

Poetics or Politics: Contemporary Polish Literature

THEORETICAL POSTULATES

An attempt to describe contemporary literature is a difficult undertaking. Yet, the attempt to rationally describe the processes taking place in contemporary literature is of value because the search for such a description of the mechanisms operating helps us to understand those processes and enhances the possibility of bringing about a dialogue between "describers" of literature.

In order to make the description at least basically objective, one has to make it on two — to a degree independent — planes, looking for homological phenomena in both aspects of the analysis. The first of these aspects is that set of phenomena which is often designated as "literary life." It is an aspect of description that is exceptionally significant and, indeed, in times of social, political, and literary changes, probably more important than the immanent changes within literature itself, as it enables one to discern motives for these changes. At the same time, a focus on "literary life" refers us directly to events which constitute factors underlying the changes taking place. Basic rules governing literary life make a diagnosis of the immanent changes, poetics, and ideology of literature itself possible. In other words, if literary analysis is conducted without attention to the texts' extra- or peri-literary context, the analysis will become a mythologized and absolutized interpretation and thus a *misinterpretation*.

One of the main problems with a description of contemporary literature is periodization. This holds true also for most of modern Polish literature. In our case, the disagreement among literary scholars as to the timeframes of literary epochs concerns two threshold dates: some rank the turning-point of the year 1980 higher, while others prefer to hold 1989 or 1990 for the more significant date (Kisiel 4; Bolecki 35). Both sides argue using references to purely external, socio-political events — an approach convenient but implausible. It is almost always the case that such events influence literature only after some time has elapsed and literary works reflecting such changes are usually created quite later.

The summer of 1980 is understood as the beginning of social and political protest in Poland, while June 1989 is important because of the elections that brought political victory to the new social formation (significant in this context are the suspension and then elimination of censorship in 1989 and 1990, respectively). Both dates are rationally justified and are informative enough. However, neither of these dates represents sufficiently the historical turning-point in contemporary Polish literature (Maciejewski 1993b, 24).

In our view, the most rational choice seems to be a notion that would consider both these thresholds as a frame, thus representing a period of literary activity with special social and literary awareness. The decade thus described is such a period "in-between," where the clash of the old and new tendencies of literary development becomes discernable. In addition, this time frame allows an emphasis on the Martial Law years, a truly paradoxical cultural event. This time frame concerns not exclusively intra-literary processes, but also, and indeed even more significantly, literature in the context of social awareness and its role within the processes of social and cultural changes.

CONTEMPORARY POLISH LITERATURE: A DESCRIPTION

During the period as postulated above, at least three literary and artistic contexts coexist in Polish literature. Their mutual inter-relationships, as well as quantitative and qualitative changes within separate contexts determine the direction of the processes taking place. The first context, that of official, state-supported literature, represents works approved by the state and operating by state patronage. This literature may be concisely described as literature written to support official and state-controlled socialist ideology.

At the same time, however, more and more highly regarded and almost officially sanctioned becomes the so-called "second circuit" literature. This context of contemporary literature emanates from a declaration of the then Minister of Culture. The Minister not only acknowledged the presence of such literature and termed it "second" or "unofficial circuit" literature but also acknowledged a lack of official objection to these works. From an ideological point of view this literature may be described as an anti-socialist literature. Here, the point of discussion should concern ideological differences in the texts with respect to the utilization of similar or dissimilar rhetorics for political purposes. Also, notice should be taken of the mechanisms of these two parallel literary developments. On the one hand, political changes taking place in Poland allowed for the gradual reduction of official literature in quantity and, consequently, in importance. Moreover, in the decade discussed, clearly noticeable is an accumulation of a defensive stance in official literature. On the other hand, a clear quantitative increase occurred in the "second circuit" literature while it also gained in importance. The growth of "second circuit" literature was evident in the appearance of new underground periodicals, the existence of illegal publishing houses,

and, most importantly, the emergence of a *sui generis* market and readership for this unofficial literature. These phenomena were accompanied by a mechanism — indeed classical for turning-point times (as was the case, for example, in Russia during the 1920s) — of writers clustering around periodicals and magazines, the formation of coteries and literary groups which formed upon the basis of organizational or ideological principles instead of aesthetic interests and considerations. Thus, we can postulate that Polish literary life in the period discussed transformed itself significantly more and more according to ethical and/or political considerations and less on artistic and aesthetic polyvalence.

The fact of belonging to one or the other circuit constituted a basis for the moral classification of writers. This ethical utilitarianism created new hierarchies, thus altering the map of contemporary Polish literature and reinforcing that particularly East Central European phenomenon where the function of literature exceeds the norm usual in Western democracies. Frequently, writers who dared spectacular political acts and manifestoes were those who moved to the foreground in literary life as well as in the perception of social change. Literary authority is thus measured by the openness of the views expressed and by the courage to formulate them as radically as possible. This is not to say that the moral and political position of a writer may not be part and parcel of aesthetic excellence, however. The dialectics of the increase of the presence of the "second circuit" literature and the reduction of the official one — an analysis of the number of publications and copies per issue of state sanctioned publications is not decisive because popularity and readership was determined exactly by the political and ideological parameters of this "second circuit" literature — seems to be the basic mark of the sweep that took place during the 1980s.

In addition to the state sanctioned and the "second circuit" literary production, there was also a "third circuit" literature: this was Polish emigré(e) literature (see, for example, Możejko). Existence of this separate literary world in post-Second World War Poland was, while known by many, barred from readership by state authority and repression. Important from our point of view, however, is how by the 1980s emigré literature began to penetrate domestic literary circulation. Until the 1980s, these works reached only a narrow circle of experts and their influence on general aesthetic or historical literary awareness was negligible. In addition, the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Czesław Miłosz became a watershed as he represented the importance and hence prestige of emigré literature in Poland. Although at first Martial Law inhibited the circulation of emigré texts, the activities of "second circuit" groups compensated for these limitations to a large degree with an abundance of literary texts and critical works. Thus, by the mid-1980s a "triumvirate of power" came into existence and the literary scene achieved a balance between official literature and the "second" and "third circuits" of literature.

The end of the Martial Law period and the beginning of economic changes in Poland is clearly connected to external literary rules of conduct. These new mechanisms and rules were based on and expressed by — among other factors — underground publishing houses which gradually were allowed to become legal and new management models in publishing which significantly influenced the circulation of books and brought about the independence from state control of editors' decisions. Also worth mentioning is that the oppositionist literary movement, that at some point could avail itself of the possibility to exist officially, organized under the slogan of "independence," was in fact a *littérature engagée*. The second half of the 1980s, and most visibly after the June election of 1989, is a period when an almost complete subordination of the former powerful official literature occurs. Its textual and institutional mechanisms represented the acquiescence to the primacy of the former underground and emigré literatures. At the same time, it also lost its political and ideological direction and sense of purpose.

Irrespective of these trends and tendencies, over the whole of the period described, existed "non-institutionally" a fraction of the literary field that always — even in stormy times — meticulously guarded its true independence, cherishing an attitude of special disinterest with respect to the political temporaneity. This type of literature is best termed purely aesthetic and polyvalent literature, that which strenuously avoids political commitment and the taking up of persuasive missions.

A characteristic feature accompanying changes of literary hierarchies is the transformation of the critical review of literature in Poland. Over the first years of the period discussed, irrespective of its political option or its belonging to the official or the oppositional networks, literary criticism was dominated by the conviction of its socio-political mission. It usurped or, to say the least, claimed the right — and sometimes indeed the duty — to openly promote certain extra- and non-aesthetical ideologies, usually accompanied by normative aesthetic valuation. On the other hand, a transformation of the role of the writer from an active and productive author into that of a annalist and an arbiter of literature marked a turning point. Thus, the postulative pathos of literary criticism has conspicuously been replaced by a literary evaluation of different circumstances.

Another essential index of literary life in Poland was its break with historical closure into an opening to the historical past. It was, first of all, the "nearest" past; renewed were connections with that literary territory that for ideological reasons had been silenced after World War II and that had not functioned in the country's social perception. Polish emigré literature has returned from "exile" and post-1956 and post-1968 literature have been read anew and in a different context. This filling in of gaps in the picture of contemporary Polish literature also significantly influenced the kind of works now emerging. For example, Czesław Miłosz's Nobel Prize in 1980 brought about an unexpected increase in

the interest in this poet, and brought the pattern of his poetry into contemporary lyrics. Similarly, after 1980 Zbigniew Herbert began to influence new poetry again. Thus the classicist moralist tendency in the poetry of the beginning of the 1980s was born; its propagators and its direct connection with the social political situation are obvious.

After 1981 the relationships with contemporary times turned out to be less important in literature. The imposition of Martial Law significantly altered both the writers' interests and the direction of the development of Polish literature. Emphasis was then laid on the border between good and evil, people closed their minds to all that did not go with the accepted rules:

the Messianic romantic ... and the martyrological ones of the times of the fall of the January Uprising. This strong opposition of open and closed attitudes, tendencies to either freedom or intolerant rigourism, took on new, different strength and new senses in the new (post-Communist) conditions; it dominated culture and the whole of public life. (Lukaszewicz 6-7)

One may, indeed, risk saying that at the beginning of the 1980s the internal course of Polish literature ran along two lines: in the direction of social and public choices (these dominated), and in that of aesthetic ones. This duality may also be observed from the angle of the writers' attitudes: they were an opposition between realism and avant-garde — in the case of the aesthetic attitude — and between a committed approach and withdrawal, mainly in the case of social attitudes. These were not unified positions and should rather be construed as antithetic ones. Realism did still express itself both in poetry and prose in the form of a new pattern of commitment during the Martial Law period. At the same time, it also constituted an overstepping of the public pattern, especially in autobiographical literature — a substitution for the great epic. Similar was the case with avant-garde literature: on the one hand it was an objection to "committed" literary production, but on the other hand a sovereign literary model was constructed, one of a *à rebours* — it required courage, no doubt, to write literature against the surrounding reality. Thus, in the 1980s two literary antinomies appeared. One was an antinomy of a creative attitude (morally honest against morally dishonest writing); the other was an antinomy of literary codes (innovative against traditional production). In poetry and prose the battle continued during the whole decade between the traditionalists and the innovators.

Classical and closed forms were set against open ones, symmetry against asymmetry, order against a lack of faith in any order whatsoever. The realistic novel was replaced with the *interview-fleuve* (J. Strykowski, T. Konwicki, J. Lem, and others), with the novel process of writing which made the reader and the author equal and placed them against the same circumstances of creation. A similar role was accorded to paraliterary texts such as the conversations of E. Gierek, S. Kania, W. Jaruzelski, and the interviews of T. Toranska and J.

Trznadel, for example, where the poem was transformed into a note, into a loose form of temporary script. Impression replaced reflection. On the other hand, however, an extremely strong trend towards standardization of poetics and style occurred. The Romanticist concept of the creator clashed with the Classicist-writer's concept of the need to present what is happening within extra-literary reality using a single verifiable and confirmable pattern. A poetic duel raged within the circle of a tradition that was perceived as a closed system (Miłosz, Herbert, the New Wave poets). During the first half of the 1980s Romanticist historiographies were more often employed and since the mid-1980s Classicist examples were used. However, by the end of the decade in 1989 it turned out that the influences of Miłosz and Herbert proved stronger than the Romanticist and New Wave dictions (Łukasiewicz 1993a, 49-50). Sławiński maintains that the stable system of poetics decomposed then (15-16).

The situation was different in prose. Classicist forms were supplanted by a new type of language expression absent from Polish literature until that time, or if present, then only weakly. The team work of prose-writers of the so-called Bereza school (A. Łuczeńczyk, D. Bitner, P. Przywara, T. Sęktas, J. Rudnicki, K. Bielecki, and others) was a victory of the "excluded languages," anti-logical codes, polymorphous forms, polyphonic structures not yielding to dismythification and propaganda pressures. Yet, the line of tradition is conspicuous here, too: its roots are in the changes of literary expression in the 1930s and in the changes of Polish prose after 1956 (Maciejewski 1993a, 1). Grotesque is substituted for seriousness, the all-knowing character is replaced with the introspective one, deformed reality is not subjected to any ordering action, men and women are presented as the synthesis of opposing emotions and, in a way, as personifications of the forces of decay. This clash of the traditionalists and innovators would mean nothing particularly significant (it has been active in Polish literature for a number of decades, now), if not for the fact that during the 1980s these writers' attitudes were ascribed moral meaning. The poetic codes of the Miłosz and Herbert school, of Romanticism, and the New Wave, were considered morally honest while the new prose-writing code was perceived as morally debatable. This valuation appears strange if we consider that in the case of prose it was not the world presented or the point of view that was discussed, but rather the technique of expression. This way of thinking also found keen patronage in part by literary critics of the "second circuit." Critical descriptions manifested a high level of hysteria. The person who did not take up the proposed, simplest, "black-and-white" axiology, was deemed not a literary expert and was ostracised. This situation manifested itself as a construction of a competitive model with state authority and its exclusion tactics based on an identical axiology.

One may assume that in Polish literature of the 1980s polemics went on not so much about social or public models of writing but rather about aesthetic models. Organized actions of the innovators were opposed by the defenders of traditionalist Polish literature and culture. The debate that began may best be

described as debate between the Romanticists and the Post-Modernists, a debate of the followers of the old, great cultural era and those proposing new expressions of a new era. Maria Janion, a scholar of Polish Romanticism, describes 1989 as follows:

1989 ... was a portent of a symbolic closure of a whole great epoch in Polish culture, the epoch of the domination of a uniform romantic symbolic style. For two hundred years our culture organized itself around spiritual values, construed as symbols of Polish identity, such as fatherland, freedom, national solidarity. With the social, economic, and political changes that are to make Poland into a "normal" country of democracy and free market, this exceptional monolithism had to be shaken. "Uniformity" is at odds with "multiplicity", "solidarity" with "competitiveness", and (mainly spiritual) "value" with "business" (i.e., mainly economic interest). This new situation, replete with strife, chaos, and misunderstandings forces the idea-forming elites (the end of the *Intelligenzia* in Poland has been announced, it seems, too hastily) to take up the challenge, that is, to create a free market of ideas, to form various plans of spiritual life, to forge an abundance of languages, speaking of the reality characteristic of democracies. Alternative trends in culture will appear, expressions of a "different" thinking will show. (6; our translation)

This stance is not exceptional in modern Polish literary criticism as Włodzimierz Bolecki writes:

The decade of the 1980s forces literary critics to ask for the first time the question about an entity much larger than just one decade.... Features of this historical literary whole, thus, seem to be a continuity, consisting in a continuation of various traditions, and simultaneously a sense of an end to the communication system between the writer and the reader, existing to date.... (43; our translation)

After 1989, the subject matter of Polish literature underwent significant changes both in theme and in form. The notion of "national sacrum," covering both sacralized and mythologized "Polishness" and traditionally highly esteemed Catholicism, vanishes. The new poetic movement, focussing around the poets of Kraków's "Brulion" (P. Filas, Z. Sajnóg, M. Świątlicki, J. Podsiadło, M. Biedrzycki), the so-called young Post-Modernist prose (A. Stasiuk, R. Praszynski, M. Kotarski, I. Filipiak, M. Gretkowska) and the authors of the "Art-Zin" movement circle, aim against that "national sacrum" (Tomkowski 61-62). Destroying authorities, showing the world mutilated, unmasking the heroic ethos, moral provocations, grotesque forms and mockery of the established hierarchy of values — these are the features of the newest literature in Poland. Much is show and rebellion for rebellion's sake. Nonetheless, it is in these expressions of the younger generation of authors and critics who support this model and its expressions that these hitherto unprecedented characteristics of Polish literature manifest themselves. What was until this day a national, religious, or moral

taboo, has now become a messenger of the artistic quest, a dominant of the turning point in the most modern literature (Balcerzan 8-13).

A description of two parallel elements — the tensions within literary life on one hand, and immanent changes of literature itself on the other — uncovers a variety of processes thus conditioning the awareness of the changes taking place. Extra-literary rules of politics, influencing the literary "circuits" overlap here with developmental tendencies within the art of the word, connected with the interplay between tradition and innovative actions. Ethical valuations of political attitudes begin to actively shape purely literary qualities. The rebellion of the younger generation — already linked with a break of literary generations — and the impact of a socio-political contexts upon the changes of literary forms — aesthetic choices formed by a revaluation of cultural traditions — become agents in the changing picture of contemporary Polish literature.¹

University of Silesia
Trans. Wojtek Maj (Katowice)

Works Cited

- Balcerzan, Edward. "Ubytki, przedłużenia, trójkąty. Poezja polska w latach 1989-1993." *Kresy* 2 (1994): 8-13.
- Bolecki, W. "O literaturze polskiej w latach osiemdziesiątych." *Współczesna literatura polska lat osiemdziesiątych i dziewięćdziesiątych*. Lipsk: Instytut Polski, 1993. 34-44.
- Janion, M. *Projekt krytyki fantazmatycznej: Szkice o egzystencjach ludzi i duchów*. Warszawa: PEN, 1991.
- Kisiel, M. "Literatura się spóźniła." *Wiadomości Kulturalne* 3 (1994): 4.
- Łukasiewicz, J. "Poezja polska wobec współczesności." *Współczesna literatura polska lat osiemdziesiątych i dziewięćdziesiątych*. Lipsk: Instytut Polski, 1993a. 46-54.
- . *Rymy czyli powinność: Szkice o książkach i ludziach po roku 1980*. Wrocław: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Polonistyki Wrocławskiej, 1993b.
- Maciejewski, J. "Co dalej z literaturą polską?" *Przegląd Literacki* 2 (1993a): 1-3.
- . "Systematyka prozy polskiej ostatnich lat dwunastu." *Współczesna literatura polska lat osiemdziesiątych i dziewięćdziesiątych*. Lipsk: Instytut Polski, 1993b. 22-32.
- Możejko, Edward. "Ethnic or National (?): Polish Literature in Canada." Joseph Pivato, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, and Milan V. Dimić, eds. *Literatures of Lesser Diffusion/Les littératures de moindre diffusion*. Special issue of *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 16.3-4 (1989): 809-25.
- Ślawiński, J. "Zanik centrali." *Kresy* 2 (1994): 14-16.
- Tomkowski, J. "Literatura polska po 1989 roku: Perspektywy, obawy, prognozy." *Współczesna literatura polska lat osiemdziesiątych i dziewięćdziesiątych*. Lipsk: Instytut Polski, 1993. 56-65.

MARTIN PILAŘ

Making Both Ends Meet, or, Czech Literature after November 1989

THE IDEA OF CONTINUITY

It came as no surprise that following the heady days of the "Velvet Revolution" many prominent writers — and not only those prevented from publishing by Husák's neo-Stalinist establishment — started to give voice to their belief in the need to continue in the rich tradition of modern Czech literature, cut short by the Russian invasion in 1968. Such opinions were also widespread among dissident authors united under the common programme of anti-Brezhnevist opposition in Charta 77. However, the voices of the "sixty-eightists" soon subsided as the newly revived right wing of Czech culture began to stress the need to probe even further back to the years before the Communist coup in 1948. Yet, the discussion does not stop here. Writers of the previous generation, whose lives were shattered by the holocaust, concentration camps, and imprisonment during World War II, started to publish their personal reminiscences of happy days in a democratic Czechoslovakia between the World Wars. In many ways they were justified in this, especially when advocating pluralism as an essential feature of a free and open cultural environment. But their fundamentally optimistic vision of this time remains clouded by an unavoidable shadow: there was something rotten in the state of Czechoslovakia, an observation proven by the simple fact that it no longer exists. I could carry on in pursuit of an ideal period in history and mention certain elements of nostalgia for the Austro-Hungarian Empire, for bygone monarchist days when we were a part of a strong Central European state under the rule of the Habsburg dynasty. But there is no sense in continuing this pilgrimage which is growing steadily more utopian. By now, i.e., from the perspective of the last decade of the twentieth century, it should be evident that it is futile seeking an elusive concept of continuity. In Czech literature of this century it simply does not exist and this is an idea which fills me not with pessimism but with enthusiasm. It seems that a truly rich and self-confident literature is not forced to rely entirely on forming various literary circles and following a given artistic (or even political) programme. Cultural life in Czechoslovakia between the wars could boast of a rich array of literary camps whose numerous magazines proved a fertile ground for artistic manifestos. However, a few strongly individual authors of the time, whose works are widely

1 It should be noted that preferences of the reading public follow the above described changes of Polish literature at a much slower pace.

read and prove inspirational to today's readers and writers of successive generations, such as Ladislav Klíma, Jakub Deml, Josef Váchal, Richard Weiner, etc., were in their time far from being highly regarded heroes. Unfortunately, they were solitary outcast figures and hermits living on the periphery of our cultural life. Of course, it would be easy to find consolation in the belief that the situation in the pre- or post-Hussite times, or under the strongly oppressive regime after the victory of Catholic forces (at the battle of the White Mountain in 1620) was radically better. But it is a more realistic and bold approach to accept the idea of continuity as utopian and the Central European environment as fundamentally uncondusive to such idealism.

A FEW NOTES ON CHANGE

November 1989 saw a general outburst of optimism, caused not only by the opening up of new — and this time realistic — political and economic horizons, but also by the fact that too many generations of Czechs have been subject to constant totalitarian indoctrination about a "happy future in peace for all working people." Suddenly this utopian vision seemed almost to be on the verge of fulfilment. Milan Kundera's sceptical commentary on the Czech tendency to look to a "lyrical age," the false, or at least exaggerated cult of Youth and Revolution (*Život je jinde [Life is Elsewhere]*), proved to be founded on a deep understanding of our national characteristics. However, Kundera's bitter observations could not make any impact in the general euphoria of the revolution: his novels were previously banned and for the average Czech there were too many practical problems and political risks to obtain a typewritten or smuggled copy of his novel. When mentioning one of the most famous Czech writers today, I should add that Milan Kundera — now a French citizen — has chosen a very exceptional way of publishing his novels in his native country. After the Velvet Revolution he allowed his Moravian-based publisher to issue only one book of his mature fiction a year, keeping to a strict chronological order (the only exception is the Czech version of *Immortality* in 1993). While many readers have to some extent become jaded about Josef Škvorecký's and Ivan Klíma's novels and short stories, which flooded the bookstalls in the first years after 1989, a few copies of Kundera's four famous novels (from *Life is Elsewhere* to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) are available only to the most determined readers and to students in university libraries. This situation is so absurd that it brings to mind the tragicomic jokes which typically weigh upon Kundera's characters. But on the other hand, it is evident that Czechs are still looking forward to reading his novels.

As I have already mentioned, the first years of regained democracy were marked by a general feeling of the need to acknowledge a debt to hidden currents of Czech literature: to our many exiles and to the slightly more accessible dissident authors who remained in Czechoslovakia and distributed their works in

type-written editions (*samizdat*). The reading fever caused by mass publishing of this literature lasted about two or three years, following which since 1993 the prevailing tendency in our literary life has been one of a gradual but intensive discovering of the middle and younger generation which had grown up under the conditions of neo-Stalinist colonialism. The generation of exiles and dissidents gained the place in the Czech cultural consciousness of most citizens and was accepted into literary dictionaries and interpretative handbooks published after 1992 (Dokoupil and Zelinský 1992, 1994; Holý; Křivánek). These publications were not conceived on a purely factographical framework, such as the list of banned writers but on concise biographies and often very valuable and wide-ranging bibliographies which form the content of the famous *Slovník a českých spisovatelů (Dictionary of Czech Writers)*, a volume formerly very influential and also circulating in *samizdat* copies. My central argument lies in the fact that the new post-revolutionary handbooks did not aim to include all the Czech writers who could be considered deserving inclusion, owing to their politically motivated exclusion from remotely comparable Communist publications. The books mentioned above are selective dictionaries of separate works and this very important fact was overlooked by critics, who found it difficult to accept the way that entries about formerly banned writers suddenly appeared in the same context as authors with much lower moral credit, who did not openly protest against Communist policy and were permitted to publish their works officially. The new handbooks were written mainly by representatives of the middle aged generation of academics, who did not share the general view which found wide acceptance after November 1989, namely the deeply rooted concept of Czech literature as split into three parts, of which exile and *samizdat* activity carried the greatest prestige, while the books published officially during the two decades following the 1968 Russian invasion were not considered so significant. Psychologically it is not difficult to understand the motives of the authors who were not selected for the handbooks and politically it would be surprising if a few (in my opinion relatively minor) writers did not protest against such a coupling.

But let us return to the main themes of my first paragraph — the ideas of missing continuity and of outstanding individuals creating lasting values that are often only discovered posthumously. This viewpoint highlights the irrelevance of arguments about writers' relative merit and their standing in the light of contemporary interpretations by critics and literary historians. The fundamental value likely to prove resilient for at least some time is the freedom to publish everything from the most stupid, banal commercial pulp fiction to less conspicuous, but really original works of art.

THE SPELL OF AUTHENTICITY

In English-speaking countries it is common to speak of literature in terms of the bipolarity of "fiction" versus "non-fiction." Czech terminology is a little different,

but understanding of the given concepts is similar. In the Czech literary context of the last decade, "authenticity" seems to be one of the most quoted words. In some ways it can be compared to "non-fiction," at least in the sense that many readers feel distaste at the prevalent Stalinist and neo-Stalinist fiction which aimed to present a persuasive picture of an artificial paradise, while our society as a whole suffered from an absence of the plain, unadorned truth. It was notably Jan Lopatka (1980, 1991), who in his essays from the 1970s — when his critical activities were banned — stressed the importance of the general tendency of many unofficial authors to express their personal experience in diary form. He hated literature founded on perfect craftsmanship and artfully constructed plots and even the first mature novels of Milan Kundera (e.g., *Žert* [*The Joke*], 1967).¹ He was a passionate admirer of the significant but for a long time undervalued Czech diarists of the past (e.g., Karel Hynek Mácha, Jakub Deml, Jiří Orten, Jiří Kolář, Jan Hanzl, etc.) and in the diaries, rock lyrics, and non-conformist poetry of the Czech "underground" of the 1970s he envisaged the strongest current of alternative literature. Most of the significant texts from the underground have been published since 1989 and together with magazines (*Revolver revue* and *Vokno*) they still seem to have a strong impact on younger generations of writers. The current boom in diaries and memoirs may recall the situation immediately after World War II as many people who suffered in wartime offered the public their authentic testimony. The tendency to combine fiction with non-fiction was also very apparent in the works of dissident writers before 1989, of which the most outstandingly successful were Pavel Kohout's "memoir-novel" (*Kde je zakopán pes* [*Where the Dog Is Buried*], 1987), Ludvík Vaculík's "diary-novel" (*Český snář* [*The Czech Dreambook*], 1983), while Jaroslav Seifert's memoir (*Všecky krásy světa* [*All the Beauties of the World*], 1981), full of nostalgia and evocations of past friends and loves is a typical example of the genre.

After 1989 the diary form of non-fiction started to blossom in a more authentic way. The published book versions of such diaries are usually only slightly edited selections from real entries in the personal notebooks of writers. For example, Jan Zábřana's *Celý život* (*The Whole Life*, 1992) won enormous and well-deserved success. The entries begin at the time of the author's teens (1948), before his family life was shattered by the witch-hunting and Stalinist trials which followed a few years later, and ends with the sceptical observations of a disappointed, seriously ill man written in a hospital (1984). Although Zábřana did publish several times in the 1960s (poems, detective stories, and a book for children), owing to his political background he was forced to realize his literary ambitions mainly as an outstanding translator from English and Russian.

1 For example, Ludvík Vaculík (*Sekýra* [*The Axe*], 1966), whose texts are thought to be the most important Czech novels of the 1960s, did not escape his criticism.

Before the posthumous publishing of his diaries he was remembered foremost as a writer whose translations of the American Beatniks (A. Ginsberg, L. Ferlinghetti, G. Corso, etc.) were extremely popular not only in the time of the political thaw of the 1960s but probably proved even more so during the following decades of neo-Stalinist repression. For many writers of a younger generation this poetry, along with the books of Jack Kerouac and Charles Bukowski, became a typical model of artistic freedom and of an authentic style of writing.

THE SITUATION OF POETRY

As I have mentioned, the first years after 1989 were touched by a phenomenon resembling Kundera's "lyrical" euphoria, but it is necessary to add that this was rather surprisingly represented mainly by an older generation of writers. I dare to say that in our literary context the status of poetry has undergone a radical change during the last decades, and certain post-revolutionary critical reflections on lyricism prove that my feelings are not unfounded. Undoubtedly since the Czech national revival at the beginning of the last century, poetry has been considered an elite genre of the highest status, a conception which was reinforced by the prevalent modernist understanding of a poet as prophet (e.g., the symbolist Otokar Březina) or as a genius of imagery breaking with old conventions and seeing the future (most representatives of the avant-garde, esp. Vítězslav Nezval). The cult of mediocre political poetry, which was typical of the first years of Stalinism and neo-Stalinism is not a phenomenon of artistic relevance, but it was significant that these "lyrical poets" were at the time officially promoted as a new avant-garde. However, by now the time of avant-gardism is gone. From the generation of poets who came to prominence in the 1950s I will mention only two personalities whose works seem to survive all the political shocks and changes of direction: firstly, the internationally renowned Miroslav Holub, whose "scientifically" rational poems have met with a positive response especially in English-speaking countries and Karel Šiktanc, who shows more prominent national characteristics in the positive sense of the word and whose poetry from his dissident years started to find deepening roots in archetypes from pagan and early Christian times.

After the Russian invasion in 1968 printed editions of poetry quickly lost their prestige and independent poetry survived only thanks to exile publishing houses (in Toronto, Köln, München, Rome, etc.) and *samizdat* but it was also alive in the songs of folk singers and the lyrics of underground rock groups. The group "The Plastic People of the Universe" and whose members spent many years in prison, set to music many poems by Ivan Wernisch, probably the most appreciated Czech poet of these days. Most of our avant-garde poetry looked to French and Russian poetic patterns for inspiration, but Wernisch's poems and other texts renewed a half-forgotten tradition of decadence, absurdity, and ancient German

and Scandinavian myths. Such qualities are also conducive to comparison with the Jewish-German milieu of the Prague past. It is not necessary to stress that a Kafkaesque vision of reality was not officially recommended before 1989 and only fully developed in the works of younger poets, e.g., in Ewald Murrer's *The Notebook of Mr. Pinke*. A remote influence of Franz Kafka can be seen in the fact, that many of these poets do not use an "I"-form narrative voice (*Ich-Erzählung*) and they do not conceive the writer as an omniscient authority but prefer a personally centred mode of narrative.² Their "personae" are unhappy, lonely individuals, wandering and lost in the chaotic labyrinth of the post-modern world, seeking their roots in local myths and often overcoming their sadness by playfulness and laughing in the face of absurdity (main representatives are Ewald Murrer, Petr Motýl, Norbert Holub, Jiří Syrovátka, František Vašek, etc.).

BEING POSTMODERN?

"Postmodernism" in undoubtedly one of the most frequently used literary terms of the years after 1989. At the end of the 1960s Czech critics could gain access to translations of the main essays of Umberto Eco and Leslie Fiedler on this theme, but later on Czech postmodernist thinking almost disappeared, although the leading Czech experts in literary theory (esp., Sylvie Richterová, Daniela Hodrová, and Vladimír Macura) admired and to some extent followed Eco's understanding of semiotics. Logically, they developed this approach to literature a long time before today's explosion of praising and cursing postmodernism. The later this word entered the language of literary revues and magazines, the more it was used and misused. With regard to the present Czech literary context it can be said that postmodernism is so modern (and in some ways even "avant-garde"), that it cannot mean anything other than its own end. Yet, there do exist a few exceptions to the rule — both in the critical essays and fiction of the three authors mentioned above. Daniela Hodrová is an outstanding expert in comparative studies of novels and the influence of Eco can be easily recognized in her interest in the Middle Ages (1989, 1993), while Vladimír Macura is known as a scathing critic of false Czech national myths, many of which are still very influential, especially after the creation of the Czech Republic. The fiction not only of these writers, but also of Michal Ajvaz and other authors of the middle generation has many common features with — what Milan Kundera calls — the "Central European novelistic tradition," in their balancing of simple narration and essayism, their reflection of the traumatic events of Central European history, their disbelief in words combined with an unhidden obsession with writing as a way of being, and their irony and scepticism which is a painful experience most of all for its author. This deconstructive, philosophical face of postmodernism is

2 See the classification of narrative situations in Stanzel.

not the only one. Leslie Fiedler's understanding of postmodernism on a background of pop culture can be recognized not only in the best-selling novels of Michal Viewegh, a rising literary star from Prague, but also in the fiction of two Czech writers living in North America: Josef Škvorecký (Toronto) and Jan Novák (Chicago). These authors see creation not only as a sacred and serious mission, but at the same time as a profane and profoundly funny craft. In this way they are able to describe both the Stalinist persecution of the Catholics and the post-1989 political screening in the form of a black farce or a crazy tragicomedy. The main trends in "Central European" writing seem to be a more suitable means of expression in the uncertain space in the middle of Europe with its absent historical continuity than the heroic epic as we know it from American and Russian historical movies.

CONCLUSION

Making both ends meet is undoubtedly the most serious problem of Czech producers and consumers/readers after 1989. Czech literature is in a much more healthy situation than the Czech economy because it is no more obliged to look for progressive traditions in the past and it is not forced to see a paradise in the future. In the open space of freedom it is useless to think of beginnings and ends: it is possible for literature to make both ends meet. Like the mythical snake Uroboros trying to swallow its own tail, Czech literature exists, provokes questions, and has its natural place between zero and infinity.

University of Ostrava

Works Cited

- Dokoupil, B. and M. Zelinský, eds. *Slovník české prózy 1945-1991* [Dictionary of the Czech Novel]. Ostrava: Sřinga, 1992.
- . *Slovník české prózy 1945-1994* [Dictionary of Czech Fiction]. Ostrava: Sřinga, 1994.
- Hodrová, Daniela. *Hledání románu* [The Search for the Novel]. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1989.
- . *Román zasněžení* [The Novel of Initiation]. Praha: H & H, 1993.
- Holl, J., ed. *Český Parnas — Literatura 1970-1990*. Praha: Galaxie, 1993.
- Křivánek, V., ed. *Český dekamerón 1969-1992*. Praha: Scientia, 1994.
- Lopatka, Jan. "Literatura v katakombách." *Hodina naděje — almanach české literatury 1968-1978*. Toronto: 68 Publishers, 1980.
- . *Předpoklady tvorby*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1991.
- Macura, Vladimír. *Znamení zrodu* [The Sign of Birth]. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1983.
- Murrer, Ewald. *Zápisník pana Pinkeho*. Praha: Inverze, 1993.
- Novák, Jan. *Milionový jeep* [Willy's Dream Kit]. Toronto: 68 Publishers, 1989.
- Škvorecký, Josef. *Mirákli* [The Miracle Game]. Toronto: 68 Publishers, 1972.
- Slovník českých spisovatel* [Dictionary of Czech Writers]. Toronto: 68 Publishers, 1982.
- Stanzel, Franz K. *Theorie des Erzählens*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979.
- Viewegh, Michal. *Báječná pod psa* [Fabulous Years in the Doghouse]. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1992.