

THE UNSUBMISSIBLE. THE DIRTY. THE BAD

People on the Margin of Society in the 20th Century Polish Prose

Summary

The book is about an important trend in the literature of the last century the distinguishing feature of which is the presence of figures from "the social margin". The concept of "the margin" is treated as a descriptive category and not as an evaluative one. To this category belong, among others, a knife-wielding assailant, a prostitute, poor people from Nowolipki – a pre-World War II quarter of Warsaw, a thief, a bum or an inhabitant of a village where there was a PGR (a state-owned farm). The area of the author's interests in the history and theory of literature is very extensive hence the works quoted were produced within different poetics and trends and belong to different literary genres (a story, a short story, a novel). The problems which are mentioned in the title are presented chronologically, which matches the evolution of the main current in social sciences, which took place in Europe and accounts for the specifically Polish situation.

That is why in Chapter One the author refers to the context connected with the activities of the leftist groups of intellectuals aiming towards national liberation. This context is very important for the country in captivity. In the chapters that follow, which deal with the literature of the years 1918–1939, are mentioned eugenic ideas confronted with not very good living standards of the great masses of people in the state which wanted to be a modern one as is Communism introduced in the USSR, the country which had a border with Poland. In the works written at about the time of Polish October and in some later ones, this context is the political and economic system founded on Communism and dominant in Poland "after Yalta Conference" in which by assumption there was no place for any "margins", and in the last chapter which treats of the literature of the 1990s and the first years of the 21st century this context is the political and economic transformations that occurred in Poland and transformations which took place in the eastern and south-eastern Europe after the fall of Communism and disintegration of the "Eastern bloc".

Chapter One treats of the Young Poland writers, presenting at the same time the literary problems of the modernist artist in opposition to the world and his interest in the improvement of living conditions of the lowest social classes. The heroes of Janusz Korczak's (*Dziecko salonu*), Ludwik Stanisław Liciński's (*Halucynacje. Z pamiętnika włóczęgi*) and Feliks Brodowski's (as the author of *Wspomnienia*) leave their homes to lead their own independent life among people who, because of their "low" stature fill with disgust members of "the normal society". Each of the above mentioned writers has his own vision of the future of people with whom they lead their everyday life. The city is for

Brodowski an area in which everybody experiences degradation, and only death can free them from the ultimate destruction. The hero of Korczak's autobiographical novel thinks that one can help the poorest by offering oneself to them. And Liciński is convinced that the fate of the poor can only be improved by a revolution.

The heroes of the literary works discussed in the chapters that follow already live in an independent country. In contradistinction to their literary predecessors they do not descend to the socially "underprivileged" groups since most often they come from these groups themselves and are doing everything to improve their social status. Here ingenuity, help from others and at last literature are to be useful. The author shows these problems by presenting novels by Uniłowski (*Dwadzieścia lat życia*), Gojawczyńska (*Dziewczęta z Nowolipek*) and Rusinek (*Burza nad brukiem, Człowiek z bramy*). The wish to mingle with the "normal" society also is the concern of the Jewish hero of the autobiographical novels of Urke Nachalnik (*Życiorys własny przestępcy, Żywe grobowce*). In case of Sergiusz Piasecki's works (*Bogom równi, Piąty etap*) we can speak of a somewhat different situation. His heroes are determined to lead a lonely life in order to halt the wave of Bolshevism approaching from the East. Both Nachalnik and Piasecki wanted to pay with the same money for being recognised on the literary market – with a story the truth of which was guaranteed by their own experience.

This kind of figures in the 1930s was defined by the name of "barbarians" – this is how one of the critics called the writers who were not coming from the circles of intellectuals and who started writing because they were presenting their social and professional experiences. These were of a child from the Powiśle quarter in Warsaw (Zbigniew Uniłowski also as the author of *Wspólny pokój*), a waiter (Henryk Worcell), a thief (Urke Nachalnik), a smuggler and spy (Sergiusz Piasecki also as the author of *Kochanek Wielkiej Niedźwiedzicy*).

In the books published after 1956, the authors of which were Marek Nowakowski, Jan Himilbach and, to some extent, also Andrzej Brycht, "people from the social margin" appear because of at least three reasons. First, they were viewed as "good savages" and they were ascribed moral attributes which "members of intellectual circles" did not have being forced in the pre-October Poland to give up to numerous compromises. Second, "the social margin" due to their actual distance from the centre might appear as an oasis which the Communist "laws" had not managed to reach, and people living in this oasis looked as if they were the only ones who had not undergone the so called Stalinist one-size fits-all-policy. Third, the life and customs of the "people from the margin" still encouraged through their exoticism and pointed to their pre-World War II origin.

In the parts of this monograph that follow the evolution, connected with the presence of these heroes in the works of Marek Nowakowski, is discussed. In the autobiographical *Książę Nocy* it appears that they form a reality which shaped him as a writer. However, it gained his interest as a writer not only due to its mysteriousness and exoticism, but also because of his socialist ideals when he was a young man, which were based on Żeromski. That is why in some of his later works Nowakowski's hero-writer penetrating the sombre dead ends of the city transforms into a writer-oppositionist, who is followed, frisked and arrested by militia.

In the works produced after 1989 the past has been viewed by the writer as a world ruled by unchangeable and clear laws, populated by independent and honourable people. The reality of the beginning of capitalism loses with such a world. Hence the melancholia which accompanies more and more often the autobiographical hero of Nowakowski's stories.

This book is concluded with a chapter devoted to the works of Andrzej Stasiuk and other younger writers, for instance, Daniel Odija (*Ulica, Szklana huta*), Filip Onichimowski (*Zalani*), Tomasz Białkowski (*Leze*). Andrzej Stasiuk's early works (*Mury Hebronu, Biały kruk*) are presented as a prose breaking with the myth of the necessity of the civic engagement in the social and political matters. Instead of this myth another one is evolved – that of a generation which is not politically engaged. The choice of the place of living in a small settlement in Beskid Niski (The Lower Beskids) which is far away from the political and cultural centre seems to confirm that Stasiuk includes this myth within his own biography as well as his works. It is from there that he sees whatever has been left of the disintegrating Polish People's Republic, and later observes the disintegration of the "socialist" and poor south-eastern Europe. In his works (*Opowieści galicyjskie, Dukla, Jadąc do Babadag*) there is not one word of complaint about any social injustice. Also works by the youngest authors are analysed, e.g. those of Onichimowski and Białkowski who rebel against poverty and seem to claim that with their stories they represent the masses of those who have not been invited to "the consumerist paradise". Their prose is confronted with that of Stasiuk.

In his works a conviction can be seen that poverty, sweat, dirt as well as the necessity of everyday hard work are the indispensable attribute of human fate, and man can do nothing but accept it.

Translated by Andrzej Pietrzak