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ADAM CHMIELOWSKI – SAINT BROTHER ALBERT OR BETWEEN ART AND SAINTLINESS

I shall begin in an encyclopedic fashion: Adam Hilary Bernard Chmielowski was born September 20, 1845 in Igołomia and died December 25, 1916, in Cracow. Igołomia is a village on the extensive black earth of the Proszowice region, situated little more than thirteen miles from Cracow, and one might surmise from those two dates that life passed Chmielowski by in seclusion, between the prosperous village and the sleepy old capital. In fact, the future Brother Albert began his life's journeying at the age of 12, and besides, in those days the thirteen-odd miles between Igołomia and Cracow were divided into two separate worlds; the cordon separating two partitions ran through the village of Cło. Born in the imperium of the tsars, Chmielowski died in the disintegrating imperium of the Habsburgs. But in the meantime...

He belonged to that essentially Polish social phenomenon: the migration to the cities in the nineteenth century of the impoverished nobility, who created there the new class of noble intelligentsia which filled the gap left by the incomplete

development of the cities in the First Republic. At young Adam's birth the Republic had gone, but Poland remained – unreal, politically nonexistent, but therefore perhaps all the more vital in the hearts of the people. Especially of the young. Chmielowski enrolled as a student at the Puławy Institute of Agriculture and Forestry in 1862. A year later the next Uprising – the most tragic of the revolts against the partitioning powers because it had not the slightest chance of success – broke out. Chmielowski joined up immediately and was wounded at the battle of Melchow. He lost a leg.

The handicap did not induce him to settle down: on the contrary, he began henceforth to change places constantly, wandering among Warsaw, Paris, Munich, and Cracow. He made another attempt to learn "something sensible" when he enrolled as an engineering student in Ghent, but a restless spirit and a fiery heart gained the upper hand over common sense: Adam Chmielowski began to study painting. He took most of his instruction in the years he spent in Munich, from 1869 to 1874. This was no flight of youthful fancy: Adam Chmielowski was 24 when he began his studies and 29 when he finished them. By the standards of the time, he was in the prime of life when he set about his new career and his quest for the painter's laurels. The second half of the 1870's was the apogee of his artistic activity: exhibitions, a studio shared with Stanisław Witkiewicz and Józef Chełmoński (who became a close friend) and then, in 1880, a turning-point: in September he entered the Jesuit novitiate in Stara Wieś. It is true that he left the novitiate in the following year and spent some time undergoing treatment in a sanatorium for nervous disorders, but he was bound forever to religion and the living practice of the Christian virtues. In 1887 he joined the Third Franciscan Order and a year later he took his vows – *mortus est Adamus, natus est Albertus*. In the same year, 1887, he created the Congregation of Brothers in Service to the Poor, which soon assumed the name of its founder and functions down to the present as the Albertine Brothers. The Brothers and, since 1891, the Albertine Sisters as well, have been fulfilling the mission to which they were recruited by a former soldier of the Uprising, a one-legged painter, a man of deep intellect and a passionate heart.

Brother Albert



This suffices to recall the most fundamental stages in the life of the saint. Let us now consider the connections that occurred in his personality at the point of contact between the artist's calling and the vocation of the monk. We should say at the outset that because of the hard labour of playing father to a new order, the unending cares, travels, efforts, teaching, and so on, Brother Albert had to give up painting after an artistic career of little more than a dozen years. This was not what he had intended; far from it. In one of the many letters, still signed "Adam Chmielowski", that he sent to friends – in this case, to Chełmoński – upon joining the novitiate, he wrote, "I have entered the novitiate, I feel quite happy. I am painting and I will certainly paint better than before." As we know, this prediction and longing were not to be fulfilled. The dramatic crisis was to last several years, and by the time Adam Chmielowski had been transformed into Brother Albert and achieved spiritual peace, the press of work and responsibilities ruled out systematic artistic work. He kept painting, but at a slower and slower tempo and with less and less of that

decisiveness that brings a work to completion. How can this be explained? Was it only lack of time, or the aftermath of the crisis, or some other reason about which nothing certain can be said, because the saint carried it to his grave?

Let us consider, then some aspects of these paintings which, in the few examples that have been preserved, surprise and charm. Quite varied thematically, they show us the painter as a man full of internal doubts and hopes, a man eternally searching. It is difficult to make an unequivocal classification of Chmielowski's paintings: they are of course rooted in their epoch and in that Munich circle which has given us so many splendid artists. But Chmielowski's work seems to stand off to one side, without adherence to either the idealistic-nationalist painting of Brandt, Chełmoński, and the early Aleksander Gieryski, nor to Siemiradzki's elegant academism, nor to Matejko's historical pathos; it reacts only in a limited way to French inspiration, approaching impressionism without becoming impressionistic.

This is confirmed by a letter to Lucjan Siemieński, a letter from a young man to an older friend and also from a student to his master, in which Chmielowski informs the poet of his Munich doings and considerations. Here, he writes clearly that neither genre painting nor historical painting (he makes several critical remarks about Piloti and critical, but respectful, ones about Matejko) is for him. Expressing his doubts as to whether the subjects he has chosen and his methods of executing them will find a favorable reception in Munich circles, in this letter that must have been written in 1870 (unfortunately, many of the letters are not dated), he comments: "... because they do not like such things here. They are fond of Polish peasants as long as they are well painted, if you know what I mean." Another letter contains a similar assertion: "I regret very much that I am not composing anything Polish, because I would very much like to. What can I do here? I cannot manage the genre things, and people have no taste for those historical fabrications ..."

These letters suggest that he painted a great deal during his Munich studies, that he rarely had time to go to the tailor's for a new frock coat, that he took advantage of as much daylight

as he had and spent his evenings in a circle of Polish friends. The best testimony to the perplexities that he could not banish in this whole period is a fragment of a letter from the early phase of his residence in Munich (December 1869–January 1870): "In general, art makes very boring people its adepts, which does not surprise me and I am convinced that whoever takes a serious approach to things must become a moral card-sharp, and he might not be betting thousands but he hazards little by little everything that is most dear to the heart and mind – a very demoralizing occupation, when somebody will sell their friend for a well laid-down colour, so it is no wonder that there are so many stupid people and drunks among artists; even the best are used up once the game is over, except perhaps if they win, and that is a rare thing."

Of course, this quotation can and even ought to be attributed to youthful artistic exaltation, but at the same time it is an indicator of how deeply and directly Adam Chmielowski experienced creative problems and at the same time an explanation of why he became a sort of *spiritus movens* in that Munich Polish community. Such indeed he was, as his friends and acquaintances from those days confirm, and the best instance is Maksymilian Gierymski's avowal: "Can I say that I have no moral debt to Adam Chmielowski, that he did not contribute to making a man and an artist of me? Without him, could I have become who I am? Is it not thanks to him that I could draw out of my mind and my heart certain strings that had not sounded before? In other company, would I have developed in the proper direction?"

This restlessness and searching appear in recollections of his enthusiasms and discouragements, in fascinations that pass because they are crowded out of his heart and mind by new ones. A very fine illustration of this is found in a fragment of a letter to Siemieński (December 27, 1869), describing visits to museums: "Tastes change devilishly here, I can no longer look at Piloti, there has already been so much of that and it is all the same. The new Pinakothek makes me choke so I go to the old Pinakothek and look at Van Dyck's portraits with boundless curiosity, and whereas I used to watch Velazquez the same way I would watch a wolf, it now seems to me that there is nothing

more beautiful in the technique of painting. I do not even spend much time looking at the old Italian school, Perugini and Raphael, because it is hard to start at the top. Almost everyone here regards painting and drawing as ends in themselves, not as means, and why not, since a thoughtless picture that is well composed and painted very often goes down well and makes the impression of poetry or a dream."

The correspondence cited here makes it clear that among contemporary artists he was most inspired by the pictures of Anselm Feuerbach, full of noble elevation and therefore of that academicism that I would call classicism – Chmielowski paid attention to its refined shadows, to the dignity of its themes and artistic material. He was no less fascinated by Arnold Böcklin, which might be surprising because our artist's symbolism pulled him in another direction while the German painter expressed visionary and allegorical contents through unusually realistic conventions: his mermaids had authentic fish scales on their tails and his satyrs frolicked on hairy, cloven-footed legs: the whole world of what Chmielowski called "poetry or a dream" was dissimulated with German mimetic pedantry. Other consequences of such attitudes are admiration for the drawings of Alfred Rethel, sympathy for the Nazarenes, and finally delight over Schwind's saccharine romanticism. Let there be no misunderstanding: God forbid that I should look down on these nineteenth-century German painters, whom I myself like and appreciate, but I can only wonder why Chmielowski is completely silent about his French contemporaries. When he was in Paris did he encounter only the conventionalists and regard them the same way he regarded Piloti? Who knows in the end what strikes us as French in his paintings was not received by way of his Polish colleagues, and perhaps especially the two Gierymskis? Evidence of his interest in France is scant and mostly concerns the Franco-Prussian War.

One might conclude, on the basis of the surviving paintings as well as the correspondence, that painting did not come easily to Chmielowski, that he worked against great internal resistance, that he was constantly correcting something and painting over and that he was never fully satisfied with what he had

done. In an 1873 letter he reports that technical mistakes on a work in progress had caused the colors to "go blue" in such a way that he had to paint everything over. A statement in what is supposed to be an ironic tone (from a letter of August [?] 19, 1870) is also significant: "For me at least the most charming pictures are those covered with paint from edge to edge. Sometimes smearing it on well also does the job, but only sometimes. What profit even such highly religious paintings as Perugini's draw from naive plantations [landscapes – T.C.], and how they explain their intentions."

This attitude of endless searching of art leads to moments of doubt and bitterness. Here is an admission from March 6, 1870: "In general this painting and all devotion to art is a craft fit for a dog. You have to spend the whole day agonizing over a picture, and in the evening there is not one merry hour, not one thought, only colours and lines. Since I started painting I have been either busy or exhausted."

I can perfectly imagine this lonely man with his deep physical disability and his heart still longing somewhat blindly as he composes his paintings with the greatest of effort and thus exposes himself to such criticism as Sienkiewicz's that he paints in a flat way, without depth and expression. Siemieński also criticized the young painter, with an effect that can be significantly noted in a letter written in 1874, when Chmielowski was already in the Ukraine: "I am very sorry that you do not like my painting, but I have nothing on my conscience since I did what I was capable of. Having accepted in advance the principle that a picture from the realm of fantasy should be painted without a model and without nature, the picture could not have come out differently, it is very sketchy and not at all painterly – and this uncertain appearance is even intentional." This quotation strikes me as a very good key to the symbolistic strain in the work of the future Brother Albert. That gloom, those insinuated silhouettes looming out of the shadows or the muted light that we find in "Italian Siesta" or "The Garden of Love" are the most authentic voice of a painter who had such trouble finding his place among the hurly-burly of fashions and tendencies.

The small number of Adam Chmielowski's paintings that have been preserved as well as the evidence of those that were

never finished – like "The Trappist in his Cell" – attest to the artist's unending travails. There are painters of born talent, and supposedly also many writers, for whom creation comes easily, but does the number of works testify to the greatness of the talent? Is talent only ease of composition? Only virtuosity? Is not talent perhaps also, at times, that effort, that eternal dissatisfaction, those unceasing doubts and misgivings? So little of this artist's work remains not only because Poland's poor fate led to the loss of many canvases, but most of all because they were born in effort, in pain. And in my life I have known a few artists who created in the same way, who gave birth to their works in the sweat of their brows and the pain of their whole existence.

Here we approach what is perhaps the greatest dilemma of Adam Chmielowski and Brother Albert: the meaning expressed by the artist. There is no doubt that Chmielowski was a deeply religious person all his life, and yet between the one calling, to art, and the second, to the service of God, there stretches a period of almost twenty years. The explanation for this may lie in the doubts and excessive modesty that were always present in the soul of the future saint.

In this correspondence with Siemiński the artist keeps coming back to the problem: Exactly what does he want to paint? Where should he seek an outlet for his talent? And for a long time he believes that the artistic world he dreams of is a world of fairy tales, fantasy, and imagination. Here are two quotations from this correspondence of great documentary value. In a letter probably written in August 1870, Chmielowski explains: "I think that at best I could understand a fairy tale (it is my misfortune to be such a dunce), a fairy tale about a fern flower, about how a princess has an apron covered in stars and a dress with the moon on it, conveyed in the old way, with the character of the old times, but I do not know where I can learn to look for it."

In the summer of 1873 he wrote, "I wander through the sleepy forest with a dark-haired nymph and we kiss very tenderly and talk about ferns, about the pasque-flower: I love her to madness, but so what, because when I think of her at bad moments I think that she does not even exist and that the

forests that are supposed to be sleeping do not exist either—and then there is no picture and then I think that I am just an oaf...”

As we read these admissions we must ask ourselves: Why did the painter come so slowly, so timorously, to religious art? And there can be only one answer: Adam Chmielowski did not feel strong enough or mature enough to take up such a burden. In two letters from 1873 Chmielowski confided his apprehensions to Siemieński: "Such questions must be old things: nevertheless, when a man reaches a certain age and begins to acquire a little wisdom he would like to know what road lies before him and how he will cope with life, and there is something beautiful: sacred pictures; I would very much like to pester God to let me paint them, but with sincere inspiration, which is not given to everyone. Painting costs the artist so much torment and the best of his blood."

And there is another letter from the same year: "Both a painter and a poet monk... serving art, could I also serve God? Christ says that no man can serve two masters. Art may not be mammon, but it is not a deity either; at the best it is an idol. I think that serving art always ends up in idolatry, unless perhaps like Fra Angelico one dedicates one's art, talent, and thoughts to the glory of God and paints holy things."

Adam Chmielowski published a text titled "On the Essence of Art" in *Ateneum* in 1876. I have purposely not referred to this well-known text which expresses ideas that had not yet crystallized in reference to the religious vocation. Therefore I will cite only its very last lines: "The great Raphael, who is said to have glimpsed heaven in some of his paintings, never managed to equal in expression the naive Fra Angelico. So I can sum up my thoughts: The essence of art is the soul expressing itself in style."

Finally, I shall take one last quotation from an 1880 letter to Helena Modrzejewska, in which the future saint informed the great dramatic artist of his decision to join a monastic order: "I am joining the order for this reason: If I were to lose my soul, what would I have left? Słowacki, whom you like so much, says that 'talent in the hands of a madman is a lantern that lets him see where he is as he walks into the river and drowns.'¹ How

terrible this is, but also how often true. Although I do not know if I have real talent or only minor talent, I know for certain that I am on the way back from the very bank of that river which has swallowed up many of those unfortunate drowned men, and swallows them up still. Art and art alone, for any smile or shadow of the goddess's smile, any rose from her wreath, for she bestows fame, affluence, and personal satisfaction – leave the rest unsaid: family, morality, union with God are lost in the pursuit, whatever is holy and positive is lost – the years fly, the physical organization is ruined and with it the so-called talent – beyond that, death – and if there were only death and oblivion, but no, because the soul never dies...

I have thought much in my life about who that queen of art is – and I have arrived at the conclusion that it is only an invention of the human imagination, or rather a terrible spectre that obscures the reality of God from us. Art is only expression and nothing more, and the so-called works of art are completely natural manifestations of our souls, they are our works and, to put it simply, it is a good thing that we make them, because this is a natural way to communicate and understand each other. But if we bow down before ourselves in these works and offer everything up as a sacrifice, then even though this is what is usually called the cult of art, in fact it is only disguised egoism; to deify ourselves is, after all, the most stupid and most abject category of idolatry..."

These fragments of Adam Chmielowski's statements, and especially the last one, show that he lived for art and, at the same time, refused to grant it the autonomy with which it was endowed by the nineteenth century, which was not, in the end, such a beautiful century. Brother Albert, on the other hand, lived only for people, and especially for those who had become the victims of an egoistical consumer society that had turned its back on God. Between the two lay the unity of a great spiritual transformation, but this had ceased to be a unity of artistic accomplishment: art had to yield its place to Christian service. If Brother Albert had been born in the Italian Quattrocento, he would have been able to combine his service to God with his service to art. But he was born in flat, melancholy regions where history had turned out wrong, and he had to make



Brother Albert, ECCE HOMO

a choice. This is why his art remains a mystery to us while at the same time he opens his whole passionate heart, which is filled with desire for another person – for the one who has been wronged.

As I viewed the exhibition of Adam Chmielowski–Brother Albert's work held several years ago at the Archdiocesan Museum in Warsaw, I became aware that we will never be able to decipher exactly what Adam Chmielowski's art could have turned out to be. This art was simply never fulfilled – the artist renounced further explorations of the kind he had been so intensively conducting. This is why it is wrong to undervalue the painting by measuring it against the saintliness of the artist, as some have done. The two scales are incompatible. Renunciation is also an art, even if it is the art of keeping quiet, of silence and obscurity. Among the various renunciations that Brother Albert undertook out of his own free will, there was also this one, which strikes me as the most difficult: he renounced his own creativity and painted more seldom, more sporadically, once he became a monk – it is known that all art, which is also craft, must be practiced continuously if the hands, eyes, and mind are not to become rusty.

The interrupted, suspended, unfinished painting of Adam Chmielowski exists, however, and has been the more striking to us since 1989, when Brother Albert was called to that most holy congregation, which gives us models and hope of intercession.

The quantitatively scant legacy of the artistic worth, his *qualite*, as the kapists² liked to say – that side of his creativity demonstrates, on the one hand, an unending search, and on the other much splendid promise that, as a result of his renunciation, was never fully realized. Adam Chmielowski was a very conscious painter and this could be why his legacy is so small in numbers: in each painting, the struggle with problems of painting can be seen, and only that vast, light-filled landscape of Zawale, a village located in a valley on the Zbrucz, seems to have been completely finished in accordance with the soul of the artist. This is one of the few testimonies to artistic and spiritual inspiration – there is so much sunshine here and quiet, so much peace. Other paintings, especially those of a symbolic

nature, like "The Grey Hour" or "The Garden of Love" also breathe peace, but that peace exists by way of obscurity, of incomplete statement. Still others, particularly those where the artist tried to draw on his own experiences of the uprising, fail to transcend the epoch in which they were created.

In this "secular" phase of his painting, the absence of religious themes is remarkable. He approached them gradually, and his first attempt in this direction, "The Vision of St. Margaret", seems less than convincing today. And yet it was just at the end of the last century, after decades of exhaustion and surrender to convention, that religious art was reawakening. One can only guess, therefore, at the metaphysical background of such pictures as "The Suicide's Funeral" or "The Cemetery".

Today the only picture that documents in art the artist's great spiritual crisis is the "Ecce Homo", found in the Cracow cloister of the Albertine sisters. This picture – and in fact its symbolic dimension is enhanced by the fact – is also unfinished. The artist worked on it for many years, carrying it with him through the Polish provinces and creating a kind of legend about the difficulty with which it was being created. In the end, the Uniate Metropolitan of Lwów, Andrzej Szeptycki, wheedled it out of Brother Albert and only wartime and postwar events returned the work to the city in which it was most probably begun.

The only thing that is finished in this striking picture is the face of a Savoir who has been set up as a laughing-stock. The scarlet of the royal cloak is the dominant element connecting the muted flash of gold with the gray of the stones. In this picture, there is great calm, similar to but completely different from the calm of the Zawale landscape: a calm born not of sun or shadow, but of the reconciliation of the soul.

All quotations are taken from the "Pisma Adama Chmielewskiego (Brata Alberta)", Fr. A. Scheltz, ed., *Nasza Przeszłość* vol. 21 (1985).

¹ Słowacki, Juliusz, *Kordian* (Kordian's speech to Laura).

² "Kapists", a Polish acronym of "*Komitet Paryski*", a group of interwar Polish artists connected with the Cracow Fine Arts Academy but active mainly in Paris. The Kapists are also known, in view of their sensitivity to form and color, as the "Colorists" (J. Cybis, J. Czapski, Z. Waliszewski).