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POLAND'S COMMUNIST SELF-LOCATION IN MAREK NOWAKOWSKI'S *POWIDOKI*

The present article dwells on Marek Nowakowski, one of the most important Polish writers in the second half of the twentieth century, and analyzes his book *Powidoki (Afterimages)*¹. *Afterimages* provides an example of quasi-biographical prose that depicts the past of the Republic of Poland's people with a particular focus on Warsaw and its citizens. This intimate and minimalistic sample of literature helps to preserve the memory of the nation. The article analyses three different types of memory which can be observed in *Afterimages* – archeological memory, autobiographical memory and nostalgic memory. All of them are unique, as they construct the mosaic of the past seen in Nowakowski's prose that shows in its original way the times of communism in Poland.

The paper not only presents Nowakowski as an important figure in Polish modern literature, but it also studies the subject of memory in literature and the ways in which literature preserves history and human experience.

Key words: *literature, prose, Marek Nowakowski, Poland, history, memory, communism*

Two historical events played a major role in the history of Poland in the twentieth century. Not only did they shape the lives of Polish citizens for decades, but they also contributed to their current self-location. The events in question are World War II and what happened after – the fact that Poland entered the zone of influence of the USSR. After the conference in Yalta Poland became The Polish People's Republic, a satellite country of the Soviet Union until the end of the 1980s.

Literature in the face of communism

Polish writers had attempted to describe the Polish People's Republic and its aspects in many ways. Some of their preferred topics would consider the operation of the communist system in Poland, its influence on society, and the lives of the common people. Here included is also the question of writing about the essence of communism in general. Most of the works concentrating on this subject were published either after the writers' emigration or by underground circulation. Sometimes writers would use artistic forms that allowed them to conceal the actual

¹ Translation of the title by the author of the article

sense of their works. On some occasions writers showed the actual climate of the communist time in a realistic way, by describing the reality of the way it was.

Polish literature is full of examples of works dealing with the nightmare of totalitarianism. Among the names of outstanding authors that explored this topic in many different ways, we can find Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Czesław Miłosz, Sławomir Mrożek and Stanisław Lem. A brief look at their works shows that the subject of communism can be approached in diverse ways.

Gustaw Herling-Grudziński is known especially for his shocking report from a soviet labour camp, quite similar to *The Gulag Archipelago*, by Aleksander Solzhenitsyn. His book *A World Apart* is a realistic or even naturalistic record of Grudziński's experience from his several-year-long residence in the labour camp. *A World Apart* depicts the cruelty of the system smothering humans in the most violent way. His graphic description of violence shows life in the labour camp as an unceasing horror filled by the uncertainty of existence and fate. These autobiographical memories also contain meditations about the moral condition of humanity. These reflections connect with the observation that the world pushes people towards animalistic behaviour.

The Captive Mind by Czesław Miłosz is composed as philosophical thoughts about communism. A Polish author, better known as a poet, Miłosz wrote an essay that portrays his own views of the communist country and the situation of writers forced to work in this environment. The book presents four characters – Alfa, Beta, Gamma and Delta, who stand, respectively, for four Polish authors: Jerzy Andrzejewski, Tadeusz Borowski, Jerzy Putrament and Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński. Miłosz shows their various attitudes to the communist system – ranging from Romantic depression to absolute conformism. He shows how ideology could, step by step, enslave people (in this case artists) in the Polish People's Republic. As Karl Jaspers states in his introduction to the French edition of the book, it offers a remarkable study of human nature splitting into two separate characters under the influence of great ideological pressure².

The Polish playwright Sławomir Mrożek offers another representation of totalitarian terror in his debut play *Police*, which Martin Esslin considered one of the most important works of the theatre of the absurd in Western Europe³. This play shows us a grotesque and ironic view of a totalitarian country. The police in this country are trying to convince the last political prisoner not to sign a declaration of loyalty and confess his crimes against the government. In this legal case, the national army, or the police in the country have become unnecessary. The grotesque and the absurd turn out to be instrumental techniques in plot construction to demonstrate the grotesque and absurd state of the totalitarian country.

We can also see how such strategies are deployed in Stanisław Lem's *Futurological Congress*. This long story shows the main character – Ijon Tichy, taking

² Jaspers, Karl. "Przedmowa", Miłosz Czesław, „La pensée captive”, Paris, Gallimard, 1962, pp. 9.

³ Esslin, Martin. "The Theatre of the Absurd", New York, The Overlook Press, , 1973, pp. 278.

part in the eponymous congress convened to discuss the problem of overpopulation. As the result of escalating riot taking place during the congress Tichy is exposed to the actions of hallucinogenic substances that are sprayed over the city. The first person narrative is composed in a way that makes us feel uncertain about what is true and what is false. In the end it turns out that Tichy has taken part in a chemical experiment orchestrated by the government. Lem asks a fundamental question – is it better to know the truth, even a horrifying one, or live in the unconsciousness created by the system.

As we can see, all of the above-mentioned Polish authors are concerned with serious topics regarding communism and the condition of humanity. But there were also some Polish authors writing about the Polish People's Republic that chose another way. They would seemingly avoid the “big questions” and instead wrote simple stories about ordinary people and ordinary daily reality. Marek Nowakowski is an outstanding representative of this generation.

Who is Marek Nowakowski?

Marek Nowakowski was born in Warsaw in 1935 in one of its suburban districts. In his youth he performed a lot of different jobs, for example he worked at an airport and as a miner. In the 1950s he was convicted two times and jailed. He was connected with Warsaw his whole life. He lived and wrote in this city. The people of Warsaw could meet him in the streets, walking through the city, which was his daily habit.

He debuted in 1957 with a short story published in the periodical “*Nowa Kultura*” (“New Culture”). The next year he published one of his most popular collections of short stories titled *Ten stary Złodziej* (*This Old Thief*). This work contained simple stories of marginal men, their earthbound problems, and everyday dilemmas. In his stories we can meet simple men, often from the lower social layers, alcoholics or criminals. After the success of *This Old Thief* Nowakowski continued his career, and published his next collections of stories – *Benek Kwiciarz*, *Silna Gorączka* (*High Fever*) and *Zapis* (*Notation*). All of them were published in the first half of the 1960s. Nowakowski's prose was free of ornamentation, complicated psychological descriptions, or philosophical or sociological analysis. It was a simple observation of the world as Nowakowski saw it, with protagonists full of defects and flaws. The colourless city was incompletely rebuilt after the war. People tried very hard to make their living day by day. And at the same time there were love and death, the little joys of life, little dramas. Nowakowski's stories were a part of the trend in Polish literature called “little realism”, which was established in the 1960s. Writers who were part of this trend chose simple topics about everyday life. They were minimalistic in the creation of characters, and they did not pass judgement on the reality or the people depicted. They showed reality the way it was, without ornamentation, but also without forced pessimism. That was also the nature of Nowakowski's literature, who published over twenty books till the 1980s.

In the 1980s we can see a change in his writing. Fiction is very often displaced

by facts. Nowakowski still writes short stories about the life of people in Poland, but now they became accurate reports of real events. This is the nature of *Raport ze stanu wojennego* (*Report from martial law*). In this collection Nowakowski depicts the atmosphere of these difficult days. The stories are connected by the eponymous period, and the situation that was the effect of martial law. Nowakowski shows the people who collaborated with the communist authorities, and again depicts the difficultness of every day life.

In the next decade, the 1990s, now in the new democratic Poland, he writes stories about the complicated political transformation. One story that stands out in this part of his career is *Homo Polonicus* which portrays a middle-aged businessman that makes a great fortune by using the specific opportunities of this historical period. In the 1990s Nowakowski also wrote one of his greatest works, *Powidoki* (*Afterimages*), which puts together the factual depiction of “little realism” and the memories of real events seen by Nowakowski. *Afterimages* is Nowakowski’s memories of Warsaw in the past. He comes back once again to the times of the Polish People’s Republic to make his own testimony of this time.

“Afterimages” – a mosaic of the past

Afterimages is a collection of seventy-two very short stories, mostly two or three pages long. The place of action is Warsaw in all the stories. The action takes place in many decades of the history of the Polish People’s Republic, from the 1940s to the 1980s. The characters and events seen in this collection really happened. As we can deduct, the characters from *Afterimages* are not the people from the headlines, but common citizens of Warsaw: merchants, workers, and sometimes prostitutes, thieves and beggars. Nowakowski gathers in one place the long history of Warsaw. The stories are very different from each other, and every one of them has its own simple subject. “Boxers”, “Bazaar”, “River” – these are only a few examples of the titles of the stories. Every one of them depicts another element of the city, a different place or social group. Every one is a brick that makes the whole construction of the city and its story. Nowakowski makes a mosaic that shows Warsaw in all its shapes.

Nowakowski shows the places and people that were close to him. He constructs the mythology of the city. He keeps the memory of the past, of a city that does not exist anymore. He is somewhere between the form of short stories and memories. The narrator is a man walking through Warsaw in modern times (in the 1990s), just like Nowakowski in reality. Walking through the city, he sees elements that recall memories. Facts interfere with creation, and this allows Nowakowski to show the fullness of the memory of Warsaw. And as we can see, it actually consists of three different types of memory harmonizing with each other.

Three types of memory – archeological memory

First type that we can indicate is archeological memory. What is it? As its name indicates, its nature is archeological work, looking for traces of the past, and bringing them back to life. In *Afterimages* this archeology can be about places, things or situations.

The memory of the villa standing in Pilsudski street is a good example.

The house stood at the end of the city. In this place Pilsudski street changed into a bumpy road between fields and the clay pits. Then there were the tracks that separated Wlochy from Wola (districts of Warsaw). The house had a few floors, a porch and a terrace, big windows, glazed doors. These kinds of houses were called palaces, villas. There were not many of them⁴.

In this fragment we see a very important category for the archeological part of Nowakowski's work. This category is the Memorial Places and an attempt to keep them alive through literature. Memorial Places are the elements of space (buildings, places, monuments, or even private apartments) that for some reason cause remembrance; they are the carriers of knowledge of the past. These places can be connected with important historical events or with smaller ones connected to the intimate memories of individuals or social groups.

Nowadays, we can see increased interest in Memorial Places in the study of literature. The Polish scientist Wojciech Kudyba even wrote about the "topographical turn" in the study of literature⁵. The memory prose made by Nowakowski is a very expressive example of that category. In *Afterimages* all of the stories are connected with a certain space, and on all occasions this space is Warsaw. Nowakowski is remembering, keeping the Memorial Places, and creating the mythology of the city at the same time.

Krzysztof Krasuski recognized *Afterimages* as a collection of literary images. He noticed that Warsaw plays an important role in this collection, but Nowakowski did not make simple "Postcards from Warsaw". He created a real living depiction of the city. As Krasuski noted, "one of the qualities of the city in this prose is participating in the mysterium of creating and keeping the values"⁶. The researcher underlined that Nowakowski showed Warsaw as his own little homeland that belongs to him and the characters that we can meet in *Afterimages*.

Indeed, for these characters Warsaw is something more than just the place where they live. It is a place that their lives are connected with.

This problem is shown clearly by the depiction of the city that is changing through the years and is being left by its citizens.

Mietek Łapka has gone to an exotic country. Mr Haspert's flowershop business collapsed and he went across the ocean to America. (...) There was nothing much left after the former people and places. I was reproducing the dead picture of the city with difficulty, when I was walking near the Marriott Hotel and Central Railway Station⁷.

⁴ Nowakowski Marek, „Powidoki – Chłopcy z tamtych lat”, Warsaw, Wydawnictwo ALFA, 1995, pp. 87 (translation done by the author of the article).

⁵ Kudyba, Wojciech, „Miejsce i pamięć w późnej twórczości Marka Nowakowskiego. Prolegomena”, *Coloquia literaria*, vol. 2, 2015, pp. 119.

⁶ Krasuski, Krzysztof, „Powidoki Marka Nowakowskiego jako współczesna odmiana obrazka literackiego”, Krasuski Krzysztof, „Na obrzeżach arcydzieł”, Katowice, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2009, pp. 108.

⁷ Nowakowski Marek, „Powidoki – Chłopcy z tamtych lat”, pp. 128-129 (translation done by the author of the article).

That is the reason why this city deserves to be remembered. Nowakowski often underlines the role of citizens in keeping the memory of the city's history. In *Afterimages* the author honoured the function of the elder, who is a kind of leader of the social group. He tells stories to other people, and in this way he keeps memory in the oral way. These characters become the depositaries of the collective social memory.

We can indicate the two most important strategies that help Nowakowski achieve his archeological goal. It is the construction of the collection that is similar to the chronicle and the mosaic way of putting together the stories. The frugal depiction of information used by Nowakowski indicates the form of the chronicle very clearly. Stories are built in the form of short, concise narratives.

As we can observe, all of the stories have a consistent construction. We could take a map of Warsaw and place all of them on certain points of the map. They are seemingly about separate stories, but when we put them together we see a complex view of Warsaw in the past. That is the figure of the mosaic.

Autobiographical memory

The second type of memory that we can find in *Afterimages* is the autobiographical memory. As it sounds, this type concentrates on the individual memories of the narrator, things that are important and very close to him. This kind of memory is very strongly bonded with the person of the chronicler, which doesn't mean that this fact excludes the chronicle style of the narrative.

Many critics have written about the biographical side of *Afterimages*. As Adam Poprawa wrote, the writer has here the same identity as the narrator remembering the past. In other words, the distance between the author and the narrator is very close⁸.

Following this thought, we come back to the Memorial Places in Nowakowski's prose. It turns out that they can also have an individual character and evoke the past for one certain person. As Marie Delaperrière wrote about the influence of the individual memory on the depicting of Memorial Places in literature:

In literature the situation is more complex because on one hand, the individual memory comes under cultural regulation and fits into the common social-cultural code. On the other hand, this memory endeavours to express artistic independence, and creates literal fiction which can enrich the code⁹.

Nowakowski keeps the memory for others, but paradoxically he also keeps it for himself. As Saint Augustine (author of *Confessions* – one of the most famous classical autobiographical books) noted: “memory concentrates on the past, and the

⁸ Poprawa Adam, „Knajpy niepodległościowe”, *Twórczość*, vol. 5, 2006, pp. 120.

⁹ Delaperrière Marie, „Miejsca pamięci czy pamięć miejsc? Kilka refleksji na temat uobecniania przeszłości w literaturze współczesnej”, *Ruch Literacki*, vol. 1, 2013, pp. 51 (translation done by the author of the article).

past is the past of my feelings. So the past belongs to me”¹⁰. Is *Afterimages* the notation of his emotions? Let's have a look.

The suburbs as well as the centre of the city were full of doves. Very often you could see a silver flock of birds in the blue sky (at these times summer was summer and winter was winter). Beautifully swirling and making circles. Pigeon-fanciers devoted time to their birds. They had a lot of work¹¹!

In this part of *Afterimages* the narrator is impressed by the flight of birds and recalls old summers and winters in the city. He regrets that seasons are not the same anymore. In *Afterimages* we can find a lot of similar depictions showing memories of things that Nowakowski misses. The author criticizes the political system that existed in the Polish People's Republic, but the way he looks at people is different. He is able to notice beautiful things in this dull communist world. Things that created his youth and are now gone.

There is a strategy that is typical for the autobiographical memory. It is the flaneur – the motif of the wanderer. This motive is very clearly seen in *Afterimages*, because the narrator is literally the wanderer walking the streets of Warsaw. He observes the space during his walks and recalls different aspects of the past. This wanderer can be the archeologist walking through the routes of memory, looking for the artefacts of history, as well as the lonely man wandering through the past only for a brief return to the reality that can exist only in his imagination. As we look at the narrator in this way, we can see that his journey is kind of a personal confession.

Marek Nowakowski was surely a writer who felt great nostalgia for the past and wanted to show history in his unique way. When asked about *Afterimages* he rejected terms such as a “catalogue of places” or “catalogue of people”. He said that everything that he described was taken from his own “archipelago of memory”¹².

“Archipelago of memory” – this is the function of the wanderer motif in *Afterimages*. When we think about it, it is quite clear that the “real” action of the book focuses on a man walking the streets and thinking. If *Afterimages* was a movie, its plotline would concentrate on a man wandering between places and scenes. The protagonist would be distracted by many retrospections. That is the way this collection of short stories works – the flaneur affects the pilgrim, and his resurrected memories affect the reader.

Nostalgic memory

Finally, the third and last type of memory, nostalgic memory. As always, we are obliged to ask about its nature.

Nostalgia is connected with longing for the past, missing something that is gone forever. Something that for some reason is still in our memory. Nostalgia refers

¹⁰ St. Augustin, “Wyznania”, Cracow, Znak, 1994, pp. 78.

¹¹ Nowakowski Marek, „Powidoki – Chłopcy z tamtych lat”, pp. 100 (translation done by the author of the article).

¹² Lipszyc, Jarosław, „Spacer po miejscach nieistniejących. Rozmowa z Markiem Nowakowskim”, *Życie Warszawy*, vol. 292, 2005, pp. 17.

not only to real experience, but also to an imaginary form of it that exists only in somebody's mind. Nostalgic memory is a result of the connection of archeological and autobiographical memories. The narrator recalling the past is now functioning in the present, and is going back in time to take a look at the archeological artifacts. His view is filtered by his biography and is compared to the present time. Nostalgic memory is an internal and individual need to go back to the past. The roots of nostalgia may derive from the disappointment caused by new modern reality.

Is Marek Nowakowski nostalgic? *Afterimages* gives us a lot of proofs for a positive answer. We can see that the narrator misses the past and recalls it because of his nostalgic need. At the same time, we can see him in the present, forced to deal with the new world.

We can see it in the extract below:

Finally, Włochowska tramline died in the 60s, and the second line leading to Milanówek, Podkowa Leśna and Grodzisk was moved to Aleje Jerozolimskie. The trolleys' look and colour were completely changed. Old stuff vanished forever. I woke up from the choke-damp of memories and rushed through the street full of cars, advertisements, shops, and people as busy as myself³.

The narrator confesses that he is busy and in a rush. He notices that modern times are more dynamic than the past. Old trolleys do not exist anymore; they exist only in the mind of the narrator. A feeling of a “choke-damp of memories” came over the narrator. This smoke that he felt is nostalgia.

The logical question is: what is the type of nostalgia that Nowakowski creates in his book? Marta Gąsowska, by analyzing *Afterimages*, asks if Nowakowski is a melancholic or a nostalgic person? Gąsowska points out that when the memories of the author are not so clear they seem more melancholic. According to her, Nowakowski treats Warsaw as a land from mythology, and the gallery of the characters that he portrays is filled with kindness¹⁴.

We can raise the question: is nostalgia the goal of the author, or maybe it is something inevitable? We can find the answer in an anecdote about Nowakowski noted by Zbigniew Skrok:

I saw Nowakowski recently on Śniadecki street near the university of technology. He was conspicuous because among the crowd of rushing students and clients of the cheap book stores he stood there motionless and was observing how plasterers were changing the elevation on the old building nearby, still riddled by bullets from World War II. This was the place where Polish people fighting in the Warsaw Uprising were giving up guns after capitulation. Another image of Warsaw turned into the afterimage...¹⁵

¹³ Nowakowski Marek, „Powidoki – Chłopcy z tamtych lat”, pp. 237 (translation done by the author of the article).

¹⁴ Gąsowska, Marta, „Między nostalgią a melancholią. O miejskiej przestrzeni w *Powidokach* Marka Nowakowskiego”, *Bez porównania*, vol. 1, 2012, pp. 86.

15 Skrok, Zdzisław, „Ostatni wojownik”, *Życie*, vol. 26, 2004, pp. 23.

That's our wanderer in his full glory. Walking the streets, breathing in the city air, looking at its landscape. And that inevitably changing landscape influenced Nowakowski. What did he feel looking at this seemingly unimportant scene of elevation changing? We can guess that he felt nostalgia (or even melancholia) for the old world, literally vanishing in front of his eyes.

The nostalgia in his prose was born in a natural way, but it still had a specific purpose. Archeological memory served to keep history for the next generation, autobiographical memory was an intimate notation, and nostalgic memory was a comparison between the past and the present, which led the author to conclusions about the modern world.

Nowakowski noticed that there is one thing that vanished after the communist times: the spirit of community that brought people together. This spirit in the Polish People's Republic gave people a little joy and hope in the sad and cruel country. People had each other. As Nowakowski stated, this spirit was destroyed by the reality of capitalism in modern Poland.

This is a seemingly surprising quality of the late works of Nowakowski. That this stubborn anticommunist did not welcome the new democratic Poland with joy, but had a lot of bitter thoughts about the new Polish reality. He dressed these thoughts in irony and melancholia. This disappointment caused by new times may be another reason that led the author to nostalgia. But we have to say it very clearly – it is not nostalgia for the Polish People's Republic meant in a political way. It is nostalgia related to certain places and people known by the author. The communist political system was always strongly criticized by Nowakowski.

Conclusion

As we can see, *Afterimages* is an original view of living in a communist country. At the same time, in spite of the minimalistic style of Nowakowski's literature, it contains a profound reflection on the past. Different types of memory mix and get together in Nowakowski's work, creating a unique image of the past. Archeological, autobiographical and nostalgic memory constitute a historical notation, mythology and intimate confession. *Afterimages* is a testimony of the past. It helps to maintain the dead city and history that passed away. It is the conservation of memory in its most fundamental form, closest to the lives of common people. These facts mean that *Afterimages* is an important book in Polish modern literature and should also be known outside Poland.

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