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STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH EMPTINESS THE YOUNGEST GENERATION IN THE LITERARY FIELD IN POLAND¹

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SŁOWA KLUCZE: socjologia literatury, literatura polska po 1989 roku, Pierre Bourdieu, literackie pokolenia

Abstract

The author describes the dynamics of change and rules of innovation in the Polish post-1989 literary field, applying tools from Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of art. The starting point is the work of the first generation of Polish writers born after 1989, raised as European citizens with no memory of communism (e.g. Dominika Ożarowska, Dominika Dymińska, Daniel Kot). Their projects are shown as innovative and distinct from the previous literary movements, established and consecrated in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The Lukewarm Generation

I would like to talk about the re-birth of the Polish literary field after the fall of communism and the political transformation. I shall begin with the work of the youngest Polish authors, those born after the year 1989, who are currently in their twenties. In order to sketch the relations, tensions and confrontations in this field, I shall use the terminology devised by a sociologist of art, Pierre Bourdieu. In Bourdieu's theory, a field is a place where the avant-garde fights against what is consecrated, and by avant-garde (which in Bourdieu's theory does not have historical connotations) we mean that which introduces something new, which is on the side of cultural production, and is charac-

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terized by a high risk level, as opposed to what is consecrated, meaning already accepted and established. Bourdieu's terminology and his thoughts on the birth of the field in 19th-century France (as explained in his book *The Rules of Art*²) are ideal for explaining the situation in Poland after 1989 (before 1989 literary production was steered centrally and subject to various forms of control and censorship). So what formations are confronted in the contemporary field of Polish literature?

I believe that it is appropriate to underline the uniqueness of literature created by the very youngest authors, since they are the first generation to be born and to write in independent Poland. It is thus not surprising that in 2010 the publication of a novel by the 19-year-old Dominika Ożarowska, *Nie uderzy żaden piorun* [No Lightning Will Strike]³, the first novel by a representative of this generation and about it, resulted in a heated discussion – not only literary, but also sociological. Two years later Dominika Dymińska, a student of linguistics from Warsaw, made her literary debut with the book *Mięso* [Meat]⁴, which won awards and praise from critics. On the website of the Ha!art publishing house, for a few months now, yet another young author has been publishing his prose, a serial novel titled *Kierunkowy 0-22* [Area code 0-22]⁵. I'm speaking of Daniel Kot, the head editor of the e-zine *Kofeina*, which was the first to publish literature written by teenagers, his peers. Do these three debuts form a consistent generational narrative? Undoubtedly, if we consider the presented attitudes and subject matter. Is this what this formation will look like as a certain historical literary or sociological entity?

What do the works of the “children of the Third Republic of Poland” have in common? What is communicated by the formation and generation that has neither any memory of communism and the martial state of the 1980s, nor of the critical enthusiasm of the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement? What characterizes the writing of authors raised on the media and a free market, who were teenagers when Poland became part of the European Union?

Ożarowska's book has been very often dubbed a generational narrative, a mirror for the “post-” generation. One literary critic, when discussing the words most frequently appearing in Ożarowska's book, singles out “Nothing, boredom, nihilism, nullity, mockingness...”⁶, while another reviewer seconds her with “unidimensionality, passivity, boredom”⁷. All who have commented on the book unanimously repeat

² P. Bourdieu, *Reguły sztuki. Geneza i struktura pola literackiego*, transl. A. Zawadzki, Kraków 2001.

³ D. Ożarowska, *Nie uderzy żaden piorun*, Kraków 2010.

⁴ D. Dymińska, *Mięso*, Warszawa 2012.

⁵ D. Kot, *Kierunkowy 0-22*, <http://www.ha.art.pl/prezentacje/29-projekty/2408-daniel-kot-ludwik-lis-kierunkowy-0-22.html> [Accessed: April 29, 2013].

⁶ M. Nawisińska, *Na pohybel krytykom, czyli jak nie „czytać” książki Dominiki Ożarowskiej „Nie uderzy żaden piorun”*, <http://www.ha.art.pl/komentarze/866-magdalena-nawisińska-na-pohybel-krytykom-czyli-jak-nie-czytac-książki-dominiki-ozarowskiej-nie-uderzy-żaden-piorun.html> [Accessed: April 29, 2013].

⁷ M. Wilk, *Czekając na piorun*, „Dekada Literacka” 2010, nr 4–5, <http://www.dekaliteracka.pl/?id=4852> [Accessed: April 29, 2013].

that it is built around the fact that nothing happens, and the basis for the plot is a total lack of events. Ożarowska's characters are seventeen, come from good homes, and attend a good high school. Their most serious problems are that they already have everything and that probably nothing will happen (the lightning bolt mentioned in the title will not strike).

One critic, Jaś Kapela, wrote about Ożarowska's book: "Ożarowska describes a reality where nothing more can happen, where waiting for a miracle is unbreakably linked with the status quo. Her characters ostentatiously drink tea, as if it were a credo. And even when there's vodka, it changes nothing. Because it can't change anything. No change is possible. Towards a world conceptualized this way one can feel only disgust. But even this disgust does not turn into hatred, it remains a lukewarm feeling, a shrug of the shoulders"⁸. To prove that not only older critics and sociologists lament over the young generation, it is worth examining the way the children of the Third Republic of Poland describe themselves.

A Mirror for the "Post-" Generation

in a scene depicting the aftermath of a party, Dominika Ożarowska describes her characters in the following way:

Kasia [with an] indulgent expression, which, it seems, has become customary for her face. [...] Wanda [...] an embodiment of diligence, sensibility, camaraderie – fifty kilograms of common sense, strangely lifeless. Next to her slept Janka. Further Tomcio – he's not worthy of words, and next to him Badył – a fucking minion, a conformist without personality. Next to Badył, Kalka, the same, but even worse. Next Bela, an anonymous being, afraid to say anything, boring, blank and useless, a waste of space begging for attention. Who's next? Cyryl who can't decide whom to like, so he likes everyone equally – and Kornel, who got high no one knows when and grinned at everyone and everything, fucking junkie. Only the wind howls in his brain full of holes. Oh, and Magda. Magda, an absolute zero, lack of initiative, easy resignation, a carcass of average ambitions. They sat there, a chorus of stupid gobs open wide with laughter⁹.

Kamila H. Kurzeja, her main protagonist, declares in turn: "I represent mockingness. I profess nullity. I waive the banner of emptiness. Mockingness, nullity and emptiness the ideological set dearest to the collective heart of the masses"¹⁰.

A similar feeling of emptiness is present in the work of Dymińska, who, however, contrary to Ożarowska, does not portray a community, but only one heroine, whom she describes from her youngest years. When the character is about to begin university, she writes:

⁸ J. Kapela, *Biblia pokolenia JP II*, <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/Jas-Kapela/Biblia-pokolenia-JP-II/menu-id-244.html> [Accessed: April 29, 2013].

⁹ D. Ożarowska, *Nie uderzy...*, p. 100–101.

¹⁰ D. Ożarowska, *Nie uderzy...*, p. 83.

I do not cry the entire week. My studies begin, I meet a lot of new people, who do not interest me one bit. All the students look alike. They are colorless. They are constantly babbling, even though they have nothing to say, all the time there is someone replying to somebody, even though nothing is of interest to anyone. The life of a student consists of creating context for smiling at each other¹¹.

The final note is delivered by a character from Daniel Kot's prose who wanders the streets of the capital with his friends, having conversations that sound like: "Yeah, maybe, dunno, fuck, clear rules, I need clear rules, fucking rhythmic, there are no limits, the only regularity in my life is day and night, and even this – not always. Get it?"¹² or "Emptiness occurs in two states – self-aware and unaware. Emptiness fills us to the brim, but we either call it emptiness or just a strangely crappy feeling"¹³.

The Nuisance of Everyday Life

It is interesting that in all of the above-mentioned works we witness a deep persuasion that there is no future. Ożarowska's dreadfully conscious character, Kuka, says she "will try everything early on, and will get bored with it quickly". She knows that she will have to choose her studies prudently, take out a loan, buy an apartment just like the one where she lived with her parents, from which she will have a view "dreamed of by real estate investors"¹⁴. In phrases like these, the young author from Kraków seems to take on an accusative tone against the Polish unconditional acceptance of capitalism and neoliberal ideology. In the sociological discussions that started after the book's publication, it was often underlined that the claims present in the description of Kuka's friends were very accurate. The following observations were made: the youth do not want to become involved, they do not want to build social capital, they have stopped being citizens and think in categories of individualism and egoism (this is a mighty blow for the architects of Polish democracy, which was founded on the involvement of millions of Poles in the Solidarity social movement). This status is best exemplified by the author herself: "It [the generation] doesn't have such a thing as common ideals, a generally imposed enemy against whom it could unite, as, for example, the generations twenty or thirty years older, who had their communism. And we? We've already got free Poland, a free hand, we have facilities, we have parents who can support us, etc. And there seems to be little of something like romantic rebellion, and you grow cynical early..."¹⁵.

It is difficult to say that the literature of the youngest generation is critical, because it is lukewarm. However, if there is someone singled out, it is the parents, who

¹¹ D. Dymińska, *Mięso*, p. 158.

¹² D. Kot, *Kierunkowy...*

¹³ D. Kot, *Kierunkowy...*

¹⁴ D. Ożarowska, *Nie uderzy...*, p. 83.

¹⁵ *Niedorelacja ze spotkania z Dominiką Ożarowską w Kombinatorze*, <http://niedoczytania.pl/niedorelacja-ze-spotkania-z-dominika-ozarowska-w-kombinatorze/> [Accessed: April 29, 2013].

both in Ożarowska's and Dymińska's novels appear to lack contact with their children. These novels speak about a generation of parents who have lost, who are not considered role models by their children. "Parents [...] have compromised themselves as role models, as rebels, as hippies, and now, after the transformation, they have established their own businesses, their ambitions are satisfied by the purchase of a plasma TV. And confronted with this we do not even feel like fighting, because we know that exactly the same will happen to us"¹⁶.

The characters' expectations have rather simple limits: "And on the weekend, an important thing – you can meet with friends, be bored together, talk about nothing". Ożarowska's characters do not talk much with each other while they hang around at parties, malls, and houses, because they know almost everything about each other from Facebook – where they were, what they feel. They exchange small-talk about the weather or about abortion, and all the important social issues are simplified by them to the lowest level of a simple conversation about the weather. Naturally, Ożarowska does not spare us these conversations about nothing, empty dialogues stretching through endless pages without any conclusion. Dymińska's heroine has even fewer conversations – she communicates with the world and successive partners through the Internet. Daniel Kot's character presents us with a similar sensation of boredom: "Successive days blurred in time, like ripples on the surface of a lake, slowly beginning to resemble each other, dissolving chronological frames. In order to remember what I did two days ago, I have to look through the photos on my phone, and if this doesn't help, realize were I woke up"¹⁷. It is worth mentioning that the first suggested version of the title was *Uporczywa codzienność* [The Nuisance of Everyday Life]. It is also worth mentioning that boredom and tepidity in Kot's universe generate the most pleasure for his skater characters, and hedonism reveals itself as a strategy for coping with emptiness.

In comparison to Ożarowska's work, the novel by Dymińska published two years later constitutes a step further. Unlike Ożarowska's and Kot's characters, Dymińska tries to fill in the emotional void of her heroine through sex, which for her is everything but sex. The self-conscious character, lacking contact with her divorced parents, creates an identity for herself on the Internet, the way she wants to be. She starts to flirt, photographs her breasts and edits them in Photoshop, and begins to have sex with random men. She is not searching for a real person – she takes away her virginity with a cucumber smeared with oil, makes contact with someone through the Internet, and only later meets the man for a while, for an act of unsatisfactory sex (the man turns out to be a pedophile). Later, there are more men and other forms of killing emptiness such as alcohol and drugs, intertwined with the death of her grandma and a relationship with a young writer. While in Ożarowska's book we see characters paradoxically formed and grown up (although they are seventeen, they are deeply persuaded they won't change), Dymińska's book is about a process of individuation,

¹⁶ *Niedorelacja ze spotkania z Dominiką Ożarowską...*

¹⁷ D. Kot, *Kierunkowy...*

building an identity, which will turn out to be a fiasco and will only lead to emptiness; sexual adventures turn out to be a prologue to a mock life. Such scarce events constitute the plot of the book, written in a style that is – in the words of a reviewer – “dry, crippled, emotionless”¹⁸. In one of her interviews, the author herself, in turn, described the form of her prose as follows: “I created something like Polaroids, short scenes or only descriptions. Later, I built a plot around it. In fact, I did it for the publishing house. Because I would rather have left it the way it was”¹⁹.

All of these books are about nothing, about the lack of phenomena such as rebellion, activity, community, involvement, enthusiasm. They depict a deficit. The characters from the pages of these works blend into one whole, a mass, an amorphous organism, they are all alike. One of the characters kills her boredom by drinking coke and eating cookies, others hang around shopping malls. In Daniel Kot’s work of prose titled *Nic się nie dzieje* [Nothing Happens] the characters speak the following words:

- Another day lost?
- From a life out of control – he replies unmistakably with a quote²⁰ and we grin at each other.
- Perfect air for a good binge, the wind worries me a little, so what options have we got? Because rather not outside, unless there’s some flat for afterwards?²¹

Resigning from Creating Institutions and Communities

If we assume that literature tells us a great deal about society and we are able to read society through it, the novels by Ożarowska, Kot and Dymińska are something very new in the Polish public sphere. It is significant that after the premiere of Ożarowska’s book, the first ones to comment on it were sociologists, who were only later joined by literary critics. The sociologist Jan Sowa wrote: “All the imaginings about growing up as a period of rebellion, storm and stress, all the stereotypes portraying youth as a time when one longs to change the world, all the beliefs about the excessive idealism and enthusiasm of teenagers are confronted with an utter and absolute lack of ideals, lack of activity and lack of interest”²². As Sowa pointed out, the first free generation growing up in an independent country stopped being citizens who care about public interest; in fact, anything that goes beyond the egoistically considered individual is nonexistent in their language. These one-dimensional peo-

¹⁸ <http://experymentt.wordpress.com/2012/10/12/dominika-dyminska-mieso-recenzja/> [Accessed: April 29, 2013].

¹⁹ <http://kultura.onet.pl/ksiazki/literatura/dominika-dyminska-to-nie-tylko-powiesc-oseksie,1,5225219,artykul.html> [Accessed: April 29, 2013].

²⁰ From a rap song by the Polish rapper Peja, titled “Dzień stracony” [A Lost Day].

²¹ *Ha!art. Kierunkowy 0-22. Second episode*, <http://www.ha.art.pl/prezentacje/47-uporczywa-codziennosc-0-22/2435-daniel-kot-kierunkowy-0-22-nic-sie-nie-dzieje.html> [Accessed: April 29, 2013]; D. Kot, *Kierunkowy 0-22. Odcinek 2. Nic się nie dzieje*.

²² J. Sowa, *Dyskretna nuda młodej burżuazji*, „Tygodnik Powszechny” 2010, nr 15, http://tygodnik.onet.pl/30,0,43846,dyskretna_nuda_mlodej_burzuazji,artykul.html [Accessed: April 29, 2013].

ple, avoiding any rebellion or critical potential, seem to avoid community most of all, because it is the enemy of neoliberal ideology.

Polish literary formations after 1989 can be characterized through a description of the institutions that create and promote them, and through the involvement of individuals associated with these institutions. In the case of the young generation, this translates into an immense atrophy and failure to create their own institutions. This is a manifestation of the difference between those who are the youngest and the formations that began and functioned in Poland in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century. The main gap is caused by the fact that they do not have any memory of the People's Republic of Poland and of the way work and social activities were organized under communism. This was deeply experienced by the formation that entered the literary scene during the period of political transformation. Creating institutions was often facilitated by their experience in the dissident movement and their involvement in the so-called third circulation, which was an alternative to the samizdat. From these circles emerged the creators of institutions that gave birth to the literary field in Poland after the year 1989, who shaped the hierarchies and decided about debuts, introducing innovations and steering the logic of change at the time. Robert Tekieli, the editor of the magazine *Brulion*, Paweł Dunin-Wąsowicz, the founder of *Lampa i Iskra Boża*, as well as Rafał Grupiński, head of *Czas Kultury* (the first two are connected with alternative culture, the latter is associated with a radical faction of *Solidarność Walcząca* – Fighting Solidarity) are figures who decided on the greatest number of literary debuts and awards. The authors they helped promote, who today are “consecrated”, established names for themselves in the Polish public sphere (Tokarczuk, Stasiuk, Pilch, Filipiak, Świetlicki, Varga), and accepted the political changes in the 1990s rather enthusiastically, which is visible in their literary strategies, strongly privatizing and mythographic. Both of these types of strategies are connected with an effort to establish a certain order, a new cosmos after the disintegration of a world, and to form a new hierarchy (in Poland, this occurred both on an institutional and esthetic level).

Another change on the literary scene was introduced by those born a decade later, who also have their own institutions (foundations, associations, e.g. *Ha!art*, *Portret*, *Meble*, *Krytyka Polityczna*), exploding with a large critical potential, involvement, and the will to undertake subjects relating to social issues overlooked in the 1990s. This is connected with the unconditional acceptance of the new order after 1989, which, however, lasted but a decade. In the socially engaged novels written in a critical spirit by the writers who are now in their thirties, the subjects excluded in the 1990s return. Among them, unemployment (Sieniewicz, Odija, Dzido), consumption and corporatism (Shuty), gender inequality (Chutnik), sexual minorities (Witkowski, Schilling, Zygmunt), ethnic minorities (Paziński), restricted access to abortion (Dzido), the brainwashing role of the media (Masłowska), religious hypocrisy (Czerski), and drugs (Piątek).

Avant-Garde?

Using Bourdieu's terminology, in accordance with the logic of change indispensable for the functioning of the field, the clash should occur between the ideologically blank generation of the 1990s and the radically different older formations which are today in strongly established positions. However, it is difficult to speak of any kind of fight or acts of rebellion, aiming for distinction, when these attitudes are simply alien to the youngest generation (it can be taken for granted that they have not created any institutions or manifestos). It is difficult to expect such things from a formation that behaves as if tomorrow it were to be run over by a truck (Dominika Ożarowska's feeling, voiced during her first meeting for the promotion of her book in the Nowa Huta district of Kraków).

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