

ANNA NASIŁOWSKA

Polish Literature 1939-2000 – Selected Issues

Historical outline: Germany's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 marked the start of WWII. As the German forces gradually overran the country from the west, the Red Army invaded from the eastern side on 17 September, in keeping with the secret protocol of an agreement forged between Nazi Germany and the USSR (the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop pact). The Polish public was gravely disappointed in the forthcoming reaction from France and Great Britain, which was limited to diplomatic protests. Some representatives of the Polish government and the political elite managed to flee Poland. Under an agreement forged among representatives of Polish political parties, a Polish government-in-exile was set up in London. In areas that temporarily came under Soviet control, political terror ensued: officers of the defeated Polish Army were taken prisoner and executed (the ill-famed Katyń crime), the civilian population was deported to far-flung regions of the USSR, and even prewar Polish Communists were treated as a political threat, with the exception of those individuals who were utterly subservient. In the German-occupied areas a resistance movement started to spontaneously develop, and gradually began to establish the institutions of an underground state, which cooperated with the government in London. The determination to resist the occupations was only hardened by absolute terror, the gradual extermination of Jews in the Polish lands, and the establishment of labor and death camps to which Jews were brought from many occupied countries in Europe. Unlike in many other occu-

pied European states, Nazi policy in Poland did not provide for any collaborative government or any other form of political cooperation; the Polish lands were treated as a pool of cheap labor and territory for future settlement. In April 1943, near the end of the operation to eliminate the closed Jewish quarter in Warsaw, a Ghetto Uprising was launched by a group of desperate individuals who realized how bleak the ghetto's prospects truly were. The later insurgency organized by the Polish underground on 1 August 1944, called the Warsaw Uprising, involved different circumstances: given that the Red Army was approaching from the east, it was decided that Warsaw should liberate itself. This was part of Operation Tempest, aimed at liberating Poland using the nation's own forces. If successful, this would have brought about a different political situation than waiting for the Soviet Union to liberate the country. Nevertheless, conferences held among the great powers (first in Yalta, later in Teheran) placed the Polish lands within the future zone of Soviet influence. The Warsaw Uprising died out in October 1944, and the Red Army would only enter Warsaw, a completely ruined and empty city, in early January 1945.

The policy of political subjugation pursued by the new postwar authorities acting under Soviet patronage included: repressions against those who had been involved in the underground wartime resistance movement, even including death sentences passed against its heroes; political terror against all political opponents; the nationalization of industry and strict control over the entire economic realm, the imposition of censorship, and Communist ideological pressure when the outward pretenses of legal and democratic legitimacy were being established. The terror gradually abated after Stalin's death (1953), yet this economic system based on full state management and Communist party control of the economic domain would remain unchanged all the way until 1989. The inefficacy of this political and economic system sparked numerous crises (1956, 1958, 1970), which usually involved the mobilization of society. One of the most profound crises, which demonstrated that Communist ideology had already become completely defunct, came during the period of the first Solidarity movement (1980-1981), which saw the establishment of free trade unions intended as an alternative to the official bodies of authority. The decision taken by

General Jaruzelski to impose martial law on 13 December 1981, fearing an intervention by Soviet forces (as had been carried out in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968), blocked further change and plunged the country into stagnation. Only in 1989, when the entire Eastern Bloc crumbled, did it become possible to change the system that had been sustained in Poland only owing to Soviet domination in this region of Europe.

Literature and Wartime Experiences

The experiences of WWII left a very profound mark upon Polish culture, and would also have an impact upon later generations. The image of the war cultivated by literature remains part of tradition, which of course has a national dimension but consistently exceeds beyond this national scope – forcing one to ponder questions that address the root of evil, human nature, and the mechanisms of terror and extermination. The whole set of WWII-related issues is not uniform and consists of various components that are etched deeply in Polish culture.

The first issue of strictly national significance is the immediate revival of the Romantic tradition, in response to the threat posed to liberty. In the 19th century, Polish literature had been treated as a spiritual manifestation of the nation's existence, even more important than possessing a Polish state. In the face of the renewed wartime threat, this former tradition immediately revived. Inspirational poems began to appear just before the outbreak of war. Inciting Poles to fight the enemy, sustaining their determination to pose resistance, expressing approval for military action – such were the objectives of many poetic works written during WWII which remain well-known to this very day, since their linguistic mold and congruity with tradition ensured them a special place in the history of literature. They most frequently draw upon the model of Tyrtæan poetry that had been cultivated in the era of Romanticism. Here, the poet assumes the role of an expresser of collective emotions, sets forth the goals and personally identifies with them very strongly, restricting his own individualism. This model was followed by numerous works written both in occupied Poland and abroad, everywhere there were large

concentrations of Polish refugees. It will not be extreme to assert that this tradition also constituted an important political factor that influenced Poles' behavior, boosting their determination to take armed action and also to collaborate with the country's allies. The slogan "for your freedom and ours" served as inspiration for Polish regiments that cooperated with the Allies and took part in the Battle of Britain, the liberation of Italy, and the deliverance of Europe.

A second element of the wartime experience that cannot be belittled is the generation of young Warsaw writers born in the 1920s, who were actively involved during the war in the various deeply divided groups within the overall resistance movement. An underground university, the continuation of Warsaw University, also functioned in occupied Warsaw, in secrecy from the Nazi authorities. Lectures were given in private apartments by prewar professors, and students utilized their private book collections in light of the fact that libraries were closed. There was also an underground Polish schooling system on the high school level, and the education so gained was also recognized after the war. Such forms of education could not, naturally, encompass a wide circle of young people, but the elite were nevertheless successfully gathered together in the underground program of Polish literature studies in Warsaw. There was also a kind of underground cultural life: there were journals that were reproduced by household methods; volumes of poetry were published in the same way; and literary meetings were also organized. Young poets had contact with somewhat older ones who had debuted in the 1930s; one prominent figure among the latter was Czesław Miłosz, future laureate of the Nobel Prize in literature. This was a generation that had made their debuts marked by premonitions of war, in an ambience of mounting danger, waiting for tragic predictions to come to fruition. This attitude was termed catastrophism, and justification for it was found in the works of many thinkers, such as Oswald Spengler, or domestically Witkacy, who augured the coming of an epoch of cultural decay.

While the writers of the 1930s had managed to overcome catastrophism before the outbreak of war, deeming it to be a fatalist attitude that led one to passively succumb to evil, for the wartime po-

ets it represented something self-evident. The most important traits of their works included extensive metaphor, vague images of the most tragic prophesies coming true, and *topoi* borrowed from the Apocalypse, portraying their own generation as people lost and doomed, internally paralyzed by the enormity of the unpreventable evil going on around them. The leading representatives of this generation, in keeping with their own premonitions, perished as young underground activists or died guns-in-hand during the Warsaw Uprising. Their work, coupled with their legendary biographies, is still remembered, not only as evidence of heroism. It above all appeals very strongly to young people, who are sensitive to any inconsistencies between a person's biography and the views he or she professes. In the case of such poets as Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński, the testimony of his life, work, and death are all in harmony, and his legend bears clearly Romantic traits. However, disputes over how to judge his generation constantly reemerge: shouldn't artists refrain from endangering their lives in an underground movement? By recognizing love to be one of the few surviving values, did they manage to create an alternative to the image of all-encompassing evil? Finally, isn't the cult of strength, characteristic of a certain group among them, evidence of their being contaminated by evil and their unconscious adoption of Nazi inspiration?

From the outset, Czesław Miłosz maintained a great distance to the radicalism of the young poets. During the war, for example, Miłosz translated Eliot's *The Waste Land*, seeking a springboard for wartime reality. His verses from this period evidence lyricism, as well as a search for historical analogies in European culture. In the poem *Campo di Fiori*, when writing about those perishing alone behind the ghetto wall, unnoticed by the city populace lost in amusement, Miłosz evokes Giordano Bruno and the image of a Roman marketplace teeming with life, which resounds with myriad voices but a moment after the stake at which the philosopher was burned has died out. He asks questions about the moral obligations that bind those who have witnessed tragedy, he is worried by the indifference of the mob, but he does not pose allegations. He does believe, however, that it is possible to draw upon historical analogies, and so the continuity of European culture has not been disrupted, since the experiences of different epochs do serve to

explain each other. The artist's most important task is to compose a calm statement in which he does not succumb to hysteria, and rebuilds the faith that he can find an expression for his own times without succumbing to them, while rescuing his own faith in the order of values.

Literature and Totalitarianism

This problem was viewed in an entirely different way by young writers after the end of the war – above all by Tadeusz Borowski, one of Warsaw's catastrophist poets, the author of the well-known Auschwitz stories, and by the poet Tadeusz Różewicz. For both writers, living through the war was a kind of extreme experience that forced them to rethink the nature of artistry. Forms of expression that art had employed for centuries were rejected and gave way to simpler solutions, to stories in which the two writers indict themselves as bearing mutual guilt, as being burnt-out inside and contaminated by death. In their opinion, anyone who witnesses a crime bears part of the guilt for it – and as long as survivors fail to admit this, no credible account is possible.

For Tadeusz Borowski, the camp in Auschwitz represents a miniature of a horrible future society, wherein the human will to live is turned against other individuals. SS officers rarely appear in Borowski's stories; the camp is a hierarchically arranged structure, in which victims cannot oppose their tormenters. Survival was only possible if someone stole food, was savvy enough to have less debilitating work assigned, made use of things brought by Jews sent straight to the crematorium, etc. Tadeusz Różewicz, in the poems of *Anxiety* (*Niepokój* – 1947), addresses the commonplace and universal nature of evil, and sees the world in the wake of the war as being stripped of beauty, faith, and hope. Both writers want to purge themselves of illusions, including those that seem to them to be the heritage of many centuries of European culture. They prefer to be scoffers rather than idealists, to be atheists rather than the inheritors of a naive faith. They are impassioned accusers, who likewise perceive themselves in the shadow of the crematorium. Their moral sensitivities force them to doubt the heritage of European culture, seeing as what their genera-

tion underwent was possible. Tadeusz Różewicz himself and critics writing about him both frequently refer to the dramatic conundrum raised by Theodor W. Adorno: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” This issue has profound artistic consequences for Różewicz – it forces him to refrain from poetic adornment, to reject all aesthetic utopias.

All of subsequent literature pertaining to the death camps and the Holocaust, which continues to be enriched with new stories, relates to the questions these authors raised about the credibility of witnesses and the moral right to accuse. André Malraux’s coinage “days of contempt” takes on a concrete meaning in Borowski’s stories.

The depiction of the Auschwitz camp in Tadeusz Borowski’s stories bears comparison to Gustaw Herling-Grudziński’s account of a Soviet gulag. Obviously, such an account could only have been written in emigration – the book *World Apart (Inny Świat)* first saw publication in English translation in London in 1951, and until 1989 was known in Poland only owing to a small number of copies smuggled in from the West. The most important elements of Herling’s reportage lie in his analysis of how interpersonal relations change under the influence of hunger, his depiction of the absurdity of totalitarian society, and his attempt at demonstrating that cruelty is the dark side of human nature. This work complements and concurrently polemicizes with Borowski’s stories. The prison camp experience is treated by the author as the key to understanding the 20th century – not a byway of history in which the camps were but an episode, but rather the essence of the process whereby totalitarian systems deprive individuals of their rights. In his gulag account, in the diaries he kept for many years, and in the stories he wrote in Italy, Herling-Grudziński tries to offset his bitter view of history with his faith in the capacity of solitary human beings to retain their dignity and to make choices that are moral.

Under Political Pressure

The new state system established after WWII tried to bring the realm of culture under its subjugation. After 1949, the doctrine of

Socialist Realism, based on models drawn from the USSR, became compulsory. In poetry, pompous tones were used to extol the labor of workers, to sing the praises of the new system and to exalt the Soviet Union. In prose, optimistic images of the lives of workers were composed according to party directives, and the nobleness of the working class was juxtaposed against the behavior of individuals from the politically dubious intelligentsia.

After Stalin's death, a process of change began with the USSR itself. Writers themselves also became increasingly sharply aware of the absurdity of tendentious and panegyric writing, especially since no work of poetry or prose could manage to satisfy the incited ideologues: whoever did not abandon their ambitions and creative quests quickly had the charge of "formalism" leveled against them, but copying tradition evoked a wave of criticism against "traditionalism," and appealing to patriotic feelings and arguments was criticized as "nationalism." It proved to be impossible to closely imitate Soviet models under Poland's different conditions without unwittingly becoming the butt of ridicule. "*Socrealizm*" remained dominant for a relatively short period, and after the turning point in 1956 even the Communist party (which was called the worker's party in Poland) officially distanced itself from what was euphemistically termed the "period of errors and distortions."

The problem of ideology's impact on literature, however, does not end together with Socialist Realism. All the way through 1989, all of domestic Polish literature developed under strong pressure exerted by the political conditions. Freedom of expression was curtailed by censorship, but this was not the only means whereby control was exercised and political pressure exerted. An artificial division was also maintained between domestic literary society and Polish émigrés. Indeed, works of foreign literature were also subject to political control, and statements made by foreign authors about current affairs could lead to all of their translated works being banned throughout the entire Eastern Bloc. Nowadays, in the age of the Internet and the rapid exchange of information, it is hard to even imagine bans of this sort. Society's hunger for "forbidden fruit" could only be partially satisfied by the influx of smuggled émigré publications and – after

1976 and the emergence of a political opposition – by the appearance of illegal works produced domestically using better and better printing techniques (from handwritten copies to duplication machines). Distributing literature of this sort was a prosecuted crime, but certain habits that stretched back to the wartime occupation remained extant, and *samizdat* publications were quite widely available, especially after 1980.

Under such conditions, the art of allusions, wordplay, and beating-around-the-bush also flourished. Emigration also served as a kind of springboard. A huge political and cultural role was especially played by the community in Paris (or more precisely in the nearby Maisons-Lafitte), where the monthly journal *Kultura* and books were published. Whereas the London community, where the Polish government-in-exile was still functioning after the end of the war, saw its role in forming a political alternative to what was going on in the country, the group associated with *Kultura* was interested in influencing the intellectual elite in Poland, in backing the opposition and free thinkers, and in promoting avant-garde writing. The Paris émigré community played a prominent role with regards to many writers, Czesław Miłosz and Witold Gombrowicz among them.

Social Forms and Gombrowicz

The work of Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969) is distinct in terms of his independence from the traditional interpretation of “Polishness” and his skill at looking upon all stereotypes from a philosophical standpoint, as conventionalized forms of interpersonal communication. As young writer – then the author of a few prose works, the most outstanding of which was *Ferdydurke* (1937) – Gombrowicz set off on a voyage to South America in August 1939. After having settled in Argentina he established friendships with young people and formed his own circle, such as he had maintained in the cafes of prewar Warsaw. This new situation was expedient to the writer in a certain sense, by delivering him from the pressure of gentry society, to which he had family ties, and from the traditional forms of Polish culture.

In *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz had already outlined the fundamental philosophical issues that he would deal with consistently throughout his later work: the issue of form, as something that cramps the individual, imposes itself upon him in every situation, and yet is impossible to evade, and the issue of the relations between a freedom-seeking individual and his environs. This second issue rose to the fore in the two most important works written by Gombrowicz in Argentina – the novel *Trans-Atlantyk* and the play *The Marriage (Ślub)*, published together in Paris in 1953. Both works pursue an in-depth analysis of their protagonists' relations with Polish culture, which imprisons them and imposes itself upon them through the power of stereotype, yet is hard to evade. *Trans-Atlantyk* takes the author's own arrival to Argentina as its point of departure. The Polish émigré community cultivates traditional customs without noticing their anachronism; behind this façade a force of passion and youth is in operation, and the hero becomes imprisoned between the "fatherland" and the "syntheland," between the patriotism of fathers and the endeavors of the millionaire Gonzala, who wants to beguile the young Ignacy, between platitudes that turn grotesque and earnestness. The novel ends in a liberating burst of laughter and the mutual annihilation of forms.

The theme of *The Marriage* is based around the dream of a Polish soldier who longs to return home, but upon his arrival there finds his manor changed into a tavern; his parents have become innkeepers and his fiancée a whore. Henryk, the soldier in question, decides to impose his own order here, yet struggles against drunkards, who symbolize the forces of destruction, and against his own father, whose authority he must overthrow. If he does manage to do so, however, then who will perform his marriage ceremony? Only an interpersonal understanding can make a symbolic change possible, yet this is undermined by chaos. Henryk vacillates between engaging in intrigue forced upon him by his jealousy for a woman, and following his desire to proclaim himself king. This dream-world, a great *psychomachia*, is rife with motifs that are significant psychoanalytically (power and paternal dominance) and philosophically. *The Marriage* presents the drama of the lone individual, faced with the death of God and the decay of traditional forms of coexistence. Henryk becomes embroiled

in contradictory arguments: he is dependent upon others, since the disappearance of faith in transcendence means that the only sanction is to be found in the “church of humanity,” meaning the community, but he is unable either to subjugate himself to the community, or to impose his own laws.

These themes, further developed in Gombrowicz’s subsequent works (the novels *Pornografia*, *Cosmos (Kosmos)*, and the drama *Operetta (Operetka)*, written after the writer moved to Europe, are given an interpretation by the author in his three-volume *Diary (Dziennik)*. Gombrowicz is said to have himself developed an analysis of his own works and forced it upon his readers, and there is much truth in this. Gombrowicz successfully commented on his works by planting them firmly within the realm of Sartresque existentialism and structuralism that then dominated the European elite, yet his thinking, portrayed against this backdrop, retained at the same time its originality. His *Diaries*, which present a mix personal journal entries, reflections, and polemics, represent the fruit of Gombrowicz’s affiliation with the small but politically significant émigré monthly *Kultura* – they were printed in serial form in this publication, and the very concept of writing them had originated with *Kultura*’s editor-in-chief, Jerzy Giedroyc. Gombrowicz’s close ties to *Kultura* essentially precluded any chance of his works being published in Poland – this was facilitated when an interview he gave in 1963 was put to use as propaganda, after which the press railed against him, accusing him of a lack of patriotism.

Yet despite Gombrowicz’s émigré status, *Operetta* and *The Marriage* did appear in Polish theaters, staged by leading directors. Here Gombrowicz’s dramaturgy came into contact with stagings of Sławomir Mrożek’s plays, creative interpretations of Romantic-era dramas, and the repertoires of European stages, which played home to the theater of the absurd in the 1960s and 70s. Tadeusz Kantor’s theater “Cricot 2” grew out of avant-garde experiments in the fine arts. The director Jerzy Grotowski proposed a new anthropological view of the spectator and of the work of the actor, which took him beyond the bounds of theater. Despite many restrictions, Polish theater was a very artistically fertile terrain.

Society Under Conversion

One of the leading motifs of Polish postwar dramaturgy must be recognized as the topic of mankind when faced with the catastrophic breakdown of established social forms and norms and the destruction of stable points of reference. Society in postwar Poland was subjected to an incredible social experiment: all stable grounds for the existence of traditional classes were destroyed, and this process did not take place gradually and in evolutionary fashion, whereby certain adjustments and adaptations are possible, but rather suddenly (and in revolutionary fashion). The topic of social forms therefore holds great potential, of both a historical-philosophical and existential-philosophical nature. Gombrowicz's *The Marriage* can be read as the drama of an individual longing both to liberate himself from Form, and to reinstate Form. Sławomir Mrożek's *Tango* contrasts the generation of iconoclastic artists to the generation of their successors, who long to revert to fixed norms.

Tango draws upon the marriage ceremony and wedding reception motif, a theme that repeatedly resurfaces in Polish literature. In Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, a wedding provides an occasion for a reconciliation of old enemies and a promise that order will continue to prevail. In Wyspiański's *The Wedding*, reconciliation between the peasant and noble estates, joining them in a united national effort, proves impossible. Postwar invocations of the wedding motif, in turn, treat it as a kind of convention addressing the possibility of restituting norms, and the ceremony itself most frequently fails to come to fruition.

Such is the case, for example, in Jerzy Andrzejewski's novel *Pulp* (*Miazga*). This writer passed through a very complicated chain of ideological shifts, from Catholic modernism in the 1930s, through a short-lived fascination with Socialist Realism in the 1950s, to an involvement in the dissident movement. He was the author of two novels, *Darkness Covers the Earth* (*Ciemności kryją ziemię* – 1957, published in English as *The Inquisitors*) and *The Gates of Paradise* (*Bramy raju* – 1960), with plots set in the times of the Spanish inquisition and the Crusades, he most thoroughly analyzed the mechanism by which

a person succumbs to the power of ideology and subjugates his or her freedom of thought to a doctrine that offers the illusion of infallibility, of acting in the name of higher truths. These two works constitute the most profound reckoning of the “period of errors and distortions,” and in the years when the freedom of speech was restricted, similar historical guises became the most favored means employed in Polish prose to evade censorship (a historical milieu is also treated as a model of modern times by Andrzej Szczypiorski in the novel *Mass for the City of Arras* (*Msza za miasto Arras*) and Jacek Bocheński in the novel *The Divine Julius* (*Boski Juliusz*).

With time, however, the use of historical parable, although very artistically fruitful, ceased to suffice. Andrzejewski’s huge novel *Pulp*, begun in the early 1960s and published outside of censorship as an underground *samizdat* publication in 1979, constituted a critique of the intellectual elite and party circles. The plot is spun around preparations for the marriage and wedding reception of a prominent actor and the daughter of a party politician, which is meant to symbolically unite and assimilate the artistic world and the party “*crème de la crème*.” This of course harks back to Wyspiański’s *The Wedding* (1900), where the marriage of a nobleman to a peasant girl is meant to lay new groundwork for societal accord. In Andrzejewski’s novel, the wedding ceremony does not ultimately take place – not as a result of a lack of love (from the outset, emotional issues are not of much import here), but because of societal chaos, which means that such assimilation of the “estates” doesn’t make any sense. Having been subjected to the experiment of eradicating all traditional structure, society has been reduced to a “pulp,” and can only be navigated by means of corrupt dealings. The wedlock between party authorities and the intellectual upper crust proves to be of no advantage to anyone – the open form of Andrzejewski’s novel, in which there is a diary of a writer that in the meta-textual domain represents the impossibility of drawing the plot to a conclusion, likewise portrays the process of decay, society’s plunge into ever deeper chaos.

The wedding symbol, treated as a type of test for the ability to form lasting social ties, is also present in Sławomir Mrożek’s *Tango*. This play ends in victory for Edek, who is primitive yet has strength,

unlike the intellectuals engaged in perpetual discussion. And so, this is a precautionary warning against the domination of a new class of “boors,” who prefer kitsch to art and fisticuffs to arguments. Sławomir Mrożek (b. 1930), a playwright, prose writer, and drawer, was from the outset a vigilant observer, hunting out the absurdities of Polish life under the new system. He moved to Italy in 1963, and his protest against the aggression by Warsaw Pact troops against Czechoslovakia sealed his status as an émigré, which remained in force until the downfall of Communism. During this time the writer became known chiefly as the author of many highly esteemed plays, which couple a comic element with bitter political reflection and observations on the state of culture. He lived in many countries, including France and Mexico. In the 1970s his plays were nevertheless staged in Poland.

Tango, written in the early 1970s, demonstrated how the progressive intelligentsia’s drive for freedom and anarchy could lead to a yearning for dictatorship and open up a path for a new class, which is not afraid to use force and would be eager to revert to a totalitarian system. In *The Émigrés (Emigranty – 1974)*, an intellectual and a boor meet in a small room in some Western country – both equally at a loss, but different in terms of their understanding and reactions. For Mrożek, the comic element is always an ambiguous force, and that which is laughable is concurrently painful.

Reality in a state of decay is also portrayed by the poet Tadeusz Różewicz in *The Card-File (Kartoteka – 1960)*. The author revisited this work in the early 1990s, augmenting the already open structure by including a depiction of the chaos present during the period of regime change in Poland. One of Różewicz’s plays coined a symbolic description of the 1960s as the “little stabilization,” a term that reflects the ambivalent attitude most people took towards this epoch in which all endeavors had been curtailed *a priori*, and life in the “new system” began to take on aspects of middle-class stabilization, yet on a low level, without prosperity. To this day, Różewicz’s most controversial play remains “Dead and Buried” (“Do piachu” – 1979), and war veteran organizations usually protest against its being staged. Here the plot is centered on a partisan unit holding a trial of the mentally

handicapped Waluś, who took part in a robbery against a rectory, during which half a pig carcass was stolen and the priest's housekeeper was raped. The remaining perpetrators of the escapade fled, but Waluś, too stupid to have run away, is supposed to be put to the firing squad. Anticipating execution, animal fear, and banal conversations (Waluś speaks in regional dialect) stand in contrast to stereotypical patriotic beliefs and ultimately with the scene of the firing-squad death. Tadeusz Różewicz also depicted a clash of behavioral models in his stories, but above all in his poetry, which after 1989 derisively depicts the civilization of consumption and self-gratification.

One surprise was the career enjoyed by the New York based Janusz Głowacki, who earned a reputation as a brilliant ironist, as the author of columns and mocking stories depicting the artistic community in Warsaw, and lastly as a playwright. He was in London when martial law was declared in Poland in 1981, but soon thereafter he came to live in New York. The characters of his play "Antigone in New York" ("Antygona w Nowym Jorku") are immigrants from the peripheries of the free world. No one believes as fervently in the possibility of living the American dream as immigrants do, and no one has become as disillusioned as the small group of homeless individuals in the play. The world offers them only a spot on the park bench and trash to eat, and the world even treats them like "human trash." A poor Portuguese woman (the titular Antigone) therefore decides to salvage at least the myth of love, perhaps a false love but one that is precious to her as evidence of what human beings are entitled to. The play appeared in English and Polish versions (the former the earlier of the two, the latter the author's own reworking), and since the regime change Głowacki has himself been dividing his time between New York and Warsaw. The status of émigrés and the problem of emigration are slowly becoming a thing of the past.

The Poetic Myth of Europe – Classicizing Trends

In various literatures, 20th-century Classicism encompasses two stances: one turned against the avant-garde, an attempt to revert to

the past, and the other stance evincing moderate tendencies (especially in the English-speaking realm), an expression of modernism. The work of Thomas Stearns Eliot, considered a 20th-century Classicist, also inspired Polish poets, although they drew upon him in differing ways. His poems make multi-tiered, complicated reference to various cultural motifs, and he also sought to move beyond subjectivism in his poetry. What the Polish poets found most captivating, however, was his individualism and how he incorporated his work within the unbroken sequence of tradition.

The problem of the new Classicism emerged at the outset of the 20th century in Poland, in the poetry of Leopold Staff. Aside from Staff's work, during the interwar period the poetry of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (due to his aestheticism and cult of art) was also placed under the rubric of Classicism, especially after his publication of the volume *Return to Europe* (*Powrót do Europy*); such trends were likewise noted in the works of Czesław Miłosz, after he overcame his catastrophism in the volume *Three Winters* (*Trzy Zimy* – 1936). In the interwar years, therefore, Classicism was still defined not in terms of form, but rather in terms of the values professed, such as a sense of cultural continuity, emotional balance and distance, and the supremacy of the intellect over emotions. In all of Polish post-war literature, however, the problem of cultivating ties to European culture – which above all entails maintaining continuity in the language of cultural symbols and values – becomes a matter of particular import, since this is a realm that faces particular threat as a result of social instability and political isolation from the West. From the outset, after all, Polish culture has developed within the orbit of the Latin milieu, and separation from it is considered to be the greatest threat. Isolation can only spell disaster. Barriers were erected between Poland and Europe during WWII, but the end of the war did not lead to their removal. Quite the contrary, Poland was cut off from Europe by an “iron curtain,” and ascribed to the eastern political bloc. Under such circumstances, the myth of Europe has been very frequently cultivated in Poland, and yearnings and sentiments have appeared which are not always equally strong in the West.

The poets who were already associated with Classicism before the war – Staff, Iwaszkiewicz, Miłosz – remained active afterwards. Each of them is an authority, but it was not they who established the program of postwar Classicism, but rather younger writers like Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz. Ryszard Przybylski, a critic who came out firmly in support of Classicism in the book *This Is Classicism (To jest klasycyzm – 1978)* considers the Classicist writers to include Zbigniew Herbert. Herbert is a modern poet, for whom references to Greco-Roman antiquity play a large role. He is also a poet that adopts the avant-garde slogan of “modesty of emotions.” His poems, therefore, fit within the scope of values professed by the Classicists, although at the same time they represent a continuation of the avant-garde.

Yet what is Classicism? It seems that so many answers exist to this question, that we have to conclude: a Classicist is anyone who desires to bear the name.

Moral Choices and Tradition

After he had only published his first volume *String of Light (Struna światła – 1956)*, Zbigniew Herbert was already hailed as one of the most important Polish poets. From the outset, Herbert’s poems evinced a yearning for the old harmony of the Mediterranean world, and so he was perceived to be a poet of culture, a representative of modern Classicism. His fondness for the past is nevertheless coupled with a sense that modern man lives among uncertain values, since 20th-century history has upset their traditional order, making it impossible to simply revert to the past.

Many of Herbert’s poems manifest a conviction that history has disrupted the natural order that enables people to fully experience their condition. This condition consists in the discovery of secrets, above all within daily life, in communication with machinery, among the rhythm of ordinary activities. Art, in particular poetry, should restore such sensibility. God is inaccessible; man is, by necessity, a rationalist full of anxiety and conscious of his own imperfection. Art, therefore, is an important part of self-awareness.

In 1974, Herbert published the volume *Mr. Cogito (Pan Cogito)*. The protagonist of these poems, Mr. Cogito, draws upon the Cartesian tradition of subjectivity and rationalism. He is also an alter ego of the author, and at the same time a persona treated with a slight ironic distance. The poem “The Envoy of Mr. Cogito” (“Przesłanie Pana Cogito”) is the most serious declaration of the values professed in this poetry: one has to bear witness to the truth, even though this does not ensure success, but indeed to the contrary, it renders one susceptible to hardship, sometimes even death. Remaining faithful to the values one professes even when they stand no chance of realization – such is the fundamental ethical principle of this poetry. One might conclude that Herbert thus lingers within the milieu of the values harbored by the wartime generation, who valued honor and remained faithful, to the very end, to the model set by Joseph Conrad’s characters. Referring to Conrad made it possible, in the years when freedom of speech was restricted in Poland, to discuss the Warsaw Uprising and the moral obligations that had not ceased to be binding for all those who sensed a moral connection to the Home Army generation. Herbert’s poem “The Envoy of Mr. Cogito” is also closely associated with the political atmosphere of the 1970s and the emergence of a conscious political opposition, which did not expect its goals to be quickly achieved. Dissent made moral sense, as a way of bearing witness to the truth, sometimes requiring personal sacrifice or even heroism. Soon, Herbert’s poem gained great popularity among the circles of the democratic opposition, with which the poet had always sympathized. His volume *Report From the Besieged City (Raport z oblężonego miasta – 1983)* constitutes a poetic reaction to martial law.

A conscious cultivation of ties to European culture is also patently evident in Zbigniew Herbert’s volumes of essays. *Barbarian in the Garden (Barbarzyńca w ogrodzie – 1962)* is an account of his travels to France and Italy in search of the traces of Mediterranean culture, and the title purposefully contrasts between the idyllic garden and the intruder. Yet this is no irascible barbarian who desires to plunder and destroy; to the contrary, he only deserves to be called a barbarian due to his incomplete knowledge, and the fact that he hails from distant

lands. He is more of a humble pilgrim that comes in search of education, longs to experience rapture, to understand and describe the richness of the true “cultural paradise” from which he has been unjustly ousted. This volume’s continuation devoted to Greece, *Labyrinth on the Sea* (*Labirynt nad morzem*), only appeared in 2000, after the author’s death. *Still Life With a Bridle* (*Martwa natura z wędzidłem*), from 1993, is a collection of sketches written by the author over many years about Dutch painting, which he particularly cherished for its cult of details, sense of the secrets of life, and reverence for the day-to-day world. For Herbert, Mediterranean culture is above all an undisturbed continuity of development, whereby the achievements of many centuries can accumulate. The contributions of Greek and Roman antiquity, the Italian renaissance, and Dutch art are equally tangible within it. One can sense the voices of artists who knew how to speak about matters both large and small.

Other “Classicists”

Julia Hartwig (b.1921) is a poet usually mentioned among representatives of Classicism. However, the aspects of her work that could be considered to represent a Classicist attitude – a reckoning with reality and concern for clarity – plainly stemmed from her affinity for the French avant-garde tradition. The poet has translated Max Jacob, written an esteemed biography of Apollinaire, and also translated poems by many contemporary American poets. She considers formal discipline to be a very important trait of modern poetry, although it manifests a different nature in free verse and poetic prose. It was the avant-garde that dealt with the issue of economy of means, and decried verbosity. Classicism cannot signify an attempt to revert to the past, but rather a departure from purely personal expression and an attempt at objectification, at perceiving the human condition. In essence, this is close to the intellectualism of Wiesława Szymborska.

A considerable role in Julia Hartwig’s poetry is played by dreams, reveries, and visions. Discipline does not, therefore, entail a rejection of intuitions. The poet quite frequently writes in the *poème en prose* genre – a fairly rare form in Poland, linked to the French tradition.

Here, even though formally written as prose, a text can be poetry by dint of precise wording and vividness.

In the works of Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (1984-1980), one can perceive a vacillation between calm aestheticism and Dionysian frenzy. Also perceptible is a kind of tension between the East and the West, which is uncommon in Polish culture. As the author of ambiance stories he is close to the tradition of Russian novel-writing. As a poet, Iwaszkiewicz spent a long time searching for his own form in the postwar years. He experimented with free verse (for example in the volume *Italian Songbook – Śpiewnik włoski – 1974*), but it was only his last two collections, *Weather Map (Mapa pogody – 1977)* and *Music in the Evening (Muzyka wieczorem – 1980)*, that bore witness to his discovery of his own forms of expression and at the same time to exceptional poetic flights; here Iwaszkiewicz avails himself of all the possibilities that tradition and modernity have to offer. His poems are unusually varied in formal terms, and the poet feels free in many styles. The dominant topics of these verses address the theme of passing on, the ephemeral nature of beauty, and the tragedy of leaving life behind. Iwaszkiewicz sees man against the backdrop of nature, portrays variability as a principle of the world, and depicts the need to reconcile oneself with death.

Another poet who sought ties to the Mediterranean tradition was Aleksander Wat. He made his debut as a futurist. In his later works, he drew upon the biblical tradition (as well as his Jewish roots), and in highly visionary verses he sought contemporary signs that could be interpreted as belonging to the metaphysical plane.

Classicism was understood in yet another way by Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz. In his early programmatic essays, he related the use of the symbolism of Mediterranean culture to Jungian archetypes, which constitute a permanent element of both art and the human psyche. Artistically, however, he was closest to the Polish Baroque tradition. In the novels *Polish Conversations in the Summer of 1983 (Rozmowy polskie latem 1983 roku)* and *Umschlagplatz*, Rymkiewicz did not shy away from political issues, and in his later poetic works the Polish tradition of the Baroque merges with the sensibilities of a reader of modern philosophers: Husserl and Heidegger.

Czesław Miłosz

Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004) decided to leave Poland soon after the war. Initially, he initially went abroad as an envoy of the official Polish diplomatic services. In 1951, facing the threat of losing his passport, he asked for political asylum in France. After several difficult years he moved to the United States, where he was employed as a professor of Slavic literatures at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1980 he won the Nobel Prize for his poetic works, and only then could his poems, long banned in his home country, reach Polish readers directly. Previously Miłosz's poetry – written before the war, just after the war (the volume *Rescue – Ocalenie*), and in later years – had only been known among to an elite circle, but was very highly esteemed. Because the name “Miłosz” could not be mentioned in the censored press, the poet was sometimes referred to with characteristic paraphrases, such as “the author of *Three Winters*.” In the 1990s, owing to the political changes, the elderly Miłosz was able to settle in Kraków.

Miłosz's first poetic collection published in emigration was the volume *Daylight* (*Światło dzienne* – Paris 1953). Although a considerable segment of the old émigré community gave him an adverse reception, he became associated with the circle of the monthly journal *Kultura*, where he published articles. His books were likewise printed by the publishing house associated with this circle. A certain portion of Miłosz's prose work comprises a critique of the Communist system and an analysis of the way in which power was wielded in the satellite states of the USSR. Here we should chiefly make mention of his collection of essays entitled *Captive Mind* (*Zniewolony umysł* – 1953), an analysis of the stances taken by Polish writers and intellectuals towards the Communist system. This book contains penetrating portraits of various important literary figures (including Andrzejewski and Borowski, of the writers mentioned above), described under easy-to-decipher pseudonyms. Nevertheless, Miłosz's chief focus of interest and analysis rests on not personal judgments, but rather on the mechanism of dependency upon the system. Miłosz believes that certain intellectuals construe unctuous intellectual theories in order to justify their servility, for example following Hegel in recognizing his-

torical necessity as a general principle, to which the individual should acquiesce.

Political themes, however, do not dominate Miłosz's essayistic or poetic works. In his poems one can find statements of a moral nature, reflection on the passage of time, and rapture at the beauty of the visible world. Miłosz endeavors to carry across his own worldview and his own vision of mankind. His intellectual pursuits gave rise to the volumes of essays *Visions From San Francisco Bay* (*Widzenia nad zatoka San Francisco* – 1969), *Private Obligations* (*Prywatne obowiązki* – 1972) and many others. The comprehensive essay *Land of Urlo* (*Ziemia Ulro* – 1977) can be treated as holding the key to Miłosz's mature poetic works: here he portrays modernity as an epoch in which mankind has become deprived of its inheritance, not only because of totalitarianism, but because of a lack of metaphysical sensitivity and a simplification of worldviews, stemming from the fact that scientific truth and religion have diverged. And so there must be a restoration – not so much of institutional faith as of sensitivity – and the fractured vision of the world must be reconjoined. Here Miłosz cites Witkacy and Mickiewicz, the religious visionaries Blake and Swedenborg, as well as his own distant relative Oskar Miłosz, a poet from Lithuania writing in France, a continuator of symbolism.

Miłosz devoted a considerable portion of his prose work to the issue of tradition. However, he understands tradition not as the Mediterranean canon (a term he does not even use), but chiefly as a bond to one's own birthplace. Miłosz was raised in Lithuania, terrain that was divided up in the interwar period between the Lithuanian and Polish states – with the latter successfully claiming Wilno (Vilnius). He inherited the traditions of the Lithuanian nobility, who were tied to Polish language and culture, yet open to the ethnic traditions of many peoples. The convention of the former “Republic of the Two Nations” appeals to him, and he sees it as the antithesis of nationalism, against which he consistently polemicizes. Europe, in his view, consists in exactly such a multiplicity of local traditions and their creative coexistence, in a continuity of development, and in living bonds to distant past and to the native landscape. The poet also treated these problems in the partially autobiographical novel *Issa Valley*

(*Dolina Issy* – 1955) and the volume of essays *Native Realm (Rodzinna Europa* – 1959).

Nevertheless, Miłosz is predominantly a poet. The description “Classicism” already appeared in criticism of his interwar work, especially after Miłosz abandoned the visionary tone characteristic of the “Żagary” group (where he got his start), and the poet’s attitude towards history and the tragic events of WWII began to manifest an emotional distance and a quest for a wider perspective. The poet, however, never considered himself to be a representative of Classicism – his postwar poetry began to manifest diverse quests, clearly extending beyond the canon of emotional restraint and formal perfection. His treatises – *A Moral Treatise (Traktat moralny* – 1953) and *A Poetic Treatise (Traktat poetycki* – 1967), joined in 2001 by *A Theological Treatise (Traktat teologiczny)* – are versified polemic works, immersed in current debates, expressing the poet’s attitude and views in the form of digressions, recollections, and polemics.

Miłosz is considered a metaphysical poet. He also took an interest in the diverse traditions of remote religious cults, which for example gave rise to *Hymn of the Pearl (Hymn o Perle* – 1983), a reworking of a symbolic poem about seeking a secret from the early centuries of Christianity. Miłosz devoted a particularly great amount of space in his work to the Manichean sect. He was intrigued by the sharp division into the corporal and spiritual, he does not trust nature, and he constructs his worldview around the truths of faith, enveloping them in Christian mythology, which does not always fit within Catholic orthodoxy. In his verses, which are momentary records of experience, Miłosz strives to detect the presence of another dimension, asks questions about the human condition, and seeks out latent philosophical meanings. Miłosz is, therefore, a philosophical and religious poet.

He is also far removed from the mode of aestheticism. The poet does not consider beauty to be the ultimate goal of art, and stresses the importance of moral and intellectual problems. One can find regular forms among his works, but also, for example, verse modeled after the Biblical sentence. He also maintained his distance to the avant-garde, although he did not opt for traditionalism.

Intellectualism and Irony – Wisława Szymborska

Born in 1923, Szymborska is among those writers that came into adulthood just after WWII. Her first two volumes appeared in 1952 and 1954, and although they do include works that were clearly inspired by Socialist Realism, the poet has from the outset been characterized by a tone of contrariness, searching, and objection to linguistic schemas. Szymborska's true debut is considered to be the collection *A Cry to Yeti* (*Wołanie do Yeti*) from 1957. Szymborska's work has nevertheless not undergone many changes since that time, even though the poet published new volumes; her style is exceptionally pronounced and has for many years been considered among the most superb. Several selections of her poems have appeared, as well as the volumes *Salt* (*Sól* – 1962), *A Hundred Consolations* (*Sto pociech* – 1967), *A Great Number* (*Wielka liczba* – 1976), *People on the Bridge* (*Ludzie na moście* – 1986), *Moment* (*Chwila* – 2002). In 1996, Wisława Szymborska won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1996.

Szymborska's technique is quite diversified – in the 1970s she employed both free verse and various forms of regular verse. For example, the rhymed poem “Nothing Twice” (“Nic dwa razy”) was used as the lyrics for a popular song, but it seems that its form and even banality signals a certain distance to the topic and to simply formulated judgments. Szymborska's later work comes to be dominated by free verse. The poet's most distinctive trait is her quest in search of the paradoxes inherent in the human condition, demonstrating that many of the truths considered to be obvious are in fact only superficially so. She contrasts the universal and subjective perspectives, demonstrates how the fate of the individual is subject to the general rules that pertain to all of humanity. The poet generally shuns very personal expression, and an intellectual attitude dominates her lyricism. However, philosophical subtlety does not require complicated language or erudition; Szymborska's verse sounds very natural. Owing to this, Szymborska was able to address such difficult themes as protesting against the war in Vietnam, or attempting to answer the question of how the 20th century should be summed up, in a way that is far removed from the language of publicist commentary or politics, outside of the schemas they employ. Sober scrutiny,

rationalism, and a lack of Romanticism might seem exceptional in Polish literature – but this is not in fact the case. Szymborska's tone stems from the interwar avant-garde; after 1956 it similarly shapes the voices of most Polish poets, including the young ones. After the war, Romanticism is a realm of tradition that is not called to mind every day, although it is indeed remembered.

Szymborska's work is a kind of playing with varying ways of looking at the same theme, a search for unexpected meanings, and an attempt at identifying the modern human condition. Szymborska represents the intellectual current of Polish poetry. Previously the chief peculiarity of women's work was considered to be eroticism, seeing expression for love-related experiences. The topic of relations between a man and a woman does appear in Szymborska's work as well, but not as a direct expression of feelings. Love is above all a close bond with another person. But how close? How does this emotional bond relate to the existential loneliness of each individual? Here lies the theme of many poems. The poet never juxtaposes feelings and the intellect, never abandons her contemplativeness – her eroticism is characterized by emotional discretion. Neither is this an exceptional topic; a similar vision of human fate appears in all of Szymborska's poems. Man cannot escape suffering, even if the constant passage of time and the world's changing nature have to provoke reflection. Expanded awareness is also a source of disquiet. Many poems address the struggle against chance, fate, and determinative factors (such as those of a biological or historical nature). The fate of man is, at one and the same time, open-ended and planned in advance. However, this is not a tragic vision. Szymborska's irony does sometimes take the form of a subtle joke; the constant motion of meanings in this poetry enables one to enjoy discovering unknown facets of the human fate. Quite frequently, Szymborska refers to well-known paintings by the masters – by interpreting an image from the past, she incorporates it into the modern situation of the individual.

Szymborska also authored various feuilletons published under the general rubric "Non-Required Reading" ("Lektury nadobowiązkowe") as well as humorous poems, which have been appearing in various publications for years.

Since the regime change

The two Nobel Prizes in literature won by Polish poets are a telling indication of Polish poetry's high stature. Polish prose is quite frequently believed to be of a lower caliber, yet it is in fact prose that shapes the way in which the contemporary world is perceived, that depicts daily life, marks out problems, and reacts to tensions. Freedom has finally come to prevail in Polish culture since 1989, but for Polish literature this is not entirely a watershed date. Even before the formal restrictions were lifted, literature was already admirably working towards reclaiming the zone of freedom. And so, the topics and depictions that are now dominant in our literature were already being developed earlier. The liveliest of these in recent years have included:

- Root-seeking prose, which registers the diversity of biographies and complicated traditions, and demonstrates the interplay of various cultures, especially in the multicultural milieu of the “*kresy*” (the former Polish territories to the east) and in places where Polish and German culture intermingle. Of great import here is depicting local diversity, which allows unification, an element of conscious social policy prior to 1989, to be turned away from (for example Stefan Chwin).
- Holocaust-related prose, which documents memories and gathers recollections. This literary current is still alive despite the passage of time (Hanna Krall).
- Postmodernism, which encompasses very different modes, ranging from an analysis of language and play, to elements of mythology and fantasy (Magdalena Tulli, Olga Tokarczyk).

Yet regardless of all discussion, Polish literature remains lastingly bound to Europe. The adoption of Christianity from the West in 966 and the choice of the Latin alphabet were decisive in establishing close ties between Polish culture and the West. On the other hand, the Slavic nature of the Polish language and to a large extent our history situate us closer to the East. Polish culture has been a constant meeting-ground for various trends; it strives to harmoniously combine openness to all outside influences and stimuli with a strong sense

of its own identity. Many historical processes that have played out in the Polish lands took a particularly dramatic course. Polish literature has always been characterized by a sense of obligation to rise to such historical challenges. This means that it remains, especially in the 20th century, a very important part of the common European experience, in which there is a place for warnings against totalitarianism, for the passionate quest for freedom, as well as for the appreciation of beauty.

In tandem with the greater ease and prevalence of communication, the 20th century will surely bring even greater openness to other cultures, and therefore also augment the will to overcome divisive factors, as well as entail a need to comprehend extant differences.

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