

A Quest for Lost Reality

Some tendencies in Polish narratives from the 90s

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THE SHIFT of the political system in 1989 (although, in fact, the process of undermining the political structures had begun much earlier, at least by the beginning of the 80s) resulted in a radical, symbolic break with the past. A half-century of Communist dictatorship was put in brackets, or even erased in the collective memory. A tendency to forget the past—the grey, hopeless reality of real Socialism—went together with a longing for novelty; a blank page in the book of Polish history was about to be written, filled with new symbols, values and ideas. In the symbolic space of remembrance some new tendencies appeared—the tendency toward radical separation from the sad, grey, hopeless reality of Communist Poland together with a longing for symbols of novelty, of modernity. The Polish people preferred to conceive their future as an open space with no burden from the past. The necessity of turning off corrupted reality, the will to forget an epoch of captured minds and of a life in ideological coercion was as strong as the repulsion against a man or woman afflicted with the plague.

In order to grasp, to understand the new reality that has gradually emerged from the ideological ruins of Communism, one needs, however, a solid mark, a kind of grounding. Very soon it appeared that the process of radical cut-off from the past had gone too far, that the egg had been thrown away with the shell. One cannot entirely erase fifty whole years from the history of a country; years that had, for better or worse, formed the greater part of Polish society. Personal biographies do not tolerate a void, they need the substance of events,

memories and roots—even if that substance has been affected by corruption and the roots are partially rotten.

The process of symbolic erosion of the reality of Communist Poland had started much earlier, run on many fronts and led to a growing feeling of alienation, to a lack of the sense of participation in the actual world. The literature of *démystification* from the 60s and 70s laid bare all the shadows, shortages and excesses of the political system in Poland. The works of Konwicki, Kołakowski, Anderman, the poetry of The New Wave—of Zagajewski, Krynicki, Barańczak—strengthened this negative attitude towards Communist reality. On the other hand, the works of nostalgia, depicting life in Poland in the past, a mythical childhood in Lithuania, in Lwów, in pre-war Cracow or Warsaw, deepened the feeling that 'life is somewhere else' (the title of a collection of poems by Krynicki). The uncovering of ideological manipulations of the truth, of the cynical attitude of the governors of the People's Republic of Poland, the revelation of economical and cultural backwardness of our country, specially in its relation to Western Europe, all this lead to a peculiar phenomenon: after 1989 inhabitants of Poland renounced their past and started to treat their past reality in terms of an alien country, governed by alien forces: the forces of geopolitics, the ideology of coercion—uncontrollable, and unfamiliar, saturated with the totalitarian dictatorship of lies. The Poles, awakened to freedom, asked themselves with astonishment: how was it possible to live in such a world ? How could we work, act, love in that half-existing quasi-reality, separated from the rest of the world ?

However, we did all manage to live in that reality; we learned about ourselves and the world; we chose our attitudes, our values for and against; we judged people and ideas, and we endowed the world with meaning by both mythologizing and demystifying, by making stories and discovering biographies. In this context it is not all that surprising that the young literature of the 90s, particularly narrative, focused its attention on regaining that lost reality, on familiarization with that time-space that had been lived up under a state of alienation and occupation.

The most significant novels of the last decade attempt thus to grasp a past that is near at hand, a past that is part of the authors' own biographies. This is by no means a rehabilitation of real Socialism; these novels do not express any kind of nostalgia for the good old

Communist times. There is something much more important at stake here: the restoration of the meaning of one's own life; the search, under the dust of political fallacies and delusions, for a space of Home.

The novels of Olga Tokarczuk, Magdalena Tulli, Stefan Chwin, Wiesław Myśliwski (the latter from the older generation) are stylistically different; however, they have a common trait which can be called 'looking for a remedy for the sense of disinheritance'. Their narratives meet in a description of Poland during the past 50 years, reconstruct the micro-worlds of childhood, of adolescence, of entering manhood or womanhood. In contrast to narratives from the 70s and 80s (Konwicki, Andrzejewski, Anderman) which depicted the world as infected, alien, deformed and meaningless, the prose of the present decade discovers the true values — aesthetic, existential, psychological—of a reality represented and regained. The process of discovering is at the same time a process of mythologization or, as Weber would put it, a profound enchantment of the radically disenchanted world.

This mythologization of reality is represented differently by different authors. In Olga Tokarczuk's novel *Prawiek* the core of the story comprises a saga of several generations, which takes place somewhere in the middle of Poland, throughout the twentieth century. The reality represented is strongly cosmologized: the village Prawiek (i.e. the arche-time, the dawn of history) forms an enclosed universe with symbolical borders, strongly marked symbols of the beginning and the end and with periodical, cyclical changes. The external events, wars and revolutions, have very limited impact on reality, rather they resemble natural disasters, are like tempest, fire or deluge. That this world should exhaust its supply of energy and fall into delapidation is, in a way, inevitable since it is inscribed in its own destiny and thus reminiscent sometimes of Gabriel Garcia Marquez' Macondo, from his famous, magical-realistic *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

In the novels of Paweł Huelle the mythologizing effect has been achieved by the constant presence of an enigma permeating his worlds. In *Weiser Dawidek*, a novel from the late 80s, the title hero, a Jewish boy, the Other, whose supernatural qualities and puzzling disappearance provide a pivot for the narration, symbolizes that enigma. The story does not solve its enigmas; it makes them only more and more complicated, leaving the reader with a feeling of the

world's inexplicability. This story of a gang of youngsters takes place in Gdańsk after the war during the 50s; it gives a detailed description of the reality of the time, with traces of German culture present in the background, and, by way of an insignificant detail, some accidental signals from the Communist system that are rather a part of the scenery. The most important element of the story, the experience of an enigma (the boy's disappearance), forms the world and leaves its traces in the future lives of all the characters in the novel. The message of the book runs as follows : 'The world is mysterious and multi-faceted and it never reveals the enigma lying at its center'. This message probably contains some political accent implicated in the work and indicating that prolonged experience, real life itself, is resistant to all ideologies and systems.

The novels of Jerzy Pilch, Stefan Chwin, Antoni Libera, Henryk Grynberg rediscover the particular atmosphere and surroundings of the 40s, 50s and 60s in Gdańsk, Cracow, Warsaw, or some small town in southern Poland etc. They reconstruct the forgotten details and settings of those worlds, modes of behaviour, smells and colours; they permeate reality with things, people, and experiences. The dark political atmosphere of those years is in a way present in the stories, but merely on the margins of the narrative.

It is striking that the majority of these books tell the story of initiation, of growing up. Polish literary critics recognize that phenomenon and observe a correlation between the occurrence of narratives of initiation and the situations of transition in our culture : the present tendency resembles that of 1918 and 1945, other significant turning-points in Polish history.

Such a sharp break calls for reevaluation, for a rediscovery of one's roots, identity, continuity. 'Because our generation has no history we would be tempted to create it', proclaims Olga Tokarczuk in an interview from 1995, observing accurately the tendencies appearing in the last decade. This process of 'making history' often takes the form of a crystallization of the reality surrounding the biography of the narrator or a character. The dark hole of oblivion is gradually filled with details, everyday-life; the meaningless, formless reality of real Socialism is replaced by authentic experience, by a mythologized childhood, adolescence, by records of discovery from the realms of culture, of love, desire, ambition. What we have to do with here is a

process of enchantment, or re-enchantment of reality, which is created post factum, as the world is endowed with forms, patterns, transcendence, archetypes, myths: the Quest for the Grail, Cinderella, Revelation etc.

The tendency described above can also be called 'the privatization of history', the disentangling of colourful threads of the private, unique and personal tales from the collective, grey image of reality. Stories of first love, of artistic initiation, of remarkable encounters with significant personalities, together these create a colourful tissue, a bright pattern that shines through the coarse texture of the realm of real Socialism. Manifold personal worlds, manifold private experiences, manifold particular roots—such is the image that gradually emerges from the readings of contemporary Polish literature.

Those forgotten worlds brought into being by the new literature consist sometimes of elements from other, non-Polish cultures that were (or still are) present in our cultural space. The novels of Huelle, Chwin, Tokarczuk rediscover the German atmosphere of Wrocław and Gdańsk, apparent from the first glance, radiating from the architecture, surroundings, from the image of these cities but so far unexplored by Polish literature, partially due to political censorship (the Communist propaganda demanded that one find only Polish accents and traces there). The history of German culture is present in these narratives in the form of readings of the surroundings: of the facades of houses, of the shapes of church towers, of the traces in interiors, furniture, and china-cups. The title hero of the novel by Stefan Chwin, Mr Haneman, a German staying in Gdańsk after the war, fascinates and at the same time frightens the young narrator; Mr Haneman's presence in the spooky post-German house opens the door for the narrator to the world of German culture, the world of Goethe and Schopenhauer (another ex-inhabitant of Gdańsk) and deconstructs the stereotype of the German Gestapo or SS-member dominant in Polish mass-culture and official indoctrination during the whole post-war period.

The realm of Jewish culture also remained a vast space of oblivion. The presence of this culture in Poland, in our cultural heritage, its fatal, tragic disappearance in the time of Holocaust has not yet been solidly presented in the realm of literature. There was a Jewish school in Polish prose, recognized and described by Jan Błoński, with Bruno Schulz as the starting point, which included two generations

of Polish novelists of Jewish background, who wrote in Polish and yet kept alive their Jewish identity. In their novels and stories these writers attempted to depict the disappearing culture of the shtetl (Adolf Rudnicki, Julian Strykowski), and bore witness to the inexpressible experience of the holocaust (Artur Sandauer, Bogdan Woy-dowicz, Henryk Grynberg). Their works have had a very vague response in Polish culture, especially after 1968, owing to reasons now familiar, in connection with the explosion of Polish anti-Semitism. In the 90s this non-presence of Jewish traces has been gradually repaired, at least in the field of literature.

There is a thread linking together such distinct writers as Henryk Grynberg, Wilhelm Dichter, and Hanna Krall, and it is not exclusively 'the Jewish story'. Their novels and stories employ the perspective of an individual experience, frequently the viewpoint of a child, and are quasi-documentary and autobiographical. The depiction of events and calamities from the past, from the war and postwar times, often renders the confrontation with Evil in the form of a mythical, ungraspable Evil hidden in human nature, concealed in cultural and ideological constructions. The efforts to understand the nature of Evil, to grasp it with the help of words, shape the interpretative horizon of these works. Feelings of alienation, of being excluded from the Polish community, intertwine with reports about acts of assistance, full of sacrifice, coming from the members of that very same society. Dilemmas concerning identity, choices between Polishness and Jewishness, a quest for lost roots, those are the kind of problems which torment the characters from the novels of Grynberg, Dichter, and Głowiński.

The Jewish subject, apart from this quasi-documentary school, also features in another branch of Polish modern prose, that of the 'fabulators', the creators of imaginary, fictitious worlds. Here it is present, however, in a slightly different way.

In the books of Anna Bolecka (*Biały kamień*), Paweł Huelle and Olga Tokarczuk, the Jews and their culture appear as elements of the social landscape from the past. Unlike the narratives from the previous periods, which presented the Jews as some exotic, alien detail in Polish society, these texts show them as human individuals, as neighbours, partners in dialogue, friends from childhood, objects of fascination, love, or antipathy. This prose rediscovers, or rather reconstructs from the past, a potential (sometimes actual) communi-

cational space between the two cultures. This is achieved through the filter of individual experiences, meetings and encounters.

It is astonishing that Polish literature has had to wait so long for Jews as human beings—friends, lovers, enemies—to appear in its literary space. Now our Polish cultural landscape from the past is gradually being filled with meetings with Jews, it is attempting to discuss the origin of anti-Semitism, attempting to remember not only the shadows but also traces of understanding, communication, and mutual fascination. That subsequent regaining of lost reality is conducted only by and through memories of a world that once existed and is lost forever.

Some significant shift can also be traced in the exile literature from the 90s. Here, again, the shift is marked by an individualization of perspective, by a de-politicization of the literary stuff. Even the status of an émigré-writer has changed radically, from the image of a political exile, cut off from his mother tongue and culture, toward that of an émigré by choice, a traveller rather, a globetrotter, describing his encounters with different cultures and peoples. In the novels of these 'new waves' of emigrants, B. Swiderski, Z. Kruszyński, M. Gretkowska, the political issues gradually disappear as does the experience of life in translation, translation between cultures, codes of behaviour and languages. These new novels explore that experience of cultural misunderstanding, untranslatability of certain experiences, create figures of universal emigrants, coming from nowhere (Swiderski) or from an unidentified country in the East (Kruszyński). The new worlds discovered here are the worlds of modern or even post-modern civilization, permeated by technocracy, failure of inter-human communication, by a fragmentation of life, impossible to grasp, or to understand.

A great number of literary critics dealing with modern Polish literature, who attempt to figure out some new ideological frame which would grasp together these current tendencies, find it in the general shift in the conception of Polishness. Through many decades, if not centuries, the idea of Polishness has governed and affected the core of Polish culture. The relation to Polishness, whether affirmative, critical or destructive, has always set a frame or a horizon for the understanding of the surrounding world. Only a few Polish authors,

among them B. Schulz, M. Białoszewski, B. Leśmian, have succeeded in escaping that Polish paradigm, and they were accordingly sentenced to remain in the margins of the official cultural life.

The majority of characters in recent Polish literary production are, of course, of Polish origin, and the setting is always Poland. There is, however, a difference in the construction of these characters (compared to the former periods); their destiny is no longer determined by their Polishness. A new cultural paradigm emerges gradually from these books, where the hero or narrator, although remaining inside the Polish setting, becomes more and more universal, graspable even beyond the Polish perspective. It would appear that the prophetic call of the great Polish visionary, Witold Gombrowicz, for 'transforming Polish mentality, liberating Polish culture from the burden of Polishness' is gradually being answered.

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