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Nancy Burke: A Reminiscence

In my desk in Edmonton, I have a blue paper file labelled simply "Burke." I have many correspondents, but Nancy Burke is the only one whose letters warranted their own folder, for they were always several pages long, often with last-minute marginalia scribbled in the margins in all directions of the page, stuffed with newspaper clippings, and always written with the engagement and passion and intellectual and emotional honesty that characterized every exchange I ever had with her, written and face-to-face.

We met in Warsaw – I think it was 1986 – when she was already an exchange-professor with the Department of English Studies and I was on one of my several research trips to Poland in the 1980s. We met in the editorial offices of the magazine, *Literatura na swiecie*, to which we had been invited for the same purpose: to act as consultants with the editors as to the contents of an issue they were planning, dedicated to contemporary Canadian literature. The fact that our advice was thoroughly ignored (the editors went ahead and included Malcolm Lowry, but no woman writer other than Margaret Atwood) consolidated, I think, our friendship, and set the tone for it: we were kindred spirits, politically and intellectually, who very much enjoyed the forum we provided each other to vent our thoughts and feelings on any subject.

The fact that Nancy had been born an American but, with her and her then-husband's move to Canada in 1966, had transferred all her considerable civic patriotism to her adopted country, further cemented our bond. We met only occasionally, and once Nancy had definitively decided to live and work in Poland and cut her ties with Canada (she sold her house in Toronto and resigned from Sheridan College), even less frequently. But our letters filled the space between us.

From a letter February 1989: *The Round Table is the subject of all conversations these days as well as being the news in the papers daily and on T.V. It is really amazing to see all these people on T.V. who a few years ago were personae non-grata. Walesa is the man of the hour and seems more and more statesmanlike and impressive. It's anyone's guess as to what will result from all this. The very fact that they are talking, on the government's initiative as well, is good, and of course Solidarity is to be legalized and is bound to become a major force. Everyone is talking "pluralism" and "democracy" and "a new type of socialism" these days. However, the strikes that are starting are worrying. Inflation is sky high...I have done more travelling around the country, just returned from four wonderful days with R's family in Sandomierz, speaking only Polish, I might add!...The new First Secretary for cultural affairs at the [Canadian] Embassy...has talked with me about giving lectures in Canadian literature, which I am only too happy to do and so I'll be going to a university in Opole to give the first one in a few weeks....Must go now, off to the dentist. That will be fun. They don't have any novocain these days.*

Her teaching of Canadian literature, and later her dedicated commitment to the Centre for Canadian Studies at Warsaw University provided much fodder for exchanges about the state of Can Lit (she was often indignant about the

celebratory reception by Canadian media of books that she and her students deplored, and wondered about the lukewarm reviews of books she admired) and the political issues of the day agitating us Canadians. (Besides shipping her tonnes of Canadian magazines over the years, I also provided a “clipping service” of articles and reports that would interest her. She always got a kick out of Margaret Wente’s columns in the *Globe & Mail*, and any good gossip about literary figures.)

Her teaching was her passion – I believe it was the reason she finally chose Poland over Canada – and no letter failed to include some observations on how her students were doing, and how very proud she was of their work. It is a measure of her natural modesty that she was always “bowled over” when her students expressed their gratitude for her labours on their behalf. Similarly, she was overwhelmed by the appreciative audiences she garnered for her published poetry, some of it translated into Polish, Russian and Serbian. One of her happiest moments was her visit in 2005 to the Belgrade Book Fair and the University of Nis in Serbia, a visit arranged by her translator and cherished colleague in Canadian Studies, Dr. Vesna Lopicic. One felt that each Muse – the teacher and the poet – sustained each other.

After 1989, and the normalization of postal communication with Poland, and especially once Nancy and I both had mastered the technique of e-mail, her messages to me came fast and furiously, with much forwarding of articles from various political websites. Much of this remained within the realm of spirited reportage – Nancy’s often salty comments on post-Communist Poland could distress me as much as entertain me, for we shared a rather romantic view of “upsurgent Poland” that should somehow not have chosen the free-booting capitalist alternative. But she was the one living there, not I.

From a letter August 1992: *I still love my work and that, as much as anything else, keeps me. I love the sense of academic freedom and the high level of student intellect and interest, but Warsaw daily life is quite unpleasant in a totally different way than it used to be. In the past there was the censorship, the noble fight against the stupid government etc but now the poor intelligentsia is totally degraded, they are poorer than ever before and since people all admire money and what it can buy, the status is gone...*

P.S. I do indeed wish we could set up a real dept. In Can Lit here – if there were only more money. I have been talking to M.G. about a Canadian Studies program since he teaches History and Culture, or even a Dept of Other English-Speaking Countries, i.e. Canada, Australia, the Caribbean – lots of possibilities.

From a letter May 1994: *I continue to be very happy in my work, all of it, here. Classes are always great. The Canadian Studies Centre, with a lot of hard work on my part I can tell you, is moving along...Basically I am feeling more centred myself – in my free time I am in the forests a lot, and find the contact with nature very soothing – I love the Polish forest especially in Spring...Warsaw has changed so much. While life is superficially easier, i.e. much more is available in food stores and they stay open all hours, I miss some of the things of times past and I cringe at the sight of Pizza Hut across from the Royal Castle, the Burger King around the corner from the university....I never realized how ugly naked capitalism could be; so was naked communism, but isn't there another solution?*

From a letter December 1994: *Here in Warsaw I have just finished reading, actually for the first time, Timothy Findley's The Wars for my Can Lit class...and I'm sorry, I think it's a mediocre book. In fact, other than a couple of short stories I've never been terribly impressed by anything he's written. It always irritates me a writer hasn't bothered to "do his homework."* Right at the start he gets his history wrong, he talks of the start of World War One "when the Germans invaded Poland" !! for God's sake Poland didn't even exist as a country then and part of it was German. When I teach it, I'm simply going to ask those students, all very bright, for their critiques and see what they come up with – but this won a Governor General's Award?????!!

The Can Studies Centre opened officially, the Ambassador came, the Rector came, Seagrams Canada donated French champagne and it was a great success, considering that it's not very large and financially under-supported. I did everything myself since I have no secretary or cleaner, I bought carpets, curtains, etc...I was completely exhausted. Now we just need more books and materials.

It was a source of pain to her that Polish public opinion was so pro-American, while her own political views were fuelled by her unappeasable disgust with George W. Bush's administration. But gradually, as Nancy's ties with her son, daughter-in-law and, eventually, grandchild in Moscow, strengthened, and as her work with Canadianists in Russia took her on several joyful trips there and she felt the injustice of the popular Polish hostility to Russia, our exchanges became rather more barbed on the issue of the nature of post-Soviet Russia, for, as a Ukrainian-Canadian, I had very much my own point of view on the nature of the Russian state! This tension between us came to a head during the events of the so-called "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine at the end of 2004, when we would forward to each other articles clearly denouncing the other's opinions. For the first and only time in our friendship, we were not in basic sympathy with each other's point of view. We retreated from the confrontation with a tacit agreement that she would not forward articles about Ukraine and I would refrain from doing the same about Russia.

But there was another element to the evolving complexity of our friendship, and that was my return to the Orthodox Church of my upbringing, and Nancy's powerful affinity with the Orthodoxy she experienced in churches in Moscow and Warsaw. On my last visit to Warsaw in 2004, and the last time I was to see her, Nancy took great pleasure in our visit together to the beautiful little Russian Orthodox church in the Praga district of Warsaw. She had begun studying the Russian language (adding to her linguistic repertoire of French, Spanish and Polish), and it was obvious that the simple welcome she was extended in this church, the beauty of its icons and its liturgy, were a great consolation for her. In Serbia, she had written me, "I felt a real kinship with the Slavic soul there. One afternoon I toured the Orthodox churches in Nis – met the clergy, heard a choir sing, bought icons and lit candles." For there was in her core being, I felt, a loneliness that no amount of friendship or collegiality could assuage. For all the frank and loving communication over twenty years, I always sensed that some – inexpressible perhaps – melancholy was her constant existential companion.

She then wrote of an "odd experience" she had had in Nis when, on leaving the theatre one evening, "a woman, nicely dressed, seemingly quite sane, said to me in English, 'You have a soul. I have to tell you that. It is wonderful that you are

here; it is wonderful to be in your presence.' I was so stunned by this encounter that I never thought to ask her what she meant, or why me? Strange, isn't it?" It is more than strange: it is a haunting late moment in what was to be the closing of her life. Three and a half months later Nancy Burke was dead.

In her last e-mail to me, January 26, 2006, she wrote, so typically, even from her sickbed, of politics and of spirit:

"Can't write a lot as I tire easily - probably the medication, but the election results in Canada weren't too bad. Could have been worse since I read that with a minority, [Stephen] Harper won't be able to do anything radical. I note that Michael [Ignatieff] won in the Lakeshore riding - shocking! Did the Ukrainian Canadians there actually vote for him? He will probably be the eventual Lib leader - world class star? Give me a break. That was one of the most cynical moves in politics.

"Oh, as to the baptism question. Well I was baptized as a baby as Anglican. Would love to incorporate myself totally as adult into the Orthodox Church, which is definitely the religion in which I've found a home. But...I feel strongly about cremation and the Polish Orthodox Church forbids it so this is rather a hurdle for me."

In the end, she was cremated and taken back to Connecticut, to her parents' grave.

Her colleague, Dr. Ana Olos, of the University of Baia Mare in Romania, sent me this note on the news of Nancy's death: "When I got up this morning, one of Nancy's books – "Wypalona Ziemia / Scorched Earth" – opened at a poem entitled "Black Dog". I copy the end of it:

"When screaming you awake, / the room is empty / outside – the sound / of one barking dog / breaks the stillness / of the country night. / And there is no rest."

But perhaps – as she now knows? – there is rest. As the Orthodox pray for the departed: "With the Saints give rest, O Christ, to the soul of thy servant, Nancy, where there is neither sickness, nor sorrow, nor sighing, but life everlasting."

Vichnaia ii pamiat'. Eternal be her memory.

Myrna Kostash
Edmonton, Canada
March 14, 2006