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The Polish Novel After 1989
Common elements in Polish post-dependent literature*

Polish post-dependent literature marked a defined and noted break from the topical and formulaic constraints of the pre-1989 literary scene that had been tormented by political and “moral” censorship as well as by exigencies to conform government requirements with the author’s both literary and personal vision in order to qualify as politically trustworthy enough for actual publication. After 1989, the literary elites were relieved of the burden of moral obligation to support ideas of nationhood, patriotism, and political hope on either side of the official government-versus-opposition divide through Romanticism, Positivism, and Socialist Realism, and they were free at last to look at other avenues for their individual creative talents, expressing, as Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski put it aptly, their ‘joy of the reclaimed garbage heap.’ The climate was similar in many ways to the inter-bellum period of Polish culture.

In a natural and predictable first reaction, literary circles started out by shaking off the tedious content and formulae associated with socialist realism, even those that had been previously liberalized during the ‘little realism’ period of Edward Gierek’s political ‘little stabilization.’ If the goal of classic social realism had been to educate the masses in the prevailing and politically correct world view, necessarily bringing the intellectual level of discourse to the lowest common denominator in order to

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be accessible to the proletariat as the ostensible Ruling Class, liberalization brought a potential for much more intellectually demanding works. And yet, the changes of 1989 hardly warranted an emphasis on the intellectualization of entertainment. With the population eagerly embracing status symbols of the West, what seeped now through the far more porous borders of the former Iron Curtain was more akin to a wave of commercialization and mongrelization of Polish culture.

Inga Iwasiów bluntly characterizes some of this new culture¹ as outright “kitsch,” and blames the phenomenon on a lack of education on the part of the readership. It might well be that the current system of education stresses lofty ideas somewhat less, instead exposing young minds to the cultural accomplishments of modernity in the West — where commercialization is an undeniable aspect, as exemplified by the literary standard of the New York Times Bestsellers list where ranking is determined by the number of copies sold. But looking at it from a different viewpoint, by focusing on those aspects of popular culture to which society at large can actually relate, either through personal experience (as, for example, in *Nine* by Andrzej Stasiuk or in *The Mighty Angel* by Jerzy Pilch) or through its aspiration to Western models,² writers are able to bring back a phenomenon that had just about disappeared for all practical purposes from the Polish literary scene for decades: the view of people commonly reading books on buses and trains again. The ensuing estrangement of literary critics whose role as arbiters had just been rendered obsolete by market forces resulted understandably in ungracious expressions of their disappointment. But faced with the alternative of an a-literate society or one that actually does read, even if it largely reads oeuvres one has to consider far from ambitious, a critic who cares about literature might be well advised to join the popular movement and contribute to educating the public by starting from zero rather than, in effect, to condemn to extinction

¹ Specifically, she refers to *Primeval and Other Times* by Olga Tokarczuk.

² Tokarczuk’s *Primeval and Other Times* reflects a popular trend of magic realism with fantastic elements fashionable with the younger generation raised on Tolkien and Gabriel García Márquez.

what he considers “real” literature by isolating it, not to mention himself, from the preferences of society at large — the very same society that still happens to pay for writers’ livelihoods by voting with their wallets in an era when public employment of artists in the socialist tradition has largely ceased to exist.

Two common and only superficially contradictory trends are readily discernible in post-dependent literature: nostalgia and condemnation of the past. Both are parts of a larger phenomenon of memory that characterizes much of post-modern writing. With the present severed from the past in a brusque political regime change, a change that, this time around, for once was for the better, not for worse, and thereby stood out amidst the tortured history of Poland, the ambiguity of liberated Poles now finds its expression in literature. To be sure, liberalization and Westernization were goals for which Polish society had fought for decades — but the result was far from the utopian ideas a once isolated part of Europe had developed. That sudden disappointment with a clash of dreams with the reality of a polity in transition is especially noticeable in *Nine*. In this novel, Andrzej Stasiuk focuses on the distressing, unexpected consequences that a new free market economy brings on the underdogs left behind in a ruthless and rapacious chase after success. Similarly, Mr. J., *The Mighty Angel’s* protagonist, lashes out in some of his rants against the same socioeconomic changes as exemplified by his reaction to the girl in a yellow dress at the ATM. On the other hand, Mr. J. remembers his childhood and the lives of his ancestors with searing nostalgia. Antoni Libera in *Madame* chose a more ambiguous approach to the past. At first, his young protagonist looks at his own life with utter disappointment, concluding that the best times were in the past, before he was even born. As his own experiences turn into glorified embellishments for the benefit of the next generation, he feels vindicated, discovering that he really did live in interesting times. In this way, Libera creates a snapshot of nostalgia in the making — as present turns into past, it becomes something to long after, just like the torments of the protagonist’s unrequited love for his French teacher become a cherished memory of times not missed, but spent together.

Nostalgia is expressed also through shared memory — the new generation of writers addresses the times before their own existence, reviving and reimagining the past as it was handed down to them by the stories and writings of others. This memory-of-memory technique becomes a defining aspect of post-dependent literature, especially as the removal of censorship now allows them to address painful experiences of the nation as a whole and of individuals drawn into the cogs and gears of history. The retold story of Maximilian in *Madame* is but one element of that novel; yet, on the other hand, *Tworki* by Marek Bieńczyk and *Annihilation* by Piotr Szewc are entirely reconstructed from the resources of shared recollections: remembrance of World War II with the aspect of the Holocaust, and of pre-Holocaust Polish-Jewish coexistence, respectively.

Tworki and *Annihilation* share another element of post-dependent literature: the existence of the Jews. While communist censorship until 1989 had the result of ignoring or camouflaging the extent of Jewish presence throughout the history of Poland, new authors rediscover this long-repressed part of their country's past and bring it back to light. In *Tworki*, readers witness an entire group of characters disappear into the abyss of the Holocaust: Marcel, Anna, Joasia, and Sonia, in addition to Polish victims of the Warsaw Uprising: Mother, Olek, Witek, and the rest of The Magnificents. In *Annihilation*, Piotr Szewc describes life in a Polish-Jewish town in minute detail, a life that is about to disappear within very few years hence.

Nostalgia can also take the form of focusing on various 'small fatherlands.' With Polish nationhood and independence no longer a topic, writers are now free to relate to those aspects of past geography that still hold personal significance to them. To Mr. J. of *The Mighty Angel*, it was the town of Wisła and his Lutheran roots; to the author of *Annihilation*, it was a small Polish-Jewish town reminiscent of Zamość, the place from where he hails. The characters of *Nine*, *Madame*, and even *Tworki* cruise Warsaw by foot, tram, or bus, observing changes etched by time into the profile of the city. And for Olga Tokarczuk in *Primeval and Other Times*, the mythical village of Primeval represents the original

small fatherland, where history is compressed into the stories of a few generations. Use of toponyms facilitates such an approach as Primeval, Kielce, Tworki, or Praga stand not only for particular locations, but rather for all that the protagonists associate with them — emotionally, historically, economically, socially.

Post-dependent literature treats reality whimsically, and that is very noticeable: approaches range from the hyperrealism of microscopic pictures of insects and plants, through photographic fidelity of town scenes in *Annihilation*, with much latitude given to the surreal (eye of the herring in the jar observing life in Rosenzweig's tavern), through literal realism depicting life in the gutter in *Nine* mixed in with dreams, to the conventional realism of *Madame*, and onward to a blending of reality with delirium, delusion, or alcoholic amnesia in *The Mighty Angel*, or the denial of wartime reality in idyllic *Tworki* that comes back to haunt the characters among the childlike lunatics of bedlam, to finally culminate in Olga Tokarczuk's unapologetic new mythology when she creates not just one primeval village, but altogether eight different worlds associated with the different ages of a god shaped by his creation as much as his creation is by him — or was it her, as the village idiot savant/mystic suspects. In *Primeval and Other Times*, reality mixes with magic, fantasy, and dreams in a spicy and exciting blend that effortlessly effaces borders between those alternative realities and the mysticism of everyday objects such as the coffee grinder or a board game. It intertwines its stylistic flavor with a veritable cult of nature.

In accordance with a much broader postmodernist trend, plot is not the focus of the post-dependent novel. It can lack one entirely, as in Piotr Szewc's *Annihilation*, which consists of a description of one day in the life of a small town from an outsider's perspective. Its emphasis on the present is a stylistic tool to emphasize the absence of a future, and the only character who does have an explicit past is Attorney Daniłowski, whose personality and experiences merge with those of his childhood self. It is a difficult strain to speak of an actual plot in the writings of Tokarczuk or Stasiuk, since both authors focus on describing the situation of their characters rather than following them *stricto*

sensu. The narrative of the characters is often muddled by temporal shifts as well as fragmented disclosures from which the reader needs to piece together a coherent whole; this is the case with the life stories of Pilch's Mr. J. or Libera's Victoria and Maximilian, as well as the biography of Stasiuk's characters.

The classic concept of an individual protagonist is also far from common in post-dependent literature — the writers of the era prefer to focus on entire groups or even places that undergo some kind of change. This was the case in *Annihilation* and *Primeval and Other Times*. In Stasiuk's *Nine*, the city or even an entire socioeconomic group seems to be as much a protagonist as Paweł himself. Even there, Paweł, without being afforded a great many individualized characteristics, stands for an abstract figure in this economy of change: the character of a small businessman brought down by organized crime. In *Tworki*, the collective of inhabitants and employees of the bedlam is as much protagonist as Jurek, who is the demonstrable focus of the author. In those novels where there is, in fact, a discernible protagonist, as in *The Mighty Angel* or *Madame*, readers can recognize the elements of a Bildungsroman. Libera's *Madame* may be described as a classical coming-of-age novel: it follows the young protagonist throughout his last stages of secondary education and his romantic and creative frustrations, until he realizes his own maturity during his conversation with a reflection of his younger self, the Sad Boy. *The Mighty Angel*, more of a Künstlerroman, focuses on the achievement of artistic maturity, since we meet the writer as an already middle-aged man in search of inspiration by way of alcohol — and in the alcohol ward. The theme of maturing, both artistically and personally, also emerges in *Tworki* whose young protagonist experiences first loves and early writings in his wartime hiding place.

The paradigm of center-periphery dichotomy has been a mainstay of literary analysis since long. It accomplishes important phenomenological and theoretical tasks in that it acknowledges productive encounters and cross-cultural exchange, both vertical and horizontal in terms of hierarchical structures of hegemony and resistance, between a mode of reading central to and typically favored within academic practice and one that is not.

It highlights the potential of traditionally peripheral operations, at once peripheral to the 'cultural establishment' and yet influential. They ask that we privilege that which has traditionally been marginalized.

These lacunae served as a point of departure for the present study.

It is nothing short of ironic that literary critics use the 'center versus periphery' rhetoric extensively in Polish post-dependent literature, considering that the term was first used in social and political theory to describe concepts in the theory of conflict such as the Marxist doctrine of class warfare.

In any event, by treating the center-periphery theme in spatial terms, post-dependent literature reflects the broad influence of this concept. Perhaps the most striking example is *Primeval and Other Times* by Olga Tokarczuk. In this novel, the village of Primeval was not only the symbolic center of the universe — it was also literally called that. In Tokarczuk's description of the world, Primeval was the center — guarded by four archangels, it was the place where everything started. More than that — it was the only place that was. An invisible border disclosed by Ruta to Izydor divided the real world from the imaginary, a border cutting right across the road to Kielce. When children extended their arms through the invisible border, the arms disappeared in nothingness. The landscape that surrounded Primeval was imaginary, since, in reality, the world outside simply did not exist. Or rather — it did exist, but only in the dreams of those who believed to have crossed the border, and had remained immobilized on the road to Kielce, dreaming of going for and returning from a trip outside the village. Nonetheless, Izydor conjectured that there must be an opening in the invisible border somewhere, a hole that would allow one to pass outside the center. Ruta found it years later, when she was able to leave the village on foot, through the snow. Tokarczuk's periphery is the world outside of Primeval, marked by the embracing arms of the Black and White rivers.

Tokarczuk's center is not a uniform structure. It has four corners, like the four cardinal directions, each guarded by its own archangel. It also has its own center. The center of Primeval is deep

in the forest, and is marked by the heart of a living mycelium spreading under all of Primeval.

In *Annihilation* by Piotr Szewc, the small town is also treated as the center, and its Town Square with the all-seeing eye of Town Hall tower serves as the center of the center itself. The narrator, just like the adult residents, never leaves the center. Peripheries are scarcely even mentioned, though they are not impermeable — it is where small Walek goes to play in nature, and where adult Walenty Daniłowski escapes into his memories. Children, then, are able to cross into the periphery, but that part of reality is of no particular interest to adults, unless they wish to relive their childhood days.

Antoni Libera's *Madame* uses an interesting reversal of the center-periphery conflict — the center is outside and the periphery hopelessly enclosed within it. Polish citizens, like Jerzyk and Victoria, or even her thesis supervisor, Ms. Surrowa-Léger, dream, struggle and conspire to leave the periphery of their communist country, to inhale the political and cultural freedoms of the world outside — the Western world, personified in this novel by France with its golden ages of refined culture and high intellectual achievement, once a world center of sophistication and still its vivid symbol. By cultivating French language and literature, Libera's characters seek to recreate the center within the periphery: a whiff of fresh air and a sanctuary in the repressed and corrupt world of totalitarian state-run academia of the 1960's, a world where lofty idealists are forced into subservience to powerful political brutes. Imaginatively, the intellectual center of society is under assault by its political periphery, and hence the only way out of all that is to escape beyond the periphery — to the center outside, or to reality abroad.

In the distorted universe of Jerzy Pilch's *The Mighty Angel*, the illusory, alcohol-drenched world of the protagonist is the periphery of his existence, with real life beginning only when he checks himself into the alcoholic ward that constitutes the Center for him and for the other patients. In this Center of a detox ward, the addicts sober up and attempt therapy, which includes articulating their thoughts and realizations that had previously

been diluted by drinking outside. For Mr. J., the alcohol ward is an invigorating sanctuary where his creative juices flow and where meaningful experiences materialize for him in the written word. The place is most conducive to creativity — part of the therapy regimen requires patients to write a journal. The small world of these alcoholics — regulars at the ward — shields them from the uncertainties and temptations of the outside world. At the clinic, they are safe from all material disturbances, free to rest and to recover their lost sense of normalcy. The periphery infiltrates the center only very occasionally when rare visitors arrive to see the patients. The duality and completeness of the center-periphery construct is underscored by the protagonist's behavior once he finds himself released from the program — his first steps outside take him to The Mighty Angel pub, where he ritualizes the crossing of the border by having a couple of fine vodka shots. There is nothing in between the center and the periphery — for Mr. J., it is either habitual drinking or sobering up in a detox program. The distant possibility of being sober outside, of opening the center to the periphery, as it is suggested by the narrator at the end of the novel, never really materializes, and the reader is left uncertain as to whether the lofty assurances of the protagonist are not a sign of his being already in the periphery and thus the words of a man in delirium, or of one longing for it so badly that he proclaims victory over his addiction only the faster to throw himself into its arms.

The social aspects of the center-versus-periphery paradigm are also noticeable in Marek Bińczyk's *Tworki*. The center of wartime society, the Polish population represented by Jurek, is largely unaware of the periphery. Its Jewish element is driven underground by the anti-Semitic legislation of Nazi German occupation. Scattered Jewish refugees dissimulate their affiliation at the center, in the Catholic Slavic majority, where they hide from their German persecutors and from the profiteers of the Holocaust in equal measure. Assuming a false identity, Sonia, Marcel, Anna and Janka cross over into the center, but their safety remains precarious since they do not really belong there and nobody, not even Sonia's boyfriend, is able to ascertain the truth. Sonia

discloses her true identity and predictably pays with her life; Marcel and Anna reveal themselves by trying to escape to the periphery by leaving the country; and only Janka is explicitly assimilated by Jurek, who accepts the truth of her origins and welcomes her to the center where she is able to survive the war safely. Assimilation into Bieńczyk's center is not done by dissimulation, but instead through the invitation and protection of a person who is already part and parcel of the center.

Turning full circle on the center-periphery theme, Andrzej Stasiuk's *Nine* returns to the concept of a center versus periphery conflict. On a superficial level, the narrative reflects a dissonance between the spatial aspects of the city — suburbs versus city center. Downtown, with its conspicuous affluence of luxury stores and successful people, contrasts with the poor suburbs where people "still eat rabbits" and hope for change that bypassed them at every turn. But there is more to it than just geography — entire class divisions run through the river separating poor Praga from rich downtown. The suburbs are left behind in a brisk march toward capitalist comforts, and their inhabitants face either exclusion from, or intrusion into, the center. The characters portrayed by Stasiuk all choose the latter option. Some of them try to improve their lives by legal — or at least semi-legal — means: Zosia moves to the city looking for work, while Paweł tries his luck at small business — and promptly gets in trouble. Others take the shortcut more aggressively: prosperity sprouting up all around them prompts them to pursue a simple redistribution of wealth, and theft, extortion, drug trade, and assorted other crimes associated with inequality begin to create their own economy with the organizational structures mimicking those of lawful society. Stasiuk's center-periphery border has a gray zone — it is where Paweł's dealings are domiciled. Without a clearly drawn line between legal and illegal, between center and periphery of the economy and of society, Paweł inadvertently crosses over into a world where a baseball bat and a gun settle conflicts and debts alike, and most effectively. Mr. Maks, on the other hand, is well on his way to crossing into the center that is legitimate society. With a powerful crime organization under his control, Mr. Maks can

begin to invest in lawful businesses, and subsequently to attain social and legal recognition in the desired center. Their polity in social and economic transition blurs the divide between center and periphery, exposing contrasts between the two, but also allowing infiltration between them.

The class conflict between center and periphery also finds its reflection in a clash of cultures: the gaudy tastes of the nouveau riche, or at least of those aspiring to that position, focuses on brands and flashy status symbols. Those indiscriminately include clothes, cars, women, purebred dogs, foreign cigarettes, and even just plentiful food. Bolek, the overweight small boss and presumed drug wholesaler decorating his small apartment in the projects with a kitschy mix of “stylish” furniture, is a colorful example of this emerging class.

Reverberations of Marxist theories of class conflict are not completely dead in post-dependent literature after all. The economy, liberated from central planning in Stasiuk’s *Nine*, reverts to an aggressive capitalist free-for-all, with class conflicts intensified by memories of recently experienced systemic egalitarianism. In Marxist dogma, the peripheries unite to conquer the center; the exploited and the poor disenfranchise the rich in a revolution of the proletariat. In Stasiuk’s world, the center is but a vague Other while the real world is, in fact, that of the poor. Not one of his characters actually belongs to the prosperous center. Yet, his characters are by no means part of the working masses — in this scenario, the assault of the periphery on the center is done by idling masses devoid of work or prospects for advancement through legal means. Stasiuk’s world is not based on exploitation: *Nine* portrays a society where even subjection to exploitation seems like a lifetime opportunity. The real tragedy of *Nine* is hopelessness of dreams colliding with reality, of being left behind in history, and of facing what developing countries have experienced since centuries — striking inequality accompanied by an almost total lack of any prospects.

Conclusion

Unquestionably, post-dependent literature has been freed from some restraints that drove much of Polish artistic talent abroad before 1989, and yet that talent was not even dormant, just suppressed by creative conditions that were rarely conducive to the literary mind.³ Its re-emergence shows predictable pendulum swings — but the six novels from that era discussed herein⁴ show remarkable commonalities in instruments of style and literary technique to delineate a distinct and separate quality from Polish post-war socialist writing. These post-dependent novels describe spaces where language, culture and traditions converge along colliding paths toward national, collective and artistic self-realization, and where they coexist in a transitional time and place. As such, they present an interdisciplinary literary view that would always anticipate a novel vista of multiplicities to be just over the critical horizon. They explore the ‘in-between spaces’ where collective and individual identities are formed, the site and symbol of transition, of transfer and transformation.

Generally speaking, Polish post-dependent novels contrast settings and references to the centers and margins of the past that, as seen today, can be brought into dialogue with contemporary literature whilst remaining sufficiently rigorous in its explorations of specific literary contexts and material considerations. They represent ‘writing as home’ for intellectual authors disowning substantial parts of their homeland’s past despite continuing to harbor cautious skepticism of its emerging direction. For them, the

³ It should still be noted that, despite obvious limitations, half of the four Polish writers to be awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize for literature to date — Henryk Sienkiewicz (1905), Władysław Stanisław Reymont (1924), Czesław Miłosz (1980) and Wisława Szymborska (1996) — received it for writings during the communist period.

⁴ *Annihilation* — Piotr Szewc

Primeval and Other Times — Olga Tokarczuk

Madame — Antoni Libera

Tworki — Marek Bińczyk

Nine — Andrzej Stasiuk

The Mighty Angel — Jerzy Pilch

entire world is a foreign land — and yet a most familiar anchorage.

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