

Polish Literature in Transformation

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This volume of essays, inspired by the conference on post-1989 Polish literature held at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, on 10–11 November 2011, comprises sixteen papers that offer substantial insight into recent developments in Polish literature. The primary focus of the contributors is on texts published and literary debates held after 1989, which are often analysed in a comparative framework and in a broader European context. As Ursula Phillips states in her introduction to the volume, most of the chapters approach literary texts not only as artistic creations but also as 'reflections of social reality' that give witness to 'a wider phenomenon of social and cultural change' (p. 11). This change, as understood by the contributors to the volume, consists first and foremost in the questioning and redefinition of Polish national identity. This shift takes place at several levels and is reflected by a number of themes recurring in almost every chapter: the question of feminism and new literature by women authors; the rise of new gay literature and LGBT-oriented literary criticism; a substantial rise of interest in literature exploring the questions of memory (in particular the memory of the Holocaust, World War II, and communism) in relation to questions of cultural, ethnic, and national belonging; and an emergence of bi- or transcultural literature that attempts to account for the experiences of 21st-century Polish migrants. These topics are addressed from a range of perspectives, which makes the volume a rich and interesting source of knowledge and inspiration for scholars of contemporary Polish literature and culture.

The rise of publications by female authors that question traditionally patriarchal social structures and male-dominated canons is tackled by a number of chapters. Several contributors discuss the ways in which feminist-oriented works bring to light the all too often neglected experiences of generations of Polish women and embark on a search for what Ursula Phillips calls a 'more home-grown feminism' (p. 12). Kris Van Heuckelom provides an insightful analysis of recent Polish migration narratives, drawing attention to the ways in which Polish women who enter into inter-ethnic relationships are represented as 'Penelopes on the loose' and their mobility is to a large extent associated with sexual promiscuity (p. 53). Van Heuckelom concludes that the frequency with which texts by male authors resort to such representations of female migrants expresses a fear of 'the inevitable loss of a particular kind of Polishness: a Polishness that is male-centred and patriarchal, relegating women to a secondary and subordinate status' (p. 65). The subject of women-migrants is also addressed by Urszula Chowanec, who focuses on the presence of melancholy in writing by Polish female authors such as Wioletta Grzegorzewska. Chowanec reads it as an expression of dissatisfaction with the patriarchal world and an active demand for a change. Agnieszka Mrozik in her paper on identity politics in

women's (auto-)biographies investigates the role played by women authors in sustaining the traditional ideal of family and nation as two core components of Polish past and present identity. Analysing Joanna Olczak-Ronikier's *W ogrodzie pamięci* (*In the Garden of Memory*, 2006), Ewa Kuryluk's *Frascati* (*Frascati Street*, 2009), and several other texts, Mroziak arrives at a conclusion that 'in all the examined (auto-)biographies, there occurs a nervous process of adjusting personal and family history to fit the existing model' of the traditional family, with women exclusively relegated to the position of wives and mothers (p. 151). This model is idealised and presented as a symbol of the nation's identity and only careful unravelling of subtle hints and clues hidden under the surface of women's (auto-)biographies can uncover the suppressed voices of women who were silenced and disciplined by the idealised patriarchal order. Finally, Monika Świerkosz in her paper on Izabela Filipiak's *Absolutna amnezja* (*Total Amnesia*, 1995) tackles the question of the male-created and dominated canon from which female authors have traditionally been excluded. Świerkosz shows how Filipiak uses the archetypal story of Bluebeard and his castle to critique the violence used against women writers and investigate the possibility of a female rebellion against the authoritarian power of the male canon. Świerkosz concludes that Filipiak does not seem to believe that such a rebellion could be successful and therefore prefers 'individual attempts at anarchist contestation of any hierarchy', and proposes to see women writers in 'the ambivalent, but also unconstrained, sphere of anarchy' (p. 122).

Further exploration of contemporary issues of gender and sexuality can be found in the chapters by Dirk Uffelmann and Błażej Warkocki. Uffelmann discusses the question of post-communist masculinity and investigates the representations of migrant men in migration novels and short stories by Piotr Czerwiński, Daniel Koziarski, Łukasz Suskiewicz and others. Uffelmann analyses the changes that the traditional construct of male authority and sovereignty undergoes in an urban context in a situation of migration, which often leads to the marginalisation of men and the creation of what Uffelmann calls 'male subalternity' (p. 73). Uffelmann comes to the conclusion that the crisis of communication and 'aggressive reactions to women's emancipated behaviour are ... testimony to the incompatibility of the patriarchal system with the global city' (p. 84). Błażej Warkocki's chapter 'Homobiographies and Gay Emancipation' explores the 'epistemological breakthrough' in the perception of homosexuality in Polish society and culture (which he situates in the first decade of the 21st century) and the impact it has had on contemporary Polish literature and literary criticism. He provides an insightful discussion of Krzysztof Tomasiak's study *Homobiografie* (*Homobiographies*, 2008) and the evolution of the Polish 'coming-out' novel.

The remaining chapters of the volume explore the question of national identity and its contemporary meaning, especially in relation to cultural memory, Jewish-Polish history, and bi- and multicultural identities of migrant Poles. Uilleam Blacker analyses Polish urban prose, including works by Olga Tokarczuk, Paweł Huelle, and Marek Krajewski, drawing attention to the ways in which the memory of those who had lived in spaces currently inhabited by Poles, in particular Jews and Germans, has begun to resurface in contemporary literature and serve to undermine a purely Polish narrative about those places. Paul Vickers offers a comparative analysis of two versions of Tadeusz Słobodzianek's play *Nasza klasa* (*Our Class*, 2008 and 2009), showing how the changes made by the author in the later version contributed to creating a 'Polish/Jewish community of memory' (p. 221). Vickers convincingly argues that the way in which the play treats the killing of Jews by Poles in the town of Jedwabne offers a critical reflection on how the traditional understanding of the core elements of Polish

national identity – God, Honour, and Fatherland – makes it impossible to create an open and inclusive community of memory that would endorse the experiences of Polish Jews. The question of transmission of memory and trauma is taken up by Katarzyna Zechenter, who explores the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust and victimhood is passed down from mothers to daughters in texts by Ewa Kuryluk, Bożena Keff and Anda Rottenberg. Other papers that tackle the issue of memory transmission are Knut Andreas Grimstad's chapter on postmemory in the works of authors belonging to the third generation of Holocaust survivors, such as Piotr Paziński, and Grzegorz Niziołek's chapter on the ways in which resentment is addressed by post-1989 Polish drama and theatre.

The question of bi- and multiculturalism of contemporary Polish literature is addressed by Elwira Grossman, whose contribution offers a comparative analysis of the Polish and English versions of Janusz Głowacki's *Antygona w Nowym Jorku* (*Antigone in New York*, 1992) and Catherine Grosvenor's *Cherry Blossom* (2008). Investigating the possibility of 'creating a transnational drama/performance', Grossman draws attention to the extent to which the relation between migrants' experience and language is highlighted in each play. She concludes that while within Głowacki's drama the issue of language is curiously omitted, Grosvenor's play manages to bring it to the fore, and hence attains a truly intercultural perspective that moves away from a 'hierarchical way of thinking when narrating the migrants' experience' (p. 247).

Given the diversity of the volume's chapters, any scholar interested in Polish literature will find a paper of considerable interest. The volume succeeds in offering the reader diverse and insightful perspectives on how contemporary Polish literature can be fruitfully contextualised within socio-cultural changes that have been taking place in Poland for the last few decades. All the contributions in different ways provoke a reflection on how traditional Polish national and cultural identity can be reconceptualised and turned into a more open and inclusive category that gives voice to those who have been traditionally perceived as the Other – female, homosexual, Jewish – and as potential threats to the integrity of Polish national identity. Significantly, as Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese points out in her discussion of recent anthologies of Polish poetry in English, when 'protecting the national soul and language' ceases to be of central importance, 'the room is being prepared for alternative signposts' (p. 277-8).



Zitierweise:

Joanna Rzepa: Rezension zu: Ursula Phillips (ed.): Polish Literature in Transformation, 2013, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/1900#r2944>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/1900?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=2944>