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THE CRYSTALLIZED EXPERIENCE.
THE CASE OF COLLINGWOOD'S MONADISM
IN HENRYK ELZENBERG'S THOUGHTS ON ART

I

One of the central questions of art theory concerns the object of art, which, in regard to the artist, may be external or internal. Theorists like Aristotle state that the artist's role is to try to provide a representation of the objective reality. Others, like Croce or Collingwood, and Plotinus before them¹, state that the only thing that the artist should care about are his subjective, internal states and his attitudes towards reality. As non-artists, whose relation with art is limited to books, exhibitions, concerts and museum tours, we may tend to prefer theories of objectivity in art, as that makes us feel we are able to grasp the true meaning of a work of art without any previous knowledge of the artist's state of mind. Yet, a subjective perspective provides no strong argument for a truly justified understanding of art by anyone but the artist himself.

The concept of subjectivity of art is an important part of what Collingwood called *the monadism of art*². This idea is one of his earliest, first expressed in his *Speculum Mentis* and although it never came back explicitly, nevertheless it is present implicitly in his subsequent works.

Collingwood's concept of monadism may be explicated in the following points:

- 1) Each work of art is an imaginary picture of reality³.
- 2) This picture is a subjective picture of reality as experienced by the artist⁴.
- 3) This is a world *inhabited* solely by the author of the work – it exists only while it is being imagined⁵.

¹ Although there is no evidence of Plotinus's influence either on Croce or on Collingwood, there are scholars, like S. Stern-Gillet, *Neoplatonist Aesthetics in: A Companion to Art Theory*, (eds.) P. Smith & C. Wilde, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford 2002, p. 43, who suggest that the ancient philosopher's theory prefigured idealist theories of both thinkers, mentioned above.

² R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis or The Map of Knowledge*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1956, pp. 68–73.

³ R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 61–65.

⁴ R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 61–65.

⁵ R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 68–69.

4) Each such imaginary picture of reality is an internally coherent and finalized image, which means that:

4.1) Works of art may be inconsistent with one another¹.

4.2) Works of art may be inconsistent with objectively perceived reality².

The consequence of such approach was the recognition of the creator (an Artist) as the sole and only necessary recipient of the work of art, and the only person which can legitimately claim to have properly read it. Any other recipient, even if his reading of the work coincides with what the artist wanted to express, has no tools and methods enabling him to make sure of that. Even a broken clock shows the correct time twice a day, but that does not mean that we should rely on it – after all, to know when it shows the correct time we must refer to a working clock. Similarly, to know if one's interpretation of art is correct we must refer to its creator's opinion.

There are similarities between Collingwood's theory and thoughts expressed by Henryk Elzenberg, who also claimed that any aesthetic activity implies subjective expression, but they differ by their attitude toward the concept of beauty. Collingwood claimed that beauty has no meaning for art proper, while Elzenberg's idea of art was that its true concept must inevitably be connected with the notion of beauty, which he considered as objective. This contradiction led in the past to misunderstandings (e.g. Wolniewicz's reading of Elzenberg's theory where he states that any activity which aims for beauty can be considered art). But I think that there is a way of reading his thought, from the perspective of Collingwood's monadism, that shows its coherency and allows to avoid such errors.

II

Elzenberg claimed that we should be very careful and suspicious with any attempts to define anything, since every definition is *a very peculiar thing. It explains one obscure term with two obscure terms*³. Hence, he did not provide any definition of art in his writings. Instead, he tried to think through the problem and report his attempts to resolve it. We can try to consider his entire writings, especially his journals *Kłopot z istnieniem*, as a permanent attempt to think better. This attempt took the form of a system which could never attain a form that Elzenberg acknowledged to be satisfying⁴. I believe, however, that by analyzing what Elzenberg *did* write we can obtain an outline of his view of art.

In this endeavor we should start with a thought Elzenberg wrote in 1937:

*We should reach the notion of Art through more
general and fundamental terms. Such a general term
for me is the notion of beauty, a positive aesthetic*

¹ R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 71–72.

² R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 76.

³ H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem. Aforyzmy w porządku czasu* (4 xii 1909), Wydawnictwo UMK, Toruń 2002, p. 37.

⁴ H. Elzenberg, *Wstęp* in: H. Elzenberg, *Wartość i człowiek. Rozprawy z humanistyki i filozofii*, Wydawnictwo UMK, Toruń 2005, p. 12.

*value. Among essential human duties, there is a duty to create beautiful objects, external to the creative man: such activity aimed at creating such things I call Art.*¹

Now, from the statement above, we can derive three assumptions:

- 1) The notion of art is subordinate to the broader idea of beauty.
- 2) Beauty is a positive aesthetic value.
- 3) Art is an activity which aims at realizing the value/idea of beauty.

What we should know about Elzenberg's concept of beauty is that he conceived it as a *perfect value*. That means we can call any thing beautiful, as long as it fulfills the condition of being such as it should be². And it literally means *any thing*, since

*Beautiful are deeds and characters and souls and historical figures and entire historical epochs and social patterns and mathematical proofs and mathematics as such, and not infrequently philosophical systems are charged that they are only beautiful*³.

And nature, and its elements, also can be called beautiful⁴.

While keeping in mind the three assumptions stated above, we can assume that any activity could be described as artistic only if its beauty was its purpose. Art, therefore, must be an intentional activity, which means that it is impossible to create a work of art by accident. It may be that a monkey randomly striking a typewriter in an infinite period of time eventually produces all of Shakespeare's texts. But in terms of Elzenberg's theory these texts can not be considered as works of art, because they did not arise deliberately.

If we correlate these findings with the notion of art as an activity intended to create beautiful objects, we are confronted with the following options:

- 1) As art Elzenberg recognizes any intentional activity which aims at producing a beautiful object. In this perception, not only poetry, painting and

¹ H. Elzenberg, *Aesthetica* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, (ed.) L. Hostyński, Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 1999, p. 194: *Do pojęcia sztuki należy dotrzeć od strony pojęć bardziej ogólnych i bardziej podstawowych. Takim pojęciem ogólnym i podstawowym jest dla mnie pojęcie piękna, wartości estetycznej dodatniej. Istnieje, wśród zasadniczych powinności ludzkich, powinność tworzenia zewnętrznych w stosunku do człowieka przedmiotów pięknych: czynność zmierzająca do tworzenia takich przedmiotów nazywam sztuką.*

² See H. Elzenberg, *Pojęcie wartości perfekcyjnej* in: H. Elzenberg, *Wartość i człowiek*, pp. 18–19.

³ H. Elzenberg, *O różnicy pomiędzy „pięknem” a „dobrem”* in: H. Elzenberg, *Wartość i człowiek*, p. 22: *Piękne są i postęпки, i charaktery, i dusze, i postacie historyczne, i całe historyczne epoki, i budowa matematyki jako całości, a nierzadko i systemom filozoficznym zarzuca się, że są tylko piękne.* Perhaps it is relevant to underscore the relationship between Elzenberg's thought and investigations of Plotinus, whom Elzenberg undoubtedly esteemed, and who wrote in *The Enneads* (*Ennead I, 6 (= On Beauty)*, 1, 1 sq.), trans. S. MacKenna, Faber & Faber Ltd, London 1956, p. 56: [...] *beauty addresses itself chiefly to sight; but there is a beauty for the hearing too, as in certain combinations of words and in all kinds of music, for melodies and cadences are beautiful; and minds that lift themselves above the realm of sense to a higher order are aware of beauty in the conduct of life, in actions, in character, in the pursuits of the intellect; and there is the beauty of the virtues.*

⁴ H. Elzenberg, *Przeżycia związane z przyrodą* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, pp. 151–152: [...] *zjawiał się nowy sposób ujmowania przyrody, której widoki zaczęłam wtedy odczuwać jako aspekty kosmosu, zewnętrzną zaś ich piękność czy to jako rodzaj wspaniałych tych potęg ucieleśnienia, czy to jako dominujący kontrast w stosunku do grozy rzeczywistości.*

music belong to the field of art, but also mathematics, improving ones own character, cooking and playing soccer (if the intention is to produce beauty).

2) As art Elzenberg recognizes only one of the many activities which aim at creating beautiful objects. This would mean that the notion of art must have another defining characteristic, besides beauty, that would distinguish it from other activities resulting in beautiful things.

Let us consider the first of these options.

III

For Elzenberg beauty is a *perfect, final and independent* value¹, which means that the beauty of the object must be independent from any other value or item. Chopin's Nocturne No. 3 in B major is beautiful not because it was composed by Chopin in Vienna, just like Vienna is not a beautiful city because Chopin's Nocturne was composed there. Chopin's Nocturne in B major is beautiful because it fulfils the condition of being as it should be, and not because of the value of the artist himself. The corollary is that the work of art cannot be something useful, since utility is based on the relationship of one object with another. This is confirmed by the words of Elzenberg himself: *For me, art is also "for art's sake" and has a value for itself, an absolute value. But it has it, because it is beautiful*².

In Elzenberg's system there is another sort of value – contrasted with the final, independent, ultimate one – *relative and dependent* value. Relative/dependent and final/independent/ultimate values alike can be realized in creativity: *Wasn't it one of my chief thoughts, that the value is realized in things external to us, and that it's all about "shaping the world", about creativity*³.

Creativity, understood as the realization of the value in external objects, is to be compared with Elzenberg's understanding of culture, which he perceived as the *sum of things the creation of which is in the scope of the possible for a human being, and which are valuable*.⁴ It is important to ask whether this sum of valuable things means things of value both ultimate and relative.

To this question Elzenberg responds firmly rejecting the suggestion that satisfying the needs of any human would lay in the heart of culture:

If the whole meaning of culture lies in the fact that it caters to our needs, then we can never and in no way prove that it should be rather than not be; as we cannot see even a shadow of a reason for which the needs of the species homo should be fulfilled rather

¹ See H. Elzenberg, *O różnicy pomiędzy „pięknem” a „dobrem”*, pp. 21–22.

² H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem* (18 x 1912), p. 74: *Dla mnie sztuka jest także „dla sztuki” i ma wartość samą w sobie, bezwzględna. Ale ma ją, bo jest piękna.*

³ H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem* (10 iii 1915), p. 94: *Czyliż nie było również jedną z moich myśli naczelných, że wartość realizuje się właśnie w rzeczach poza nami, że idzie o „rzeźbienie świata”, o twórczość.*

⁴ H. Elzenberg, *Nauka i Barbarzyństwo* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma aksjologiczne*, (eds.) L. Hostyński, A. Lorczyk & A. Nogał, Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 2002, p. 354: *[...] rzeczy, których stworzenie jest w zakresie możliwości człowieka, a które są rzeczami wartościowymi.*

*than the needs of the species felis tigris or taenia echinoceus.*¹

But the final values provide the reasons for themselves – just be such as you should be. And for this reason, according to Elzenberg, the work and deeds of him who is acting for the sake of utility will have lower value (variable and dependent) than the work and deeds performed for the sake of realizing the final value. Thus, according to Elzenberg, we should always give priority to the final values (constant and independent).

The difference in the action resulting from realization of one of these values is easy to illustrate with an example of a painter in need of money who has been commissioned to paint someone's portrait. Our painter paints the image of the client just to please him – he shows him as a younger and more beautiful person; he uses the most expensive paints and finally, he inserts the image into a richly gilded frame. The existence and the assessment of value of such image both depend largely on its usefulness: the picture would not have been painted for reasons other than someone's pleasure and one's need for money (dependent and variable values). As a counterexample, consider a painter who does not *have to*, but *wants to*, paint someone's portrait. All he cares for is to paint a portrait such as it should be. To do his work in terms of realizing *perfect* value, he probably needs to know what is a portrait itself, just like the previous artist needed only to know how to please his commissioner. This second portrait will be valuable in the ultimate sense, assessed only on the basis of its very essence, and not due to any necessity, and its value will be independent of any circumstances. However, as Krasicki tells us in his tale *Malarze*², it is not the painter who paints well (as it should be), but the one who paints the way he believes he is expected to paint (thus abandoning final value), which is highly valued by the general public.

Elzenberg points out that only one of the two painters will be a creator of culture, namely the latter one, as a painter creating for the sake of the created object.

But, as a matter of fact, there is no strict demarcation line that would tell us which objects were created for the sake of usefulness, and which for their beauty. In fact, we see no reason for not assuming that we could realize both values (final as well as dependent) in one object. It is possible to paint a portrait which someone has commissioned and still paint it as good as it should be. Such portrait will be valuable (in the perfect sense) too, irrespective of the value it may have for the commissioner.

¹ H. Elzenberg, *Nauka i Barbarzyństwo*, p. 354: *Jeżeli całe znaczenie kultury leży w tym, że zaspokaja ona nasze potrzeby, to nigdy w żaden sposób nie wykażemy, że powinna ona być raczej, niż nie być; cienia bowiem racji nie widać, by potrzeby gatunku homo raczej miały być zaspokajane niż potrzeby gatunku felis tigris albo taenia echinoceus.*

² I. Krasicki, *Malarze* in: *Bajki*, (ed.) Z. Goliński, Zakład Narodowy Imienia Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1975, p. 125: *Dwaj portretów malarze stnęli przed laty: / Piotr dobry, a ubogi, Jan zły, a bogaty. / Piotr malował wybornie, a głód go uciskał, / Jan mało i źle robił, więcej jednak zyskał. / Dlaczegoż los tak różny mieli ci malarze? / Piotr malował podobne, Jan piękniejsze twarze.* [There used to be two painters, years back: / Peter was able, yet hard up; while John, the inept, was well-off. / Peter worked hard, and made worthy paintings, yet all but starved, / what John used to turn out was sparse, and shoddy, yet lived in full-bagged. / Now what made their lives so badly divergent? / Peter painted true, as John flattering, faces., transl. Z. Nierada.]

It is important to see that in such approach artistry is not associated with any object or activity because of their nature, but is attributed to them by analyzing how they have been created or performed. Music itself is not an art, and not every melody is a work of art, although both belong to the field of creativity. This is something that probably eluded scholars like Wolniewicz, who wrote about typically feminine art of creating homestead, starting from the assumption that *culture consists of many arts*¹. As far as I know, there are no *arts* in Elzenberg's theory so far; there is only art considered as a desire to create beautiful things.

Such mistakes may have two sources. The first one lies in the mistaken impression that a creator participates in only one type of activity. In truth, a creative person can realize values of a different nature in one object. The second source of error is a division of the field of creativity into two concepts: of arts and of utilitarian activities as exclusive activities, and denying that it is possible to simultaneously realize values of two different kinds in one object. A close reading of Elzenberg's texts provides sound arguments against such erroneous interpretation. This also means that of two possible ways of interpreting Elzenberg's claim about a connection between the notions of art and beauty we should consider only the latter one. It states that art is only one of many activities, which aims to create beauty and it is only one in many cultural activities.

IV

The other interpretation of Elzenberg's theory implies that Elzenberg recognizes as art only one of the many activities which aim at creating beautiful objects. Hence the conclusion that the notion of art must have, besides beauty, a further defining characteristic that distinguishes it from other activities resulting in the creation of beautiful things. This means that while choosing this way of interpretation we should still assume that art is an activity aimed at creating beautiful things – like other cultural activities – but it will also be necessary to distinguish it in some way from other culture activities. As it seems to me, that needs to be done and can be done.

In both the unpublished texts and in *Kłopot z istnieniem*, Elzenberg pointed out another aspect of art. This aspect had perhaps been neglected even by himself, maybe because of its weak association with the concept of beauty, in which Elzenberg was interested primarily. In 1917, Elzenberg wrote in his journals that the artist is a *lens* in which the image of the world is focused. Such image is undoubtedly marked by subjectivity, but it is still an image of the world. The same issue appears in his manuscripts:

[...] *remark on parallelism of art and philosophy* [...]
Here, however, we have something else: a (sensory) revelation of some general aspects of the world, its general, previously only vaguely discernible, characteristics. Well, it is the same with philosophy

¹ B. Wolniewicz, *Dom jako wartość duchowa* in: B. Wolniewicz, *Filozofia i wartości. II*, WFiS UW, Warszawa 1998, p. 174: *na kulturę składa się wiele sztuk*.

[...] *philosophy brings to light some intuited, yet, so to say, unheeded, aspects of the world.*¹

It then appears that we should define Elzenberg's concept of art not merely from the angle of beauty. It is also about *revelation* and *bringing to light* some of the not fully discernible aspects of the world. But philosophy also describes the world and it also brings to light some of its aspects. If so, then how different is an artistic depiction of the world from the view philosophy gives us? First, an artistic image does not exclude other representations of reality:

*Philosophical systems, as logically motivated, fight and exclude each other: but the views expressed in the works of Titian and Michelangelo's works, are they mutually exclusive? Everyone feels that the world is such as in Titian, and such as in Michelangelo.*²

This implies resignation only from a rational exclusion of the works of art which still have their own logic and, indeed, it may be the logic of values. In an unpublished manuscript entitled *On Art*, Elzenberg mentioned that artistic activity is one of two possible ways of achieving an evaluative description of reality. While Elzenberg did not state it, these two ways can be opposed to scientific descriptions of the world, wherein we should avoid good/bad and beautiful/ugly evaluation. According to Elzenberg, *reality, as it appears to us, is made up of objects among which certain relations obtain*³.

We submit to aesthetic valuation (beauty judgment) objects themselves, and not the relations between objects, unless we recognize a certain pattern of relations as an object. Such objects or their arrangements submitted to evaluation are *closed system of phenomena*⁴. Relations as they occur to us in reality can be evaluated as good or bad, but in such closed systems, regarded as one object, relations can not be evaluated from the perspective of ethics, for the whole system is settled for aesthetic reasons.

As an example of such closed system we can try to grab single, beautiful objects, like a human being, but also a group of people viewed together with their relationships but without evaluating these relationships. So, Elzenberg writes, moral judgments of the chorus in Greek tragedy are relevant only for characters in this very tragedy, being inside the system. We should not treat

¹ H. Elzenberg, *Ogólność i oryginalność w sztuce. Głębokość. Sztuka jako objawienie* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, pp. 174–175: [...] *uwaga o równoległości sztuki i filozofii* [...] *Tu jednak mamy co innego: objawienie (drogą zmysłową) pewnej ogólnej strony świata, ogólnych, niewyraźnie przedtem dostrzegalnych jego charakterów. Otóż to samo jest w filozofii* [...] *I filozofia wydobywa na jaw pewną przeczytą a zapoznaną, że tak powiem stronę świata.*

² H. Elzenberg, *Ogólność i oryginalność w sztuce. Głębokość. Sztuka jako objawienie* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, pp. 174–175: *Systemy filozoficzne, jako logicznie motywowane, zwalczają się wzajemnie i wykluczają: poglądy wyrażone w dziełach Tycjana i dziełach Michała Anioła czyż się wykluczają? Każdy czuje, że świat jest taki jak u Tycjana, i taki, jak u Michała Anioła.*

³ H. Elzenberg, *O sztuce*, manuscript from the Archives of H. Elzenberg (Archiwum PAN), III – 181, 72, p. 17: *rzeczywistość, jak się nam przedstawia, składa się z przedmiotów między którymi zachodzą pewne stosunki.*

⁴ H. Elzenberg, *O sztuce*, manuscript from the Archives of H. Elzenberg (Archiwum PAN), III – 181, 72, p. 18: *Zamknięty system zjawisk.*

them as moral guidance for us, because what is the result of artistic activity should not be treated as ethical comments. On the other hand, as stated in the previous section, no object should be considered *entirely* as a work of art, hence – in the case of literary expression – it can also contain comments on ethics in relation to reality. One should keep in mind what in a particular object belongs to which particular field of activity.

When Elzenberg describes constructing such types of closed system as artistic activity, he does so with firm emphasis on the notion that *in the very essence of artistry lies the alienation from our real world, the lack of connection with it*¹. This same idea is found in a manuscript entitled *Aesthetica*:

*The feeling of 'specificity' of the world of a work of art: it is a world absolutely sui generis, with its principles absolutely different from all the others.*²

So, to the two previously described types of painters we should perhaps add a third one, that of a painter who paints pictures neither for the sake of utility nor for its beauty but in order to express some aspects of the reality.

In Elzenberg's view, none of the three, if taken separately, is an artist. Elzenberg's understanding of art relies in its essence on a combination of the second and third attitudes. Accordingly, the artist is properly defined as someone who assesses an element of reality as valuable and, feeling compelled to fully realize this value, acts in order to describe that element. Such description need not be performed in words: painting describes without words.

But one could ask: how is the beauty of reality revealed to the artist? Elzenberg replies that anyone can perceive the beauty of things by way of contemplation, which he understands as:

*a specific type of sustained observation, one in which we no longer penetrate the watched thing for exploration thereof but keep aware of all its elements and qualities recognised before [...] Experiencing contemplation, means reliving all those emotional states of mind that appear and grow in us as we are contemplating the thing and owing to the circumstance that we that are contemplating it.*³

Contemplating an object results in the fact that excitement and other emotional states associated with the object develop in contemplating the

¹ H. Elzenberg, *O sztuce*, manuscript from the Archives of H. Elzenberg (Archiwum PAN), III – 181, 72, p. 19: *w samej esencji artyzmu leży obcość dla naszego realnego świata, brak z nim łączności*. H. Elzenberg, *O sztuce*.

² H. Elzenberg, *Aesthetica* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, p. 194: *Uczucie „swoistością” świata danego dzieła sztuki: jest ono światem absolutnie sui generis, mającym swoje prawa absolutnie różne od wszystkich innych*.

³ H. Elzenberg, *O różnicy między „pięknem” a „dobrem”* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, p. 16: *pewien rodzaj przedłużonego oglądania, taki mianowicie, przy którym w przedmiot oglądany nie wnikamy już dalej poznawczo, ale utrzymujemy w polu świadomości jego elementy i cechy poznane już uprzednio; [...] Przeżywanie kontemplacyjne to przeżywanie tych wszystkich stanów uczuciowych, które się w nas budzą i rozwijają, w miarę jak przedmiot kontemplujemy i dzięki temu, że go kontemplujemy*.

subject. Lesław Hostyński suggested that it means that Elzenberg's aesthetic experience is of emotional nature¹. If so, the better we understand our feelings toward a given object and the more we feel that an object is as it should be, the more likely we are to evaluate it as beautiful.

Elzenberg describes two thinkable reactions to such experience. The first is a refusal of further contemplation:

*Why do we part so easily with our most beautiful experiences: listening to a music, delight with some natural beauty? Because we shun: the internal effort we would have to put in to lift ourselves to the level of the subject – the peace that would imperil our futile workaday excitements – and the ecstasy that would make us realize that our ordinary experiences are doomed to die. One has to pass through something like an agony to become totally immersed in the Fullness; it is this agony that life fears to face, and so it hastily withdraws into commonplace.*²

This attitude can be called passive, and there is an active one, opposed to it:

*And one more thing: intense thinking induces a state of emotional excitement, which keeps up, until the thought has been written down, a kind of uneasiness; it intensifies, yet at the same time it subsides, in the course of writing, as the thought clarifies and crystallizes. That is all old stuff, what I say here – and yet, what is experienced directly for a first time is always “new”.*³

On his own experience Elzenberg comes to the conclusion that only by actively *working through* what was given in contemplation one attains to a pure and direct experience. Also, in other passages, he expresses the belief that the complete experience can be reached only through the creative process. The clearest testimony to this belief can be found in a note of 1953 where Elzenberg analyzes the *artistic type*:

It is known that important, groundbreaking realizations, essential spiritual “crystallizations”, sometimes come about as dreams, in a form of intelligible symbols; the same, sometimes, is the role

¹ L. Hostyński, *Układacz tablic wartości*, Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 1999, p. 121.

² H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem* (4 vii 1942), p. 318: *Dlaczego ucinamy tak prędko nasze najpiękniejsze przeżycia: zasluchanie w muzykę, zapatrzenie w jakiś piękny obraz przyrody? Bo b o i m y się: pracy wewnętrznej, którą by nas kosztowało dociągnięcie się do poziomu przedmiotu – spokoju, którzy by nam obrzydził nasze czerce podniecenie codzienne – i ekstazy, która by dała nam odczuć, że to, czym żyjemy zwykle jest śmiercią. Trzeba przejść przez swoistą agonię, by wejść w Pełnię całą swoją istotą; tej agonii lęka się życie i co rychlej wycofuje się w małość.*

³ H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem* (21 xii 1908), p. 35: *I jeszcze jedno: wytężone myślenie wywołuje jakiś stan uczuciowego podniecenia, zachowującego, póki myśl nie jest spisana, cechę jak gdyby n i e p o k o j u; przy spisywaniu dochodzi ono do najwyższego napięcia, a jednocześnie się uspokaja, rozjaśnia krystalizuje. Stare to rzeczy, co tu powiadam – a jednak to, co po raz pierwszy bezpośrednio przeżywamy, zawsze jest „nowe”.*

of creativity. An accumulated potential of experience actuates and sparks off in the form of a work, and as he is writing such and such a work the creator realizes that he used to feel in such and such way.¹

This is a clear indication of the fact that if one desires full access to the emotional content intrinsic to a contemplated object one has to be an artist. Without that all one knows is that he feels something – but the essence of the experience remains unclear.

The contemplation of the subject does not necessarily have to occur at the same time and place as the actual contact with the object. Elzenberg claimed that an object can be called beautiful when *I am contemplating it or experiencing it contemplatively directly or in recollection or in anticipation²*. There is only one condition: *I do not see though how “beautiful” could ever have denoted anything close to “valuable and contemplated by someone”, that someone being other than the speaker himself.³*

This condition is important in so far as it suggests that while contemplating the image, which is an expression of someone’s aesthetic experience, one cannot gain the same experience as the author of the contemplated object, because he is not contemplating the same thing. One can contemplate the object itself – the result of someone’s contemplation – just as something beautiful, as one of the elements of reality. As Hostyński stated, in Elzenberg’s philosophy of art *there are no grounds for separating experiences associated with nature from experiences of works art⁴*. Hence the conclusion that one object under contemplating is actually different for the creator of the object from what any other recipient of such object experiences. For the creator it is the extant residual of an expression of his experience, while for the recipient it is an object of experience.

What seems most important is Elzenberg’s statement that he is wary of speaking out about his experiences of objects of nature, because in such cases he is aware of the *impossibility of describing the essence of things in anything but artistic language⁵*. This statement confirms, therefore, that a work of art – expression, in the language of art – is a result of contemplation of reality. And since contemplation and its results have essentially the same character,

¹ H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem* (17 ix 1953), p. 425: *Wiadomo, że czasem ważne, przełomowe uświadomienia, zasadnicze „kryształizacje” duchowe dochodzą do skutku w postaci snów, pod osłoną przejrzystych symboli; podobna bywa rola twórczości. Nagromadzony potencjał przeżyciowy aktualizuje się i wybuch w postaci dzieła, i pisząc dzieło takie a takie twórca uświadamia sobie dopiero, że tak a tak czuł i myślał.*

² H. Elzenberg, *O różnicy między „pięknem” a „dobrem”* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, p. 17: [...] *wtedy, kiedy go czy to rzeczywiście czy we wspomnieniu, czy przez antycypację kontempluję lub kontemplacyjnie przeżywam.*

³ H. Elzenberg, *O różnicy między „pięknem” a „dobrem”* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, p. 17: *Nie wydaje mi się natomiast, by „piękny” kiedykolwiek znaczyło tyle, co „wartościowy i kontemplowany przez kogoś”, przy czym tym kimś byłby ktoś inny niż sama osoba mówiąca.*

⁴ L. Hostyński, *Układacz tablic wartości*, p. 128: [...] *nie ma żadnego uzasadnienia podział na przeżycia związane z przyrodą i przeżycia dzieła sztuki.*

⁵ H. Elzenberg, *Przeżycia związane z przyrodą* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, s. 158: [...] *niemożności opisanie istoty rzeczy językiem innym niż artystyczny.*

regardless of whether we contemplate a landscape or a work of art, it is fair to assume that the recipient should not try to retrace experiences of artists, which he cannot do, for the recipient's experience is a completely new experience of the object, which, from his own perspective, could be part of nature. Nor should the recipient try to speak of his experience in languages other than artistic.

The recommendation of speaking about one's experience of the world as valuable only in the language of art sheds a different light on Socrates' statement mocking poets for their inability to explain what their poetry was about. From the perspective of Elzenberg's philosophy, poets cannot speak about their experiences in a language other than artistic. But if this is correct, then it also results in the conclusion that for a recipient other than the author himself *Hamlet* may be just as well a series of lines of text randomly typed on a typewriter by a monkey. For Shakespeare, however, the text would be something different than for readers – for him it would be but an expression of his own emotions experienced through the contemplation of an element of reality.

Elzenberg's notion of contemplation provides a key to understanding his thesis of non-exclusiveness of works of art, for there can be many of them that express the experiences corresponding with the same aspect of reality:

*A contemplative attitude, in terms of aesthetics, involves perhaps (in the classical doctrine I generally subscribe to) an indifference to the real or unreal nature of what is contemplated.*¹

According to Hostyński, such indifference to reality results from a non-substantial and purely qualitative recognition of the world in aesthetic contemplation². Hence the indifference towards the aesthetic experience, which is a consequence of *suspending the question of whether or not the object really exists*.³ In 1914 Elzenberg noted:

*An emotion cannot possibly tell us about what is, because its essence lies in dissolving the category of being itself and the category of knowledge at the same time, but it [the emotion] itself is. And this suffices, even though thought cannot penetrate this.*⁴

This means that emotions do not inform us about reality in such a way that if we feel something in respect of an object then that object must be real. But the emotions themselves really exist. Hence, since the foundation of aesthetic

¹ H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem* (10 vii 1961), p. 490: *Z postawą kontemplacyjną w ujęciu estetycznym wiąże się chyba (jest to doktryna klasyczna, i ja się jej na ogół trzymałem) obojętność na rzeczywisty lub nierzeczywisty charakter tego, co się kontempluje.*

² See L. Hostyński, *Układacz tablic wartości*, p. 121.

³ L. Hostyński, *Układacz tablic wartości*, p. 121: *zawieszenia pytania o to, czy przedmiot istnieje realnie czy też nie istnieje.*

⁴ H. Elzenberg, *Kłopot z istnieniem* (23 iv 1914), p. 93: *Uczucie nie ma możliwości pouczyć nas o tym, co jest, bo jego istota polega na rozplawianiu samej kategorii bytu i jednocześnie samej kategorii poznania, ale j e s t ono samo. I to wystarczy, chociaż myśl tego nie przeniknie.*

experience lies in emotions one feels vis-a-vis certain aspects of reality, it is difficult to expect works of art, whose purpose is to express such emotions, to exclude each other.

V

Considering the analysis of Elzenberg's thoughts on art, we can, I think, assume the following: Art, in Elzenberg's theory, has two aspects: objective and subjective. In the objective aspect, art can be acknowledged as intrinsic to the sum of culture productions, i.e. objects valuable in the perfect sense. The latter aspect lies in the expression of subjective experiences associated with the creator's feeling of the beauty of the world, recognized through contemplation.

A recipient, other than the artist himself, does not experience the same way as does the artist, who contemplates certain aspects of reality. Through contemplation a recipient experiences the reality of which the contemplated work is part. The state of this contemplation can be expressed in another work of art, which would then become the object of further contemplations, and so on.

That may mean that for a recipient other than the creator itself it is immaterial whether *Hamlet* was written by Shakespeare or by a monkey. This, in turn, implies that a non-creative recipient who has access to nothing more than the form of the work of art only, is unable to identify a work of art as distinct from a random object (what is a rack of clothes at an the exhibition of contemporary art?).

But it also appears that, since art is an activity of the artist (artist seeking to realize values recognized by himself), and not of the recipients, the objective aspect may be derivative to the subjective one and the artist is the only indispensable recipient of his art. The same thought is found in the philosophy of Collingwood, who considered the case of art from the perspective of the artist conceived as agent – a subject who conducts artistic activity. Elzenberg's theory of art, compared with Collingwood's, is close to Collingwood's monadism. However, this can be said only in what relates to its subjective aspect, for the objective one, by its very nature, escapes the terms of Collingwood's theory which is essentially marked by the idea of subjectivity. Nevertheless, three of Collingwood's four elements are present in Elzenberg's view on art. These are:

- 1) Each work of art is a picture (closed system) of reality.
- 2) This picture is a subjective representation of reality as experienced by the artist.
- 3) Such image of the world is an internally coherent and closed image, which means that:
 - 3.1) The contents of works of art do not necessarily have to be consistent with one another.
 - 3.2) The content of a work of art does not necessarily have to be consistent with the objectively perceived reality.

As for the fourth element, what remains to do is to demonstrate that, as in Collingwood's theory, Elzenberg's perception of the world of art is one of a

world *inhabited* by the artist only. This is no easy task. However, may be looked for in Elzenberg's declaration about the necessity of absolute solitude, without which no aesthetic contemplation of nature is thinkable, does perhaps provide a clue to the answer¹. But this sentence as it stands alone may still be insufficient as a justification. Hence the need for further analysis.

¹ See H. Elzenberg, *Przeżycia związane z przyrodą* in: H. Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, p. 158.