

THE POLISH HISTORICAL NOVEL AFTER 1945 SOME GENOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

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The association of modern (and post-modern) historical novel with the questions of genological nature is by no means accidental. This prose genre, apparently the mainstay of tradition and conservatism, underwent exceptional alterations in Polish literature and became a medium of a radical artistic, intellectual and communication experiment since the relationships between the reader and historical novel have always been unusually durable, or even sanctified by patriotic tradition. Therefore, the genre problem, in fact, refers to the question of the scale and range of transformations undergone by the Polish historical novel in the unique period from 1945 – 1990. Consequently, the issue also concerns the problem of changes which occurred in collective consciousness. And then – going further – it is also the question to what extent all those changes affected the processes occurring in other areas of literature and, more broadly, in culture. There is no doubt that the historical novel can be treated as a unique phenomenon insofar as its traditionalism was associated with the continuity of social experience, with axiological order, with the semiotic system of cultural auto-models characterizing an organized community. That explains why radical genre changes within the historical novel were often treated as attempts at undermining those extra-literary harmonies and accepted very reluctantly. As a matter of fact, most commonly people tended to respond in a very hostile manner since they constituted a forewarning of a potential reevaluation of established historic assessments, they predicted a total overturning of the structure of self-consciousness – not a very likeable experience. The question that arises then is – whether, and in what way did Polish historical novel change after 1945, bearing in mind the fact that it found itself in a completely different political, social, moral, and even geographical situation. Did it respond to those changes by a revolutionary transformation, by adopting a new, political platform for historic interpretations? In a short sketch like this, it is simply impossible to give an exhaustive answer and, therefore, I shall restrict myself to discussing the most important problems. To begin with, it must be said that Polish historical novel became in fact this domain of literary activity where – with best results – attempts were made to justify the

logic of Poland's return to, what was referred to as, „pra-Slavic“ and „old-Polish“, i.e. our own land. The Poland of the Piasts seemed politically secure and quickly gained support of the authorities as the vision of roots of the new state and, last but not least, it did not affect historical sanctities. The more so, as it did not disturb the conceptions and interpretations developed on the basis of a certain genre model which, in Polish tradition, was and still is the novel of Henryk Sienkiewicz, especially *The Trilogy*. Naturally, it would be a gross simplification to maintain that genre controversies overshadowed all other problems the Polish novel, more widely – the Polish literature after 1945 – had to cope with. Nevertheless, the tensions and strains between genre traditions and pressures to change the model and form new more challenging assessments of the past seriously determined historical awareness of at least two large social groups, especially of new elites emerging after the war.

A few remarks concerning genological issues, in particular genre conventions of the Polish historical novel, must be mentioned in the beginning. The issue was discussed by Kazimierz Bartoszyński in his article *Genre Conventions of the Historical Novel*.¹ The author maintains that the status of existence of a genre – „[...] consists in belonging [...] to a domain of the so-called literary awareness“² in which the process of notional categorization functions which activates definite transmission-receptive expectations. Bartoszyński asserts that:

„[...] classification of a given work into a broad category formed by the convention of the historical novel happens approximately as follows. The recipient of the text – generally speaking of a novel – recognizes in it, firstly: certain obvious „signals of historicity“. Secondly: beginning with these signals, the reader re-constructs the class of literary conventions associated with such signals, i.e. to a certain extent, the entire convention of historical novel. Thirdly: within the framework of this convention set, the entire text is read and it is either accepted or rejected as a historical novel. The most frequent signals of historicity are media of conventional time criteria, conventional – contained in socially accepted historical categorization – stereotypes of certain epochs as well as conventional historical manifestations of stylized novel expression“³.

¹ Bartoszyński, K.: *Konwencje gatunkowe powieści historycznej*. „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1984, n. 2, pp. 3-44.

² K. Bartoszyński, p. 3.

³ Bartoszyński, p. 5.

Bartoszyński re-constructs an ideal model of a historical novel, in his opinion, very close to the work of Walter Scott, Alexander Dumas (father) and Henryk Sienkiewicz and which is characterized by certain essential strategies: 1/ strangeness and familiarity, 2/ interpolation of historical subject matter, 3/ disclosure of sources, 4/ historified modeling, 5/ fictionization, 6/ actualization. The above mentioned characteristics are next used by Bartoszyński to distinguish non-classic varieties of historical novel. He writes:

„It may be assumed that the characteristic features of those varieties of the novel can, to a large extent, be restricted to the way they position themselves in relation to strategically recognized convention of classic historical novel“.⁴

It is worth stressing here that those non-classic, especially current, varieties of historical novel derive from the rejection of at least several of the above-mentioned features. However, for the sake of clarity, I will successively discuss them drawing attention only to the most important dominants affecting new conventions, and, consequently, new varieties of the historical novel.

The resignation from a widely known framework (familiarity) and introduction of a novel with appearances of historicity (M. d'Ormesson's *Glory of Empire*) seems to be the most radical declaration in favour of the convention of strangeness. The above approach moves the novel into regions of epistemological experiment carrying a significant risk load, especially when the work is outside socially established knowledge concerning a given subject. The novel of Jadwiga Żylińska about women from the neolith epoch under the title *Priestesses, Amazons and witches (Kaplanki, amazonki i czarownice, 1972)* or an attempt at a total (including narrative) reconstruction of the Polish language from the times of kings of Mieszko I and Bolesław Chrobry in Antoni Gołubiew's cycle *Boleslaw Chrobry (Bolesław Chrobry, 1947-1974)* seem to be sufficiently clear examples here. In both cases, we have to do with a hypothesis requiring various explanations, interpretations of scientific nature which, however, does not avoid a certain amount of risk bordering on fantasy. Peculiar and unapproachable world of these works full of exotic elements does not hinder the development of this tendency of historical novel, as evidenced in the writings of Teodor Parnicki and, later, in the postmodernist literary works of Mieczysław Porębski.

The above current is highlighted by the neighbouring trend for free or creative treatment of sources (point 2 of the classic historical novel) charac-

⁴ Bartoszyński, p. 41.

teristic especially for the output of Teodor Parnicki. According to Bartoszyński: „The open creativity of the historical novel sometimes constitutes simulation of research and scientific procedures in their productive aspect. This refers to those trends in the theory of historiography which, drawing upon premises of historical relativism or conventionalism, put emphasis just on the very conventional and creative character of the construction of a historical fact, causative dependences, the temporal system.”⁵ This was the strategy adopted by Jacek Bocheński employing his narrator in the novel *Devine Julius (Boski Juliusz, 1961)* in the capacity of an antique dealer or compère – *Poet Nazo (Nazo poeta, 1969)*, most certainly an amateur, having a high sense of historical relativism with tendencies for disillusionment, disclosure of sources. In such circumstances authentic characters (Caesar, August, Ovidius) play roles of actors realizing exactly the assumed concept of revealing mechanisms of gaining and losing power, the tyranny. Tearing the curtain off, coming out of hiding of the narrator allows for the necessary distance indicating Bocheński's critical and, in fact, presentative approach. Phenomena of disillusionment, creativity, sham scientism result in the relocation of the work towards pastiche, as is the case with the output of Andrzej Kuśniewicz *King of Both Sicilies (Król Obojga Sycylii, 1970)*, *Lesson of a Dead Language (Lekcja martwego języka, 1977)*, Piotr Wojciechowski *Stone Bees (Kamienne pszczoły, 1967)*, *Scull in Scull (Czaszka w czaszce, 1970)*, Andrzej Stojowski *Polish Romance (Romans polski, 1970)*, Kazimierz Sejda *C. K. Deserters (C. K. Dezerterzy, 1984)*, M. Porebski *Z. Powieść (1989)*.

The resignation from the principle of interpolation of a historical subject matter which comprises Walter Scott's canon of the two plots – private and historical – is probably the most difficult task of a novel. Resignation of privacy leads to literary works, in their extreme, devoted to mechanisms of politics, while the departure from the historical framework eliminates the novel from the area of its genre completely turning it into an obscure creation most commonly concerned with modern problems. It may be said that writers are undoubtedly very attached to this principle which, by common consent, constitutes the foundation of the historical novel as a genre. However, T. Parnicki's dialogue „novels“ (*Identity [Tożsamość 1970, Transformation [Przeobrażenie], 1973*) should be mentioned here in which the historical plot is, at the same time, a private one while the whole thing refers not so much to history as to the author's family history and the actual process of the creation of a work of art.

⁵ Op. cit. p. 43.

The process is set in a perspective conferred by a transversal mind of the novel – a super mind preoccupied with auto-analysis.⁶ Historians and writers of former novels were primarily interested in global phenomena and a historic detail was of a secondary importance for them. However, as shown by publications of the scholars from the *Les Annales* school as well as current novels, a single historical fact turns out to be exceptionally interesting. Seeking the causes of an event and results which it produces in the life of an individual and, via individuals, on larger sections of the historical process, in other words the resignation from the presentation of historic panoramas in favour of an „internal panorama“ – all this resulted from a growing feeling of the impossibility of reaching the essence of history other than by an individuality, a single fact, an event around which values, assessments, systems evolved. In this respect Parnicki reached the furthest point constructing a novel as a creative mind in whose chasms the private and historical plots became melted together in a peculiar way.

The resignation from historical modelling is accompanied by an ideological shift onto the level of timeless generalizations or aspects from the area of philosophy of history. The novel becomes impoverished in realities but gets richer in global undertones. We then have to do with the parabola (Hanna Malewska's *Story about Seven Sages* [*Opowieść o siedmiu mędrkach*] 1959), moralistic parable e.g. a popular plot of Poncius Pilatus or Judas written into the poetry of a novel-type apocrypha turning into a story about man's condition – in the works of Henryk Panas *According to Judas* (*Według Judasza*, 1973), *Judas's Intimate Diary* (*Dziennik intymny Judasza*, 1985), Jerzy Piechowski's *Pilatus's Secretary* (*Sekretarz Pilata*, 1966) or even Jesus Christ himself – *Nicodemus's Letters* (*Listy Nikodema*, 1951], of Jan Dobraczyński or *The Firm from Nazaret* (*Niezlomny z Nazaretu*, 1988), by Ryszard Kurylczyk. The poor historical modelling is also characteristic of the carnival, Pantagruelian novel of Józef Ozga-Michalski *Świętokrzyski Scamp* (*Sowizdrzał świętokrzyski*, 1972), *Love Witchcraft* (*Czary miłosne*, 1984). The main weight here falls on the creation of a picture of a grotesque world permeated with the desire for pleasure and unending pursuit of man after the demon and demon after man. The reader is taken into domains situated at the border between myth and

⁶ On this subject see: Bakula, B.: *Rhetoric and Transversal Mind* [*Retoryka a rozum transwersalny*] and *Character and Author* [*Postać i autor*]. In: Bakula, B.: *Man as a Masterpiece. From the Metareflexive Problems in Modern Art* [*Człowiek jako dzieło sztuki. Z problemów metarefleksji artystycznej*]. Poznań, 1994, pp. 166-182.

history. An attempt at re-introduction of the carnival novel into Polish conditions is noteworthy with both François Rabelais and Mikhail Bulgakov acting as patrons.

The disruption of equilibrium between the historical material and a specific novel convention may lead to a situation of special subordination of the presented world to one dominant, for example, psychological with a simultaneous elimination of the background. This is the approach used consistently by Władysław Terlecki in his creation (e.g. *Return from Carskie Siolo (Powrót z Carskiego Siola, 1973)*, *Black Romance (Czarny romans, 1974)*, *Animals Were Paid (Zwierzęta zostały opłacone, 1980)* which is subordinated to laws of psychologism rather than historicism. Hence, interference with fictionization, reduction of the historical background to the indispensable minimum replaced by an exposure of the categories typical of a psychological – or even more – psychiatric novel.

The historical novel, especially the one infected with the temptation for settling accounts, revisionism, abolition of myths restricts the actualization strategy in favour of the direct conversation with the present. This evident presentative references are characteristic for novels-masks or costume novels, in the period of PRL (Polish People's Republic) „using“ the costume, not infrequently, to avoid censorship, but also because of a stronger artistic and intellectual effect. It seems that those were the very objectives used by Jerzy Andrzejewski when he was writing his post-Stalin era account settling works – *Darkness Hide the Earth (Ciemności kryją ziemię, 1957)*, *Gates of Paradise (Bramy raju, 1963)*, by Andrzej Kijowski when he was creating *A Child Brought by a Bird (Dziecko przez ptaka przyniesione, 1966)* and by Andrzej Szczypiorski in his *Mass for the Town of Arras (Msza za miasto Arras, 1971)*.

The deviations from the classical form of the genre presented above (which do not comprise all achievements, since there is a wide traditional current, partly connected with catholic problems, even in years 1949-1955) allow us to talk about the intensive life of the Polish historical novel. Paradoxically, traditionalism of this genre resulted in numerous valuable artistic and philosophical experiments pushing it, in many cases, to the vanguard of Polish prose. The traditional historical novel became a breeding ground of exceptionally revealing and prolific – artistically, philosophically and politically – achievements which transformed its model structure based on several strong conventions which was discussed by K. Bartoszycki so clearly. New genre varieties which are the result of a reevaluation of variety norms as well as a reevaluation of stereotype attitudes to history decide today about a specific appearance of the

Polish postwar prose and, undoubtedly, managed to affect the evolution of the prose dealing with present-day problems. As a rule, the process of transfer of artistic innovations used to proceed in reverse order. Hence, metanovel-dialogue (*Transformation*) and historio-fantastic novel by Teodor Parnicki (*Muse of Distant Journey*, [Muza dalekich podróży], 1970) – treating problems within the area of intellectual, literary and life experiences of the writer, novel as a linguistic and stylistic experiment of Antoni Gołubiew, novel as a pastiche of historicity of Andrzej Kuśniewicz, Piotr Wojciechowski, the modern parable of Hanna Malewska, Henryk Panas, Ryszard Kurylczyk, the psychological novel of Władysław Terlecki, the novel-mask of Jerzy Andrzejewski, Andrzej Kijowski, the historical carnival novel – all of them develop side by side the strong prose current for which the classical signs remain almost inflexible. The second current respecting the requirement of the subject matter framework (events definitely closed), of the axiological framework (set of assessments of the past), written into a „system of stereotypes affecting the recognizability of a given historical epoch“⁷ is identified, as a rule, as a true historical one, while the species varieties breaking with the tradition are treated, to a lesser or greater extent, presentatively. The second element uniting many of the indicated artistic achievements is their metaliterary quality and the third – autothematism (as a reflection on a piece of work, process of creation⁸). These factors are capable of deforming the majority of literary genres turning them into the variations of a *quasi*-historical, auto-reflective prose. Here the historicity is simply a mask under which contemplation on the present, both political and artistic, takes place. In other words, in the „revolutionary“ segment of the Polish historical novel the most important were and still are the associations of even the very distant past with the present day and current consciousness of the Poles. Irrespective of the extent to which those changes were enforced by political conditions (strict censorship which allowed a certain degree of freedom to „neutral“ artistic experiments, certain amount of scientific element, metaliterary air), it must be said that they are also the result of certain intellectual ‘backwardness’ of Polish prose which is quite successfully made up just in the area of historical prose and, therefore, very clear inspirations by modernism and, later, postmodernism (Parnicki, Wojciechowski, Porębski).

⁷ Bartoszyński, p. 9.

⁸ See: Sandauer, A.: *Degraded Reality (On Brunon Schulz)* [Rzeczywistość zdegradowana (Rzecz o Brunonie Schulzu)] „Przegląd Kulturalny“, 1956, nr. 31; Bakula, B.: *Faces of Autothematism (Auto-reflexive Tendencies in Polish Prose after 1956)* [Oblicza autotematyzmu. Autorefleksyjne tendencje w polskiej prozie po roku 1956], Poznań 1991.

Presentativeness, bucolic vision of history, metaliterary character and auto-thematism are indispensable constituents of the majority of the above discussed new genre tendencies in the Polish historical prose after 1945. To a certain degree, this is also illustrated by the distance the Polish historical consciousness had to cover (at least some part of this consciousness) from the spasmodic holding to the idea of regained Piast space to the sincere throwing off the mask and treatment of the past (especially the distant past) in more conventional, intellectual and bucolic categories.