

# Introduction

My intention while writing, or rather dictating, this book was purely utilitarian. I wanted no more than to provide university students with as much information as possible within a limited number of pages and, at the same time, to avoid the scholarly dryness which, more often than not, comes from the author's lack of emotional involvement with his subject. At no moment during my work did I feel boredom; indeed, I was playing more than toiling, and several passages preserve, I hope, a trace of my smile. Since every reader is able to sense the mood in which given sentences were conceived, my hope is that I will not bore either students or the general public.

Since Polish literature has always been oriented more toward poetry and the theater than toward fiction, it has remained little known in English-speaking countries and has been often victimized by clichés. Romanticism, both as a literary trend and as a political attitude, has been considered the very core of Polish letters, and Roman Catholicism an inseparable ingredient. But, in fact, these commonplaces are of relatively recent origin, and the story of their elaboration is one of the themes of my book. Let us keep in mind that of all the modern Slavic languages, Czech and Polish were the first to reach maturity as instruments of literary expression. In the kingdom of Bohemia, this happened during the Middle Ages; in the kingdom of Poland it occurred during the Renaissance. Consequently, the "Golden Age" of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries has given a durable shape to Polish literature, and nearly half of my work is dedicated to literary phenomena previous to the emergence of Romanticism on the European scene. As for Roman Catholicism, the truth is that the vernacular, stifled for a long time by Latin, the language of the Church, won its ascendancy in Poland primarily thanks to religious controversies engendered first

by the ideas of Jan Hus, then by Luther's and Calvin's. Poland of the "Golden Age" was largely a Protestant country, a "paradise for heretics." And despite the subsequent victories of the Counter Reformation, the heritage of intellectual rebelliousness has never been lost; it was transmitted through the publicists of the Enlightenment and the democrats of the nineteenth century to the liberal intelligentsia of our time. A curious dichotomy may be observed as a more or less permanent trait of Polish letters; namely, an emotional moralism obviously nourished by a strong residue of Christian ethics has coexisted with anti-clericalism and an utter skepticism as to any dogmas (religious or political).

As I said, my ambition did not reach further than putting together a decent textbook to fill the obvious gap, for the only other possible source of information, *A Survey of Polish Literature and Culture* by the late Manfred Kridl (once my professor in Poland; later on, a professor at Columbia University), is out of print; besides, it does not cover the decades that separate us from 1939 and that are, in many respects, of capital importance, if only because they answer the question as to what influence historical cataclysms of extraordinary violence may have upon writers.

Although an author of a textbook should be as objective as possible, this does not mean he has to become an impersonal machine computing data. He brings into his enterprise his own personal frame of reference, visible in the very selection of his material and in the stress he puts upon certain personalities and trends. Let me say, therefore, a few words about my personal slant.

Brought up in Poland, I am imbued, for better or for worse, with the historicism typical of many European intellectuals. For the reader who is expecting an eager search for purely aesthetic values, this will not be a good credential. Literature, to me, appears as a series of moments in the life of the species, coagulated into language and, thus, made accessible for reflection by posterity. While severe discrimination is a necessary quality for anyone who wants to explore the jungle of time, the human voice we hear in that jungle deserves respect even if it is awkward and faltering. Because I feel this way, I have given much space to those developments which are not directly responsible for any masterpieces but which are very characteristic of a given period. I have not scorned the crazy, the funny, or the bizarre. Moreover, since literature in Poland has always strongly reacted to historical situations and one cannot always assume the reader's knowledge of facts, I have introduced every chapter with a brief sketch of the international and domestic political scene. The tendency in these prefatory remarks is toward a history of institutions and ideas.

To me, the history of Poland and of its literature seems extravagant

and full of incongruities: a Slavic nation whose writers, up to the Renaissance, used only Latin; a huge state which, for centuries, stood up to the Teutons, Turkey, and Muscovy but owing to the abuse of its parliamentary system literally fell apart while its once weaker neighbors partitioned it and erased it from the map of Europe for some one hundred and twenty years; an astonishingly vital people who sink easily into moronic apathy and who show their virtues only in circumstances which would crush and destroy any other human group; a refinement of taste, which produced lyrical poetry comparable to that of Elizabethan England, combined with irony and brilliance but always threatened by drunken torpor and parochial mumblings; habits of religious and political tolerance, acquired in the multidenominational and multinational *Respublica* headed by an elected king, which gave way, as a result of collective misfortunes, to a wounded, morbid nationalism; a country whose loyalties in this second half of the century are courted by two equally matched powers, the Communist Party and the Roman Catholic Church. This chaos of elements seemingly so disparate, yet interrelated by a logic of their own, may contain some lessons of universal portent.

Due to the fusion of two political organisms—the kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania—the area with which I have had to deal was, for several centuries, much vaster than Poland proper. It also included Lithuania, Byelorussia, and the Ukraine. I tried, therefore, as far as possible, not to bypass the role of languages other than Polish, especially of that Eastern Slavic (neither Polish nor Russian) dialect which was called “Ruthenian” before it evolved into Byelorussian in the north and into Ukrainian in the south. I also felt it necessary to dispel misunderstandings about the word “Lithuania”: once it was used to denote both the small Baltic peninsula inhabited by people speaking a non-Slavic language and a much larger territory, watered by the Dnieper river system, whose inhabitants, for a long time, were called “Lithuanians” just because they had fallen under the rule of the Lithuanian dukes. I am aware, however, that the linguistic imbroglios in this area are beyond the scope of any brief exposition.

For the sake of ordering the material, textbooks usually employ a system of periodic divisions. A certain amount of arbitrariness must be reckoned with, as the flux of history rarely lends itself to imprisonment in neat compartments. Scholars like fine-sounding words such as the “Renaissance” or the “Baroque,” but one should be aware of how relative and imprecise a meaning is communicated through these words. Any phase in the life of a given civilization witnesses coexisting and crisscrossing currents; the new and the old contaminate each other, and it is far from certain whether everything new in thought or

sensibility always plays a leading role just because it is "in advance." Furthermore, the vagueness of such terms that we take for granted discourages me from taking up the hopeless task of capturing their "essence" through a definition. As Paul Valéry justly said: "It is impossible to think—seriously—with words like Classicism, Romanticism, Humanism, Realism. . . . One does not get drunk nor does one quench one's thirst with bottle labels." For an author of a textbook, labels are indispensable; he does not, however, have to employ them necessarily in dead earnest. I confess that, contrary to those who see in literature a protracted interplay of, say, the "classical spirit" and the "Romantic spirit," I do not go beyond treating notions and literary devices prevalent in a given period as something that in its specific variety occurs but once, at a definite point of time.

All the problems confronting me became more acute as I started work on the last part of the book, dealing with contemporary literature up to 1966. A reader, presented with a picture of religious strife in the sixteenth century, takes it with a considerable dose of detachment. It becomes less easy when we move toward the present day and have to use emotionally loaded words such as Marxism, revolution, Communism. A history of literature is not a proper vehicle for conveying one's perhaps too-complex views on issues which provoke so much heat. My effort, therefore, was aimed at remaining as factual and unbiased as possible, although such reticence may well irk those who would prefer an arrangement of facts more favorable to their respective causes. Another difficulty I had to cope with in approaching our day was my double perspective: as a creative writer who has been engaged in Polish literary life for several years and as a self-appointed chronicler. One has an uneasy feeling, wearing a judge's wig, when it is necessary to pass sentence on the merits or failures of one's colleagues, the more so since the names omitted outnumber those I could include; otherwise the chapters on contemporary literature would resemble a gossip column on the Writers' Union. I have assumed the risk of being attacked for my choice, and the only consolation I can offer the maltreated is both the lack of space and the unavoidable errors of judgment. I expose myself to possible sarcastic remarks by saying a word about Czesław Miłosz as one of the Polish contemporary poets. But I would have been a pharisee had I pretended to be much more severe toward that person than are Polish literary critics.

Any discussion of literature not accompanied by a sampling of styles is of a doubtful use. The scarcity of valid versions in English compelled me to look for improvised remedies. I started from the premise that a literal translation of a poem is more relevant than an inadequate artistic transposition. Wherever poets have used syllabic or "syllabotonic" verse with rhymes, I relinquished in advance any pre-

tense at rendering the sound of their lines in English. In some cases the original is followed line by line; in others (where the poet's ideas are of main concern), the translation is transcribed as prose. Occasionally, I have had recourse to translations other than my own. A respect for certain high achievements in poetry, which would look pale when stripped of their sound and their sensuous connotations, inclined me to refrain from quoting them in English. Contemporary Polish verse, however, being more translatable than the poetry of the preceding centuries, owing to the widespread abandonment of meter and rhyme, is represented by several poems that, I hope, can stand in English on their own.

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C.M.