

## ON THE REVIVAL OF THE NEED TO TAKE ROOT – DOROTA MASŁOWSKA’S *ALL’S GOOD BETWEEN US*

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The work by Dorota Masłowska, focused primarily on issues related to contemporary culture and its critical examination, also manifests involvement in the problems of Polish identity in a particular way. This is due to the fact that by making contemporary culture the object of observation and reflection, Masłowska’s texts accentuate its linguistic character. Thus, if the criticism of culture is carried out by revealing what is specific for a national language and what is closed in it, it also leads to statements concerning Polish identity as such. The outlined perspective of reading Masłowska’s works is confirmed by the majority of the few studies published so far with regard to her oeuvre. Such a style of perception of her texts is exemplified by a fragment of Przemysław Czapliński’s (2009), which, in the analysis of the novel *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną* [UK: *White and Red*; US: *Snow White and Russian Red*; literally: *Polish-Russian War under White-Red Flag*], formulates a suggestion that the linguistic and cultural chaos designed by the protagonist’s stream of consciousness can be treated as proof that the Polish identity is saturated with the need to create phantasms of Otherness, searching for an enemy who, as a negative point of reference, would allow for the constitution and consolidation of a safe identity (Czapliński 2009: 271-272). However, the discussion on Masłowska’s work in the context of Polish identity is not only motivated by the fact that the world of her works is strictly situated in Polish realities, nor by the fact that it expresses criticism of Polish culture – it is suggested by the title of the first novel itself and, most emphatically, by numerous references

to the issues I am interested in the drama *Między nami wszystko dobrze* [*All's Good between Us*].

This work, commissioned by TR Warszawa and Berlin's Schaubuhne am Lehniner Platz, gained great popularity primarily as a 'score' for theatrical performances<sup>1</sup>, but has not yet become an exhaustive subject of literary attention. The possibility of looking at drama as a literary statement on Polish identity seems interesting because of the feeling that it has a special and specific character, which I will try to demonstrate. I would like to use the categories of lightness and heaviness as the key to capturing this specificity.

The understanding of these categories in the present essay is not based on their complex philosophical conceptualization, but is motivated by a common aesthetic intuition, which requires a link between lightness and the way qualities such as grotesque and comedy exert their influence, and heaviness to be linked with pathos (see: Kierkegaard 1992). In this sense, Masłowska's drama can be described as a strategy of offsetting heaviness with lightness at a very elementary level – we are dealing with overcoming the pathetic style that often accompanies the problematization of national issues through the use of an ironic, ridiculous tone. Of course, this way of expressing oneself about Polish identity has its tradition in literature – I do not undertake a detailed characterization here, but shall only stop at a simplification, indicating a connection between the mocking tone, poetics of the grotesque and the intention to devaluate the national issues, sometimes even the negation of Polishness (see: Kłoskowska 1996: 394-301). As the main representative of this tradition, one should mention Witold Gombrowicz, who, using his own means, formulated critical concepts of Polishness, both in his *Diaries* and in strictly fictional works. A similar way of defining Polishness can be found in the works by Czesław Miłosz, who, sometimes with blunt metaphors, formulated his critical attitude towards the Polish cultural heritage as a tool for shaping mentality (see: Walicki 1985; Majda

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to Grzegorz Jarzyna's staging, which was the first theatrical production of the drama, we should also mention the shows directed by Piotr Ratajczak, produced at the Zagłębie Theatre in Sosnowiec, Michał Pabian at the Lubuski Theatre in Zielona Góra, Piotr Waligórski at the A. Fredro Theatre in Gniezno and Andrzej Majczak at the Bagatela Theatre in Krakow.

2005). Meanwhile, I leave aside the issue of the complexity of this idea and the simplifications of the writers' attitudes towards the subject of the nation, which are present in the interpretations. A generalizing look allows me to clarify the specificity of Masłowska's work being of interest to me in this essay. One of the theses of the article is an idea indicating a different way of functionalizing lightness in the texts of this author than in the tradition in which she – because of the aesthetic identity of her works – inscribes herself. Despite being saturated with grotesque, *All's Good between Us*, despite being ridiculous in tone, allows itself to be read as a work leaning towards the opposite pole – thus opening the prospect of surpassing the negation of Polishness as a product imagined and encumbered with false values to look at it as a positive value. The blade of criticism contained in the drama is directed against the devaluing narratives, the intention to reveal their simplistic character is inscribed in it.

The drama *All's Good between Us* is an image of a confrontation of different languages, representing contemporary Polishness, written out to the voices of individual characters – three generations who express themselves in clearly different ways, thus defining their identity. Each of them is subject self-disgrace in the drama – the Old Woman, who expresses the voice of a generation that remembers the time of war, spins her story about the past. The narrative takes on the character of a chaotic, archaic monologue, appearing as a conglomeration of motifs of sentimental character repeated like a mantra. The middle generation, represented by Bożena and Halina, seems to be saturated on the one hand with the fear of a threat in the form of a recurring World War II (the grotesque image of obsessively collecting empty yoghurt cups), and thus in a certain superficial way inscribed in the paradigmatic, romantic Polishness, while on the other hand its mentality is determined by its resentment, founded by a cosmopolitan leaning towards the culture of the West. Its essential component is the mythologization of history, depicted in the drama by the statement of the Radio, whose voice the representatives of the middle generation listen to with excitement.

In the old days, when the world was still governed by divine law, all people in the world were Poles. Everyone was Polish, the German was Polish, the Swede was Polish, the Spaniard was Polish, the Pole was Polish, everyone was Polish, just everyone, everyone, everyone. Poland was a beautiful country at that

time; we had wonderful seas, islands, oceans, a fleet that sailed on them and discovered new continents, also belonging to Poland, among others, was the famous Polish explorer Krzysztof Kolumb, who was later renamed Christopher or some other Chris or Isaac. We were a great power, an oasis of tolerance and multiculturalism, and everyone who did not come here from another country, because back then, as we have already mentioned, there were no other countries, was welcomed with bread... (...) and salt... But the good times for our country ended. First, they took America, Africa, Asia and Australia from us. Polish flags were destroyed and other stripes, stars and other doodles were painted on them, the Polish language was officially changed into false foreign languages, which nobody knows but the people who speak them only so that we Poles would not know and understand it and would feel like the lowest of the low (Masłowska 2010: 113).

The motif of World War II as an important point of reference is completely different in the narration of the youngest generation, represented by the Little Metal Girl – the mythogenic fear of the coming of war appears in her statements as a deviation of the older generations that deserves to be compromised. However, the critical attitude of this character towards the mythological style of reading the past does not lead to the elevation of the Girl's attitude – this is mainly because it is expressed through self-disgracing, infantile language. Moreover, the statements by this protagonist are characterized by a particularly strong cosmopolitanism, reduced to the level of banality, illustrated by the phrase 'I do not want to be a Pole, I want to be a European'.

I decided a long time ago that I am not a Pole, but a European, and I learned Polish from records and cassettes that I have left behind by a Polish cleaning lady. We are not Poles, we are Europeans, we are normal people! (...) Everyone knows that Poland is a stupid country, poor and ugly. Ugly architecture, dark weather, cold temperature, even the animals escaped and hid in the forests. Bad shows on TV, jokes that aren't funny, the president looks like a potato and the prime minister like a squash. The prime minister looks like a squash and the president looks like the prime minister. In France, there's France, America in America, Germany in Germany and even in the Czech Republic, there's the Czech Republic, and only in Poland is there Poland (ibid.: 114-115).

The exaggerated image of the resentful negation of Polishness, can also be found in the statements by the phantom Monika, a virtual heroine:

I was born here as a tiny baby by accident, it was just that my great-great-grandparents, great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins lived here for a long time, of course, thrown here by the winds of fate, all the time longing for the West, where they came from. Apparently, from the beginning I cried a lot, I shook my tiny fists, I wanted to go back to where I came from, to the West, but being a helpless newborn I couldn't even say a word in Polish, let alone book a ticket (there wasn't even an Internet connection in Poland in the seventies). What could I do, no matter what I wanted, I learned Polish and now I speak completely without an accent, and yet I can't remember the meaning of some polysyllabic words to this day, which does not prevent me from speaking them. I must also admit that I am not happy with the water, the air, the landscape, the architecture and the people, who are gloomy, dissatisfied with life and burdened with complexes (ibid.: 108).

The ironic character of the cited words is further emphasized by the fact that they are expressed by a character of double fictional status – an ideal woman, created by the Artist, the director of the screenplay for the film *Koń, który jeździł konno* [*The Horse Who Rode on Horseback*], whose work becomes an object of mockery in the play. The character also shares the narrative of a radical negation of Polishness, manifested in the tendency to complain described by Bogdan Wojciszke (2005).

I cannot write (...) this script, because not only do I eat too much, I drive too much on a quad in the cradle of our civilization, to Egypt to the swimming pool and to New York for shopping, but also when I come back and I want to make a film about contemporary Poland and the excluded, uprooted, the disintegration of ties, poverty, intolerance, destabilization of national identity and other terrible problems, about which Hokelbet wrote very well – I don't know, I haven't read him – but which don't concern me, it's not only that I can't, because I can't, but when I come back from Okęcie to this potato field, where sick systems, sick concepts, sick conflicts and sick relations prevail, and the metro goes *brrrr*, the trams go *vrrr*, the cars go *whoosh*, the polluted slurry goes *gobble gobble gobble*, I also want to live somehow, and I still have to pay off the mortgage for this apartment, which, to be honest, would be better suited for a wine cellar (Masłowska 2010: 111-112).

The young generation presented in the drama represents an attitude that could be, in the words of Ewa Thompson (2006), described as one of the poles of resentment – the fascination with Western culture is accompanied by the lack of respect for one’s native culture. Masłowska’s drama can be described as a work testifying to the multiple, all-embracing entanglement of Polishness in various forms and faces of resentment at the level of the character of the figure itself. However, the caricatured dimension of these characteristics reveals a critical attitude towards the ways in which they are perceived in society, thus making the drama a statement focusing not so much on the essence of Polish identity as on narratives used to simplify their conceptualization. The optics of resentful auto-narration are also exceeded at the level of the drama’s structure. The last part of it can be read as a moment of a peculiar re-evaluation. The scene of confrontation between the Little Metal Girl with the world of her grandmother, this time not only told, but also experienced, which escapes the limits of reality, leads to the representative of the youngest generation expressing a gesture of longing for having roots, which is emphasized by the repeated shouts of ‘Bread!’. Bread is a symbol of Polishness in the text – on the one hand, it is an element of the past mentioned by the Old Woman, on the other hand, it is a commodity rejected by the Little Metal Girl, which, according to the cosmopolitan narrative, should be replaced with an analogous product symbolizing the culture of the West. Therefore, the rejection of bread that repeats through the whole text is replaced (in speech) by the desire of it. The ‘last word’ about Polish identity in the drama is a turn towards respect for the past and the need to take root that emerges from the chaos of self-compromising languages. The cry of the Little Metal Girl that ends the drama, does not seem to differ from the aesthetically dominant poetics of lightness – its repetitiveness and laconic character are associated with the key language strategies for the characters: teasing and chanting. Things happen differently in the theatrical concretization of the text, a performance directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna. The exclamation turns into a scream, which can be treated as a sign of the transition to the aesthetics of heaviness. It is given a clear emotional character, referring to the experience of despair, pain and loss. The scream of Little Metal Girl is accompanied by a counterpoint, i.e. a dance scene taking place in the background, evoking obvious associations with the motif taken from Wyspiański’s *Wesele* [*The Wedding*]. The opposition

of the desire to take root with the attitude of passivity gives it a definitely positive character. Jarzyna's spectacle is therefore an interpretation that updates the pro-patriotic (as one could simply define it) potential of Masłowska's drama. This is also thanks to casting Danuta Szaflarska in the role of the Apathetic Old Woman. Szaflarska's acting gives the Old Woman a positive character, thus emphasizing the value of the tradition she represents.

The context speaking to the subtlety of Masłowska's 'patriotic' potential is the film made in 2015 as a recording of the performance. Its creators (and above all the director, Grzegorz Jarzyna) decided to introduce some changes to the performance, 'enriching' it with effects characteristic of film art, thanks to which we can talk about an autonomous work of art (see: Gulda 2015). Leaving aside the issue of the importance of the modification of individual motifs and the ways in which particular scenes are shot, I would like to focus on a significant structural transformation, namely the removal of the last scene of the play in the film version. As a result of this change, Masłowska's work is deprived of the key point of its meaning, which allows itself to be treated as a sign of reversal of the critical perspective outlined in the text. The last words in Jarzyna's film belong, as in the performance, to the Little Metal Girl – however, these are not the emotion-filled shouts of 'bread!', but declarations of hatred towards Polishness expressed in an aggressive tone, summed up in a bitter, ironic 'it's all good between us'. Thanks to the 'amputation' of the last part of Masłowska's text, the film based on the play can be treated more as a 'brilliant satire on Polish struggles with identity' (Kyzioł 2015), a 'witty story about empty forms that create social tissue' (Staszczyszyn 2014), than an ironic, perverse study of Polish auto-narration. The disambiguation of the message is confirmed by the words of critics, such as Jerzy Doroszkiewicz (2015), who in his review of the film mentions the renunciation of Polishness (by the protagonist) in the finale as ballast, and Andrzej Horubała (2015), who identifies the removal of the ending of the play from the film with the gesture of depriving 'Masłowska's grotesque games' of reality (seriously) as a context. Incidentally, the way Jarzyna's accents are arranged in the film results in a kind of visible simplification, creating a hypocritical filter of reality – Masłowska's work begins to function in public opinion as touching upon the problem of the 'exhausted pride' of Poles and framing national identity

as built on national myths. All these features can be found in the drama, but the important thing is in what compositions they occur and what their weight is. The juxtaposition of the performance and the film – two cultural texts, based on the same drama and, above all, on a close mutual relationship – makes it possible to realize the importance of minor shifts.

Coming back to the reflection on Masłowska's drama itself, lightness, which breaks the burden at the level of the ways of dealing with the problem of Polishness, ultimately serves to reveal its importance, to emphasize its value. This leads to the establishment of a 'new burden', the foundation of which is the conviction inscribed in the text that the resentment narratives about Polishness are insufficient as tools to describe its contemporary condition. The work, which can be superficially read as another text stigmatizing Polish vices, becomes a 'rehabilitative' message when seen as a whole – even if only because of its open ending, marked by a leaning towards the search for values. The very fact of leaving space for reflection on the meaning of Polishness, being suspended between the attitude of unambiguous identification and rejection, against the background of radical negative narratives may appear as a sign of positive leaning.

A critical picture of the attitude of Poles towards their own identity in the opinion of the author herself is more of a question, a study of this issue than a diagnosis. In this sense it is a step on the way to the affirmation of Polishness (Baluch 2011: 192).

I am of course not trying to suggest that we are dealing with an innovative phenomenon – that a similar way of using 'light' aesthetic categories was not present in any previously written cultural texts dealing with the issue of Polishness. In the case of the analyzed drama, however, the tension between aesthetic and semantic identity seems to be particularly clear and important from the point of view of reflection on the way the issues of national identity are understood in contemporary Poland. One might think that this issue is additionally illuminated by various critical statements in response to the drama and its staging.

The analysis of the reception of this work leads us to reflection on the transformations of reception styles – the creation of a critical image, the expressive and 'abundant' presence of qualities usually associated with the creation of an aura of irreverent distance do not cause the work to be



rejected by critics with a conservative profile – on the contrary, they lead to the somewhat hasty and simplistic identification of Masłowska’s work with a specific ideological option. Differentiation in the interpretation of the drama and its theatrical incarnations allows to expose a significant problem of insufficiently developed reflection on the function of the means used – some reviewers and critics go in the direction of treating the presence of certain specific aesthetic qualities as the ‘identity determinants’ of a work, without taking into account the question of its intention to use them. In the case of *All’s Good between Us*, this issue is of fundamental importance; its omission may lead to interpretative conclusions marked by a serious omission, e.g. to consider the work primarily as a criticism of Polishness, without noticing its breaking frame, its critical blade directed against simplistic narratives. Thus, a ‘deep’ reading of the drama, taking into account its subtleties, requires exceeding the horizon of identification of given aesthetic means with their traditional ‘sense-forming’ roles.

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## Summary

The article tries to grasp the specifics of Masłowska's works by using the categories of lightness and heaviness. The main subject of analysis is the play *Między nami dobrze jest* [*All's Good between Us*], which treats about Polish national identity via the concept of grotesque. Although the author of the play follows the tradition to critically recognize Polishness (tradition mainly represented by Czesław Miłosz and Witold Gombrowicz), ultimately, she appreciates what have previously seemed to be underestimated. This is mainly due to the tension generated both by the structure of the play and the one caused in the process of its interpretation. The pathos and heaviness usually present in the reflections on topics related to national identity tend to be overcome here by the lightness introduced to the text via irony and grotesque. Moreover, the use of such means does not devalue the problems discussed; on the contrary, they become a key to the new and fresh attempt to redefine Polishness. The article also treats about the relation between the original text of the play and its stage interpretation by Grzegorz Jarzyna – the specificity of presenting the same concepts across different fields of artistic culture.

**Keywords:** Dorota Masłowska, Polish identity, theatre, grotesque.