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**NOWE DWUDZIESTOLECIE (1989–2009). ROZPOZNANIA, HIERARCHIE,
PERSPEKTYWY (EDITED BY HANNA GOSK)
DOM WYDAWNICZY ELIPSA, WARSAW, 2010.
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**The New Twenties (1989–2009). Recognitions, hierarchies, perspectives].
Ed. by Hanna Gosk. Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warsaw, 2010.
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Abstract

The volume *Nowe dwudziestolecie* (1989–2009): *Rozpoznania, hierarchie, perspektywy* [The New Twenties (1989–2009): *Recognitions, Hierarchies, Perspectives*] reflects on the twenty years of Polish literature and literary change between 1989 and 2009, and compares and contrasts this period with the twenty years between the two world wars. The two twenty-year periods are linked by the fact that their starting point is associated with a date of immense importance for Polish history: 1918 is the year when Poland was returned on the map of Europe, and 1989 is also the year of the change of regime in Poland. The period between the two world wars is also regarded as a separate period in Polish literary history, while the second twenty years covered in this volume are questionable as a literary unit, a question which the essays in this book seek to answer. The volume is divided into three large sections, the first focusing primarily on theory, the second on Polish characteristics and themes that characterised Polish literature after 1989, and the third large section on the genre characteristics that have characterised Polish literature since the fall of communism to this day but were also important between the two world wars.

Keywords: *regime change, Polish literature, World War I, Bicentennial, literary change*

Nowe dwudziestolecie (1989–2009). *Rozpoznania, hierarchie, perspektywy* (The New Bicentennial (1989–2009). *Recognitions, hierarchies, perspectives*) is a book published in 2010 that aims primarily to introduce the changes in Polish literature after the 1989 regime change and to show emerging and recurring trends. The texts in the book, therefore, reflect on twenty years of literature and literary change, comparing and contrasting this period with another emblematic twenty-year period in Polish history and literary history.

This earlier period of twenty years, officially called the “twenty-year period” (*dwudziestolecie*) or the “twenty-year period between the two world wars” (*dwudziestolecie między wojenne*) in Polish (literary) history writing dates from 1918–19 to 1939. The two twenty-year periods are linked by the fact that their starting points relate to a date of immense significance in Polish history: at the end of



World War I in 1918, after one hundred and twenty-three years of partition, independent Poland was re-established and put back onto the map of Europe, and 1989 brought the end of the communist regime not only in Poland but also in the whole of the Eastern Bloc. The difference between the two periods, however, is that the first has a well-defined endpoint, so we are really talking about a period of about twenty years, which we can look back on as history, while the second is a period without an endpoint, still ongoing today, and in which twenty years have just passed at the time of this book. The second period, however, has been given the name ‘the new twenty years’, not from a distance, but in the present.

In addition, literature in Poland after 1918 and after 1989 had different tasks. Whereas after World War I literature had to report on a country that was essentially a new creation – whose development literature obviously had a major role to play in –, after the regime change, literature played an important role in breaking down taboos, dealing with historical traumas, and more new trends and tendencies emerged. For the time being, one could even conclude that the authors' and editors' idea that these two periods should be discussed side by side is completely illogical. However, we will see from the individual studies that, in many cases and for certain genres, this approach is adequate, although authors often point out that it would be difficult to find two periods more dissimilar than these. Moreover, in the preface, the editors of the volume claim that 2009 will certainly not mark any breakpoint in Polish history or literary history, and that the twenty years since the fall of communism (at the time of the publishing of the book) are in fact a good excuse for producing such a comparative volume.

The extensive volume is divided into three large sections and contains a total of twenty-eight articles – such a large number of articles makes it possible to pay close attention to the period of literary history following the regime change. The first section, “Paralele i osobność epok” [“Parallels and characteristics of the periods”], contains works concerning mainly literary theory, including some of the most important representatives of Polish literary history and theory. The second section, “Przepracowania odkrycia” [“Works and discoveries”], focuses on adaptations as well as new and re-discovered works, while the third section, “Reportażowo-eseistyczna i poetycka wrażliwość epoki” [“The reportage and the essay and the poetic sensibility of the era”], deals with specific genres such as the literary reportage and the essay, which played an important role in both twenty-year periods and have a specific Polish variety.

In the first section, which focuses mainly on theory, a central theme for several authors is how the place, role, function, and character of literature changed after 1989; however, only rarely do we see examples of this being compared or contrasted with the interwar period. Violetta Wejs-Milewska, the author of the opening essay (“Literatura jako fakt społeczny. Próba porównania dawnego i nowego Dwudziestolecia” [“Literature as a social fact: An attempt to compare the old and the new twenty-year periods”]), focuses on the social aspect of literature and its educational function. She points out that while between the two world wars literature played mainly an educational and informative role, after the regime change it had to fight for the canon and the quality of culture. Maria Delapierre (“Polskie gry i



egzorcyzmy po 1989 roku” [“Polish games and exorcism after 1989”]) draws attention to a similar difference when she says that literature between the two world wars had a specific programme, i.e. the avant-garde, but after the regime change it has had none.

Going even further in his present essay (“Szczątkiutopii. Późna nowoczesność i wymyślanie przyszłości” [“The remains of utopia: Late modernity and inventing the future”] – which is perhaps the strongest and most serious work in the volume), Przemysław Czapliński, one of the most distinguished Polish literary historians of recent decades, who never lacks an anthropological perspective, calls the end of the communist era post-utopian, and even risks the bold assertion that modern age and utopia are, in fact, synonymous. He makes the very interesting point (partly with reference to Jean-François Lyotard) that the boundary between the modern and postmodern eras brought the end of the Faustian myth and, with it, the end of the Promethean narrative, i.e. civilisation. According to the author, the Hero and the Eros of the new era will be Narcissus. At the same time, a kind of emancipatory discourse is born, which is most evident in the field of post-humanism.

In the essays in the first section of the volume we often encounter the prefix “post”, whether we are talking about postmodernism, post-history, post-humanism or later even post-dependence; naturally, these terms are used concerning the second twenty-year period. As for the first two terms, which appear in the papers of several authors, the work and theory of Francis Fukuyama seem to be inescapable: Czapliński cites the Japanese-born philosopher in connection with the end of the Promethean narrative of freedom, and Delapierre cites him in connection with the crisis of the historical novel and post-history. Among the post-prefixed concepts, the term post-dependence (*postzależność*), which can be considered somewhat Polish, stands out, as Polish (literary) scholarship uses it to describe the relationship between the former Soviet Union and the former Eastern Bloc, distinguishing this relationship from the post-colonial one, as these countries were not part of the Empire, but only “henchmen” of it. Among others, this extremely important topic is dealt with in the study by Hanna Gosk (“Wychować się w momencie historycznego przełomu to żadna przyjemność...”. O postzależnościowych aspektach rzeczywistości przedstawionej w polskiej prozie ostatnich lat [“To grow up in a moment of historical turning point is no pleasure...”: On the post-independence aspects of reality as depicted in the Polish prose of recent years]), who lists the elements of this discourse in detail. Gosk also points out that this new type of narrative requires the development of a new, adequate language, which makes it possible to call things by their names in the new circumstances. Also, she raises the issue – characteristic of Polish literature in the few years after the fall of communism – that the new prose focuses on a single narrative, that of a single fragment of a person’s life, who as a child lived in socialist Poland (the works of Paweł Huelle, Stefan Chwin, Wojciech Kuczok, Dorota Masłowska, among whom there is a further link called ‘literature of the narrower homelands’, *literatura małej ojczyzny*).

Regarding the theoretical section, two things should be pointed out: the first is actually related to the issue of post-dependence mentioned above. In the transition countries the question often arises how they have been able to deal with their newly-



found freedom if so. Anna Nasilowska (“Zmarnowane szanse kulturalne dwudziestolecia” [“Wasted cultural opportunities of the twenty-year period”]) draws attention to this from a literary point of view when she claims that many writers lost their voices when the image of the enemy disappeared; also, that there was almost no literary reflection on the issue of regaining freedom. Tomasz Wójcik (“Symptom implozji. Jean Baudrillard i literatura (polska) ostatnich dekad”, [“A symptom of implosion: Jean Baudrillard and (Polish) literature of recent decades”]) looks at the last twenty years of Polish literature (looking back from 2009) in general, distinguishing between the categories of reader, writer, literary market and cultural context – all of which have also clearly changed considerably since 1989.

The second section of the volume focuses more on Polish specificities and topics typical of post-1989 Polish literature. In this context, it should be noted that in Poland, after the regime change, many historical and other traumas that had been tabooed until then came to the surface, and at the same time a powerful confrontation with the past began. Literature became one of the main arenas of this process, and it is upon such works that the authors of this volume of essays reflect. The first and most important, as well as most serious historical trauma is obviously the Holocaust, which entered both the political and literary-historical discourse after 1989; more and more Holocaust themed works were written in both prose and drama.

In this volume of essays, two papers discuss the Holocaust literature and the trauma and memorialization that goes with it. Józef Olejczyk’s study (“Śmierć masowa mówiła w jydysz” [“Mass death spoke in Yiddish”]) provides several examples of this type of work not only in literature but also in film. One of his basic propositions is the question of the literary quality of the Holocaust literature, a subject that is essentially inexpressible and, as Olejczyk says, ‘also language was killed in the death camps’. He also points out that, in these works, the ordering principle never creates pairs such as conqueror vs. conquered, executioner vs. victim, and victim vs. savior. Marta Cuber makes the same point that in this type of prose there is no stigmatisation, no executioner–victim juxtaposition. She also points out (following Kinga Dunin) that Holocaust literature is dominated by authors of Jewish origin, which gives these works a special, testimonial character, making them prophetic in a way. According to the author’s interesting observation, in the 1980s several such works were produced (also as a protest against communism), then there was a pause followed by the literature of the “children of the Holocaust”; and there is a constant search for the right form and methodology for such books.

Bartosz Dąbrowski’s Post-memory and trauma: Thinking differently about the literature of small homelands (“Postpamięć and trauma. Myśleć inaczej o literaturze ‘małychojczyzn’ ”) continues this line of thought. The author focuses on the fact that, initially, literature concerned only the Holocaust when processing trauma, and then the scope widened. He includes in this category the works of Stefan Chwin and Paweł Huelle, otherwise belonging to the somewhat nostalgic and naive prose of the literature of small homelands. He justifies this on the grounds that the starting point for this type of prose is always a childhood trauma, that the works are surrounded by an aura of ineffability, and that traces of the discarded past are everywhere.



Also, the feminist movement and with it the blossoming of feminist literature/women's literature in Poland dates from after the regime change. After 1989, "the most vociferous" books were written almost exclusively by women, so naturally, some of the authors of this volume reflect upon this trend. In their joint study *Around the dispute on women's literature, or at the root of feminist criticism in Poland* ("Wokół sporu o literaturę kobiecą, czyli u podstaw krytyki feministycznej w Polsce"), Joanna Krajewska and Maciej Duda point out that the use of the term women's literature was common in the period between the two world wars, but that today there is a confusion between the terms women's literature and literature written by women; and, after the regime change, the term 'menstrual literature' was also added (by the old critics who could not cope with women's boom –O.N.). Comparing the two eras, Bożena Karwowska, author of *Constructing the female language of migration narratives in Polish prose after 1989* ("Konstruowanie kobiecego języka narracji migracyjnej w prozie polskiej po roku 1989"), adds that the focus of these works is not on romance but on life, which approach was rare in the first twenty-year period. According to the author of the study, critics believe that autobiography, the body, the family and mythology are the focus of the works of women authors, and looking at the 'women's' works written after the change of regime, one can only agree with this.

Within women's/feminist literature, a very important point is highlighted by Agnieszka Gajewska's study ([*"There is nothing to hold on to": Recent Polish feminist literature vis-à-vis the founding myth*] "*Nie masięczego trzymać*". *Najnowsza polska literatura feministyczna wobec mitu założycielskiego*). The author argues that Polish feminist literature (especially the works of Inga Iwasiów, Joanna Bator and Sylwia-Chutnik) revindicates the history of 20th-century Poland. The same literature also revises components of national and ethnic identity, such as being Polish Jewish, Polish German, or Polish from the Eastern Ends. A separate strand of women's feminist literature (as well as public discourse and politics) is the topic of abortion, which is a sensitive issue in Poland anyway. Agnieszka Mroziak's article ([*"Coming out of silence": Literary abortion coming-outs of recent years*]; "*Wywołać z milczenia*". *Literackie coming-outy aborcyjne ostatnich lat*) goes beyond literature to warn that in Poland abortion is not only a private or intimate issue but also a political one; she also discusses abortion rights. On the other hand, she welcomes the development that, while in the period between the two world wars abortion was associated with the motifs of threat, death, and secrecy, post-communist prose has broadened the perspective. The most striking manifestation of this can be seen in the language itself, the intervention is no longer referred to as the enigmatic THAT THING but is called by its name. The common thread that connects all the studies of feminist literature is that they all emphasise the need for society to finally grow up and for all voices (including women's) to be heard.

While the second section of the volume concentrates on thematic issues, the third large section deals with the genres that have characterised Polish literature since the regime change but were already significant between the two world wars, namely, the reportage or non-fiction (which changed completely both in form and role after

1989), the essay, which (as the so-called Polish school of essays) has also had a long tradition, and poetry.

It is interesting that, while non-fiction is the genre that has undergone the greatest change since the regime change and is still the most prolific and popular in Poland, only one study deals with it here. This is Zygmunt Ziątek's "Dwadziesięciolecie: literatura jako reportaż reportaż jako literatura" ["Two twenties: Literature as reportage and reportage as literature"]. The author rightly points out that there are great differences between the non-fiction writings of the two twenty-year periods. In the twenties and thirties, these works were not yet strictly reports in the modern sense of the word but a kind of fiction (in contrast to the fact that today one of the central questions in the Polish literary scene is whether fiction is reportage – O.N.), as is also indicated by subtitles such as 'novel report' or 'report novella'. But Ziątek says it has now become a highly ambitious genre, and the author describes it as downright aristocratic. In addition to political changes, the development of the media has clearly contributed to the transformation of the genre.

Somewhat more attention is devoted to the essay genre, which, like reportage, also has a specifically Polish variety. Żaneta Nalewajk writes in her study ("Czas próby? Polski esej po 1989 roku" ["A time of trial? The Polish essay after 1989"]) that after 1989 almost every generation of writers wrote essays, and that at the same time works that had previously been available only in emigration or samizdat also appeared in Poland. This led to a large number of essays being published, and also to a certain change in the meaning of the genre, with many authors consciously choosing the genre of the essay (with unclear genre boundaries), which is not strictly academic. Also, Roma Sendyka ("Tadeusz Komendant–Projekt eseju postmodernistycznego, [Tadeusz Komendant: The postmodern essay project"]) examines the specific characteristics of essay literature at the end of the twentieth century. In this connection, he points out that this new essay is now somewhere between theory and fiction, with the essayist stepping out of the role of amateur expert (in the classical sense). A further (and as yet unanswered) question is whether we are really talking about postmodern or postromantic essay writing.

Finally, of the essays addressing the specificities of the genre, those reflecting on poetry are the most numerous in the volume. After 1989, the situation of poetry in Polish literature changed considerably: on the one hand, reading poetry became less fashionable, and on the other hand, decentralisation made it much easier for young poets to make their debut. In terms of lyric poetry, both periods have their own emblematic poetry groups: between the two world wars it was Skamander, and after the regime change it was bruLion. This comparison, parallel or even contrast appears in almost all the studies. Perhaps Aleksander Fiut puts it clearest in his "Różne dwudziestolecia" ["The different twenties"], that we are talking about two completely different periods, both literarily and historically. He asks whether it is possible to draw a parallel between the two groups and, above all, what sense it would make.

As far as specific poets are concerned, Czesław Miłosz seems unavoidable in the twenty years between the two world wars, and Świetlicki after 1989. Agnieszka Rydz Miłozzi Świetlicki. Nostalgia versus melancholia, brings together the work of



the two emblematic authors along the lines of the title, while Michał Lanek (“Walka o oryginalność. O debiucie Marcina Świetlickiego” [“The struggle for originality: On Marcin Świetlicki’s debut”]) and Piotr Łuszczkiewicz (“Przebojem w poezji. Liryka pokolenia bruLionu wobec popularnej kultury słowo-muzycznej doby PRL-u” [“A hit in poetry: The lyricism of the bruLion generation vis-à-vis the popular word-music culture of the communist era”]) focus specifically on the work of the new generation, and within it, Marcin Świetlicki. The former analyses the characteristics of the poet’s idiosyncratic lyricism in detail, while the latter discusses the relationship between poetry and popular culture, a subject that is not negligible, since Marcin Świetlicki also blends the two with his band Świetliki. In her concluding essay, “Czy nowa epoka? odpowiedź szukana w poezji (inietylko)” [“Is it a new era? the answer sought in poetry (and more)”], Ewa Szcześna points out that the ubiquitous link in post-1989 poetry is the reclaiming of freedom. The characteristic of Polish post-regime poetry is that it is simultaneously marked by the presence of the ‘great old ones’ (the so-called great four: Wisława Szymborska, Czesław Miłosz, Tadeusz Różewicz, and Zbigniew Herbert – O.N.) is present in all the studies on poetry.

Overall, the volume certainly fulfills the aim of the introduction by providing a comprehensive overview of the first twenty years of Polish literature after the fall of communism, both in terms of theory and in terms of genre and thematic specificities. The other aim, to compare this twenty-year period with the twenty years between the two world wars, has been less realised, and it is questionable whether it is really necessary to discuss two very different periods on the same platform.

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