

Introduction

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In the middle of the 1980s, Polish literature found itself in a difficult and unusual situation. In one discussion, well-known literary critics and university scholars called that decade the “black hole of the eighties,” as they were unable to identify any new aesthetic proposals, new programs, ideas, or sensitivities. They pointed to a peculiar stalemate, caused mainly by interruptions in free critical discussion, the rhythm of literary life, and natural generation changes, which had been brought about by political conditions after the imposition of martial law. In addition, poets looking forward to their debuts during the eighties faced several alternatives, none of them satisfactory. An overwhelming majority was not interested in writing for official publications, as it would provide credence to the regime. On the other hand, they perceived the underground press, connected with the political opposition, as excessive involvement in social poetry, which, in their opinion, would simplify and trivialize the message. It is also worth noting that Polish poetry functioned at that time in the shadow of Polish modern classics, who made their debuts either before the Second World War (for example, Czesław Miłosz) or just after it and around 1956 (Tadeusz Różewicz, Zbigniew Herbert). None of them—except for Herbert—was directly involved in political opposition, but their voices were so strongly embedded in the consciousness of readers, who searched for authorities in the face of the erosion of social capital

after the Solidarity movement's suppression, that it was extremely difficult to carry on discussions about completely different, new poetic programs.

A generation of authors—gaining consciousness in the eighties and writing their first poems in the shadow of the debacle of Solidarity and the dissolution of social bonds created in the past by shared books that constituted a national canon—realized that to respond to the demands of the postmodern world, formed at that time and separated from Poland by the iron curtain, they needed to respond in a novel way, and increasingly looked towards Western literature. There they drew inspiration for a variety of pursuits and discovered a potential for liberation—not in the sphere of political choices, but of independent creative expression—freedom in search of nonstandard poetics, experimentation, and the creation of “private” poetic worlds. They searched for similar inspiration in twentieth century native literature, both among the “classics” and among authors who had been previously marginalized by critical and scholarly discourse and the world of politics. These quests were undoubtedly a source of the ensuing diversity in Polish poetry during the last thirty years. Already at the turn of the eighties and nineties young authors rejected most commonly shared codes and spoke critically about the possibility of using a generational key for interpreting the works of debuting poets. And although it would be possible to talk about a group debut, about joint publications in periodicals that originated at the end of the Polish People's Republic and the beginning of the new state, skepticism was the prevailing attitude towards the creation of a program including shared experiences, books, or commonly accepted aesthetics.

In 1986, the new periodical *bruLion* was launched in Cracow in clandestine circulation. It was edited by representatives of the youngest generation of poets, among others. It quickly declared its independence from the official line of political opposition

then advanced by the authorities of social life and literature. The editors of *bruLion* strived to break the monopoly of dichotomous divisions, which resulted from the clash of the regime with the political opposition. They also aimed at revealing not just two, but many points of view and a variety of truths describing reality, as well as at restoring an unbounded democratic discourse, in both the sphere of social issues and of literary tastes. The periodical became popular thanks to a penchant for scandal and the juxtaposition of controversial texts free from editorial commentary. It promoted a group of poets who made their debuts in 1992 by publishing their books in what is called a violet series. Their poems were also provocative, since they demonstratively rejected the topics that had been imposed for years by the Polish People's Republic, as well as the poetic glorification of struggle and resistance to the communist regime. The best known poem of the period was "Dla Jana Polkowskiego," written by Marcin Świetlicki in 1988 and published for the first time in *Tygodnik Literacki* in 1990. Świetlicki juxtaposed the "poetry of slaves," conditioned by the "correct" attitude of political protest and rooted in cultural and religious tradition, with the poetry of free expression of the "I," of 'private' themes and strands, addressed to an intentionally small audience and bolstering the corporeal or even physiological side of existence. The work of Polkowski (also represented in this anthology) was interpreted as a symbol of involvement, even though the poet avoided the traps of vulgar poetic journalism in the eighties. This attitude of Świetlicki, in various versions and conventions, was also manifested in the works of other debuting poets, both in the circle of *bruLion* as well as in other new periodicals, such as "small magazines" and the organs of local literary milieus (*Czas Kultury*, *FA-art*, *Kresy*). Literary life, blocked in the earlier decade, gained dynamism and soon produced a collection of numerous proposals and "revelations," which the literary public in Poland was not at all used to or ready for.

This disorientation also pertained to literary criticism. At the beginning, attention was generally drawn to the forms of protest, and to the distance these forms stood from tradition and predecessors. The works of poets from the *bruLion* circle were compared to the poems of authors who gained popularity in the years of Poland's first independence in the twentieth century, the poets of the Skamander group from 1918; the second parallel, however, was laden from the very beginning with numerous simplifications. An attempt to promote a literary generation also ended in defeat; the subtitle of one of the first critical books devoted to this topic demonstrated this, as it read: "*About the Artistic Output of the So-Called bruLion Generation.*" In other words, literary criticism did not find a concrete formula, allowing it to embrace the entirety of poetic debuts of that time as well as define the essence of this phenomenon. When attention was directed towards representatives of other milieus, the matter became even more complicated, because that poetry could not be described solely in terms of protest or rejection of tradition. It came out that a considerable part is a continuation of themes, conventions, and versification patterns strongly rooted in the Polish literature of the twentieth century, while some poems still openly draw upon the poetics connected with public matters even though they refer to less obvious observations and diagnoses. Critics therefore reached for a dichotomous view, juxtaposing two groups of authors: those who demonstratively expressed a lack of interest in continuation—provocative and nonchalant, called "barbarians" (the poems of Marcin Świetlicki and Jacek Podsiadło were most often listed in this group)—and those who attempted to creatively modify the achievements of modern classics and displayed an ethical background, called "classicists" (led by Krzysztof Koehler and Wojciech Wencel). But even this classification, in the face of a large number and variety of debuts, does not constitute a precise description. This is especially so because another milieu (Andrzej Sosnowski, Tadeusz Pióro, Darek Foks) pointed out that the argument advanced by critics is a sham dispute, since both factions, stressing the strong identity of an individuality or community, ignore the

growing role of postmodernist culture and its understanding of language, subject, and world as a purely textual creation. The above-mentioned poets, familiar with literature written in English, drew their inspiration from the poets of the “New York school.” They are engaged in a dialogue primarily with the poems of John Ashbery and, to some extent, Frank O’Hara. Known as “postmodernists,” they have become, so to speak, heralds of a new trend of post avant-garde “exhaustion” and arbitrariness of language construction amidst the reality of fragmentation and chaos. To round out the picture of Polish poetry, it should be mentioned that there is a sizeable number of other authors who cannot be unambiguously assigned by critics to any group or literary current. Some of them, for example, have concentrated on themes of unstable cultural, sexual or historical identity (Tkaczyszyn Dycki), problems of the world of matter and nature (Marzanna Kielar), or the status of one’s own “little homeland” (Tomasz Różycki).

This richness of poetic options, which could not have surfaced in the eighties, was increased by the delayed poetic debuts of older poets (such as Janusz Szuber, born in 1947) and the ensuing groups of young poets. It was most expansive and visible in the final years of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty first century (Przemysław Dakowicz, the youngest author appearing in this anthology, was born in 1977 and made his book debut in 2002). There was even an attempt to promote the youngest poets as another distinct generation, evidenced by the publication of an anthology entitled *Tekstyliia. O “rocznikach siedemdziesiątych”* (*Textiles. About “Those Born in the Seventies”*).

It can be safely stated that the disputes of the nineties pertaining to generational issues—the poetry of “barbarians” and “classics”—or about the simplicity and hermetism of literature died out in the next decade. The appeal to novelty, artistic provocation or ostensible group activities was replaced by well-formed languages and worldviews, while the poets who made their debuts later either accepted certain creative attitudes established after 1989 or challenged them, thus recognizing their

importance for a future poetic canon. The temperature of critical discussions decreased and the literary public could read more solid analyses of the strategies advanced by individual poets that appeared in the context of the “revolution” inaugurated, among others, in *bruLion*. Many authors who made their debuts at that time became “classics” of the present, honored by numerous literary awards and translated into foreign languages (especially Świetlicki, Sosnowski, Tkaczyszyn Dycki).

If we tried—in spite of everything—to find a common ground for all of the newest Polish poetry, we would have to talk about a quest for creative freedom. This freedom is no longer understood solely as an act of protest against totalitarianism or as a protest against an attitude and poetics, wearing itself out in a verbal battle against totalitarianism. We should rather talk about an escape from any form of enslavement, also (or perhaps above all) the one imposed by “the new world,” by the ideas of dogmatically understood liberalism, consumerism, domination of mass culture (even though this poetry often appeals to mass imagination), but also to the enslavement that could result from acceptance of the tenets of an alternative, conservative order, consisting of the simple duplication of old patterns. It is a poetry of incessant astonishment and distanced analysis of changes (it is not accident that the title of one anthology published in Great Britain is translated as *Altered State*), and at the same time of escape to autonomous territories, from where more can be seen and where various, sometimes surprising, forms of sensitivity reign. It is also a poetry that does not have an unequivocal attitude towards the category of “novelty,” pointing instead to a characteristic ambivalence of experiences. On the one hand it touches everything topical, which modifies our way of looking at the world; observes the rhythm of social, technological, and cultural changes; listens closely to new codes and languages; and immerses itself in the virtual world. On the other hand it is full of unexpected returns to the past, intensive memory work, nostalgic and melancholic

glances, fascination with disintegration, and death. This characteristic balance became particularly prominent during the last fifteen years, after the period of storm and stress, which abounded in declarations and expectations of destructive gestures and still undefined new poetics. Polish poets who made their debuts recently drew far reaching conclusions from reading their predecessors' poems. They radically changed twentieth century Polish literature and posed questions about its ability to confront universal issues in divergent social conditions. But in their fascination with imagination and types of technical solutions proposed by European or American poets, they never gave up their own storehouse of native tradition, or, moreover, the storehouse of their own locality, intimacy, and matters and events essentially untranslatable into a language of another community or some generalized context.

This anthology, put together by Michael Mikoś, in general leaves out those poems most notorious in Poland in the nineties and the next decade as well as the "programmatic" poems that were analyzed in critical discussions or served to initiate them (which meant from the start that they would not be understood, or be poorly assimilated, by a foreign reader). It is also not a selection aiming at fully illustrating all of the interesting poetic phenomena during the last thirty years (critics in Poland registered in that time tens of debuting poets worthy of attention for various reasons, while only twenty-one authors appear here), but it is nevertheless a selection that is representative because it contains the exponents of various aesthetics identified by literary critics. The translator has focused his attention not on what is ostensibly the most effective or what the poets themselves advanced to the fore, but rather on a more private, intimate side of their work. Mikoś's translations show how Polish poetry manages to deal with issues of more and more complex subjectivity in the postmodern world, with obsessions of memory, ambiguity of experience, and

multidimensionality of relations among separate elements of the world. An attempt to answer this challenge is at the same time—and this is also an important element of the concept of selection—a task of coming to terms with that which is past, revealing various forms and various degrees of elegiac consciousness, from simple recall to ironic and ludic strategies. It also displays different forms of critical awareness and distance, as well as a characteristic cognitive skepticism accompanying the obsession with freedom. It is difficult to speak today about a “Polish school of poetry” (as Czesław Miłosz wished for some time ago when he spoke and wrote about its existence and significance in the twentieth century relative to other poetries of the West), because the dispersion of poetic initiatives is too great. In fact, they constitute a reaction against those works that dealt with “grand” themes and challenges. Instead, they are a manifestation of more intimate fears and anxieties, treating the national, social, and intellectual communities differently than in the twentieth century, pointing instead to nuances of existence. These elements are aptly revealed and presented by the translator.

Since the American reader cannot be expected to be burdened by hierarchies and orders established by Polish literary criticism, that aspect is almost absent in the anthology. This is one of this selection’s merits. This anthology does not uncritically duplicate the same set of names that is usually suggested to translators of Polish literature into foreign languages. At the same time, as I noted before, it includes poets who employ a variety of conventions. The boundaries between them are fluid, as are the boundaries between the worldviews of the authors who are published here. It is also difficult to discuss alternative authors to those included here; one would always find at least several other interesting proposals. In this aspect, the Polish poetry created by the young and middle age generations is doing quite well, even though it is no longer propelled by new works by such important and well-known poets as Miłosz, Herbert, and Szymborska, with whose worldviews newer poetry often polemicizes. And finally, we have in this book—on account of the poems of Polkowski—

an illustration of the process of transition from the literature engaged in the issues of emerging freedom to the literature which husbands freedom. One can find out how it is achieved, standing face to face not only with politics or a great heritage of native culture, but also with everyday life, banality, private memory, or unpredictability of language metamorphoses, by reading over one hundred poems representing this change, so important from the point of view of Polish literature in its entirety.