

## Lecture 24: The Cultural Life of People's Poland

### You Who Wronged

You who wronged a simple man  
Bursting into laughter at the crime,  
And kept a pack of fools around you  
To mix good and evil, to blur the line,

Though everyone bowed down before you,  
Saying virtue and wisdom lit your way,  
Striking gold medals in your honor,  
Glad to have survived another day,

Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.  
You can kill one, but another is bom.  
The words are written down, the deed, the date.

And you'd have done better with a winter dawn,  
A rope, and a branch bowed beneath your weight.

Czesław Miłosz, Washington, D.C., 1950

### 1. Literature During the War

With the escape of many writers to Western Europe and America or to the east, Polish literature once more, as in the preceding century, found itself divided into an emigre wing and a domestic wing. In spite of the fact that no press or publishing enterprise could exist legally in Nazi-occupied Poland, intellectual life was intense. This was due to clandestinely printed publications, clandestine poetry readings, and even clandestine theatrical performances. Literature reflected the considerable change in attitudes which took place between 1939 and the end of the war. Despair and anger at the pre-war government, which was held responsible for a rapid defeat, gave way to a critical reappraisal of the twenty-year period between the wars, its social and literary problems. While most in the resistance movement allowed themselves to be guided by the London government-in-exile, the

intellectual circles regarded it with a certain skepticism, if not hostility, as the mentality it stood for was a little too reminiscent of attitudes they had satirized and combatted in the 'thirties. However, the atrocious conditions of Nazi rule, during which everybody sought to cling to some hope of victory, hardly spurred clear thinking about the shape of the future. Literature registered emotional reflexes ranging from pain, hatred of the occupiers, through horror, pity, sarcasm, and irony. Although the suffering was many times worse than in the nineteenth century under foreign occupation, the emotional patterns left over from

Romanticism automatically reasserted themselves. Polish writers, however, had come a long way from Romantic concepts of 'holy martyrdom'; they resented those patterns, the strength of which they felt themselves, and reacted with devastating self-ridicule.

Clandestine literature can be characterized, thus, as oscillating between pathos (once again in favor) and ironic restraint.

## **II. Postwar Literature—General Characteristics**

The cultural life of the 45 years of People's Poland can be divided into four periods, whose limits were determined by politics.

1. The first extended from 1945 to 1949 and was marked by debates on what literature should be in a country aiming at socialism. Writers were left free to find their own methods. A considerable liberalism characterized their relations with the Party, and as for censorship, a watchful eye was kept out only for some clearly defined forbidden topics. Those were fecund years for literature, and while writers who had made their way before the war played a leading role, its organic growth was not hampered.

The most important literary grouping called itself *Kuźnica* (The Forge) harking back to the group of writers around Kołłątaj and Staszic during the Enlightenment. The members of the *Kuźnica* did, indeed, hope to restructure Polish cultural life in the new

political conditions, drawing on the traditions of the Polish Enlightenment. Their position has been described as follows by Czesław Miłosz:

Applying Marxist criteria, but not in a constricted, dogmatic sense, they opposed the 'narrow realism' of photographic verisimilitude and advocated a 'broad realism' such as Balzac or the English novelists and French encyclopedists of the eighteenth century had practised. Although inspired mainly by Georg Lukacs, they avoided his exaggerations. For them, an interdependence between the fate of the individual and the history of a given society was all-important. As to literary models, they more or less scorned the second half of the nineteenth century, preferring to admire Defoe, Fielding and Marcel Proust. They held Soviet Socialist Realist literature in low esteem and published instead, translations of unorthodox Russian poets like Boris Pasternak and Anna Ahkmatova<sup>1</sup>

Among the principal members of the *Kuźnica* group were the literary critic Jan Kott, Adam Ważyk, Kazimierz Brandys, Paweł Hertz, Seweryn Pollak, Zofia Nałkowska, Stefan Żółkiewski, Mieczysław Jastruń and Adolf Rudnicki.

2. The situation deteriorated in 1949 when the doctrine of Socialist Realism was imposed by Party decree. Works that deviated from the line had not the slightest chance of publication. Sterilized, reduced to an imitation of Soviet models, literature went stale and gray. The period from 1949 until the end of 1955 left few books deserving of attention.

3. The period between 1956 and the mid-1970s was dominated by attempts to work within the existing political framework. Rich in achievements, it cast an arch over the void separating it from the literature of spontaneous gropings immediately after the war and from modern literature in general, and thus restored the continuity in experimentation which had temporarily been lost.

4. As in Poland in the 1890s, the mid-seventies saw a break with 'neo-positivism'. 1968 had made it clear that reform from within the communist party was impossible. The goal was now to create an 'alternative civil society' and to challenge all aspects of communist rule, including Marxist orthodoxy.

### III. Some Representative Figures

#### Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński (1921-1944)

The child of Jewish converts and very conscious of his Jewish heritage, Baczyński was perhaps the most important of the wartime poets. He co-edited an underground literary monthly, *Droga*. Son of a literary critic, as an adolescent an admirer of Marxism, and as a young man a sophisticated, frail intellectual, Baczyński distrusted the fuzzy ratiocinations found in the articles and essays of *Sztuka i Naród*. He developed in his own manner, with a strongly neo-romantic character. The rich imagery of his poetry served more and more overtly, as he developed, to point up his central theme of self-immolation for the sake of an ideal Poland. Those critics were right who maintained that he strangely resembled Juliusz Słowacki in his concept of redemptive martyrdom. He died as a platoon commander during the Warsaw Uprising.

These people

Head by head - is this a wall?  
Their faces are like nuts of firm skulls  
Their fists are swollen like the mountains' humps -  
- they're ours.

On the roads' ropes torn to pieces  
a motive like a barbed wire breaks:  
Ours, not ours, ours, not ours:  
It remains of something... I know:  
Violins' broken hearts.

July '41

Silence

...Again, the smoke takes over,  
I'm dying nailed to a dream. The century's passing.

Stop it! Stop it! A silence. I still see the nations,  
and the people in the dome where the wild carriages  
tear from the clouds the rains of bloody scissors.  
And the plague falls down, and the frightened people  
are banging at the doors, the doors of stone.  
So they squat close to the trembling ground  
that opens its mouth, kisses, and swallows them  
the sky is shaking and no voice is calling.

16 March '42

Dead Song

The eternal dream carries away the murdered people's ghosts  
whom - even the cross won't pledge out their fiery crosses  
and the lament too late won't restore whiteness,  
and won't bleach the stigma from their death sheets.

Easter, April '42

Solitude

There are no people. That's just the tragedy freezing  
into fantastic monuments growing by themselves  
and beyond me. Their sight's like a veil  
and the original sin took their arms away.  
O, let me know that sin. Here nobody calls me.

28 June '42

Night of Faith

Hands like coal beetles  
grow grey in the window.  
Winds sow into the deep  
black gore and the stars.

28 June 1942

This time

The darkness floats in. The silence. The cracking of broken skulls;  
And the wind sometimes storms, the century crushes it with a rock.

10 September 1942

Again, Autumn

Autumn is here already. Trees are again  
the sails for dead houses, the wings for dead dreams,  
as if they didn't appear above the hacked head  
as if there were no columns of hands trampled into the ground

12 September 1942

Prayer II

None of us is without guilt. When the night descends  
your faces and my face are all dripping with blood  
and my own body feels as if it has betrayed its soul,  
and hateful are the hobnails of my hands.

17 September 1942

Prayer III

If little children's wings  
can be cut off and turned into stone,  
then take away the ground from under our accursed feet,  
turn us into clay.

September 1942

Lament II

There's no escape. Upon the broken earth  
this million of wounded hearts spills blood from my chest.  
They were alive, they've gone with a few simple words,  
they are redeemed by the silence of God.

Untitled

Wherever I go, under my foot  
the last stone breaks and the darkness opens,  
and I am like the first one after the flood  
who sinned.

6 December 1942

Untitled

Become the wrong and the vengeance, the people and the love  
Take in your hands the sword of history and strike! and strike again!

February 1943

Untitled

Like a grand old tree you were,  
my people, bold as an oak,  
heavy with burning juices of old,  
like a tree of faith, of might, of rage.

...The clock of heaven moves on,  
time bangs a sword against a shield,  
you'll shudder with the dawn's first glow  
you'll hear your heart's voice: it's alive.

You'll rise like God from the dead  
with the breath of hurricane  
for you the earth's embrace  
will open. My people! to arms!

A Generation

We learned the lesson: conscience does not exist  
We dwell in caves, fear covers us,  
we carve in horror our dark loves,  
our own statues - evil troglodytes

We learned the lesson: love does not exist.  
How else can we hide in the darkness  
while sniffing nostrils seek our scent,  
while swollen sticks and fists seek to envelop us

We learned the lesson. Pity does not exist.  
In dreams we see our brother dead.

alive, they picked out his eyes  
alive, they broke his bones with a club;  
the chisel of pain works hard  
the eyes are bubbles swollen with blood.

### **Tadeusz Borowski (1922-1951)**

From a Polish worker's family in the Ukraine, born in Zhitomir, Borowski went through a Warsaw high school after his family moved from the Soviet Union, but he finished his secondary studies in the underground-operated school system in 1940. Subsequently he became a student of literature in the underground Warsaw University, earning his living at the same time as night watchman for a building supplies firm, which gave him the opportunity to engage in a multitude of black-market activities. Critical toward all the Polish complexes of 'martyrdom' and toward the resistance movement, he preferred to write poetry, and his mimeographed volume, 'Wherever the Earth' (*Gdziekolwiek Ziemia*, 1941), differed radically from the work of his contemporaries and colleagues such as Baczyński or the group of Art and the Nation. Like them, however, he took much from the Polish modern poets, but while they dissolved images into a sort of emotional mist, he strove for sharpness, even harshness. Yet, though he employs strong metrical patterns, his poems are the most desperate of those produced during the Nazi occupation. In them, the torture and death of 'us slaves' (Poles) is stripped of all meaning, even of an anticipated meaning for posterity, and the catastrophe acquires all the earmarks of a macabre prank played by blind and indifferent forces of history, similar to a cataclysm of nature. Captured by chance he was sent to Auschwitz. Transferred from there to Dachau, where he was liberated by the Americans, Borowski then lived in Munich for a while, and there wrote his most daring stories on Auschwitz.

They were first published in Munich in 1946 in a book signed jointly with two other former prisoners. Borowski returned to Poland and published a selection of his stories

under the title Farewell to Mary (*Pożegnanie z Marią*, 1948 – the English translation is entitled *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*). The treatment of the subject puzzled and even caused indignation among the critics. It was a presentation of life in a concentration camp in which there is no clear division into victims and criminals. The camp is shown as an infernal machine, forcing prisoners, its victims, into a struggle for survival at any price, be it at the expense of the weaker among them. All notions of good and bad behavior tumble down; ‘good’ equals toughness and resourcefulness; ‘evil’ equals lack of cunning or of physical strength. The narrator, who bears the author’s first name (Tadeusz), is one of those tough fellows who organize their life in the camp quite well, steal, barter, know how to avoid overexertion while laboring, and look on with detachment, if not with a sarcastic grimace, at the daily processions of thousands destined for the gas chambers. The moral ambiguity is emphasized by the tone of the narrative, which is a bragging one; connivance of prisoners with their overseers is evoked in a matter-of-fact way. No overt moral judgment is passed. Borowski thus achieves an effect of cruelty which remains unsurpassed by any testimony on Nazi camps.

In his craft, he learned much from Hemingway, especially how to outline a situation through idiomatic dialogue without author’s commentary. Actually, Borowski was a desperate moralist. His stories place on trial our entire Western civilization, which made such crimes possible. The stories set in Germany after the entrance of American troops in ‘The World of Stone’ (*Kamienny świat*, 1948) betray a deep sense of outrage at the ‘normalcy’ that will soon relegate Nazi genocide to the sphere of vague recollections or, more probably, of silence.

As a moralist, Borowski searched for an ideology strong enough to transform the world and to prevent a future release of bestiality in man. Skeptical as to Marxism during and immediately after the war, he later let himself be convinced by his friends, the ‘pimpled ones,’ and then, as befitted his fervent temperament, outdid them in his will to serve and to be useful. He put his talent at the disposal of the Party, writing mostly journalism. His style

was forceful and often brilliant, in spite of an unceremonious twisting of facts. His friendships with young German Communists, whom he believed to be the only Germans who fully understood what happened, contributed to his evolution. After 'Farewell to Mary', which Marxist critics denounced as the work of a nihilist, tainted with the American literature of violence, Borowski plunged into an aggressive campaign for Socialist Realism. His sudden suicide in July 1951 was a shock for all political and literary Warsaw. The reasons for that act were, as is usual in such cases, a tangle of many strands: an ideological crisis when he realized that he was an abettor of the terror came together with a personal drama of involvement with two women, and this, combined with what must have been a latent self-destructive urge, got hold of him at a moment of weakened resistance.

In spite of its apparent contradictions, Borowski's work stands as a whole, unified by his chase after some unshakable moral values. The bitterness of his early poems grew out of his disagreement with the belief in the redeeming virtue of Polish heroism. His Auschwitz stories, seemingly written in cold blood, are actually a most hot-blooded protest. He embraced a dogmatic Marxism because of the same stubborn search, as he found in it a promise of rescue for mankind. And since he was a man of scrupulous integrity, he was doomed to fail in his new duty as a 'politically reliable' writer.

### **Jerzy Andrzejewski (1909-1983)**

Among novelists, Jerzy Andrzejewski, who had already made his debut in the 1930s, was the first who attempted to give a fictionalized version of the occupation. In his story 'On Trial' ('Przed sądem,' 1941) the protagonist is a young boy, condemned to death for possessing weapons, who betrays his beloved friend to the Nazis because he is afraid to die alone. The short story 'Roll Call' ('Apel,' 1942), based upon oral accounts the author heard from escapees of Auschwitz, registers the experience of prisoners who are kept standing for hours in temperatures below freezing. A long story (or short novel), 'Holy

Week' ( *Wielki Tydzień*, 1943 ), reconstructs the moral conflicts of the Warsaw intelligentsia, including those of its Jewish members who lived in hiding on the 'Aryan side,' during the Ghetto Uprising at Easter 1943, when the entire city was lit up by the glare from the burning ghetto. Because he reacted immediately to what was going on, Andrzejewski's stories that date from the last phase of the war reflect the transformations within the Warsaw intellectual milieu which occurred during the occupation. For example, he treats the mania for conspiracy with humor and, in doing so, turns, by implication, against the chivalrous patriotism extolled by the London government-in-exile and its resistance movement at the expense of clearly defined political and social goals. Andrzejewski's stand may explain why he and many of his colleagues were to accept the revolutionary changes in Poland.

Andrzejewski's sensitivity to his immediate environment impelled him to touch upon the most drastic problems of postwar Poland in his novel 'Ashes and Diamonds' (*Popiół i diament*, 1948). The idea for the novel came in the spring of 1945, when Andrzejewski, like many writers, was living in Kraków, after the destruction of Warsaw. He placed his characters in that provincial capital (although it is not named) as well as in that crucial year of 1945, the year People's Poland was born. At that time, practically every family, with its sons and daughters who had been in the Resistance, was in the throes of an agonizing decision: owing to the new government's policy toward members of the Home Army, all previous commitments to the London Government were now declared a grave political misdeed. Nor were those who returned from concentration camps free from internal conflicts. Often they had bought their survival at the price of inhumanity toward their fellow prisoners. Andrzejewski's novel revolves around these two major causes of moral strife. His hero, Maciej, a young man, an ex-soldier of the underground Home Army, would like to efface his now condemned past and return to a normal life. Yet he is loyal to the memory of his comrades who fell in battle and to his superiors. Those superiors, depicted by the author as relics of the military junta mentality, are intransigent in their opposition to the new

regime. Maciej agrees to accept a last order from them: to kill the local district secretary of the Communist Party. After that he will be free. This assignment coincides with his meeting a girl and falling in love, but he has no choice except to obey his orders. His victim, the Party secretary, whom he has seen only once, is an old Communist fighter who has suffered a great deal in various prisons and concentration camps; he is a man of hard principles, but full of compassion. The absurdity of Maciej's act, resulting in the old Communist's death, is followed by the absurdity of his own death. After shooting the secretary, he withdraws unnoticed, but is seized with panic on another street where militiamen are routinely verifying the documents of passersby. He begins to run, is ordered to stop and refuses, is fired upon and perishes from a policeman's bullets. It is obvious that both Maciej and the old Communist have the author's sympathy; their tragedies enlist the reader's compassion for those people caught in the trap of a historical situation. To complete this picture of a country torn by civil war, Andrzejewski introduces his second theme: a venerable citizen, a judge by profession, who has recently returned from a Nazi concentration camp, is unmasked by one of the characters as a former blockwarden who, as such, was ready to go very far in torturing his fellow prisoners. Should he be denounced to the police? And where are the boundaries separating crime from honesty? The judge is now an honest man, as he was before he found himself in the camp. Should he be punished if he failed once in living up to the highest, maybe unattainable (under certain conditions), standards of behaviour? The novel has a twofold ambition: to capture the chaotic reality of Poland in 1945; to focus upon instants of human choice, upon 'limit situations' which force one to live his moment of truth. From its first edition until today, hundreds of thousands of copies have seen print, furnishing the young with an insight into the first few months of People's Poland; but *Ashes and Diamonds* (the title alludes to a poem by Norwid) is more powerful in its aspects of tragic conflict than faithful to factual data. In making his hero a Home Army Resistance veteran, Andrzejewski broke a taboo, since the Home Army was only referred to then as a 'gang of bandits.' However, he was hampered, to some extent, by censorship, which

compelled him to modify many details. The film version by Andrzej Wajda, made in close co-operation with the author (after 1956, when censorship was lifted), proved to be freer.

A moralistic zeal, similar to Borowski's, propelled Andrzejewski toward the Party, which he entered in 1949; he became one of the first writers to propagate Socialist Realism in his publicism. But his attempt to practice what he propagated in a satirical-optimistic novel, 'An Effective War' (*Wojna skuteczna*, 1953), was a failure. An ideological crisis in 1954 prompted him, again as one of the first, to react against political dogma. He wrote a charming tale, 'The Golden Fox' (*Złoty lis*), in the same year, about a little boy who firmly believed that a golden fox had come to live in his wardrobe and who stubbornly resisted the 'reasonableness' of adults and other children. The tenderhearted boy felt great pity for the heroes of Socialist Realist literature for children, such as the dog who had served capitalists all his life but in his useless old age was thrown into the street; yet even such convincingly edifying stories could not bring the boy back to conformity. At last, however, he is 'integrated' and denies he has ever seen the golden fox.

In the novel 'Darkness Covers the Earth' (*Ciemności kryją ziemię*) known in its English translation as 'The Inquisitors', Andrzejewski settled a bitter account with himself. Faithful to his basic concern with moral decisions, he took up the problem of an individual's responsibility in the face of terror justified by a sublime aim. The novel gives shape to his own torments and to those of his contemporaries; in an allusion to Dostoevsky's 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor,' it is set in Spain of the fifteenth century. Its protagonist, a young monk, Fra Diego, is converted to the cause of the 'holy terror' by the 'Grand Inquisitor,' Torquemada, to whom he is bound by a deferential, nearly amorous, friendship. On his deathbed, Torquemada finally wavers in his convictions, and Fra Diego is so outraged that he slaps the face of his master's corpse.

A self-analysis from a different angle can be perceived in Andrzejewski's 'The Gates of Paradise' (*Bramy raju*, 1961). Written in a stream-of-consciousness style, without punctuation (except for commas), the novel is woven out of the mutual confessions of

adolescents who depart from medieval France for the Holy Land as participants in the Children's Crusade. What is at the root of all mass movements storming 'the gates of paradise'? the author seems to ask. Judging from the adolescents' confessions, we may presume it is the individual's fear of loneliness, his urge to be united with others in the pursuit of a common great cause, an urge which may be nothing other than libido. Inhibited until now by his Catholic and then Marxist scruples, Andrzejewski in this novel for the first time allows himself free rein in describing nuances of homosexual and heterosexual involvements. All his adolescents, both boys and girls, relate to each other in that peculiar sphere where friendship, passions of the flesh, and attachment to a cause are indistinguishable. Andrzejewski's early fondness for solemn landscapes, for the glitter of sumptuous dresses in darkness, found in *The Gates of Paradise* a territory well suited to its display. Medieval armor, cloaks, and battle horses, glimpsed from time to time in the enveloping night, lend a quality of sensuous vision to the novel, and, indeed, it was originally intended as a film scenario.

Internationally recognized, translated into foreign languages, Andrzejewski traveled to Western Europe, and after a long stay in Paris, he left his inhibitions still further behind, in the novel 'He Cometh Leaping upon the Mountains' (*Idzie skacząc po górach*, 1963; its American version is entitled 'A Sitter for a Satyr'). A mixture of buffoonery and melodrama, this is a display of the author's bravado in parodying the style of Western best sellers and in jousting with the artistic and intellectual milieu. The central figure, an old French painter, who spends most of his time in Provence and whose genius is revived, according to gossip, by affairs with young girls, resembles Picasso.

**Adam Ważyk** (1905-1982).

Adam Ważyk , whom we have already encountered, was born into a middle-class Jewish family in Warsaw and made his debut as part of the pre-war Warsaw avant-garde. His early poems reflect the influence of French ‘cubist’ painting and the poetry of Apollinaire. He wrote little poetry in the thirties, but regained his poetic voice during the Second World War in which he served as an officer in the Polish communist army established in the Soviet Union. For close to ten years, to use Sandauer’s words, ‘He was the official artistic authority. He wrote dramas which were immediately produced and inevitably failed; film scripts that were immediately shot and met with a similar fate; he excoriated Norwid for his petty-noble ideology and the producers of Coca-Cola for serving atomic death. He delivered a programmatic lecture at the Fifth Conference of the Association of Polish Writers and carried over Stalin’s linguistic theses to the methodology of literary studies.’<sup>2</sup> He actually wrote little in this period and was dismissed as editor of the literary monthly *Twórczość* in 1954. By this stage, he was thoroughly disillusioned with Stalinism and his ‘Poemat dla dorosłych.’ (A Poem for Adults) published in 1955, helped to bring an end to the system and facilitate Gomułka’s return to power. It concluded:

The dreamer Fourier prophesied  
that the the seas would flow with lemonade  
And do they not so flow?  
The drank seawater,  
they cried out -  
lemonade!  
They returned home quietly  
to vomit  
to vomit...

They came running and shouted:  
under socialism  
an injured finger  
does not hurt  
They injured a finger.  
It hurt.  
They doubted...

Let us demand a country  
for our exhausted people  
with keys which fit their locks  
with rooms with windows  
with walls without mushrooms

with hatred for paperpushers  
with dear sacred time for people  
with a secure return home  
where there is a simple distinction between word and deed.

Let us demand a country  
which we did not win in a dice game  
for which millions died in battle  
for a bright truth, for the fruits of freedom  
for fruitful understanding  
for fruitful understanding  
Let us demand these through the Party.

After 1956, Wazyk abandoned direct involvement in politics, writing spare and unromantic poems on a wide range of topics. His later poetry, 'permeated by a somewhat melancholy serenity and wisdom'<sup>3</sup> has been among his best. One has to search hard to find any specific Jewish references in it, even in poems which are autobiographical like 'Szkic dla zyciorysu' (Sketch for a Memoir).

## **Julian Tuwim**

Julian Tuwim survived the war in the west. While in exile first in Rio de Janeiro and then in New York, Tuwim wrote a long poem *Kwiaty polskie* (Polish Flowers) describing his childhood and adolescence, which however lacks the brilliance of the verse he wrote in the interwar years. He also wrote a moving prose poem, *My \_ydzi Polscy...* (We, Polish Jews..., 1944)<sup>4</sup> in which he explains his double identity as a Jew and a Pole. It deserves to be quoted at length because it articulates so clearly many of the dilemmas which are raised by Polish-Jewish literature. Tuwim dedicated it 'To my Mother in Poland, or to her beloved Shadow'. He did not know, although he must have suspected, that his mother had been taken out of the insane asylum in Otwock, to which she had retreated and been murdered by the Nazis. He went on:

..And immediately I can hear the question: 'What do you mean - *We*?' The question, I grant you, is natural enough. Jews to whom I am wont to explain that I am a Pole have asked it. So will the Poles to the overwhelming majority of whom I am and shall remain a Jew. Here is my answer to both.

I am a Pole because I want to be. It's nobody's business but my own. I certainly have not the slightest intention of rendering account, explaining, or justifying it to anyone. I do not divide Poles into pure-stock Poles and alien-stock Poles. I leave such justification to pure and alien-stock advocates of racialism, to domestic and foreign Nazis. I divide Poles just as I divide Jews and all other nations into the intelligent and the fools, the honest and the dishonest, the brilliant and the dull-witted, the exploited and the exploiters, gentlemen and boors. I also divide Poles into fascists and anti-fascists. Neither of these groups is of course homogeneous; each shimmers with a variety of hues and shades. But a dividing line certainly does exist, and soon will become apparent. Shades may remain, but the colour of the dividing line itself will both brighten and deepen to a marked degree.

I can say that in the realm of politics I divide Poles into antisemites and anti-fascists. For fascism means always antisemitism. Antisemitism is the international language of fascism.

If, however, it comes to explaining my nationality, or rather my sense of national belonging, then I am a Pole for the most simple, almost primitive reasons. Mostly rational, partly irrational, but devoid of any 'mystical' flourishes. To be a Pole is neither an honour nor a glory nor a privilege. It is like breathing. I have not yet met a man who is proud of breathing.

I am a Pole because it was in Poland that I was born and bred, that I grew up and learned; because it was in Poland that I was happy and unhappy; because from exile it is to Poland that I want to return, even though I were promised the joys of paradise elsewhere...

Above all a Pole - because I want to be...

'All right', someone will say, 'granted you are a Pole. But in that case why we *Jews*?' To which I answer: *Because of blood*. 'Then racialism again?' No, not racialism at all. Quite the contrary.

There are two kinds of blood: that inside of veins, and that which spurts from them. The first is the sap of the body, and as such comes under the realm of physiologists. Whoever attributes to this blood any other than biological characteristics and powers will in consequence, as we have seen, turn towns into smoking ruins, will slaughter millions of people, and, at last, as we shall yet see, bring carnage upon his own kin.

The other kind of blood is the same blood but spilled by this gang-leader of international fascism to testify to the triumph of his gore over mine, the blood of millions of murdered innocents, a blood not hidden in arteries but revealed to the world. Never since the dawn of mankind has there been such a flood of martyr blood, and the blood of Jews (not Jewish blood, mind you) flows in widest and deepest streams. Already its blackening rivulets are flowing into a tempestuous river. *And it is in this new Jordan that I beg to receive the baptism of baptisms; the bloody, burning, martyred brotherhood of Jews.*

Take me, my brethren, into that glorious bond of Innocently Shed Blood. To that community, to that church I want to belong from now on.

Let that high rank - the rank of the Jew *Doloris Causa* - be bestowed upon a Polish poet by the nation which produced him. Not for my merit, for I can claim none in your eyes. I will consider it a promotion and the highest award for those few Polish poems which may survive me and will be connected with the memory of my name - the name of a Polish Jew...

Tuwim returned to Poland shortly after the war and gave the new regime his support,

both in his prose and his verse. He produced almost nothing of literary value until his death in 1953.

Mother

I

At the cemetery in Łódź  
The Jewish cemetery, stands  
The Polish grave of my mother,  
My Jewish mother's tomb.

The grave of my Mother, the Pole,  
Of my Mother the Jewess;  
I brought her from land over Vistula  
To the bank of industrial Łódź.

A rock fell on the tombstone,  
Upon the face of the pale rock  
A few laurel leaves  
Shed by a birch tree.

And when a sunny breeze  
Plays with them a golden game,  
The leaves are patterned into  
The Order of Polonia.

II

A fascist shot my mother  
When she was thinking of me;  
A fascist shot my mother  
When she was longing for me.

He loaded—killed the longing,  
Again began to load,  
So that later... but later  
There was nothing left to kill.

He shot through my mother's world:  
Two tender syllables;  
Threw the corpse out the window  
Upon the holy pavement.

Remember well, little daughter!  
Recall this, future grandson!  
The word has come true:  
'The ideal reached the pavement'<sup>5</sup>

I took her from the field of glory,  
Returned to mother-earth...  
But the corpse of my name  
Still lies buried there.

It remains a mystery whether this was because he was numbed by the scale of the Jewish tragedy, whether he soon saw through the illusions of communism but could not or would not articulate his feelings or whether it was because he needed the stimulus of being hated to spur his literary creativity. <sup>6</sup> His last words were reported to have been, 'On grounds of economy, please extinguish the eternal light that once illuminated me.'

### **Adolf Rudnicki (1909-1992)**

Adolf Rudnicki had made his debut in the pre-war years. In the immediate post war period he was attracted to the *Kuźnica* group, both because of his sympathies for the socialist aspirations of the new regime and because of his deep sense of disgust at what he now regarded as his mistaken and misguided aesthetic in the prewar period. As he wrote:

The war has aged what I have written by a thousand years. I read myself full of astonishment. I read with anger and disapproval. I read and do not recognize. . . . My books exude the stuffy atmosphere of papers abandoned in attics. The war has already destroyed them, though it has not touched their physical form. The impact of the great conflagration has deprived their pages of readability, deformed them like a bridge into whose trusses a missile has been fired. Life has left them, as it has left the steppes under the crushing weight of tanks. My art seems to me to be wretched. Wretched!<sup>7</sup>

More important, he now regarded it as his mission to chronicle the tragic fate of the 'Jewish Nation in Poland'. He bitterly regretted his previous refusal to confront Jewish issues in his fiction. In the mouth of one of his characters, he put the following words:

You should have disturbed the tranquillity of traditional literary canons with your dirty, painful themes, cried out about that which pains you, bled out of yourself those centuries-long inextinguishable pains, you should have pushed aside that pot of *bigos* and placed before them your bitter goblet; they would have made faces but in the end would have reached for it. You should have spoken of us, of us above all, and each time asked this question of yourself: Whose are these themes? Of their essence you were unable to say anything anyway! You should have been merciless toward yourself, lived for the price of speaking and not being silent. You would have won, sir, as a writer, and we would have all won as people.<sup>8</sup>

Before the war Rudnicki had only occasionally touched upon Jewish topics, as in the scenes from the lives of hasidim in *Lato* (Summer). In his childhood and youth he

received a traditional Jewish education the influence of which is later visible in his works where Jewish tradition is juxtaposed and intermixed with Christian. Motifs from both the Old and New Testament appear in allegorical forms in his writings, sometimes as direct references in the names and vicissitudes of characters like Abel or Daniel or indirectly as in the figure of Raisa in 'Ascent to Heaven', patterned on the Madonna.

Rudnicki who had made his debut before the war in complex psychological novels, did not change his technique after the holocaust but adapted it to the new subject matter. His primary aim became to record the tragedy of Polish Jewry. He depicts both the victims and the survivors as seen from the inside, giving them complex psychological portraits. Since he sticks closely to the historical facts, some of his writing could be described as psychological journalism as he became a chronicler of the destroyed Jewish world, giving the grim historical truth a lyrical note.

He now abandoned the novel and resorted to long, almost documentary short stories. These are, on the surface, realistic.<sup>9</sup> But in fact, the reality which they describe, 'the world after the end of the world' has been fundamentally transformed by the contagion of Nazi evil. As Józef Wróbel has observed, 'Reality is invaded by evil, falsehood, insincerity, hypocrisy, a lack of authenticity; a man thus searches for a foothold outside of reality, because he has a presentiment of another actuality',<sup>10</sup> the possibility of the sort of behaviour which can transcend the hateful universe of the Nazis. The essence of this universe is seen as its setting people against each other, Poles against Jews and Jews against Jews by offering some the possibility of survival in a situation where others are condemned to annihilation. This process is observed in a meatshop advertisement in 'Wielki Stefan Konecki' (The Great Stefan Konecki):

Olejniczuk's butcher's stall was closed, but someone kept changing the sign on the door. The first one read: For Aryans, 10 dkg meat without bones; for Jews, 5 dkg without bones. The second sign: Aryans, 10 dkg meat without bones; Jews, 5 dkg (no mention of bones). There still was no meat, but a third sign appeared anyway: Aryans, 10 dkg meat without bones; Jews receive no meat. The stall was always closed, but the great deceit changed colour in nuances. The enemy fed the imagination.<sup>11</sup>

Against this evil and self-destructive universe, Rudnicki sets his heroes, who have made the moral choice to do what is right, even though this choice may have not a satisfactory outcome

### **Kazimierz Brandys (1916-2000)**

Like Ważyk, Kazimierz Brandys, another prominent member of the *Kuźnica* group, played a key role in the literary life of Poland in the first decade of communist rule. Born into a middle-class Jewish family in Łódź, he had just graduated in law at Warsaw University when the war broke out. He spent the war in Warsaw on the ‘aryan side’ and his first novel *Drewniany koń* (‘Wooden Horse’, 1946) describes his pre-war and wartime experiences, somewhat downplaying Jewish issues. This was followed by *Miasto niepokonane* (‘The Unconquered City’, 1946), an idealized account of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

Brandys’s work now increasingly moved towards the adoption of the aesthetic principles of socialist realism. This was already perceptible in his four-part novel, *Między wojnami* (‘Between the Wars’, 1948-1951), which has as its main theme the political delusions and vacillations of the interwar Polish intelligentsia and its responsibility for the fate which befell their country. The first volume, *Samson*, is an interesting portrayal of a Jewish assimilated milieu. Its hero eventually dies during the Nazi occupation fighting in the communist resistance. It was made into a film by Andrzej Wajda. His most fully-fledged socialist novel, *Obywatele* (‘Citizens’, 1954) with its depiction of high school students unmasking the bourgeois deviations of their teachers can now only be read with embarrassment.

Brandys was also an important player in the attempt to break out of the Stalinist literary and political straitjacket. In his story ‘The Defense of Granada’, he describes the tragedy of a group of enthusiastic actors, whose socialist convictions are betrayed by the Party official in control of their theatre, symbolically named Dr Faul, who induces them to produce a worthless propagandist ‘production play’. The same theme of the solid rank-and-

file socialists betrayed by the Party is played out in the novel *Matka Królów* ('The Mother of the Król Brothers'<sup>12</sup>, 1957). In it, the proletarian Mrs Król loses all her sons, who die, either at the hands of fascists or their own party. Brandys only gradually lost his belief that the socialist idea could be redeemed from its betrayal at the hands of its incompetent and venal bureaucratic executors. He analyzed this theme in many stories, which were ostensibly long letters (*Listy do pani Z.*, 'Letter to Miss Z.' 1959-1962) and in his diary. He has also shown an interest in using the stream of consciousness technique to illustrate the complex psychological motives of his hero as in *Sposób bycia* ('A Manner of Being', 1962). His novel *Mala księga* ('Little Book', 1970) contains an exploration of his Jewish childhood. In 1966 he resigned from the Polish United Workers' Party and in 1978 published in Paris *Nierzeczywistość* ('A Question of Reality', English edition, 1980), in which he finally and unequivocally rejected his communist past. Through his non-Jewish narrator, he also assails the role of antisemitism in Poland, past and present.

### **Antoni Słonimski (1895-1976)**

Słonimski went back to Poland in 1946, but soon returned to the West, first as Chairman of the literary section of UNESCO and then, as Director of the Polish Cultural Institute in London. While in England, he wrote a moving 'Elegia dla miasteczek żydowskich (Elegy for the Shtetl):

No more will you find in Poland Jewish shtetlach  
Hrubieszów, Karczew, Brody, Falenica  
In vain will you seek in the windows lighted candles  
And search for the sound of chants from the wooden synagogue.  
The last scourings, the Jewish rags have vanished  
They sprinkled sand over the blood, swept away the footprints  
and whitewashed the walls with bluish lime  
As after a plague or a great day of fasting.  
One moon shines here, cool, pale, alien,  
Outside the town, when the night lights up,  
My Jewish kinsmen, with their poetic fancies  
Will find no more Chagall's two gold moons.  
They have flown away frightened by the grim silence.  
No more will you find those towns, where the cobbler was a poet,  
The watchmaker a philosopher, the barber a troubadour.

No more will you find those towns where biblical psalms  
Were linked by the wind with Polish laments and Slavic ardour,  
Where old Jews in the orchard, under the shade of cherry trees,  
Wept for the sacred walls of Jerusalem.  
No more will you find those towns where poetic mist,  
The moon, winds, lakes and the stars above  
Wrote in blood a tragic story  
The history of the world's two saddest nations.

He returned to Poland in 1951 and his cautious support for the communist regime soon turned to opposition. He was largely silent until the political changes which brought Gomułka to power as head of a national-communist regime in October 1956, when he was elected president of the Polish Writers' Union, playing until his death in 1976 a key role in the anti-regime intelligentsia. He was bitterly attacked by the regime during the 'anti-Zionist' campaign of 1968, but began to publish again in the early 1970s in the liberal Catholic weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Słonimski never abandoned his basically liberal view of the world. But he became increasingly aware of the fragility of these values and of the tragic nature of life. The figures of Hamlet and Don Quixote constantly recur in his later poetry. In his 'Sąd nad Don Kichotem' (Don Quixote's Trial), the Don admits to the guilt of being insufficiently quixotic. The poem concludes:

Because I was fainthearted once,  
Because I once lacked courage  
And kept silent against my conscience,  
I wish to be naked when I die.  
I wish to throw the oppressive burden off my chest  
And I prefer to lie in oblivion  
In ashes and wayside dust,  
Rather than on a tall catafalque  
In the church of your false gods.

### **Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004)**

Miłosz left Poland in 1951, lived for almost ten years in Paris as a free-lance writer, and in 1960 went to the United States, where he has been teaching Polish literature at the University of California in Berkeley. He has always considered himself primarily a poet, although he wrote several books in prose, some of which were translated into many

languages. 'The Captive Mind' (*Zniewolony umysł*, 1953) is an analysis of the mental acrobatics Eastern European intellectuals had to perform in order to give assent to Stalinist dogmas. It preceded similar denunciations in Poland by a few years, but was attacked in the emigre press as tainted with Hegelianism and Marxism. 'The Valley of Issa' (*Dolina Issy*, 1955) is a novel close to the very core of Miłosz's poetry. It has been called 'pagan' because of its childish amazement with the world; but this story of childhood in Lithuania, with its simple images of nature, is somewhat deceptive, as underneath lurks a Manichean vision. 'Native Realm' (*Rodzinna Europa*, 1959) is written as the autobiography of an Eastern European, conducting him through his native Lithuania, Russia, Poland, and France.

Miłosz is unquestionably the greatest Polish poet of the second half of the twentieth century. His poetry is intellectual and sceptical, anti-totalitarian and concerned above all with the question of good and evil. He is extremely uncomfortable with poetic artifice, although he is himself a very accomplished versifier. In an interview with *Polityka* (7 October 2000), on the publication of his most recent book of poetry, he remarked characteristically, 'The fact that we are talking about such matters [the problems of good and evil] in connection with this book is very good. It is a sign that there has occurred in Polish poetry what I very much wanted as a young man: that I would be able to tear myself out of the chalk circle of lyricism and create a poetry in which one could think in verse'.

### Campo Dei Fiori

In Rome on the Campo dei Fiori  
baskets of olives and lemons,  
cobblestones spattered with wine  
and the wreckage of flowers.  
Vendors cover the trestles  
with rose-pink fish;  
armfuls of dark grapes  
heaped on peach-down.

On this same square  
they burned Giordano Bruno.  
Henchmen kindled the pyre

close-pressed by the mob.  
Before the flames had died the taverns were full again,  
baskets of olives and lemons  
again on the vendors' shoulders.

I thought of the Campo dei Fiori  
in Warsaw by the sky-carousel  
one clear spring evening  
the strains of a carnival tune.  
The bright melody drowned  
the salvos from the ghetto wall,  
and couples were flying  
high in the cloudless sky.

At times wind from the burning  
would drift dark kites along  
and riders on the carousel  
caught petals in midair.  
That same hot wind  
blew open the skirts of the girls  
and the crowds were laughing  
on that beautiful Warsaw Sunday.

Someone will read as moral  
that the people of Rome or Warsaw  
haggle, laugh, make love  
as they pass by martyrs' pyres.  
Someone else will read  
of the passing of things human,  
of the oblivion  
born before the flames have died.

But that day I thought only  
of the loneliness of the dying,  
of how, when Giordano  
climbed to his burning  
he could not find  
any human tongue  
words for mankind,  
mankind who live on

Already they were back at their wine  
or peddled their white starfish,  
baskets of olives and lemons  
they had shouldered to the fair,  
and he already distanced  
as if centuries had passed  
while they paused just a moment  
for his flying in the fire.

Those dying here, the lonely  
forgotten by the world,  
our tongue becomes for them  
the language of an ancient planet.

Until, when all is legend  
and many years have passed,  
on a new Campo dei Fiori  
rage will kindle at a poet's word.

Warsaw 1943

'A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto' ('Biedny chrze\_cijanin patrzy na Ghetto,' 1943):

Bees build around red liver,  
Ants build around black bone.  
It has begun: the tearing, the trampling on silks,  
It has begun: the breaking of glass, wood, copper, nickel, silver, foam,  
Of gypsum, iron sheets, violin strings, trumpets, leaves, balls, crystals.  
Poof! Phosphorescent fire from yellow walls  
Engulfs animal and human hair.

Bees build around the honeycomb of lungs,  
Ants build around white bone.  
Torn is paper, rubber, linen, leather, flax,  
Fiber, fabrics, cellulose, snakeskin, wire.  
The roof and the wall collapse in flame and heat seizes the foundations.  
Now there is only the earth, sandy, trodden down,  
With one leafless tree.

Slowly, boring a tunnel, a guardian mole makes his way,  
With a small red lamp fastened to his forehead.  
He touches burned bodies, counts them, pushes on,  
He distinguishes human ashes by their luminous vapor,  
The ashes of each man by a different part of the spectrum.  
Bees build around a red trace.  
Ants build around the place left by my body.

I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole.  
He has swollen eyelids, like a Patriarch  
Who has sat much in the light of candles  
Reading the great book of the species.

What will I tell him,  
I, a Jew of the New Testament,  
Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus?  
My broken body will deliver me to his sight  
And he will count me among the helpers of death:  
The uncircumcised.

In Warsaw

What are you doing here, poet, on the ruins  
Of St. John's Cathedral this sunny  
Day in spring?

What are you thinking here, where the wind  
Blowing from the Vistula scatters  
The red dust of the rubble?

You swore never to be  
A ritual mourner.  
You swore never to touch  
The deep wounds of your nation  
So you would not make them holy  
With the accursed holiness that pursues  
Descendants for many centuries.

But the lament of Antigone  
Searching for her brother  
Is indeed beyond the power  
Of endurance. And the heart  
Is a stone in which is enclosed,  
Like an insect, the dark love  
Of a most unhappy land.

I did not want to love so.  
That was not my design.  
I did not want to pity so.  
That was not my design.  
My pen is lighter  
Than a hummingbird's feather. This burden  
Is too much for it to bear.  
How can I live in this country  
Where the foot knocks against  
The unburied bones of kin?  
I hear voices, see smiles. I cannot  
Write anything; five hands  
Seize my pen and order me to write  
The story of their lives and deaths.  
Was I born to become a ritual mourner?  
I want to sing of festivities,  
The greenwood into which Shakespeare  
Often took me. Leave  
To poets a moment of happiness,  
Otherwise your world will perish.

It's madness to live without joy  
And to repeat to the dead  
Whose part was to be gladness  
Of action in thought and in the flesh, singing, feasts,  
Only the two salvaged words:  
Truth and justice.

Warsaw, 1945

## Dedication

You whom I could not save  
Listen to me.  
Try to understand this simple speech as I would be ashamed of another.  
I swear, there is in me no wizardry of words.  
I speak to you with silence like a cloud or a tree.

What strengthened me, for you was lethal.  
You confused farewell to an epoch with the beginning of a new one,  
Inspiration of hatred with lyrical beauty,  
Blind force with accomplished shape.

Here is the valley of shallow Polish rivers. And an immense bridge  
Going into white fog. Here is a broken city,  
And the wind throws the screams of gulls on your grave  
When I am talking with you.

What is poetry which does not save  
Nations or people? A connivance with official lies,  
A song of drunkards whose throats will be cut in a moment,  
Readings for adolescent girls.  
That I wanted good poetry without knowing it,  
That I discovered, late, its salutary aim,  
In this and only this I find salvation.

They used to pour millet on graves or poppy seeds  
To feed the dead who would come disguised as birds.  
I put this book here for you, who once lived  
So that you should visit us no more.

Warsaw, 1945

## Child Of Europe

1

We, whose lungs fill with the sweetness of day,  
Who in May admire trees flowering,  
Are better than those who perished.

We, who taste of exotic dishes,  
And enjoy fully the delights of love,  
Are better than those who were buried.

We, from the fiery furnaces, from behind barbed wires  
On which the winds of endless autumns howled,  
We, who remember battles where the wounded air roared in paroxysms of pain,  
We, saved by our own cunning and knowledge.

By sending others to the more exposed positions,

Urging them loudly to fight on,  
Ourselves withdrawing in certainty of the cause lost.

Having the choice of our own death and that of a friend,  
We chose his, coldly thinking: let it be done quickly.

We sealed gas chamber doors, stole bread,  
Knowing the next day would be harder to bear than the day before.

As befits human beings, we explored good and evil.  
Our malignant wisdom has no like on this planet.

Accept it as proven that we are better than they,  
The gullible, hot-blooded weaklings, careless with their lives

2

Treasure your legacy of skills, child of Europe,  
Inheritor of Gothic cathedrals, of baroque churches,  
Of synagogues filled with the wailing of a wronged people.  
Successor of Descartes, Spinoza, inheritor of the word 'honor,'  
Posthumous child of Leonidas,  
Treasure the skills acquired in the hour of terror.

You have a clever mind which sees instantly  
The good and bad of any situation.  
You have an elegant, skeptical mind which enjoys pleasures  
Quite unknown to primitive races.

Guided by this mind you cannot fail to see  
The soundness of the advice we give you:  
Let the sweetness of day fill your lungs.  
For this we have strict but wise rules.

3

There can be no question of force triumphant.  
We live in the age of victorious justice.

Do not mention force, or you will be accused  
Of upholding fallen doctrines in secret.

He who has power, has it by historical logic.  
Respectfully bow to that logic.

Let your lips, proposing a hypothesis,  
Not know about the hand faking the experiment.

Let your hand, faking the experiment,  
Not know about the lips proposing a hypothesis.

Learn to predict a fire with unerring precision.  
Then burn the house down to fulfill the prediction.

4

Grow your tree of falsehood from a small grain of truth.  
Do not follow those who lie in contempt of reality.

Let your lie be even more logical than the truth itself,  
So the weary travelers may find repose in the lie.

After the Day of the Lie gather in select circles,  
Shaking with laughter when our real deeds are mentioned.

Dispensing flattery called: perspicacious thinking.  
Dispensing flattery called: a great talent.

We, the last who can still draw joy from cynicism.  
We, whose cunning is not unlike despair.

A new, humorless generation is now arising,  
It takes in deadly earnest all we received with laughter.

5

Let your words speak not through their meanings,  
But through them against whom they are used.

Fashion your weapon from ambiguous words.  
Consign clear words to lexical limbo.

Judge no words before the clerks have checked  
In their card index by whom they were spoken.

The voice of passion is better than the voice of reason.  
The passionless cannot change history.

6

Love no country: countries soon disappear.  
Love no city: cities are soon rubble.

Throw away keepsakes, or from your desk  
A choking, poisonous fume will exude.

Do not love people: people soon perish  
Or they are wronged and call for your help.

Do not gaze into the pools of the past.  
Their corroded surface will mirror  
A face different from the one you expected.

7

He who invokes history is always secure.  
The dead will not rise to witness against him.

You can accuse them of any deeds you like.  
Their reply will always be silence.

Their empty faces swim out of the deep dark.  
You can fill them with any features desired.

Proud of dominion over people long vanished,  
Change the past into your own, better likeness.

8

The laughter born of the love of truth  
Is now the laughter of the enemies of the people.

Gone is the age of satire. We no longer need mock  
The senile monarch with false courtly phrases.

Stern as befits the servants of a cause,  
We will permit ourselves only sycophantic humor.

Tight-lipped, guided by reasons only,  
Cautiously let us step into the era of the unchained fire.

New York, 1946

Bypassing Rue Descartes

Bypassing rue Descartes  
I descended toward the Seine, shy, a traveler,  
A young barbarian just come to the capital of the world.

We were many, from Jassy and Koloshvar, Wilno and Bucharest, Saigon and Marrakesh,  
Ashamed to remember the customs of our homes,  
About which nobody here should ever be told:  
The clapping for servants, barefooted girls hurry in,  
Dividing food with incantations,  
Choral prayers recited by master and household together.

I had left the cloudy provinces behind,  
I entered the universal, dazzled and desiring.

Soon enough, many from Jassy and Koloshvar, or Saigon or Marrakesh  
Would be killed because they wanted to abolish the customs of their homes.

Soon enough, their peers were seizing power  
In order to kill in the name of the universal, beautiful ideas.

Meanwhile the city behaved in accordance with its nature,  
Rustling with throaty laughter in the dark,  
Baking long breads and pouring wine into clay pitchers,  
Buying fish, lemons, and garlic at street markets,  
Indifferent as it was to honor and shame and greasiness and glory,

Because that had been done already and had transformed itself  
Into monuments representing nobody knows whom,  
Into arias hardly audible and into turns of speech.

Again I lean on the rough granite of the embankment,  
As if I had returned from travels through the underworlds  
And suddenly saw in the light the reeling wheel of the seasons  
Where empires have fallen and those once living are now dead.

There is no capital of the world, neither here nor anywhere else,  
And the abolished customs are restored to their small fame  
And now I know that the time of human generations is not like the time of the earth.

As to my heavy sins, I remember one most vividly:  
How, one day, walking on a forest path along a stream,  
I pushed a rock down onto a water snake coiled in the grass.

And what I have met with in life was the just punishment  
Which reaches, sooner or later, the breaker of a taboo.

Berkeley, 1980

### **Zbigniew Herbert (1924-2000)**

Zbigniew Herbert belongs to the 'new wave' of poets who made their debuts in 1956. He is, perhaps, the most representative among the young poets of the second postwar decade. A native of Lviv, he attended a clandestinely operated high school during the war, besides participating in underground military training classes run by the Resistance and earning his living at odd jobs. He may have seen action in a guerrilla unit; after the war he obtained a diploma in law, studied philosophy and history of art, worked as a minor employee in various stage enterprises, wrote poetry, but published practically nothing throughout the period of obligatory orthodoxy. He was, thus, over thirty when his first volume, 'String of Light' (*Struna światła*, 1956), appeared in print. It was followed by 'Hermes, a Dog and a Star' (*Hermes, pies i gwiazda*, 1957) and 'A Study of the Object' (*Studium przedmiotu*, 1961). Herbert's treatment of the basic theme of Polish postwar poetry—the tension

between an artist's concern with form and his compassion for human suffering—is detached and ironic. In his outlook, he is a poet of civilization, not a rebel decrying the 'nothing in Prospero's cloak.' His training in the humanities has made him somewhat wary of the longing for a state of perfect innocence. The tragedies of our century pervade his crystalline, intellectual, and ironic poetry, but they are counterbalanced by his reflections on historical situations from other ages, and are rather alluded to than approached directly. Hamlet, Marcus Aurelius, the soldiers of ancient Greece, Roman proconsuls, or deities of classical mythology are the heroes of his poems. This procedure assures him a perspective on his own time. Some of his poems, it is true, pervert the great images of Christian civilization by irony: 'At the Gate of the Valley' suggests that the angels dividing the damned from the saved behave like guards in a concentration camp. It is also true that in the poem 'Apollo and Marsyas' the problem of imperturbable art versus howls of pain is given a solution inimical to the former: Marsyas is a satyr who dared to challenge Apollo to a contest of flute-playing. As a punishment, he was bound to a tree and flayed. The howls of the tortured Marsyas disgust Apollo, but also make him uneasy. He departs:

wondering  
whether out of Marsyas' howling  
there will not someday arise  
a new kind  
of art—let us say—concrete  
.  
suddenly  
at his feet  
falls a petrified nightingale  
he looks back  
and sees that the hair of the tree to which Marsyas was fastened  
  
is white  
completely

Yet Herbert, in most of his other poems, rehabilitates art much as he rehabilitates the perfection of objects we see and touch. Perhaps this clinging to inanimate things is a little

desperate; however, they stand for the purity of a universe independent of human suffering.

For instance, he writes in a short poem, 'The Stone' ('Kamyk'):

The stone  
is a perfect creature

equal to itself  
obedient to its limits

filled exactly  
with a stony meaning

with a scent which does not remind one of anything;  
does not frighten anything away does not arouse desire

its ardor and coldness  
are just and full of dignity

I feel a heavy remorse  
when I hold it in my hand  
and its noble body  
is permeated by false warmth

stones cannot be tamed  
to the end they will look at us  
with a calm very clear eye

Herbert's poetry might be defined as a distillation of the crushing experiences shared by everyone in Poland. Through its universalized meaning, it makes a valid contribution to the world poetry of this century. Herbert also fulfills the wishes of those Polish poets who searched, during the war, for a balance between an all-out protest against man's crime and faith in man. If his wisdom is bitter, at least he assigns the present human conflicts a place in a larger frame of reference, as he does, for instance, in his 'Elegy of Fortinbras':

Now that we're alone we can talk Prince man to man  
though you lie on the stairs and see no more than a dead ant  
nothing but black sun with broken rays  
I could never think of your hands without smiling  
and now when they lie on the stone like fallen nests  
they are defenseless as before The end is exactly this  
The hands lie apart The sword lies apart The head apart  
and the knight's feet in soft slippers

You will have a soldier's funeral without having been a soldier  
the only ritual I am acquainted with a little  
There will be no candles no singing only cannon-fuses and bursts  
Crape dragged on the pavement helmets boots artillery horses

drums drums I know nothing exquisite  
those will be my maneuvers before I start to rule  
one has to take the city by the neck and shake it a bit

Anyhow you had to perish Hamlet you were not for life  
you believed in crystal notions not in human clay  
Always twitching as if asleep you hunted chimeras  
wolfishly you crunched the air only to vomit  
you knew no human thing you did not know even how to breathe

Now you have peace Hamlet you accomplished what you had to  
and you have peace The rest is not silence but belongs to me  
you chose the easier part an elegant thrust  
but what is heroic death compared with eternal watching  
with a cold apple in one's hand on a narrow chair  
with a view on the anthill and the clock's dial

Adieu Prince I have tasks a sewer project  
and a decree on prostitutes and beggars  
I must also elaborate a better system of prisons  
since as you justly said Denmark is a prison  
I go to my affairs This night is born  
a star named Hamlet We shall never meet  
What I shall leave will not be worth a tragedy

It is not for us to greet each other or bid farewell we live on archipelagoes  
and that water these words what can they do what can they do Prince

Describing Prince Hamlet's Denmark, Herbert knows what he is talking about. Yet a genuine bond with the predicament of the Polish community, which is the strength of poets like Herbert, will probably grow weaker in much younger writers who will lack the intensity of a first-hand acquaintance with terror, either during the war or in the years 1949-1955. Whether they will be as indulgent to Fortinbras as Herbert is, or completely indifferent to his troubles, is unknown. In any case, Herbert's mature vision is matched by very few of the younger generation. Critics have described his poetic idiom as 'classical' — not in the sense that he uses syllabotonic meters or rhyme, which he does rarely, but in the sense of the clarity and logical structure of his work.

Herbert traveled much in Italy, France, and Greece, and out of his journeys, undertaken in the spirit of humanism, arose a book of essays, *A Barbarian in the Garden* (Barbarzy\_ca w ogrodzie, 1962 ). The topics include the Albigensians, the Knights Templars, Greek geometry as applied to building temples at Paestum, the preserved data of

medieval Masonic guilds. Herbert's passionate interest in the civilization of the Mediterranean owes much to Cyprian Norwid.

The Power of Taste

For Professor Izydora Dęmbka

It didn't require great character at all  
our refusal disagreement and resistance  
we had a shred of necessary courage but fundamentally  
it was a matter of taste  
    Yes taste  
in which there are fibres of soul the cartilage of conscience

Who knows if we had been better and more attractively tempted  
sent rose-skinned women thin as a wafer  
or fantastic creatures from the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch  
but what kind of hell was there at this time  
a wet pit the murderers' alley the barrack  
called a palace of justice  
a home-brewed Mephisto in a Lenin jacket  
sent Aurora's grandchildren out into the field  
boys with potato faces  
very ugly girls with red hands

Verily their rhetoric was made of cheap sacking  
(Marcus Tullius kept turning in his grave)  
chains of tautologies a couple of concepts like flails  
the dialectics of slaughterers no distinctions  
in reasoning syntax deprived of beauty of the subjunctive

So aesthetics can be helpful in life  
one should not neglect the study of beauty

Before we declare our consent we must carefully examine  
the shape of the architecture the rhythm of the drums and pipes  
official colors the despicable ritual of funerals

Our eyes and ears refused obedience  
the princes of our senses proudly chose exile

It did not require great character at all  
we had a shred of necessary courage  
but fundamentally it was a matter of taste  
    Yes taste  
that commands us to get out to make a wry face draw out a sneer  
even if for this the precious capital of the body the head  
    must fall

To Ryszard Krynicki—a Letter

Not much will remain Ryszard really not much  
of the poetry of this insane century certainly Rilke Eliot  
a few other distinguished shamans who knew the secret  
of conjuring a form with words that resists the action of time without which  
no phrase is worth remembering and speech is like sand

those school notebooks of ours sincerely tormented  
with traces of sweat tears blood will be  
like the text of a song without music for the eternal proofreader  
honorably righteous more than obvious

too easily we came to believe beauty does not save  
that it leads the lighthearted from dream to dream to death  
none of us knew how to awaken the dryad of a poplar  
to read the writing of clouds  
this is why the unicorn will not cross our tracks  
we won't bring to life a ship in the bay a peacock a rose  
only nakedness remained for us and we stand naked  
on the right the better side of the triptych  
the Last Judgment

we took public affairs on our thin soulders  
recording suffering the struggle with tyranny with lying  
but—you have to admit—we had opponents despicably small  
so was it worth it to lower holy speech  
to the babble of the speaker's platform the black foam of the newspapers

in our poems Ryszard there is so little joy—daughter of the gods  
too few luminous dusks mirrors wreaths of rapture  
nothing but dark psalmodies stammering of animulae  
urns of ashes in the burned garden

in spite of fate the verdicts of history human misdeeds  
what strength is needed to whisper  
in the garden of betrayal - was silent night

what strength of spirit is needed to strike  
beating blindly with despair against despair  
a spark of light a word of reconciliation

so the dancing circle will last forever on the thick grass  
so the birth of a child and every beginning is blessed  
gifts of air earth and fire and water

this I don't know - my friend - and is why  
I am sending you these owl's puzzles in the night  
a warm embrace

greetings from my shadow

Herbert is also known for his *alter ego*, Pan Cogito (Mr Thought), a Hamlet-like figure, torn between his moral pre-occupations and his desire for a quiet life. I reproduce five of these poems.

### The Envoy of Mr Cogito

Go where those others went to the dark boundary  
for the golden fleece of nothingness your last prize

go upright among those who are on their knees  
among those with their backs turned and those toppled in the dust

you were saved not in order to live  
you have little time you must give testimony

be courageous when the mind deceives you be courageous  
in the final account only this is important

and let your helpless Anger be like the sea  
whenever you hear the voice of the insulted and beaten

let your sister Scorn not leave you  
for the informers executioners cowards - they will win  
they will go to your funeral with relief will throw a lump of earth  
the woodborer will write your smoothed-over biography

and do not forgive truly it is not in your power  
to forgive in the name of those betrayed at dawn

beware however of unnecessary pride  
keep looking at your clown's face in the mirror  
repeat: I was called - weren't there better ones than I

beware of dryness of heart love the morning spring  
the bird with an unknown name the winter oak  
light on a wall the splendour of the sky  
they don't need your warm breath  
they are there to say: no one will console you

be vigilant - when the light on the mountains gives the sign- arise and go  
as long as blood turns in the breast your dark star

repeat old incantations of humanity fables and legends  
because this is how you will attain the good you will not attain  
repeat great words repeat them stubbornly  
like those crossing the desert who perished in the sand

and they will reward you with what they have at hand  
with the whip of laughter with murder on a garbage heap

go because only in this way you will be admitted to the company of cold skulls  
to the company of your ancestors: Gilgamesh Hector Roland  
the defenders of the kingdom without limit and the city of ashes

Be faithful Go

Mr Cogito and the Imagination

1

Mr Cogito never trusted  
tricks of the imagination

the piano at the top of the Alps  
played false concerts for him

he didn't appreciate labyrinths  
the Sphinx filled him with loathing

he lived in a house with no basement  
without mirrors or dialectics

jungles of tangled images  
were not his home

he would rarely soar  
on the wings of a metaphor  
and then he fell like Icarus  
into the embrace of the Great Mother

he adored tautologies  
explanations  
idem per idem

that a bird is a bird  
slavery means slavery  
a knife is a knife  
death remains death

he loved  
the flat horizon  
a straight line  
the gravity of the earth

2

Mr Cogito will be numbered  
among the species minores

he will accept indifferently the verdict  
of future scholars of the letter

he used the imagination

for entirely different purposes

he wanted to make it  
an instrument of compassion

he wanted to understand to the very end

- Pascal's night
- the nature of a diamond
- the melancholy of the prophets
- Achilles' wrath
- the madness of those who kill
- the dreams of Mary Stuart
- Neanderthal fear
- the despair of the last Aztecs
- Nietzsche's long death throes
- the joy of the painter of Lascaux
- the rise and fall of an oak
- the rise and fall of Rome

and so to bring the dead back to life  
to preserve the covenant

Mr Cogito's imagination  
has the motion of a pendulum

it crosses with precision  
from suffering to suffering

there is no place in it  
for the artificial fires of poetry

he would like to remain faithful  
to uncertain clarity

Mr. Cogito. Ars longa

1

Bombastic manifestoes  
civil warfare  
pitched battles  
campaigns  
filled Mr. Cogito  
with boredom

in every generation  
appear those who wish  
to snatch poetry  
from the claws  
of everydayness  
with stubbornness worthy of a better cause

already in their youth  
they enter the orders  
of Most Holy Subtlety  
and Ascension

they strain the mind and body  
to express what is  
beyond—  
what is  
above— — —

they don't even suspect  
how many promises  
enchantments  
surprises  
are concealed in the language  
spoken by all of us  
tinker tailor and Horace  
2

years ago  
Mr. Cogito took part  
in the Poetry Festival of Two Hemispheres  
the place of the event—the former Yugoslavia  
near Lake Ohrid  
on the River Struga

more than 30 thousand  
lovers of poetry  
were comfortably settled  
on both banks

a lyric poet from Paris  
Le Bon Mot  
went almost mad with happiness  
(at home his own wife  
and terrorized progeny  
listened to him)

ascetics  
flagellants  
anchorites  
of pure poetry  
wallowed in the abundance  
of starved souls

at the fall  
of darkness  
shooting flared up  
fireworks  
burst into the sky  
it seemed  
like a new Balkan war

the following day  
they fished from the river  
four peasants  
an old woman  
an infant  
a countless number of empty bottles  
the door of a barn  
the leg of a piano  
an artificial leg with no owner  
about twenty yards  
of chain  
3

the quartet of the family Wunderlich  
beat out the rhythm

father Hansi—accounting on the cello  
mother Truda—bookkeeping on violin and brasses  
son Rudi—versatile  
the natural daughter of grandpa Wunderlich  
ergo Hansi's sister  
Rudi's daughter  
arousing sweet terror—  
the frightening  
Maria Chaos

Mr. Cogito in East Central Europe

The trouble with you  
Mr. Cogito  
you don't smile.

Display your teeth  
sell yourself  
or the next guy will take  
your Nobel right  
from under your nose.

In the new order  
if you want to write  
why just write.

Don't expect  
to be given readings  
don't expect  
publishers (of poetry?  
don't make me laugh!)  
to ask for a book.  
Soon nobody  
will read poetry  
like the U.S.A.

It's dog eat dog.  
Play it safe

write what the new  
bosses want  
study your navel  
keep pleasant  
not political.

## The Monster of Mr Cogito

1

Lucky Saint George  
from his knight's saddle  
could exactly evaluate  
the strength and movements of the dragon

the first principle of strategy  
is to assess the enemy accurately

Mr Cogito  
is in a worse position

he sits in the low  
saddle of a valley  
covered with thick fog

through fog it is impossible to perceive  
fiery eyes  
greedy claws  
jaws

through fog  
one sees only  
the shimmering of nothingness

the monster of Mr Cogito  
has no measurements

it is difficult to describe  
escapes definition

it is like an immense depression  
spread out over the country

it can't be pierced  
with a pen

with an argument  
or spear

were it not for its suffocating weight  
and the death it sends down

one would think  
it is the hallucination  
of a sick imagination  
but it exists  
for certain it exists

like carbon monoxide it fills  
houses temples markets

poisons wells  
destroys the structures of the mind  
covers bread with mould

the proof of the existence of the monster  
is its victims

it is not direct proof  
but sufficient

2

reasonable people say  
we can live together  
with the monster

we only have to avoid  
sudden movements  
sudden speech

if there is a threat assume  
the form of a rock or a leaf

listen to wise Nature  
recommending mimicry

that we breathe shallowly  
pretend we aren't there

Mr Cogito however  
does not want a life of make-believe

he would like to fight  
with the monster  
on firm ground

so he walks out at dawn  
into a sleepy suburb  
carefully equipped  
with a long sharp object

he calls to the monster  
on the empty streets

he offends the monster  
provokes the monster

like a bold skirmisher  
of an army that doesn't exist

he calls -  
come out contemptible coward

through the fog  
one sees only  
the huge snout of nothingness

Mr Cogito wants to enter  
the uneven battle

it ought to happen  
possibly soon

before there is  
a fall from inertia  
an ordinary death without glory  
suffocation from formlessness

Excerpt from: Mr Cogito on the Need for Precision

3  
now Mr Cogito  
climbs  
to the highest tottering  
step of indefiniteness

how difficult it is to establish the names  
of all those who perished  
in the struggle with inhuman power

the official statistics  
reduce their number  
once again pitilessly  
they decimate those who have died a violent death  
and their bodies disappear  
in abysmal cellars  
of huge police buildings

eyewitnesses  
blinded by gas  
deafened by salvos  
by fear and despair  
are inclined toward exaggeration

accidental observers

give doubtful figures  
accompanied by the shameful word 'about'

and yet in these matters  
accuracy is essential  
we must not be wrong  
even by a single one

we are despite everything  
the guardians of our brothers

ignorance about those who have disappeared  
undermines the reality of the world

it thrusts into the hell of appearances  
the devilish net of dialectics  
proclaiming there is no difference between the substance and the spectre

therefore we have to know  
to count exactly  
call by the first name  
provide for a journey

in a bowl of clay  
millet poppy seeds  
a bone comb  
arrowheads  
and a ring of faithfulness  
amulets

### **Wisława Szymborska (1923-**

Wisława Szymborska, who was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1998 especially captivated readers with her volume, 'Salt' (Sól 1961), the very title of which is an apt comment on the sting in her verse. It would be unjust to present her as a poet of narrow range; her discipline enables her to practice philosophical poetry with a conciseness matched only by Zbigniew Herbert. Yet she often leans toward preciosity. She is probably at her best where her woman's sensibility outweighs her existential brand of rationalism, as in the following poem:

## I Am Too Near

I am too near to be dreamt of by him.  
I do not fly over him, do not escape from him  
under the roots of a tree. I am too near.  
Not in my voice sings the fish in the net,  
not from my finger rolls the ring.  
I am too near. A big house is on fire  
without me, calling for help. Too near  
for a bell dangling from my hair to chime.  
Too near to enter as a guest  
before whom walls glide apart by themselves.  
Never again will I die so lightly,  
so much beyond my flesh, so inadvertently  
as once in his dream. Too near.  
I taste the sound, I see the glittering husk of this word  
as I lie immobile in his embrace. He sleeps,  
more accessible now to her, seen but once  
a cashier of a wandering circus with one lion,  
than to me, who am at his side.  
For her now in him a valley grows,  
russet-leaved, closed by a snowy mountain  
in the bright blue air. I am too near  
to fall to him from the sky. My scream  
could wake him up. Poor thing  
I am, limited to my shape,  
I who was a birch, who was a lizard,  
who would come out of my cocoons  
shimmering the colors of my skins. Who possessed  
the grace of disappearing from astonished eyes,  
which is a wealth of wealths. I am near,  
too near for him to dream of me.  
I slide my arm from under the sleeper's head  
and it is numb, full of swarming pins,  
on the tip of each, waiting to be counted,  
the fallen angels sit.

## Hitler's First Photograph

And who's this little fellow in his itty-bitty robe?  
That's tiny baby Adolf, the Hitlers' little boy!  
Will he grow up to be an L.L.D.?  
Or a tenor in Vienna Opera House?  
Whose teensy hands is this, whose little ear and eye and nose?  
Whose tummy full of milk, we just don't know:  
printer's, doctor's, merchant's, priest's?  
Where will those tootsy-wootsies finally wander?

To a garden, to a school, to an office, to a bride,  
maybe to the Burgermeister's daughter?

Precious little angel, mommy's sunshine, honeybun,  
while he was being born a year ago,  
there was no dearth of signs on the earth and in the sky:  
spring sun, geraniums in windows,  
the organ-grinder's music in the yard,  
a lucky fortune wrapped in rosy paper,  
then just before the labour his mother's fateful dream:  
a dove seen in a dream means joyful news,  
if it is caught, a long-awaited guest will come.  
Knock knock, who's there, it's Adolf's heartchen knocking.

A little pacifier, diaper, rattle, bib,  
our bouncing boy, thank God and knock on wood, is well,  
looks just like his folks, like a kitten in a basket,  
like the tots in every other family album.  
Shush, let's not start crying, sugar,  
the camera will click from under that black hood.

The Klinger Atelier, Grabenstrasse, Braunau,  
and Braunau is a small but worthy town,  
honest businesses, obliging neighbors,  
smell of yeast dough, of gray soap.  
No one hears howling dogs, or fate's footsteps.  
A history teacher loosens his collar  
and yawns over homework.

Still

In sealed cars,  
Names are going through our land.  
And where are they going, where?  
And will they get out anywhere?  
Don't ask, I don't know, I won't tell.

The name Natan bangs against the walls,  
The name Izaak went insane and sings,  
The name Sara for water calls  
For the name Aron dying of thirst.

The name David, don't jump from the train,  
You're a name that is bound to fall,  
They won't give it to anyone again,  
It's too hard to bear in this land.

Your son should get a Slavic name.  
They will check every hair on his head.  
Here they tell who's good and who's bad  
From the name and the eyelids' shape.

Don't jump. Your son will be Lech.  
Don't jump. It is not time for you yet.  
Don't jump. The night's laughter vibrates,  
Mocking knocking, the wheels on the rails.

A cloud from the people passed over the land.  
From that huge cloud there came but little rain,  
A little rain, just one tear, for the time was dry,  
And black woods grew and covered the rails.

So and so, in the woods without glades  
So and so, knocks a wheel, new names came.  
So and so, Waking up in the night I still hear,  
So and so, how the still bangs against the still.

mid-1950's

### **Alexander Wat (1900-1967)**

Alexander Wat, still a communist at the outbreak of the war, moved to Lvov in 1939, where he briefly worked for the Polish communist newspaper *Czerwony Sztandar*. In January 1940 he was arrested by the Soviets as a Trotskyite and Zionist and imprisoned, first in Kiev, then in Moscow and finally in Saratov. While in prison, he had a vision of the Devil and finally abandoned his communist beliefs, converting to Christianity. He still retained strong Jewish feelings, which he occasionally alludes to in his work. He was only able to return to Poland from Soviet Asia in 1946. The imposition of Stalinist literary norms made it impossible for him to publish, but after 1956 he emerged as a major poet and essayist, describing his frequently nightmarish personal feelings and suffering.

'A Damned Man'

First in my dream appeared a coffee mill.  
Most ordinary. The old-fashioned kind. A coffee-brown color.  
(as a child I liked to slide open the lid, peek in, and instantly  
snap it shut. With fear and trembling! so that my teeth chattered from terror!

It was as if I myself were being ground up in there! I always knew  
I would come to a bad end! )  
so first there was a coffee mill.  
Or perhaps it only seemed so, because a moment later a windmill stood there.  
And that windmill stood on the sea, on the horizon's line, in its very center.  
Its four wings turned creaking and cracking. They probably were grinding up somebody.  
And at the tip of every one of them  
An equilibrist in white revolved to the melody of 'The Merry Widow.'

Wat's casual and random 'jottings,' though obedient to the moment, often have the  
precision of simplified drawings where a few lines suffice to grasp a scene, for instance, in  
this poem from the cycle Songs of a Wanderer:

So beautiful the lungs  
are breathless. The hand remembers:  
I was a wing.  
Blue. The peaks in ruddy  
gold. Women of this land—  
small olives. On a spacious saucer  
wisps of smoke, houses, pastures, roads,  
interlacing of roads, O holy diligence  
of man. How hot it is! It returns,  
the miracle of shade. A shepherd, sheep, a dog, a ram  
all in gilded bells. Olive trees  
in twisted goodness. A cypress—their lone shepherd. A village  
on Cabris cliff, castellated  
by its tiles. And a church, its cypress and shepherd.  
Youth of the day, youth of the times, youth of the world.  
Birds listen, intently silent. Only a cock crowing  
from somewhere below in the hamlet of Speracedes. How  
hot it is. To die on foreign soil is bitter.  
It's sweet to live in France.

It would be a mistake to bypass another aspect of Wat's poetry, namely, that it is an  
unashamed scream of pain. To quote the opening from 'Before Breughel the Elder':

Work is a blessing.  
I tell you that, I—professional sluggard!  
Who slobbered in so many prisons! Fourteen!  
And in so many hospitals! Ten! And innumerable inns.

Work is a blessing.  
How else could we deal with the lava of fratricidal love toward fellow man?  
With those storms of extermination of all by all?  
With brutality, bottomless and measureless?

With the black-and-white era which does not want to end  
endlessly repeating itself da capo like a record  
forgotten on a turntable  
spinning by itself?  
Or perhaps someone invisible watches over the phonograph? Horror!  
How, if not for work, could we live in the paradise of social  
hygienists  
Who never soak their hands in blood without aseptic gloves?

Horror!

Wat also produced a memoir in the form of an extended interview with Czesław Miłosz, one of the best accounts of the fate of central Europe in the twentieth century. It has been translated into English under the title *My Century* (New York, 1990).

### **Sławomir Mrożek (1930-)**

Born in the vicinity of Krakow, the son of a mailman, Mrożek began his career in that city as a cartoonist and an author of short humorous articles for the newspapers. Around 1956, he revealed himself as a master of the satirical short story. His fierce, absurd humour makes use of comic techniques from satirical works of modern Polish literature, from Boy's 'Little Words' to Galczynski's 'Green Goose'. The result is akin to Gogol's achievement in stories like *The Nose*. The vagaries of the bureaucratic Establishment, together with the specifically Polish mixture of industrialization and backwardness, of sophistication and parochialism, have been a boon to Mrożek's talent for concocting uncanny, surrealistic transformations of reality. For instance, in the title story from 'The Elephant' (*Słom*, 1958 English versions published in 1962, 1965), economy-minded directors in a small-town zoo fret over the lack of an elephant to display. They finally decide to 'do-it-themselves' by inflating an immense, elephant-shaped balloon. Some school children happen to witness the inevitable failure of the ruse when the gigantic balloon, propelled by a strong gust of wind, rises into the sky and punctures its 'hide' on the treetops in the neighboring botanical gardens. Their severe disillusionment turns the children into hooligans. 'Wedding in

'Atomice' pretends to be a picture of country manners, but, while the traditional peasant wedding always ended in a drunken brawl, Mrozek's peasants fight each other not with knives and sticks but with atomic weapons.

One of his favorite devices is a sly parody of styles; thus, to use but one example, 'En Route' starts out as a nineteenth-century narrative: 'Just after N— — —, the road took us through flat, damp meadows.... Our carriage bowled along at a brisk rate,' etc., but culminates in the narrator's discovery of a 'substitute telegraph line, that is, men standing in the fields at calling distance from each other and transmitting a telegram: 'Faaaaaathertrrrr deaaaad fuuuunerrraaaaal Weeeeednesdaaaay.' Obviously, a wireless telegraph, in the opinion of the local population, has its advantages, and is 'more progressive.

Children's fiction as well did not escape Mrozek's attention as a possible vehicle for the grotesque. 'Escape to the South' ( *Uciezka na poludnie*, 1961)—illustrated by the author—relates the utterly nonsensical adventures of two young boys and their friend, a huge ape. It abounds in satire or outright farce; for instance, in a Godforsaken province the boys come across a poster tacked to a wall: 'GODOT HAS ARRIVED. Citizens of the town! Polish agriculturists! You have waited a long time but not in vain! The moment has come when Godot has arrived! He is here! No later than tomorrow at 7 P.M. everybody will be able to see him in his only appearance, at the Peasant Militiamen Coop. UNFORGETTABLE IMPRESSIONS!' Since it is doubtful whether young readers will connect this with Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', most likely the book is not for children at all.

With his first play, 'The Police' (*Policja*), produced in Warsaw in 1958, Mrozek's reputation in the theater grew in Poland and abroad, where his plays have been performed both on the stage and on television. 'The Police' is a satirical fable on the self-perpetuating activity of the state security apparatus, which has to invent crimes in order to subsist and is thrown into despair when only one political offender is left.

After this play, Mrozek moved from rather traditional plot construction toward the technique of the 'theater of the absurd,' centering upon two or three people who are thrown into an existential 'situation.' The best examples of this phase of his work are one-act plays like 'Out at Sea' (*Na pełnym morzu*, 1960) and *Striptease* (1961). In the first, three shipwrecked men, elegantly dressed and known, respectively, as The Fat One, The Medium One, The Small One, debate while sitting on their raft, over which of them should be eaten. Ideological harangues and democratic majority vote disguise the inevitable: The Small One must, of course, be the victim. In the second play, two middle-aged men with brief cases, who have been quietly 'proceeding in order to succeed,' are caught up by an unknown force and imprisoned in a room (literally, 'thrown into a situation'). One of them is a proponent of internal freedom, which in the face of necessity can only be saved by inaction: if freedom is the possibility of choice, when we choose we reduce our possibilities. The other is devoured by the need for protest, for doing something no matter how absurd just to manifest his will. Yet when a Voice, and later an enormous Hand, orders them to undress step by step, both are forced to comply, and in the end both are executed.

After several plays experimenting with a few characters in a 'situation,' Mrozek wrote a complex, rich tragicomedy, *Tango* (produced in 1965), which is at once a portrayal of a society, a psychological drama, and a parable. Three generations of a family occupy the stage. Arthur a student, is exasperated by the way his elders live, by their complete moral license and their very progressive belief in the relativity of all values. He punishes his grandmother for drinking vodka and playing cards by ordering her to stretch out on a specially prepared bier, yet he cannot cope with the complete mess—his mother living with a proletarian hanger-on, Edek; his father interested only in the most extreme avant-garde art; the uncle fawning over 'modernity' (though a reactionary at heart). Arthur's successive attempts to impose a 'form' upon his family result only in failure. A Hamlet struggling to cure corruption in Elsinore, at first he tries this through a return to tradition; he convinces his girl ( Ophelia? ) that they should ask for a parental blessing, should be duly

married—much to her bewilderment, as they sleep together anyway; and he dresses everybody in Victorian clothes found in the attic. When these measures prove to be futile, he embarks upon an ideological campaign as a means of straightening morals, and, finally, having come to the conclusion that the only valid ideology is discipline for discipline's sake, he institutes a rule of terror. The boorish proletarian, Edek, proves to be stronger, however; he kills Arthur and takes power. The play ends in a tango danced by Edek and the reactionary uncle, who had been allied with Arthur but now meekly submits to Edek, though not without moral protests. Thus, without recourse to realistic techniques, Mrożek explores the disintegration of traditional values, presents a capsule history of Polish intelligentsia attitudes over several decades, and translates into an allegory the various solutions proposed in our century: the return to tradition, the search for ideology, fascism, and proletarian revolution. Unfortunately, a brief summary of the contents does not do justice to the play's theatrical appeal when properly staged. It was greeted by critics as the best play of the two postwar decades, and some of them even compared it to Wyspiański's 'The Wedding'. Be that as it may, Mrożek was undoubtedly influenced by Witold Gombrowicz's work, particularly by 'The Marriage Ceremony' (*Ślub*), which, however, had not yet been staged in Poland.

### **Stanisław Barańczak (1946- )**

What Will Be Our Witness?

Not our history text-books  
which no-one will open  
nor our newspapers  
which have never been open  
about reality  
(if you do not count some of the obituaries  
and the weather forecasts)  
nor our letters  
which were opened so often  
that we could not write anything in them openly,  
not even our literature

shut up in itself  
or locked away in the drawers of officials  
or confined to the cardboard coffins of circumscribed editions;

if anything remains  
it will be the wide open eyes  
of that child  
who cannot understand  
today  
our shut up world  
and opens his mouth  
to ask questions;  
if this child keeps questioning  
he will provide  
an open testimony  
to our truth.

### Those Men So High And Mighty

Those men so high and mighty  
presented always a little from below  
by squatting cameramen,  
heaving a heavy foot—  
to squash me—  
no, to climb up the steps to the aeroplane,  
lifting their arm —  
against me—  
no, to welcome the crowds  
which obediently wave the little flags,  
men signing—  
my death warrant—  
no, only a commercial treaty  
mopped up at once by the servile blotting paper.

Those men, so brave  
who with raised foreheads  
stand up in an open car  
and so courageously  
visit the front line  
of harvest operations  
and treading furrows in the field  
seem to enter trenches.

Those men with hard hands  
capable of slamming the rostrum  
and of slapping the bowed backs of other men  
who have just been pinned  
to their Sunday suits  
with a medal;

you were always afraid of them

you looked so small before them as they stood  
always higher  
above you  
on stairs, on platforms, on dais;

and yet it is enough for one moment  
to stop being afraid of them  
say, fear them a little less,  
and you will realize  
that it is they,  
precisely they,  
who are most afraid.

### **Adam Zagajewski (1946- )**

#### Freedom

What is freedom, ask the philosophers.  
I, too, wonder; at one time I maintain  
that it means guaranteed liberty  
in the face of the power of the State, or else  
I emphasise that it is the strength of convictions,  
the sovereignty of spirit  
and the loyalty to one's own vocation.  
But even when I am at a loss to define  
the essence of freedom  
I know full well the meaning  
of captivity.

#### Verses About Poland

I read verses about Poland written by foreign poets.  
Germans and Russians have not only rifles,  
but also ink, pens, a little heart and a lot of imagination.  
Poland — in their verses — resembles a reckless unicorn  
feeding on the wool of tapestries,  
it is beautiful, weak and imprudent.  
I do not comprehend the working of the mechanism of illusion  
but even I, a sober reader,  
am enchanted by that legendary, defenceless country  
on which feed black eagles, hungry emperors,  
the Third Reich and the Third Rome.

Franz Schubert, Opus Posth.

The train stopped in a field; the sudden silence  
startled even sleep's most ardent partisans.  
The distant lights of shops or factories  
glittered in the haze like the yellow eyes of wolves.  
Businessmen on trips stooped over their computers,  
totting up the day's losses and gains.  
The stewardess poured coffee steeped in bitterness.  
Ewig, ewig, last word, "Song of the Earth,"  
it repeats so often; remember how we listened  
to this music, to the promise that  
we so longed to believe.

We don't know if we're still in Holland,  
this may be Belgium now. No matter.  
An early winter evening, and the earth hid  
beneath thick streaks of dusk; you could  
sense the presence of a canal's black water,  
unmoving, stripped of mountain currents' joy  
and the great amazement of our oceans.  
Wolves' yellow eyes were quivering with a nervous  
neon light, but no one feared an Indian attack.  
The train stopped at that moment when our reason starts  
to stir, but the soul, its noble yearning, is asleep.

We were listening a different time to Schubert,  
that posthumous quintet where despair declares itself  
insistently, intently, almost insatiably,  
renewing its assault on the indifference  
of the genteel concert hall, ladies in their furs  
and reviewers, minor envoys of the major papers.  
And once out walking, midnight, summer in the country,  
a strange sound stopped us short: the snorting and neighing  
of unseen horses in a pasture. As though  
the night laughed happily to itself.  
What is poetry if we see so little?

What is salvation if there is no threat?  
Posthumous quintet! Only music keeps on growing  
after death, music and the hair of trees.  
As if rivers gave ecstatic milk and honey,  
as if dancers danced in frenzy once again...  
And yet we're not alone. One day some timeworn  
guitar will start singing for itself alone.  
And the train moves at last, the earth rocks  
underneath its stately weight and slowly  
Paris draws close, with its golden aura,  
its gray doubt.

To See

Oh my mute city, honey-gold,  
buried in ravines, where wolves  
loped softly down the cold meridian;  
if I had to tell you, city,  
asleep beneath a heap of lifeless leaves,  
if I needed to describe the ocean's skin, on which  
ships etch the lines of shining poems,  
and yachts like peacocks flaunt their lofty sails  
and the Mediterranean, rapt in salty concentration,  
and cities with sharp turrets gleaming  
in the keen morning sun,  
and the savage strength of jets piercing the clouds,  
the bureaucrats' undying scorn for us, the people,  
Umbria's narrow streets like cisterns  
that stop up ancient time tasting of sweet wine,  
and a certain hill, where the stillest tree is growing,  
gray Paris, threaded by the river of salvation,  
Krakow, on Sunday, when even chestnut leaves  
seem pressed by an unseen iron  
and the sorrow of old women in new projects  
on the outskirts of Barcelona;  
vineyards raided by the greedy fall  
and by highways full of fear;  
if I had to describe the night's sobriety  
when it happened,  
and the clatter of the train running into nothingness  
and the blade flaring on a makeshift skating rink;  
I'm writing from the road, I had to see  
and not just know, to see clearly  
the sights and fires of a single world,  
but you unmoving city turned to stone,  
my brethren in the shallow sand;  
the earth still turns above you  
and the Roman legions march  
and a polar fox attends the wind

**Andrzej Wajda (1926- )**

**Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941-1996)**

**Krzysztof Zanussi (1939- )**

**Conclusion**

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<sup>1</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, London, 1969, 455.

<sup>2</sup> Artur Sandauer, *O sytuacji pisarza polskiego pochodzenia \_ydowskieg w XX wieku (Rzecz, ktor\_ nie ja powinienem by\_ napisa\_)*, Warsaw, 1982, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Mi\_osz, 428

<sup>4</sup> A facsimile edition of this, with translations in English, Hebrew and Yiddish was produced by the Hebrew University in 1984.

<sup>5</sup> A reference to a poem by the nineteenth century Polish poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid in which the poet describes the sacking by Russian soldiers during the 1830-31 Uprising of Chopin's piano in Warsaw. In the course of this, Chopin's piano was thrown out of a window and smashed.

<sup>6</sup> On this see Tamara Karren, 'Tuwim as he was', *POLIN*, 6, 253-61.

<sup>7</sup> Adolf Rudnicki, 'Kartka znaleziona pod murem strace\_', in *\_ywe i martwe morze* (Warsaw, 1956), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Adolf Rudnicki, 'Wielki Stefan Konecki', in *\_ywe i martwe morze*, 74.

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<sup>9</sup>Thus, the story ‘Ascension’, translated in this volume, is based on real characters. See Władysław Bartoszewski, Zofia Lewinówna, *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej. Polacy z pomocy Szwajcaryi 1939-1945*, 590-93

<sup>10</sup>Józef Wróbel, ‘“A Small Memorial Candle” for Adolf Rudnicki (1912-1992)’, *POLIN*, VIII, 428.

<sup>11</sup>Rudnicki, ‘Wielki Stefan Konecki’, 67.

<sup>12</sup>The title is ambiguous and also means ‘The Mother of Kings’.