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At the Border of History and (Auto)Biography — Portraying Lech Wałęsa through Text and Experience

At the Border of History and (Auto)Biography — Portraying Lech Wałęsa through Text and Experience. The article analyzes selected works by Janusz Głowacki which were created in various moments of his life, and thus in different historical conditions. A narrative on the Polish August written in the 1980s, the later autobiographical writings about his émigré experience and the account of the work on the script for the film on Lech Wałęsa all have features of an autobiographical confession, being at the same time the testimony of changes in the Polish identity at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. But most of all they remain a challenge — an ironical critique of national stereotypes and community myths. The article attempts to trace conditions which determined the changes in perceiving recent Polish history and its role in shaping individual and collective identities.

Keywords: identity, “Solidarność”, opposition, memory, irony

At the beginning of 2010 rumors spread that the Polish film director Andrzej Wajda would be making a film about Lech Wałęsa. Over thirty years after the August strikes in the Gdańsk shipyard, a movie was to be made about the legendary workers’ leader. The script, to many people’s surprise, was to be written by Janusz Głowacki. Even though he had been known abroad, won a number of prestigious awards and his books were translated into many languages, his work was predominantly associated with the sneering, subversive and grotesque trends of contemporary literature. Głowacki participated in the 1980 protests at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk as an

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observer, and recorded his witness experience in his "Report on the Polish August"¹. However, this did not seem to many a sufficient recommendation. The writer's tendency to distance himself from the topics and characters in his books, regardless of the historical circumstances, appeared undesirable in the case of Wałęsa's story. Equally undesirable for some was Głowacki's strategy of provocation against the fixed icons of resistance mythology that he used in his autobiographical texts, invariably dominating over "giving testimony" or personal confessions².

One would reasonably expect that when a Polish winner of an Academy Award undertakes filming the story of a Polish Nobel Peace Prize laureate, the initiative is greeted with popular applause. Głowacki, however, in his account of how he worked on the film, published as: *Przyszłem, czyli jak pisałem scenariusz o Lechu Wałęsie dla Andrzeja Wajdy* (*I arrived. How I wrote the script for Andrzej Wajda's film about Lech Wałęsa*) depicts quite a different reality. The film entitled *Wałęsa. Man of Hope* (meant as a part of trilogy with *Man of Marble*, 1976 and *Man of Iron*, 1981) was shot in an atmosphere of animosity and suspicion, with old accusations and conflicts resurfacing. Lech Wałęsa for the two decades after the Round Table talks and the overthrow of communism in 1989 has been an intermittent object of attack from those political wings which sought to name any form of negotiation with the communists in resistance movements as plain treason. The film eventually provided grounds for quarrels regarding the origins of "Solidarność" ("Solidarity") and for the final destruction of the founding myths of post-1989 Poland, disavowed many times before.

The ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, previously indisputable, became an object of debate again. Though unreachable in the 1970s and 1980s, they defined the horizon of liberation dreams for individuals and communities back then. However, there is no unified and unifying, commonly recognized narrative of the fall of communism in today's Poland; the essentially modern narrative making up the story of the country's liberation is incessantly re-narrated and undergoes constant alterations, based on political circumstances and particular needs. According to Przemysław Czapliński:

The key feature of the end of modernity is the multiplication of narratives representing the diversity of social projects. [...] It turns out that to create new narratives at the end phase of modernity, we still need grand narratives developed in modernity, even if only as a context to be negated, deconstructed or ridiculed. Because, to understand the new society as a narrative order based on new rules, we need to re-think the ideas of the past³.

Literature and, broadly, art, still responds to the challenge of "giving testimony", albeit without any illusions about its role in the formation of collective identities.

¹ A. Szwedowicz, "Moc truchleje, czyli ironista nawrócony", [in:] J. Głowacki, *Moc truchleje*, Warszawa 2009, p. 109.

² See M. Czermińska, *Autobiograficzny trójkąt. Świadectwo, wyznanie, wyzwanie*, Kraków 2000.

³ P. Czapliński, *Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje*, Warszawa 2009, p. 16.

In the process of looking for a language capable of reflecting the complexity of the problem, literature “examines the state of the ideas of modernity and desperately recycles, questions, rejects and renovates them. Yet, arriving at a stabilized version is hopelessly difficult, because it is blocked by a peculiar ‘revenge’ of the dying-out grand narratives which take their metaphysical sanction with them to their grave”⁴. What remains are just fragmentary approaches, devoid of any higher purpose and sanction, impossible to comprise a viable whole, and, by that token, reflecting the decomposition and degradation of communal self-awareness.

The literature which manages to surpass the mass-produced texts of culture adopts mechanisms preventing oversimplified, utilitarian reading. This notwithstanding, writers are aware that they function in the space of historically determined flows of social communication. Dorota Kołodziejczyk, in her essay *Światowa Republika Literatury czy tandetny supermarket?* (*The World Republic of Letters or the Gaudy Supermarket*) warns that “[t]he paradigm of identity often limits the role of literature to a metonymic representation of society (be it national, ethnic, or diasporic), making literature studies a more logistically feasible version of cultural anthropology or area studies”⁵, but also highlights the fact that in the conditions of authoritarian oppression, art naturally becomes a mechanism of resistance against the authorities, and as such has to undertake the difficult task of diagnosing collective and communal identity. In this particular context attention has to be paid to the role of the receiver who participates in deciding on the political charge of the works of art: a given piece might seem neutral to some and iconoclastic or ostentatiously one-sided to others.

In his account of how the film was made, Głowacki had to reach back to his first story featuring the Gdańsk shipyard strikes in August, 1980. The author began his work on a short story *Moc truchleje* [Give Us This Day]⁶ while the strikes were still going on. The text he wrote became a rather peculiar testimony of the events, and, at the same time, an artistic statement of open defiance against the regime. It is therefore not surprising that the first edition of the book could only appear as an underground publication in the so-called alternative circulation system, as the communist censorship rejected the book as a whole without hesitation. The protagonist-narrator of the novel is a simple, uneducated worker performing a low-status-job in the Gdańsk Shipyard. He was given the name “Ufnal”, which in Polish may refer both to trust (“ufność” — in this case extreme gullibility bordering on stupidity) or “hufnal,” a tough nail used for shoeing horses. He lives in extreme poverty, inhab-

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ D. Kołodziejczyk, “Światowa Republika Literatury czy tandetny supermarket? Peryferyjne miejsca i globalne szlaki kulturowe we współczesnej literaturze porównawczej”, [in:] *Historie, społeczeństwa, przestrzenie dialogu. Studia postzależnościowe w perspektywie porównawczej*, ed. H. Gosk, D. Kołodziejczyk, Kraków 2014, p. 223.

⁶ J. Głowacki, *Moc truchleje*, Warszawa 1981 (English edition: J. Głowacki, *Give Us This Day*, trans. K. Brodzinsky, London 1983).

iting a wrecked circus trailer, and has to provide for a large family: sick parents, a grandfather and three young children whom he has been raising alone after his wife's suicide.

Ufnal becomes a confounding medium for relating the events at the Shipyard: he uses the caricature of the official communist newsspeak, stylistically crippled and deficient as a means of communication, which illustrates how deeply indoctrinated and incapable he is of thinking independently. To a personal and important question posed by a team mate, he is able to respond only in clichés:

Czarniawy said that it would be interesting to know what I would think had it turned out that he is, for example, 100 percent Jewish. I answered that I really doubt it, that it would be the case as I know for sure from the Great Comrade that such people as them either drive around in Mercedes cars and run the country for their own personal gain or, on the other hand, from some hiding place they incite and provoke wrongdoings in an attempt to make the country fall⁷.

The protagonist's awkward mimicking of the official language does not make him look like an oppressed victim of some language enslavement. Rather, instead, it lays bare the protocols of the official propaganda, whose purpose is to legitimate the existence of a system that exploits and violates its subjects. Finding himself immersed in the events he completely fails to comprehend, Ufnal initially becomes a feeble but obedient tool of the authorities. As the plot unfolds, however, the protagonist starts making his own decisions, objecting not only to the orders of his supervisors, but also against the pressure coming from his own family fearing for their own pitiable lives (and from his beloved, who, like most people back then, was very cautious and resigned to her fate).

The protagonist's self-consciousness progresses steadily, parallel to the process of the gradual loosening of the structures of the imposed language. The language, even though still incorrect and untrained, breaks free from the chains which were hindering the cognition of its user. Even though this specific language game is a source of humorous effect in the text, the change which the protagonist undergoes aptly illustrates the thesis that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world". *Give Us This Day* also remains till today as evidence of a well-known idea, typically suffused with irony: "being determines consciousness". Ufnal, while not fully aware of the fact, becomes a tool in the hands of his supervisors and mindlessly does their bidding, for which he is rewarded with four crates of firewood. His failure travels the whole spectrum from the absurd to the tragic as his youngest, one-and-a-half-year-old son dies due to the poor living conditions of the cramped circus trailer which was heated only with a small stove.

Głowacki shows a strong attachment to the protagonist he created in the 'eighties. Ufnal reappears in *Wałęsa. Man of Hope* in a short sequence which is not fully comprehensible to those unfamiliar with the literary prototype. In *I Arrived* Głowacki emphasizes that his intention was to show how severe poverty was for

⁷ J. Głowacki, *Moc truchleje*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 64–65 [trans. J.O.].

those who worked in state enterprises and thus were supposedly under the government's full social care and protection. One may venture to suggest, however, that these several scenes in the film reflect Głowacki's biographical experience, both as a private observer of the strikes and as a writer who decided to give testimony of the historical transformations. *Give Us This Day* captures images of hope, joy of victory, and of an optimistic vision of the future. The book ends on a positive note: the protesters return home in glory and Ufnal becomes a fully-accepted member of the shipyard's community as his old sins are forgiven. His family and his beloved greet him as a hero and he can be sure that he will not run short of firewood next winter. Evidently, Głowacki would not restrain himself from completing his text with this final pinch of irony.

Another key message of *Give Us This Day* is encoded in the representation of the relationship between the authorities and the workers. The atmosphere of suspicion, fear, and resentment permeates the shipyard both in the course of the strike and during the negotiations between the presidium of the shipyard commission led by Wałęsa (nicknamed in the novel "Mustachioed") and the emissaries of the communist party. This is the endpoint at which both sides of the conflict are at least seemingly even, though this state is temporary and conditional. The starting point seems to be more clear-cut, as it depicts the contempt of the local authorities (who were granted power by their Soviet superiors) for their subjects who are totally dependent on them: the ordinary people granted by the propaganda an elevated status of the "working people of the cities and the countryside". In reality, they are ruthlessly exploited and treated akin to slaves. In the grotesque scene of the First Secretary of the Polish United Worker's Party (PZPR) visit to the shipyard, the local authorities decide to greet him appropriately to the status he holds. As a part of the grandiose plan, the shipyard workers who were going home are herded onto a truck and driven in an unknown direction. Without a word of explanation they are taken to the Party's Executive Training Center (Ośrodek Szkolenia Aktywu), where a banquet is held for the officials from the capital.

The High Comrade stops us at his command and explains that the Most Important Person announced during the celebrations of ship launching, when he surveyed the guests gathered to pay him respect: "I cannot see the working people here!" So here we are, marching forward! The banquet hall opens, the door made of glass, the waiters make way, and inside — modern luxury, fancy, wit, elegance, provisions in unseen quantities. In the corner, the orchestra is playing the popular "Katyusha", a ram basks in cream, bacon is laid out in slices, ham, brawn, cream cheeses and fresh grapes!⁸

Accidentally invited to this "refined" world of communist extravagance for the few, the shipyard workers are ravished by this sight of goods unavailable to the common people: luxury and, even more painfully, the unlimited abundance of food. It soon turns out, however, that the Secretary has forgotten about his rash call, thus the presence of the "slaves" becomes immediately obsolete. All in all, the workers

⁸ Ibid., p. 20 [trans. D.K.].

realize their own misery as they spend a short moment in the warm banquet hall, being witness to the blissful feast that they cannot join. Subsequently, they are taken back to the shipyard in the same herding fashion, without a word of explanation or apology from the party officials.

Głowacki's "Report on the Polish August" [*Give Us This Day*], when read today, documents a short, brutally ended sixteen-month period referred to as "the carnival of Solidarity". For Głowacki, this tiny book on the shipyard strikes brought recognition in exile. The author learned about the declaration of martial law during what he intended to be a two-week stay in Great Britain, which turned into a prolonged stay outside of Poland. In his autobiographical book *Z głowy* [Off the Top of My Head], mostly devoted to his life in exile, Głowacki mentions in the beginning that "It did comfort me a little bit that André Deutsch, a renowned London publishing house, somehow figured out what my book was all about and signed me to publish *Give Us This Day*"⁹. The author did not conceal his alienation when he described those times after many years with sarcasm, distance and a good dose of self-irony.

Paradoxically, Głowacki's estrangement in exile was intensified by the fact that he could finally write freely, without censorship and the limitations it had imposed. Głowacki recalls one of his literary struggles with the topic of anti-communist resistance, and describes a typical failure of that period of his writing career in the following way: "In that story the wrath was righteous, the outrage — deserved as hell. The militiamen's eyes were cold, their grins cruel; the oppressed Solidarity workers just the opposite. In one word, I threw all of it away"¹⁰. He threw away the text, feeling ashamed not only of its poor artistic qualities, but also of the state of his own creativity. This writer, like many others in the communist world, was so accustomed to dodging censorship, speaking indirectly through layers of allusions, wrapping his texts in understatements and codes so typical of the Aesopian language, that he could not adapt to the new conditions where these strategies suddenly became unnecessary. He was also aware that the artistic strategies he developed over the course of his writing career would only work with the active participation of the reading audience:

the readers and viewers in the People's Republic of Poland were particularly skilled at finding allusions, even if none were intended. It was enough to write that the protagonist was an alcoholic, or a hunchback, or that he was cheating on his wife and not a single person would doubt that communism was to blame and the author would be given a standing ovation¹¹.

This simplified and grotesque rendition of the dissenting readership in Poland does evoke what is impossible to re-create today: a special bond between the creators and the receivers, who, while experiencing art (also popular and mass art), sealed their bond with the community.

⁹ J. Głowacki, *Z głowy*, Warszawa 2004, p. 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 12–13.

The ensuing transformation after the collapse of communism turned out to be the end of an illusion of unity, solidarity and brotherhood of the Polish people. A surprisingly critical depiction of Polish émigrés in Western Europe and in the USA in *Off the Top of My Head/Z głowy*, a book which was written as late as 2004, joined a rich repository of texts critically accounting for the Polish anxieties and *ressentiment* nurtured by Poles regardless of their country of residence. The book portrays the *homo polonicus* as a collective being which continuously celebrates its “helplessness and defeats”, later characterized by Bogusław Bakula as:

initially intimidated by communism, later by transformation, still economically dependent on the state, with a hybrid social identity, distrustfully looking both at the East and the West, with a fatalistic worldview and following the propaganda which cunningly takes advantage of its national phobias and dreams of social welfare; this human species numerously inhabits the country by the Vistula river and, shouting patriotic slogans, protects the world which his colonial origins have turned into a calcified form¹².

Głowacki's literary diagnoses confirm the fact which has been many times recognized by literary scholars, but also historians and sociologists, namely that the *ressentiment* lingering from the times of communism still determines the functioning of Polish society, divided by a deep rift into those who subscribe to a liberal and secular civic model and ethos, and those who cannot step out of the paradigm of incessant heroism and sacrifice as the grounds of national history. The memory of the past does not in the least unite the conflicted society, but, instead, reifies and solidifies the divisions, perpetuating the stereotypes these divisions are based on.

In *I Arrived*, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the collective portrait of contemporary Polish society is brought to the foreground. The subsequent scenes documenting the screenplay writing about Wałęsa are set against the background of increasingly polarized attitudes and, ultimately, the entropy of the community. Głowacki himself experiences this entropy in the encounter with people who demonstrate in front of the Presidential Palace to honor yet another “monthiversary”¹³ of the presidential airplane crash in Smoleńsk in 2010:

The priest was preaching beautifully about Christian values, love, and mercy and the person who looked like the organizer came back with a group of ten participants of the ceremony. He stopped in front of me, clenched his fists and started insulting me in a very imaginative fashion indeed. He began with calling me a “stinker,” then mentioned my deceased mother, had a go at my long-gone father and

¹² B. Bakula, “Polska i kolonialna przeszłość dzisiaj”, *Nowa Krytyka* 2012, no. 26/27, p. 156.

¹³ From the day of the catastrophe which happened on April, 10th, 2010, Jarosław Kaczyński, the deceased President's twin brother and Law and Justice leader, organized and led every 10th of each month commemorations of this tragedy. Marches with torchlights served most of all to create a sharp division between the believers in the mythicized version of a bomb attack on the plane performed to kill the supreme state authorities of Poland, and those who recognize the work and conclusions of the official investigating institutions and commissions run by specialists.

added that I should feel lucky that we had met in that sacred place because otherwise he would have already fucking killed me¹⁴.

When the sacred used for contingent political purposes gets dangerously close to the profane, the order of both discourses is disturbed: the decline of the sacred leaves permanent marks disrupting its coherence and supremacy; it inevitably leads to claiming the higher rank status by the profane sphere. Simultaneously, the unjustified usurpation of the ultimate metaphysical authority so as to empower particular claims limited in their temporal and spatial scope, makes dialog impossible. Jarosław Kaczyński and his followers successively created a new center of metaphysically sanctioned authority, aiming at shifting power from the sphere of the political to the sphere of the sacred. A few months after the tragedy of April 10th, 2010, Marek Zaleski put forth a sober diagnosis:

To claim that there is no neutral space for our knowledge (as knowledge is always “someone’s”) is parallel to a claim that there is no metalanguage in the form of a sovereign and transparent discourse. The dream of mediation between disunited (antagonized) languages has to be abandoned¹⁵.

The schizoid discourse feeding on *ressentiment* always remains hermetic and self-sufficient, making it impossible to sustain a dialog based on commonly recognized rules. As Zaleski sums up: “It is much more difficult to lay three million Poles on the couch; it is much easier to lay one of them in Wawel’s crypts”¹⁶.

Głowacki makes a similar observation. Admitting his doubts in the sense of making the “film on Wałęsa”, he explains their source — the impossibility of coming to terms with the experience perceived as an expectation of the end. The writer emphasizes the undeniably tragic dimension of the presidential airplane crash in which ninety-six members of the political establishment had perished. He does, however, point at what took place in its background, this time replacing his characteristic sarcasm with bitter weariness: “A Shakespearean tragedy. Poland wrapped in a pall, enter the real mourners and the pretenders: political players, sycophants, tyrants, compulsive meddlers, jesters. A court. Shakespeare without all the grandeur”¹⁷. The fact of the ultimate division of society and the shaking grounds of social order is not subject to mockery, but to conclusions and comparisons that are devoid of any illusions:

The Al-Qaeda assault united the Americans, and how about us? Well, Smoleńsk has managed to divide whatever we still had undivided. A great performance begins with the president’s burial at the Wawel Castle vault, in the company of all the kings and Piłsudski. Is it not too much? No, we need

¹⁴ J. Głowacki, *Przyszłem, czyli jak pisałem scenariusz o Lechu Wałęsie dla Andrzeja Wajdy*, Warszawa 2013, p. 233.

¹⁵ M. Zaleski, “Czy polski dyskurs postzależnościowy może wybić się na niepodległość?”, [in:] *Kultura po przejściach, osoby z przeszłością. Polski dyskurs postzależnościowy — konteksty i perspektywy badawcze*, ed. R. Nycz, Kraków 2011, p. 35.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁷ J. Głowacki, *Przyszłem*, p. 59.

more, we need bloodshed. The court confers and makes a decision. The plane must have somehow been knocked down by Putin and the KGB¹⁸.

The past, both distant and quite recent, becomes an object of faith rather than knowledge, and the willingness to participate in a performance built upon faith comes from a burning desire to believe in anything. Sometimes it is enough to feel needed to be happy. Głowacki persuades his readers that he can understand the traps of contemporary collective existence: "The sad, miserable, confused crowd seeking hope, meaningfulness and retribution for its miserable life has found its purpose. It had been looking for a scapegoat for a long time, and it has been given one"¹⁹.

Irony, humor and mockery made up a popular toolkit for expressing defiance and standing for the dignity of people in the times of subjugation; they gave an illusion of individual autonomy against the omnipotent and (as was thought then), permanently established world order. Today, as exemplified by Głowacki's texts, these devices appear to evoke inappropriate and largely obsolete laughter on the ruins of what was once universally recognized: hope and dreams of liberty, equality and fraternity. Although it might seem that the pathos practiced in speech and gestures by the current ruling camp suggests an attempt to come back to the traditions of the anti-communist opposition, such attempts, even if undertaken, do not bring any consolidating effects for society. The anti-communist opposition had the charisma necessary to unite the society in the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps because its language spanned various means of persuasions and poetics, from the gravity of seriousness to levity of irony. Today, in contrast, an ironizing artist is not recognized as somebody capable of diagnosing reality, rather, s/he is stigmatized by the increasingly centralized official discourse as a cynical destroyer of community myths, or an iconoclast fouling national sanctities. Of course, it is impossible to know how long this divisive discourse aimed at excluding these unruly individuals will last. What becomes increasingly obvious, however, is that the language of acerbic humor and irony, of which Głowacki is a prime example, will again serve the critical purpose of subverting and limiting the official pathos and propaganda, as it did in the times of anti-communist opposition.

Translated by Jędrzej Olejniczak

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 60.