

RE-WRITING POLAND – DISCOVERING AND CREATING LOCALNESS

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1.

The political-social transformation in Poland occurred in the period when the recovery of state sovereignty was accompanied by two processes. The first one was the construction of supranational community structures, which must be tantamount to voluntary resignation from the part of this sovereignty, and the second one is the resurgence of regionalisms, which may be regarded as a tendency weakening the integrity of the sovereign state and a certain form of its decentralization, including strives for the autonomy of individual provinces – a topic discussed not so long ago in connection with the results of the local government election in Silesia. This second process seems particularly important, because it has released the needs for the self-determination and formation of local identity that were suppressed in the practice of social life in the People's Republic of Poland. This actually refers to the entire country, because – as a result of postwar changes and the complex dynamics of migration, few places or centers have preserved their pre-war identity; as regards large agglomerations, we can say this mainly about Cracow, Poznan and Upper Silesia, but after all, the annihilation of the Jewish minority constituting an inseparable part of the city's community before the war was an important element of change in Cracow, and so was the displacement of the German population in Upper Silesia. There is one thing beyond doubt: the demographic changes that Poles experienced during the postwar period – for example, the need of exiles from the Eastern Borderlands to put down roots in northern and western lands taken away from the Germans – meant the loss of roots

in homelands for large social groups and, at the same time, as a result of the centralistic nationwide ideology, made it difficult for them to put down roots in new places of settlement. It is worth noting that this problem became an important part of experience mainly for those generations that were no longer “newcomers”, but were born in these new areas, treating them naturally as their own ‘place on Earth’. The problem is that this centralistic ‘nationwide’ ideology, which not only suppressed the issues of national minorities existing in the People’s Republic of Poland, but also censored both the memory of lost homelands and attempts to reconstruct all local specificities, made it impossible to conduct a free identity discourse.

In this context, it is worth taking a look at one of the institutions of cultural life in the People’s Republic of Poland: Conventions of Writers of Western and Northern Lands. The last of these conventions took place in Zielona Góra 1970 – further activity was abandoned after Chancellor Willy Brandt and Władysław Gomułka had signed a treaty on the acknowledgement of Polish postwar borders by West Germany. Earlier, however, this annual literary manifestation, attended by otherwise respectable writers, even those expressing opposition against the system, had been aimed not at pointing out the distinctness of regions incorporated into Poland after the war, but by demonstrating their strong roots in Polishness and prove their ongoing re-Polonization in that place. Thus, the aim of separating these lands as an object of special interest was not to indicate their regional specificity, but to highlight the fact that they are an inseparable and undiversified factor of the nationally homogeneous Polish state. This does not mean, however, that these areas were not subject to processes that manifested themselves in a relatively large constellation of works raising the identity issues of communities living here when the dominance of the centralized ideological state disappeared. And it is not a coincidence that one of the magazines created in these areas after 1989 published a text containing Václav Havel’s (1997) words raising problems related to these issues:

I think that the world is slowly overcoming the traditional concept of the national state (...). In my opinion, the gradual overcoming of the national state in its traditional sense should also lead to a new understanding of the term ‘homeland’. We should learn to feel the homeland as it may have been felt in the past – as our piece of ‘the world in general’,

i.e., something that locates us in the world rather than something that tears us away from it.

The same magazine published Yuri Lotman's (1997) reflections:

The occurrence of cultural subcultures characterized by varied constitution and capacity of memory causes a different level of ellipticity of texts circulating in cultural communities and leads to the formation of 'local semiotics'.

Both quotations are fragments of texts published as reprints from the nationwide press in the Provincial Occasional Literary Magazine „Łabuz” issued in Łobez in the years 1995-2010, edited by Leon Zdanowicz (who died in June 2009). From the very beginning, the magazine focused on creating a new identity of the Łobez Land – which, however, was rooted deeply in the past – and on interpreting successive layers of its historical palimpsest. One of the main motifs of materials published in „Łabuz” is the issue of creating local identity. This post-German Pomeranian town, inhabited mainly by newcomers from other regions after the war, could root its tradition only in the past censored until 1989. Only its reconstruction in the magazine became the foundation of 'self-pursuit', i.e., finding historical stability that allowed it to shape its new 'local semiotics'.

2.

In 1996, the special award of the Paris monthly „Kultura” was granted to Adam Kwas, Kazimierz Brakoniecki and Krzysztof Czyżewski – editors of regional magazines „Ziemia Kłodzka”, „Borussia” and „Krasnogruda”. In all of these three cases, the Editor promoted two aspects of activity of circles editing those magazines: not only the creation of a new local identity, but also the reconstruction of its cross-border tradition, i.e., the creation of such type of regionalism that is not confined to the borders of the national state and, therefore, attempts to build open and dialogue-based local structures. In the case of „Krasnogruda”, this openness resulted in attempts to re-create the Intermarium in subsequent years – in a manner similar to Andrzej Stasiuk's writings and the editorial activity of the Czarne Publishing House – that were expressed not only in „Krasnogruda”, but also in the Meridian series – a publishing initiative presenting the literature of that area as a whole.

We can risk the thesis that all of the tendencies that appeared in writings and the translation practice of circles attempting to shape 'local semiotics'

constitute the effort of interpreting the cultural palimpsest formed as a result of overlapping political and historical processes. This refers primarily to 'post-German' areas, but also to the entire European macro region forming the Intermarium; an important issue here is the turn towards history as an element shaping local communities above unsteady political borders determined on these lands by international treaties or agreements. The transformations occurring in Europe after 1989, primarily the 'opening' of borders, leads to a specific reconstruction of the areas isolated from one another in the previous period whose local communities became dispersed or were simply annihilated as a result of the events of World War II and subsequent resettlements and migrations. Today, when looking at these areas, we can observe something that I would prefer to define as the revitalization of historical memory, which was suppressed for a long time, among others, due to censorship and the determination of 'taboo' areas, which resulted in breaking the sense of historical continuity. As a result of shifted borders and a specific kind of migration, as well as the emergence of new groups of resettled communities and the blockade of memory work – in the case of Poland, this refers particularly to the memory of the Eastern Borderlands – only after 1989 can we speak of the slow 'self-pursuit' and the creation of identity narrations aimed at putting in order the experiences of the years 1939-1989 by literature (but also by literary, sociological or anthropological studies).

In Poland, this involves the dynamic revitalization of cultural life (including literary life) and the intensification of activity in centers that were previously marginalized. Examples are easy to find: mainly in Upper Silesia, where political and social transformations brought significant changes in the periodical press – within a relatively short time, a constellation of literary or social & cultural magazines emerges here, in which one of the significant motifs is to raise the issue of local distinctness both in the historical aspect and with regard to the current situation; we can notice this by reading such titles as „Opcje”, „Śląsk”, „Fa-art” or „Arkadia”, such literary works as Feliks Netz's *Urodzony w Święto Zmarłych* [*Born in All Souls' Day*], Wojciech Kuczok's *Gnój* [*Dung*], Stefan Szymutko's *Nagrobek ciotki Cili* [*Aunt Cila's Tomb*] or, finally, essays by Henryk Waniek; the same happens in Warmia and Masuria („Borussia”, „Portret”, *Oblicza ojczyzny* [*The Faces of the Homeland*] – an anthology by Wienfried Lipscher and Kazimierz

Brakoniecki) in Pomerania („Pogranicza”, works of Artur D. Liskowacki and Inga Iwasiów) or in Gdynia, which is reflected by the „Bliza” magazine founded by Paweł Huelle. These are not the only phenomena of this kind in Poland. Maybe the most interesting illustration of this process is the literature highlighting the cultural distinctness of Cieszyn Silesia with its dominant Evangelical characteristics – either in Jerzy Pilch’s prose (here the novel *Inne rozkosze* [*Other Delights*] deserves special attention, but it is also worth mentioning fragments of the cycle *Bezpamiętnie utracona leworeczność* [*Irretrievably Lost Left-Handedness*] or the diary published in old „Przekrój”), or the poetry of Jerzy Kronhold or Zbigniew Machej (the volume *Zima w małym mieście na granicy* [*Winter in a Small Border Town*]), and an important supplement that refers to the past is *Opowieści cieszyńskie* [*Cieszyn Stories*] – a publication of Kornel Filipowicz’s selected short stories. The same can be said about a series of Gdańsk publications, such as Paweł Huelle’s novels *Weisser Dawidek* and *Castorp*, Stefan Chwin’s *Hanemann*, an album series *Był sobie Gdańsk* [*There Was A City Called Gdańsk*] prepared by Wojciech Duda, Grzegorz Fortuna, Konrad Nawrocki and Donald Tusk, or Maria Kurecka’s memory book *Niedokończona gawęda* [*An Unfinished Tale*], to name only a few examples. Also Lower Silesia, particularly Wrocław, exposes ‘Gothic letters as sharp as stones’ mentioned in Tadeusz Różewicz’s poem *Kamienni bracia* [*Brothers of Stone*] and seems to create its history anew – whether in Andrzej Zawada’s sketch *Bresław* [*Breslau*], or *Microcosm* – a volume of the history of Wrocław commissioned from British historian Norman Davies.

3.

However, commenting upon these literary tendencies at the end of the 1990s, Krzysztof Uniłowski quite perversely highlighted the cognitive evasion accompanying them, which is based on the mechanism of creating identity and respecting its recovery in the cultural context through ‘provincial’ literature. But the experience of this literature is ambiguous. The specificity and safety of the identity of small homelands and entities immersed in it that is described in this literature veils a basic traumatic experience that gave rise to this idyll: the trauma of the deprivation of roots.

To what extent is this allegation justified? After all, the issue of the deprivation of roots was largely exploited by emigration literature,

particularly its Eastern Borderlands' current. Also in domestic literature, this subject area was reflected, although not quite distinctly, in works of writers like Tadeusz Konwicki or Leopold Buczkowski. Jerzy Stempowski correctly diagnosed the latter's works by writing: 'The author juxtaposes the power of memory and faithfulness to the home of which only the key has remained against barbarian destroyers, arsonists and murderers'. Obviously, the issue of deprivation of roots does not become exhausted only with regard to the loss of the Second Polish Republic – for example, in *Lida* by Aleksander Jurewicz or *Dyemtoszczyna* [*Dyemtoschtchina*] by Andrzej Turczyński – but is reflected also in the raising of the issue of annihilation of the multicolor ethnic landscape, which constituted, as Julian Przyboś wrote very suggestively, an integral component of the Polish reality of the Jewish world for centuries. It is interesting to note that Przyboś's recollection was crossed out in the context of the events of 1968; this episode, being undoubtedly one of the significant aspects of the experience of deprivation of roots, actually seems to be still hidden and censored in literary ascertainments. Nevertheless, the annihilation of the Jewish world is expressed in attempts to reconstruct local traditions also in most recent literature – for example in Piotr Szewc's works such as *Zagłada* [*Annihilation*] or *Zmierzchy i poranki* [*Dusks and Mornings*], Anna Bolecka's *Biały kamień* [*The White Stone*] or Paweł Huelle's novel *Weiser Dawidek*.

More importantly, however, the issue of the loss of roots – but also the reconstruction and creation of local identity – appears in a series of books representing the genre of a literary document, particularly in autobiographies or diaries, for example *Kręgi obcości* [*The Circles of Strangeness*] by Michał Głowiński, *Czarny ogród* [*The Black Garden*] by Małgorzata Szejnert, *Kronika z Mazur* [*A Chronicle from Masuria*] by Erwin Kruk or *Wywołane z pamięci* [*Recalled from Memory*] by Piotr Lachmann. Today we can speak of the rising development tendency of historical reportage – not only in the local dimension, as in the case of Szejnert's book, but also in the regional dimension in the broadest sense of this word, as in the case of the reconstruction of the historical and cultural memory of the Intermarium in *Linia powrotu* [*The Return Line*] – a volume of Krzysztof Czyżewski's essays-reportages. Moreover, this reconstruction and creation of localness or regionality undoubtedly carries a note of melancholy, the presence of which is described very aptly

by Czyżewski (2013) with regard to the entire space of Central Europe, but in such a manner that this description fits the areas of various provinces, too:

The traveller going across Central European lands was immersed in a trail of dusk for centuries, and this experience of the end and the resulting void allowed him to feel the community of this civilizational space as a whole. Maybe never before had it emerged as a fulfilled reality. Only the loss of this world and the empty place after it revealed the existence of the whole spiritual continent here. Hence the sadness as if after the loss of something that we have never had.

This spiritual continent obviously has its separate lands, each of which has its unique specificity.

4.

The same happens in Poland, although it was not only its case: the experience of the interwar period across this ‘continent’ was, after all, some kind of preparation for existence and creation of a new identity – a country that did not emerge as a ‘fulfilled reality’ before 1939. The interpenetrating tendencies to reconstruct the ‘spiritual continent’ to which Czyżewski refers, signified by such phenomena as the debate about Central Europe initiated by Milan Kundera, a branch of which was an excellent cycle *Europa środkowa* [*Europe of the Centre*] in „Zeszyty Literackie”, and ascertainments aimed at discovering and creating localness in the literature of this region seem to pave the road to ‘overcoming the traditional sense of the national state’ about which Václav Havel writes. Being interpreted in this context, the aforementioned works by Brakoniecki, Huelle or Kuczok form an interesting collection. In this collection, ‘localness’ acquires its autonomy, or even sovereignty, and becomes a central point of reference in the description of the world, as in the case of Ithaca in Homer’s *Odyssey* or Dublin in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Such a role is also played by Gdańsk in Paweł Huelle’s novel *Castorp* or by Szczecin in Inga Iwasiów’s works *Bambino* and *Ku słońcu* [*Towards the Sun*]. In this dimension, the restoration of localness is the creation of new universalism, where – and the evolution of Kazimierz Brakoniecki’s poetry is a perfect illustration of this – the independent identity of the human being as an irreducible value becomes a central point of reference.

The phenomenon in question is a process that becomes visible only when we try to look at the whole literary output after 1989 from a distance that allows us to see not only, as critics emphasised in the early 1990s, an attempt to discard what Lidia Burska defined as the ‘troublesome heritage’ of Poland (turned into another country – Akslop in Miłosz Biedrzycki’s poem) and ‘forms of memory’ valid until then, but also an effort to perceive the ‘other one’ in oneself, which is the prerequisite for self-determination. Therefore, Przemysław Czapliński (2009) makes the right comment when writing about Mariusz Sieniewicz’s novel *Żydówek nie obsługujemy* [*We Do Not Serve Jewish Women*]:

Thus, identity is not a fact – something that can be attested or proven objectively. It is a performative, which means a created fact: we can be thrown into identity or lose it, but its existence always manifests itself in a relation. Moreover, as a performative, identity is not static, but it acts, changing the human being provided with identity, because it produces the different attitude of other persons. Providing identity triggers the action.

This obviously refers not only to individual protagonists of our literature, but also to literature itself. The regaining of its own independence by literature is the preliminary phase of this action, and the original slogan, though not always stated explicitly, is ‘re-writing Poland’ or ‘Poland needs substitution’. In this phase, the discovery or creation of localness seems to be the starting point for liberation from the context of the ‘great narration’ dictated until now by the tradition of national culture, where ‘Polishness’, being historically determined and abstract at the same time, was the dominant category. It is also a manifestation of attempts to liberate this narration from its ‘politicality’, or, in other words, to introduce elements of the discourse of civil society. Using Gombrowicz’s language, we could call this liberation of the human being in the Pole; here, Gombrowicz’s *Diary* undoubtedly and primarily determines the horizon of searches. In the end, ‘localness’ would serve here as the opening point of the discourse about ‘my Poland’, or ‘my place on Earth’, if we are to refer to the title of the first postwar volume by Julian Przyboś.

Maybe this localness – its recognition and being rooted in it – is a chance for liberation, as in the case of Hubert Klimka-Dobrzaniecki’s prose. In *Wariat* [*The Madman*], nativeness is exceeded. However, relations with

familiarity are not broken. They exist in the memory of the protagonist, who is not homesick. Maybe this is why he departs and packs his things, seeing on the horizon of his experience the future space of freedom not restricted by localness and memories. By his own place, which he does not have, by nostalgia, which does not hold him down, but only promises freedom, by the archived familiarity of the place.

This discovery – or rather renewal – and formation of localness is the creation of an opportunity to feel like a ‘citizen of the world’. In this context, ‘rewriting Poland’ is a real challenge to discover the world as a space for the fulfillment of one’s own personal freedom. Political freedom opens huge possibilities of being free *par excellence*, free in the internal and external space. By resigning from compulsion and from the auto-censorship of the subject, literature opens us to a new, unknown and uncertain world. It reduces the distance between the political-social world and the ‘I’ immersed in the reality of its own desires, wills and places; after all, is it them, not politics and society, that constitute a small local homeland for everyone. However, it is also the curse of freedom: each ‘going out to the world’ with this small rucksack entails a risk arising, among others, from the confrontation of the well-known and inseparably ‘own’ picture of the world with what has been unknown until now, but creates a chance for its enrichment and constant ‘self-pursuit’. Thus, paradoxically, we can say that the regaining of identity is an invitation to transform it. Maybe we can, therefore, regard the end of the history of the Provincial Literary Occasional Magazine „Łabuź” as the symbolic conclusion of this transitional period in the course of most recent Polish literature, the dominant feature of which was the ‘return to oneself’. Now, after the return, literature faces another journey with tracks leading to the unknown, just as Odysseus did after reaching Ithaca.

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Summary

The article is an attempt to reconstruct a trend in literature after 1989 which focuses on restoring local identity and is often referred to as the 'literature of little homelands'. Various processes occur in this framework, like the reinterpretation of historical phenomena, restoring or creating memory by unlocking areas covered by censorship in the Polish People's Republic. The main task of this trend – which should be regarded as temporary – is to raise questions of identity. This stage should be treated as a preparation for future re-evaluation of this issue as it provides a starting point for taking advantage of those opportunities that were given to literature by the regained political freedom.

Keywords: Polish literature after 1989, literature of little homelands, locality, memory, Polish identity