski, Józef Wittlin, and Andrzej Chciuk.

³ See Włodzimierz Bolecki, *Ptasznik z Wilna: O Józefie Mackiewiczu; Zarys monograficzny* (Kraków: Arcana, 2022).

⁴ See, in particular, Katarzyna Bałżeńska, "Losers, Winners, and Their Crimes in the Context of the Themes of Józef Mackiewicz's *Selected Works*," *The Polish Review* 58, no. 4 (2013): 71–79; Katarzyna Bałżeńska, "Anticommunism as a Paradigm of Thinking: On the Works of Józef Mackiewicz," *The Sarmatian Review* 34, no. 1 (2014): 1799–811; "Eastern Europe in the Shadow of a Propaganda War: Józef Mackiewicz and Totalitarian Propaganda," in *War and Semiotics: Signs, Communication Systems, and the Preparation, Legitimization, and Commemoration of Collective Mass Violence*, ed. Frank Jacob (London: Routledge, 2021), 282–98.

⁵ See Józef Mackiewicz, *The Katyn Wood Murders*, trans. Lew Sapieha (London: Hollis and Carter, 1951; London: The World Affairs Book Club, [1952]; New York: British Book Centre, 1952). See also "Testimony of Joseph Mackiewicz (through Roman C. Pucinski, Interpreter)," in *The Katyn Forest Massacre: Hearings before the Select Committee to Conduct an Investigation of the Facts, Evidence, and Circumstances of the Katyn Forest Massacre, Eighty-Second Congress, No. 2505* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1952), Part 4 [London, 16-19 April 1952], 867–81; Józef Mackiewicz, "The Ponary 'Base,'" trans. Julian J. Bussgang, in: *Polish*

were considered by Czesław Miłosz as specific mementoes of the twentieth-century and instances of literature that strives to be as faithful to the historical reality as possible.⁶ Writing about Mackiewicz in his book on the history of Polish literature, Miłosz noted: “His descriptions have the power of an eyewitness report.”⁷

Hence, it is not only the two mentioned testimonies, but a majority of Mackiewicz’s work which is based on his personal experience. This characteristic is certainly evident in the case of his activity in the twentieth-century interwar period when, as a reporter, he portrayed the north-eastern lands of the Second Polish Republic in a new and hitherto unknown way. However, the same can be said about his fiction. A good example of a novel based directly on the author’s personal experience is the *Road to Nowhere*,⁸ a book well-known to English readers. By expressing his personal testimony through the experience of various characters, Mackiewicz included in the novel one of the most shocking—not only in Polish literature—images of the devastation caused by the Soviet occupation.

Thus, to Mackiewicz, testimony, conceived as a means to reconstruct the truth and make it possible for the reader to experience it tangibly, in an almost sensory way, is the primary literary tool. However, it is not the only one he uses for that purpose.⁹

THE EXPERIENCE

Closely related to testimony, as it also concerns his autobiographical perception of the external world, personal experience is the second component part of the truth sought by Mackiewicz. The author of *Road to Nowhere* did

Jew—Polish Soldier (1939-1945), eds. Stanisław Borkowski and Hugo Schlesinger (Warsaw: The Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, 2010), 127–34.

⁶ See Czesław Miłosz, “Koniec Wielkiego Xięstwa (o Józefie Mackiewiczzu),” *Kultura*, no. 5 (1989): 114.

⁷ See Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1983), 536; see also: Katarzyna Bałewska, “Józef Mackiewicz—Czesław Miłosz: The Story of Their Relationship in the Context of Émigré Disputes,” *The Polish Review* 63, no. 4 (2018): 3–22.

⁸ See Józef Mackiewicz, *Road to Nowhere* (London: Collins Harvill Press, 1963; Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964). See also Katarzyna Bałewska, “Sovietization as an Experience of Violence: Everyday Life and its Significance During the Occupation of the Vilnius Region (1940–1941) in Józef Mackiewicz’s Novel *Road to Nowhere*,” *The Polish Review* 65, no. 2 (2020): 59–82.

⁹ See Adam Fitas, “Testimony and Literature: The Prose of Józef Mackiewicz,” *The Sarmatian Review* 36, no. 1 (2016): 197–85.

not emphasize this element very often. However, he refers to it directly in one of the texts included in the recent extended edition of his works.¹⁰ Following German scholars, Mackiewicz traces the genesis of the valorization of experience as an important cognitive tool back to the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. He also quotes the famous words of Patrick Henry, one of the founding fathers of the United States: “I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience.”¹¹ Mackiewicz then elaborates on the maxim by adding that experience “can only be gained by coming into contact with as many people as possible, thus expanding the circle of light coming from the lamp.”¹²

Indeed, Mackiewicz’s many-thousand-kilometers-long travels through the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania during the period between the two world wars combined into a unique anthropological journey which gave him an opportunity to mix with the high, the low, and the lowest of this world, as well as to visit capitals and rural areas, cities and even the tiniest villages. No wonder that the rich, multifaceted personal experience he then gained became—side by the side with personal testimony—an important aspect of the truth, “the only interesting thing” he wished to put into words. Personal experience is the only tool we have at our disposal that makes it possible for us, on the one hand, to appreciate the diversity of the world and, on the other hand, to juxtapose various events and human destinies in order to compare them.

Thus it was experience—together with an eyewitness view and tangible contact with reality—that sharpened Mackiewicz’s instinctive opposition to communism, a system in which human life bears “nothing of knowledge, nothing of curiosity, nothing of experience.”¹³ “Truth must not be sought there, nor must it be drawn from experience, but from *Prawda* (Truth) or from *Krótki kurs historii Partii Komunistycznej Bolszewików* (A short course in the history of the Bolshevik Communist Party).”¹⁴

Mackiewicz’s way of experiencing various aspects of the world around him, the non-anthropomorphic ones (nature being not merely the scenery for people’s actions) as well as those related to the human life and activity (in time

¹⁰ See Józef Mackiewicz, *Dziela*, vols. 1-36 (Londyn: Kontra, 1993–2024).

¹¹ Patrick Henry, “Give me liberty or give me death”: *Speech to the Second Virginia Convention Meeting at Henrico Parish Church (now St. John’s Episcopal Church, in Richmond, Virginia) (1775)*, Red Hill: Patrick Henry National Memorial, <https://www.redhill.org/primary-sources/give-me-liberty-or-give-me-death/>.

¹² See Józef Mackiewicz, “Sowiecka równość,” in Mackiewicz, *Wrzaski i bomby* (Londyn: Wydawnictwo Kontra, 2021), 337. The article originally appeared in *Lviv and Vilnius*, a Polish emigration magazine published in London. See Józef Mackiewicz, “Sowiecka równość,” *Lviv and Vilnius*, no. 92 (1948): 2.

¹³ Mackiewicz, “Sowiecka równość,” in Mackiewicz, *Wrzaski i bomby*, 338.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

of war and in time of peace, in their urban and rural settings), became another means for him to approach objective truth independently. It was Mackiewicz's ambition to capture the actual, objectively existing states of affairs in his prose.

THE DOCUMENT, OR THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

While the two already described approaches Mackiewicz used to grasp truth in his prose were related to his individual biography and his personal experiences it embraced, the other two, which he would frequently adopt, may be considered as part of the public and institutionalized domain.

The first such trustworthy medium of historical truth is history and its sources. The author of *The Katyn Wood Murders* shows an awareness of this fact already in his earliest journalistic pieces, which include not only transcripts of his conversations with people and his own comments, but also references to specific official letters, documents, and all kinds of written sources (articles, books, brochures, etc.). Relating historical facts, his novels frequently include bibliographies of texts which the writer used while constructing the plots.

Indeed, a method Mackiewicz often used first as a reporter, and then as a novelist consists in comparing various types of testimonies and lived through experiences with the existing historical documentation. Such a practice, intensified by Mackiewicz's belief that the twentieth century, in particular the period after the Bolshevik revolution, is characterized by a proliferation of historical documents, resulted in his case in a conscious writing strategy which aimed to show that the fate of hundreds of thousands of people depended on such documents, while circulars and orders issued in secluded chancelleries or government offices shifted the borders of countries and changed the fate of entire societies and nations. In the text in which Mackiewicz confesses that "only the truth is interesting," he formulates the following thesis regarding the essence of his own work: "In the novels set against the background of historical events, I am fascinated with what I call the confrontation of the human fate with the historical document."¹⁵

As a result of the "invasion of the document," he witnessed Mackiewicz's works do not resemble a traditional historical narrative, but impress the readers as instances of modern writing exposing intertextual relationships as well as relations between history we know from recorded sources and its existential course inherent in testimony and lived experience.

¹⁵ See Mackiewicz, *Literatura contra faktologia*, 330.

THE EVOCATION, OR THE LITERARY BACKGROUND

A society (nation) wishing to explore the truth has still another means at its disposal, albeit one approached rather suspiciously, namely, literature. Continuing his argument quoted above, Mackiewicz adds: “Why, then, not limit yourself to the document itself? Why additionally use a novel? It seems to me that it is to express this truth in its entirety. For how else can we not only present things in another form, but also express the spiritual side (*Geist*), the emotional side of past events? Which is not only the other half of documentary truth, but sometimes even the more important one. It will not be replaced by even the most precise, albeit dry set of facts.”¹⁶

It is worth noting that, according to Mackiewicz, the best way to show existential truth (in its spiritual, emotional or experiential aspect) is embedding it in a literary work. Only literature has means, such as evocation or imagery, which enable not only cognitive, but also polysensory communication. Only thanks to literature can personal testimony, personal experience and, in particular, the document be passed on to be co-experienced.

The two quotations I will use will illustrate the above thesis. The first one comes from Mackiewicz’s monograph about Katyn, the second from *Road to Nowhere*.

I shook my head and stood watching. Before me lay the opened pit, and at the bottom of it, layers and layers, packed tightly like sardines in a tin—corpses. Uniforms and overcoats—Polish uniforms—“Sam Browne” belts, buttons, boots, ruffled hair on the skulls, now and then a mouth open in a distorted gasp. The rain had stopped by now, and a pale sun thrust through the branches of the pines. Tit-pi-tit! The little bird raised its voice in joy. The sun shone right into the bottom of the pit, and for a second glinted on a golden tooth which stuck out from an open mouth of one of the corpses. They had forgotten to knock out that one... Tit-pi-tit! It was ghastly! Arms and legs entangled, everything pressed down as if by a roller. Row after row, faded and dead, hundreds and hundreds of innocent defenseless soldiers. A *Virtuti Militari* Cross on the breast of a body in the top row, with its head pressed under the boot of a comrade. The next one lay face downwards, still in his cap, which was an exception. All the others in overcoats, their shapes scarcely discernible in that sticky, slimy mass. Mass! A word beloved in the Soviet Union!¹⁷

It reminds me of the pond that belonged to my father-in-law, God rest him. It was a small pond. I still remember when I came out at dawn and looked at the water and it was as blue as frozen fingers; the night turned pink... and later on fine days it became clearer and clearer, till at noon if the sun was out, it would shine like a monstrance.... When it fell into shadow it became as green as a leaf, and in the

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 335.

¹⁷ Mackiewicz, *The Katyn Wood Murders*, 147.

evenings it was different again.... When it rained the pond looked like lead; it was dull and heavy. Now if something were to happen which caused that pond to be like lead at dawn, and like lead in the midday sun, and like lead in the glow of sunset, as well as being like lead in the rain, if it were always the same leaden color and you knew that it would never change, then I for one wouldn't want to live near such a pond, not even if it were full of fish, not even if I could catch them in my hands.¹⁸

It does not take a skilled literary eye to recognize the above excerpts as Mackiewicz's first attempts at literary writing or to notice not only the cognitive, but also the emotional, pictorial, and experiential character of his text. In fact, we are dealing here with literature at its best, where communicative aspects are combined seamlessly with elements of artistic language. The immensity of the Soviet crime and the grayness of life in the communist system are expressed by means of a polysensory evocation, which—insofar as it is possible in language—brings us closer not only to dry facts, but above all, to their pictorial and existential dimension.

For Mackiewicz, the most important mission of literature was transmission of anthropological knowledge, that is, the knowledge of man, in particular that provided in the twentieth century, which abounded in new, often extreme or limit situations. According to the author of the *Road to Nowhere*, the literary ideal consists in writing which, on the one hand, is—like science—sensitive to factual detail and, on the other, remains close to man owing to the author's use of his personal testimony, experience, and, above all, literary evocation of the world.

THE NATURAL TRUTH

One can rightfully say that the writing ideal described above is utopian and practically unattainable. Interestingly, although Mackiewicz's thinking went along similar lines, he would never deviate from his chosen path leading to truth. His approach can be described as maximalist: he was determined to be as close as possible in his writings to fully objective truth which he described as natural truth. For that purpose he would use all the available means, which was tantamount to recourse to the literary practices described above. In the prologue to the novel *Kontra*, one of the most beautiful instances of his prose, the writer captures the following image of truth:

There are two truths in the world. The first is that which tightly encircles the Earth and faithfully mirrors in water the cirri swimming above. It reverberates with the

¹⁸ Mackiewicz, *Road to Nowhere*, 347.

echo in the mountains. It registers accurately the sough of the forest and of reeds on the lake. It knows where each stone ought to lie in a shallow brook and why such a stone foments a murmur of perpetual purl. This truth hears the lightest rustle of an insect and the most trivial word of man. It never smiles, however, even when it shines with the sun through the petals of an apple tree in the spring. But it does not frown either, it does not twist its face in anger even when it forms clouds from cirri and drives them above the flat earth, auguring a tempest. It shows neither love nor hate. It does not mock anything, because it does not consider anything on earth risible. It does not bewail anything, because nothing on earth seems to deserve such lament. It does not change anything and does not distort anything. He who killed a fly killed a fly. He who killed a man killed a man. It is perfectly indifferent, because it is perfectly impartial. It is the complete truth, because it is natural.¹⁹

The author realizes that such truth (knowledge) is unattainable by man (including by himself as a writer), because its nature is transcendent and resembles the omniscient gaze of God. However, this does not mean that such truth does not exist or that efforts need not be intensified to get as close to it as possible. Our duty to strive to attain this truth can even be called fundamental, since our mission in this world—and particularly in present-day reality—is, among others, to expose opportunist interpretations of truth clad to look like truth itself. In the cited prologue to *Kontra*, Mackiewicz portrays the other, i.e., falsified truth:

This other truth apparently consists solely of good and evil. But anyone who believed it would be mistaken, because its good and evil are relative concepts. This truth never rests, and, as a result of this, it seldom reflects things accurately. This is why its face often contorts with a wry sneer or an angry grimace. As it is constantly on the move, it can barely follow a mass of human words and gestures. It maintains that it tries to register these as accurately as the first truth, but in reality it tries only to adapt them to its relative purposes, and in the rush of life it distorts a great deal. It might appear that this truth is as superficial as a morning haze, which will be dispersed by the first sunrays or scattered by a morning wind. But this is not so, because it stays on the surface, clinging to scraps of the first truth. Spreading over the earth, it invokes the same woods, fields and sources, calls on witnesses, whether the trills of a bird, the cry of a torn cat, or a man's blood, skillfully summoned before the tribunal of human imagination, yet always omits other witnesses.... This second truth cajoles, dissembles, raises arms to the sun, swears at the rain and tempest. It promises everything, but seldom honours its promises.²⁰

Ultimately, the mission of not only a writer, but also any human being who aspires to independent thinking should be to strive for the best possible knowledge

¹⁹ See Józef M a c k i e w i c z, *Kontra* (Londyn: Wydawnictwo Kontra, 1988), 9. Translated by Nina Karsov. Special thanks to Mrs. Nina Karsov for the opportunity to use this unpublished translation.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 9–10.

of the natural truth.²¹ For Mackiewicz, the search for and the recognition of this truth is not merely a mission of an individual writer, but the essence of culture constituted by it. Any other purpose, or horizon, of inquiry amounts to accepting falsehood and to a negation of man's nature. It was predominantly in the twentieth century ideological aberrations that Mackiewicz saw symptoms of the cognitive collapse of man.

The author of *Road to Nowhere* believed that objective truth is so diverse and so rich (and therefore so interesting!) that everything else pales in comparison with it or in its light. For this reason, probably not quite fairly, he appreciated only realistic writing and disregarded any recourse to fantasy, grotesque or abstraction. He believed that all such methods of expression—when juxtaposed with tangible reality—are inevitably bound to impoverish the theme they are meant to examine. Throughout his literary and journalistic work, Mackiewicz focused on the most faithful (veristic, even photographic) approach to the natural truth. A study of his literary explorations reveals that personal testimony and experience, as well as his historian's and writer's expertise, were particularly relevant to his style and marked his journey towards the truth.

In his pursuit of truth, however, Mackiewicz was aware of (and repeatedly emphasized) the cognitive limitations of an individual human being. Therefore, he never claims a license for truth or argues that the truth he expounds is exclusive. Rather, he invites his readers to a lively debate and welcomes polemics. His output manifests exceptional open-mindedness and underscores the freedoms of thought and speech as the fundamental values on the path to truth.²²

²¹ Interestingly, what Mackiewicz calls "natural truth" is similar to the classical understanding of truth. The classical concept of truth originates from the thought of Aristotle: "This will be plain if we first define what truth and falsehood are: for to say that that which is is not or that which is not is, is a falsehood; and to say that that which is is and that which is not is not, is true." Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV, 7, 1011b 25-28, trans. Christopher Kirwan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 23–24. The concept was reformulated by St. Thomas Aquinas as the correspondence of a judgment with the state of affairs to which the judgment refers: *Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 16, a. 1, co., Corpus Thomisticum, <https://www.corpusthomicum.org/sth1015.html>). "Truth is a correspondence between the intellect and the thing." St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso, University of Notre Dame, <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC-part1.htm>).

²² See Józef Mackiewicz, *Triumph of Provocation*, trans. Jerzy Hauptmann, S. D. Lukac, and Martin Dewhirst (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). The book gives an outline of Mackiewicz's worldview and points to the coincidence of the pursuit of truth and the freedom of speech as the key characteristic of his output.

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ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Adam FITAS, Paths to the Truth: On Truth as the Key Value in the Works of Józef Mackiewicz

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Truth is the key value in both the journalistic and the artistic prose of Józef Mackiewicz (1902–1985), one of the most outstanding Polish writers of the 20th century and a classic of the anti-communist thought. The author of the article shows the paths Mackiewicz follows in his attempts to approach objective (natural) truth. The paths in question include testimony, experience, history, and literature. Each of the paths is presented in the article in detail and illustrated with examples drawn from the writer’s works.

Keywords: Józef Mackiewicz, truth, testimony, document, history, literature

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Adam FITAS, Drogi do prawdy. O kluczowej wartości w dziele Józefa Mackiewicza
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Prawda jest kluczową wartością zarówno w prozie publicystycznej, jak i artystycznej Józefa Mackiewicza (1902-1985), jednego z najwybitniejszych

polskich pisarzy dwudziestego wieku oraz klasyka myśli antykomunistycznej. Autor artykułu pokazuje, jakimi sposobami (drogami) Mackiewicz stara się zbliżyć do prawdy obiektywnej (przyrodzonej). Są to: świadectwo, doświadczenie, historia i literatura. Każda z tych dróg jest w artykule szerzej zaprezentowana oraz zilustrowana wybranymi przykładami z twórczości pisarza.

Słowa kluczowe: Józef Mackiewicz, prawda, świadectwo, dokument, historia, literatura

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