

# Non-lyrical World

## Essays on Contemporary Poetry

### Summary

The book *Non-lyrical World. Essays on Contemporary Poetry* is devoted to Polish poetry published from the 1960s to the present day and it is this period to which the notion of contemporary included in the title refers. Other notions related to the history of literature, thought and Western civilisation are also used, such as “modernity”, “late modernity”, “post-modernity” and “postmodernism”. While the practice of using postmodernism as a category to describe Polish poetry from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century has not taken root, modernism and modernity have become established concepts in literary studies. At the same time, it is hard to draw a clear line between modernity and post-modernity in Polish poetry. An illustration of this kind of problem can be found in the debate on whether Tadeusz Różewicz’s poetry should be seen as the closure point of modernism or as the dawn of postmodernism. The case of the concept of late modernity is different in this respect, as it has been borrowed from sociology and cultural anthropology, and is closely related to the notion of late capitalism. The civilisation, social, political and cultural context for the history of literature and for interpretation is important in this book (albeit not always equally visible). However, it is the reading of particular poems that is of utmost importance and it is always projected against the background of other analyses that take literature as a reference point for social life, not vice versa. Therefore what is indicated here is the continuation, reevaluation and closure within broadly understood literary modernity and late modernity.

Part One, entitled *The unobvious. The inexpressible?* is devoted to the creative output of the poets from the older generations. From the already comprehensively analysed poetic works by Krystyna Miłobędzka, Czesław Miłosz, Aleksander Wat and Tadeusz Różewicz unusual aspects have been selected and the conclusions of this interpretation form a part of the cohesive whole within the

structure of this publication. Juxtaposing the Old Masters in this way is also unusual. Wat has been put together with Różewicz, both perceived here as poets of culture, who describe the crisis or maybe even demise of the Western civilisation, observing both its achievements and failures, as well as struggling with their own personal experiences. Miłobędzka and Miłosz are seen here as writers engaged, albeit differently, in describing the sensuous nature of the world; both artists wrestling with the feeling of solitude when faced with the other, i.e. people and nature. The artistic output of all four poets, especially with the motifs highlighted above, serves as an essential background for the poets of the younger generations described further in this publication.

Part Two, entitled *Looking out onto the unreal*, tells the story of the generation of poets born in the 1940s. Their childhood, youth and most of their adulthood coincided with the era of the communist Polish People's Republic, although some of them did not spend the entire period in this country. They represent different types of poetics, and each of them can boast a significant and varied artistic output, not only in poetry. The "unreal" mentioned in the title refers to the expression popular among the intelligentsia of the 1960s and 1970s. It pertained to the language of propaganda and censorship, the object of protests by poets who were categorised in the 1970s as belonging to the so-called Generation '68 (e.g. Stanisław Barańczak, Ryszard Krynicki, Julian Kornhauser). The unreal also refers to the modern society of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, both in its Eastern European and Western form. Rafał Wojaczek's defiance was targeted against the former, whereas the latter was described in a very original manner in Krynicki's literary debut. Finally, the unreal can also refer to mass communication and culture on both sides of the Iron Curtain before 1989, as well as during the present day. This is best reflected in Barańczak's poetry and essays written "before and after" emigration and currently in the late works of Bohdan Zadura, as well as the first volumes by Tomasz Bał. Describing these unrealities could entail their rejection, or an attempt to understand them, but sometimes, as was the case with mass culture, it meant familiarising with them and getting to like them (as was the case, for instance, with Barańczak and his anthologies, where he puts The Beatles on an equal footing with the English metaphysical poets, or the Müller-Schubert partnership with the Lennon-McCartney duo). It is the poets born in the 1940s that mark the beginning of the change in the Polish language of poetry, and this continues right up until the present. These are poets who discover new styles for poetry, introduce both Polish and foreign themes and traditions which are still continued, expanded and transformed at present. They are also the ones who have ranked among the most eminent figures of the contemporary Polish literary scene. It is they who undermine and reevaluate the existing status of poetry, even

if they themselves were responsible for creating it in the first place, i.e. they contributed to establishing the current poetic authority and poetic forms. These poets are capable of standing up for themselves and can also be uncompromising.

Part Three, entitled *Minor narratives, powerful melodies*, refers to the generation born in the 1960s. Marcin Świetlicki and Jakub Ekier published their first books as part of the series under the auspices of the paradigmatic literary journal of the 1980s and 1990s called "bruLion". Sosnowski is a member of the influential circle of the "Literatura na Świecie" [*World Literature*] monthly. Sośnicki and Grzebalski were the editors of "Nowy Nurt" [*New Current*], i.e. a very important bi-weekly in the late 1990s. All these writers published their literary debuts in the 1990s and each of them became at the time an important poet in their own way. Świetlicki and later on Sosnowski as well (apart from Sommer, Zadura and Miłobędzka) turned out to be important points of reference for the younger generation, both in the positive and negative sense (the latter especially recently). Eugeniusz Tkaczyszyn-Dycki became one of the most outstanding and ingenious contemporary writers, and is very difficult to imitate, just as Bolesław Leśmian was in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Suska is one of the most widely-read writers of the middle and younger generation. Ekier is a poet rarely commented on, although he definitely deserves more attention, among other things for his ingenious ability to handle short poetic forms. All these are important poets who represent various types of poetic expression and sensitivity. For them the juxtaposition of unreal vs. real is no longer essential. With the use of their private minor narrative, which has the clarity of voice as its main weapon, equipped with a powerful melody (musicality is very important for them: they use musical metaphors, traditional rhythm, and write songs as well as non-songs), they challenge the repressive rhetoric of the surrounding languages of both grand and little narratives. They not only fight with these languages, but also utilise them in various ways. By smuggling in both directions, they play with them, but also rightfully and successfully contribute to them (just like Świetlicki to popculture).

Part Four, *Dissimilarities – three small volumes and two poems to end with*, brings together representative poets from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Andrzej Niewiadomski, Tomasz Różycki, Adam Wiedemann, Joanna Roszak, Tomasz Bąk) and focuses closely on distinctive examples of poems and volumes. This does not constitute a search for a common, albeit general, denominator. The emphasis is on dissimilarities and diversity. This poses a risk, yet any reading of modern verse that does not expose the reader to a certain degree of risk is devoid of pleasure, and might be said to make no sense.

This book can also be read across the literary historical order for what is important here are the themes, motifs, traditions and poetic techniques recur-

rent in the writing of the selected poets. Here are a few such affinities noticeable in particular texts: The question of the western modernist tradition personified by Maurice Blanchot (Miłobędzka, Wojacek, Sosnowski), Wystan Hugh Auden (Różewicz), Samuel Beckett (Kornhauser), Thomas Stearns Eliot or Philip Larkin (Grzebalski), a tradition that is assimilated, redefined and ultimately rejected. From its very beginnings the counterculture inspired Polish poets; such poets as Wojacek and Krynicki used it, and its echo was audible in the work of Sosnowski, Świetlicki and Bąk. Another interesting aspect is the resurgence of the Polish surrealist tradition, enabling a different perspective on the avant-garde tradition, not only in Kornhauser, Sosnowski or Wiedemann. A separate problem is the relation to mass culture expressed by almost all the poets discussed and, most importantly, by all these in a different way. Of fundamental significance are the diversely formulated, recurring ethical questions about the Other and similar questions that appear within and outside verse. There are more such comparable points of contact and shared collections, for example, objectivism (Kornhauser, Grzebalski, Roszak), rhythm, sarmatism (Tkaczyszyn-Dycki, Suska), humour, marxism (which allows a fleeting link to be made between Miłosz and Bąk) and, *last but not least*, the end of poetry (Różewicz, Wojacek, Kornhauser, Sosnowski, Niewiadomski).

A world which is non-lyrical is also the world and language presented in verse: styles, subjects, characters, personages, the facts of daily life and biographical details, the rhythms and melodies of poetry, the imagery and the visionary – everything that might serve to emphasize the robust status of lyric poetry or to question, negate or redefine lyric poetry derived from tradition. Critical essays contain a description of the poetic form of particular authors at particular point of their writing. Exhaustive studies interpret the entire creative output of selected authors from one perspective.

First and foremost, this book is about poetry and through poetry; it comes out of verse and returns to it. It both circumvents a particular poetic expression and dwells inside it. Such a way of interpreting art differentiates itself from all others regardless of the perspectives from which particular works are read. Here each poem is treated as proof of a search for one's own voice or that of another person, as a manifestation of an individual perspective and separate, autonomous sensitivity.

*Translated by Rob Pagett*