

The Polish Poets

Baron Wormser

Wormser is a contemporary American poet who moved to the wilderness of New England (apparently there still are such places) and lived with his wife and children off the land (more or less) for several years. His power of gentle observation suffices to place him among the fine poets of our time, but the reason he is singled out in *Sarmatian Review* is his essay on the Polish poets Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, and Wisława Szymborska. This is the best essay on these poets we have read lately: sensitive, delicate, creative in bringing forth what makes Herbert in particular worth reading.[1]

The cooking, woodcutting, and reading were equal elements of an integral life. We wanted books to have the passion and texture of clear-eyed originality. The notion of a book as a holiday from reality or touted “good read” didn’t do much for us. We wanted to encounter something that would move and surprise us. When I started to read the Polish poets—especially Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert and Wisława Szymborska—in translation, I felt, “Ah, this is what I have been waiting for. This is it.” “It” meant the depth of history grounded in individual art so scrupulous it could take the measure of the monstrosities of the twentieth century.

As an American, I hadn’t thought much about Poland. For someone who grew up in the 1950s, it was one of those countries behind the Iron Curtain; one of history’s unfortunates that moldered in the desiccating dust of communism while the West went its electric way. It lacked the élan of revolutionary Latin America; the United States wasn’t embroiled in a war there. “What else,” my ignorance said, “was there?” I thought occasionally of the hopeless mammoth that was post-Stalinism, of a repression that blew on the dead embers of ideology and proclaimed the genius of its wrongheaded ways. I recalled pictures of the Polish cavalry opposing the Nazi tanks and took this gesture to be quintessential. How could courage survive in a society where inertia seemed the motive force?

What I came to experience through the poets was that Poland was not on the periphery. On

the contrary, it was at the center of the century. Precisely because it had been waylaid, abandoned, lied to, tyraduced, and then pocketed like some weighty if not particularly valuable old coin, it had a front-row seat on several strains of political derangement that passed for dynamism in modern times. Geography is fate, and though it wasn’t a seat many people would have chosen, it was a remarkable one if a person wished to be disabused—admittedly an uncommon predilection. Opinion and dogma, to say nothing of fear and loathing, are much more vivifying and distracting. To the participant shouting at a Nazi rally or the timeserver who has made his or her peace with the gray grief of communism, the attentiveness, honesty, and various splinters of renunciation that are bound to lodge in a lucid soul seem matters of an arcane and hopeless conscience. The beauty of the poets was that a conscience can be both compelling and piquant as it testifies to how imagination can set up shop in the dreariest and most indifferent of circumstances and create quietly remarkable wares. Any place—Maine or Kraków—where an unmitigated conscience is at work is the crux of everything.

The word “conscience” was not one that I encountered in my reading of contemporary American poetry. It clearly was not an academic or stylistic word. It had nothing to do with the literary paraphernalia of personality. On the surface it seemed a bone in the craw of art, a protest on behalf of something most people agreed with already. I knew. For instance, that war, according to conscience, was wrong. It was easy to view “conscience” as a word that savored of the self-righteous, the ponderous, and the humorless. It invited the stifling embraces of sanctimony.

One of the startling traits of the Polish poets was how un-sanctimonious they were. The invited no awed hushes as they entered the precincts of art. They did not preen themselves or proffer a false, winning heartiness. They rejected cleverness out of hand. Rather, they evinced various degrees of the confusion and bemusement that are natural to human beings but that poems, in reaching for some imagist *aperçu*, frequently swept aside. They were reserved but trenchant, ironic but engaged, droll but sober, historical but sensuous,

focused but oddly discursive—as if, even as they spoke, they were hearing voices in other rooms. How could they summon up such equilibrium? And how could they avoid what seemed the natural disposition of so much American poetry—to put the narrator’s self-involvement at the center of the poem?

What I started to realize from my American vantage point, be it on a dirt road or urban boulevard, was that, in a closed, officious society from which the poet was undestandably estranged, the annunciatory inclinations of the self were both ridiculous and pathetic. The self is a kettle of identity; it spouts and rattles its lid as it feels, howedver blindly, its raw, willful energy. In a society such as the United States where the individual is empowered (however tenuously) to pursue his or her own happiness, the self is a natural correlative. The poet’s personal life owns a bottomless appetite as it broadcasts anecdotes, memories, frustrations, longings, and intuitions. There is no such thing as irrelevance. Hollywood is hardly an American accident, for each American can star in his or her own movie. Since happiness (as opposed to contentment) is founded on possibility, fantasy is our natural reality.

What was at work in the Polish poets was starkly different. War, ideology, and the lethal blend of bureaucracy, brutality, censorship, and paranoia that was state communism had humbled the authorial self and made it suspect—not on account of the “bourgeois” element that communists loved to fulminate about but on account of its being overmatched. To take some measurd of what had happened to human beings in the twenieth century, more was needed than the anodynes of conventional selfhood, of the poet mounting his or her ego and telling how life seems to him or her. Immersed as they were in the unhappy river of history, the Poles learned about (in a phrase that is the title of one of Stanisław Barańczak’s books) “breathing under water.” Whereas we, in the West, were able to paddle along on the surface assuming that each of us was at the center of some relatively secure sense of personal importance, the Poles were staring at the systematic mockery of the individual and the social impulses that bring individuals together.

Polish poetry as embodied by the likes of Miłosz, Herbert, and Szymborska did not have to happen. History deals all sorts of cards, whether those cards have a hand in producing genuine poets is very chancy. That such poetry had occurred seemed a miracle for which gratitude was appropriate. What I found in the books I brought into our house in the distant Maine woods was a poetry rooted in a passionate wariness, a poetry that approached huge dilemmas at oblique angles, a poetry that refused to make a fuss about poetry’s powers and yet trusted those powers implicitly. The personae that the poets deployed—the world-weary yet passionate, skeptical yet religious voice of Miłosz; Herbert’s Mr. Cogito who managed to be Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in the same character; Szymborska’s wonderful aliveness to absurdity and her passion for mundane sanity—were in a different league from the testifying self with which I was familiar in the United States. In their various ways, each poet was unmasking history—not in any declamatory fashion but by means of meditation, wit, and a profound refusal to join the general, contemporary din. They gave recusancy a good name. They exemplified the antidote that poetry could be.

This was not to discredit the poetry being written in my native land, a reasonable amount of which will stand the indifference of time. I had framed my own life on a degree of rejection of what was going on in society at large. Poets in America had become professors. In a society devoted to specialization and knowledge that was understandable. Spirit has to make all sorts of allowances, covert and otherwise. My feeling of irony, however, was alive to the constant bulletins of importance and stature. You could spend a long time before you found a stranger on the street who could name three contemporary American poets. Americans certainly didn’t need poetry the way the Poles had needed poetry. We had more cocktails of emotional sustenance than we ever could count. How diluted, distracted, or self-serving they were was another story.

To me the Polish poets were heroes—not because of their jumping onto barricades à la 1968—but as people who dared the challenge

the great god of history. They had, after all, choices. They could have chosen the hermetic, the arcane, the willfully difficult, the bromides of an avant-garde that is always on the side of the transgressing angels. They could have drowned themselves in booze and sex. They could have killed themselves as the tremendously talented Tadeusz Borowski had. They could have simply given up. But they didn't.

They had taken history on—not so much its massive, Soviet body but more its wily, invasive shadows. A single event may cast an aftermath that lasts for decades if not centuries. It is a truism that wars don't end when a peace treaty is signed. What happens to those shadows—how they deepen and feint—and how people adapt to them seem virtually inexhaustible subjects as the poems variously etched and mulled those human accommodations. No judgments were made, for the genius of each poet was to bring to queasy life the manner in which the shiftings and scrapings played out. To be at once lost and assertive was to be human. Even the modulated Miłosz shared a fondness for the direct yet unassuming tone—"I sleep a lot and read St. Thomas Aquinas/ or *The Death of God* (that's a Protestant book)." Those lines seem symbolic yet very real. Great gulfs of spiritual history are presented offhandedly. One wonders immediately who this "I" is just as one wonders about Mr. Cogito's perceptive blunders or the capacious yet personal (yet anonymous) "I" of Szyborska.

The points of view that the Polish poets embodied were subversively eternal. History had gone up in the smoke of Warsaw and the crematoria, but the aromas lingered and permeated every human shirt. The bland authority of the assertive, individual self was almost a joke in such circumstances. Indeed, in the hands of Herbert and Szyborska it was a joke. For Miłosz, who was older, there were the unwieldy wounds of the humanistic tragedy and the modern savaging of spirit, of more propagandistic wrong turns than anyone could count. Yet the sun rose, people fell in love, and lemons remained yellow and sour. The perennial qualities demanded their due. Praise, however

slight, remained a vital part of the poets' currency.

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For an American such as myself who was involved in a very American project of making my life over, the mere acknowledgment of history was problematic. I knew the drill well: history was the servant of progress. It testified to where we came from much as a footnote testifies to a source. It was a tableau—mute, movable, and impotent. Even its screams and agonies confirmed maxims of improvement that could be waved like brisk flags. In the present moment, there was no residual pain. If we doted on history, it was because of its inherently puny stature. We patted its simple head because we must move on. When we visited the past, it was more often than not as a theme park, a place where entertainment condescended to reality. We refused to be haunted (which meant, in a sense, we refused to be human). The whole point of leaving another land behind was to abandon history, to exchange the collective lethargy of dynasties for the individual dynamic of the personal. Like a dog, America wanted to follow its unwary, vigorous nose. Groups like the American Indians and African Americans, whose lives had been scarred for generations by outright violence and hatred, were advised to look at the sunny side.

I, who came from nowhere (neither side of my family remembered much about Europe or wanted to remember much of anything) and lived in the seasonal present with the pine trees and purple finches, had such a nose. Perhaps it was little wonder that I could not get enough of the deliberate, nervy joy that vibrated through Miłosz, Herbert, and Szyborska. They knew how appalling human behavior could be. They did not wince, but they did not become unfeeling. On the contrary, as artists, they thrived. They had been pushed, but they pushed back—adroitly. △

[1] Baron Wormser, *The Road Washes Out in Spring: A Poet's Memoir of Living off the Grid*. Hanover and London: Univ. Press of New England (www.upne.com) 2008. 200 pages. ISBN 13:978-1-58465-704-0. Paper. \$18.25 at Amazon.com. Pages 106–111. Reprinted by permission of University Press of New England.

Letters on Polish Affairs

Charles Sarolea

Editor's Note: Belgian-born Charles Sarolea (1870–1953) was a professor of French at the University of Edinburgh. He is most remembered for his political writings. He wrote on various nations in Europe including Germany (whom he viewed unfavorably), Russia (ambivalently viewed), France, England, and the relations between these nations. The *Letters on Polish Affairs*, with an Introduction by G. K. Chesterton, were originally published in Edinburgh in 1922. They are public domain and have been digitized by various entities, including the Internet Archive in 2007 with funding from Microsoft Corporation. They were also reprinted in 2012.

Professor Sarolea's preface is dramatic: "The following pages are not primarily a plea for Poland, they are a plea for Europe. There is one Leitmotiv which underlies them, namely, that the Polish Problem is not a national problem but an international problem To speak of Polish nationalism is a confusion of terms. For a Pole cannot be a nationalist. He never was a nationalist in the German sense of the word, and he has been the first to apply the federal principle in his relations with other nationalities living under the authority of the Polish State. Poland has suffered too much from the aggressive nationalism of Germany, Russia, and Austria, to be misled by the nationalist heresy" (2). What Sarolea has in mind is that "without the bulwark of a consolidated Poland, the old menace of a Russo-Prussian Alliance would once more become a formidable reality" (4). One wonders whence this Belgian professor of French in Edinburgh acquired his keen understanding of the problems smaller nations have with adversary propaganda. The answer suggests itself in the very question. Sarolea was Belgian, and Belgium experienced its share of malevolent injustice from its stronger and more-successful neighbors. As to Scotland, the repeated attempts to separate from the United Kingdom suggest that the eighteenth-century injustice and the defeat at Culloden in 1745 were remembered not only by the Scots but also by a sympathetic newcomer from Belgium.

The Second Letter in particular seems to make eerie references to the 2016 Polish public relations. In that country a small minority has fanned the flames of arrogance and asked for help from abroad (which in Poland brings back memories of eighteenth-century treasons) over a relatively minor issue: the number of judges appointed by one of the two largest parties. This has been blown into a crisis that threatens to disturb Poland's sovereign status. A lie that is repeated a thousand times becomes a fake truth; the monotonous drumming into people's ears of fantasies about breaking the rule of law in Poland is such a lie.

Portions of the Second and Fifth Letters are hereby reprinted. Orthography has been updated.

SECOND LETTER

THE ORGANIZED CONSPIRACY AGAINST POLAND

One does not require to be particularly observant or well informed to realize that the Polish government and the Polish people have not too many friends in this country or in any other country, except perhaps the Latin countries. Poland has today what may be called a very bad press. The fact is all the more remarkable because we might have expected a young state which is struggling into existence to be able to rely, if not on the support, at least on the sympathies and moral encouragement of its neighbors. Of such moral encouragement there seems to be very little trace. I do not refer here to frank and outspoken individual criticisms of the Polish people, nor do I suggest that all the accusations against the Polish government are unfounded. Indeed I am willing to admit that the Polish government have made some serious mistakes—such as the Kiev adventure in the summer of 1920. It would have been a miracle if that government had not made any serious mistakes. In a country which had been devastated by seven years of civil and foreign war, where everything had been levelled to the ground and had to be built up again, where the old rulers had been dismissed and where no new government had taken their places, the years of transition from the old to the new were bound to be much more difficult than in countries in possession of a settled government.

The attacks against Poland to which I am here alluding do not refer to the occasional and