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“You Will Never Walk Alone”: Potential Histories of Polish Literature

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Horizontal Networks

The inspiration for this text comes from the not so distant historical moment. Firstly, it was COVID-19 pandemic with its unprecedented affinity of fate and experience at the global level, and going through a collective trauma that nevertheless challenged familiar methods of describing and experiencing it. The tedious mundanity and everydayness of the pandemic life, its looped temporality and dulness, its loneliness despite its universal nature, did not chime with known patterns of groundbreaking historical events or natural catastrophes, and demonstrated the shortage of available forms of creating community: those not centered on acts of abstract heroism, but based on civil care. Secondly, the events in Poland in the fall of 2020, that is, the mass protests that erupted in response to the decision of the Constitutional Court to ban almost all abortions.¹ Even before the ruling, Poland had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, and after

1 The ruling was made on October 22, 2020. An important prelude to these events were the earlier August protests in defense of LGBT activist Margot (Malgorzata Szutowicz), a member of the Stop Bzduram [Stop the bullshit] collective.

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the court's decision, the ban would also include the cases when the fetus is affected by severe congenital defects. The protests, known as "Strajk Kobiet" [Women's strike], gathered thousands of participants amidst the COVID-19 crisis, and mobilized not only residents of big cities, but also people from smaller towns and villages alike, also in more rural regions where the ruling right-wing party had the strongest support. Thus, they made visible members of Polish community hitherto excluded, silenced or neutralized in mainstream identity-forming and historical narratives, that is, women, LGBTIQ community, people with disabilities, the youth and people from small towns.

The "Women's Strike" might be interpreted as another act of civil disobedience, common in Polish history and similar to the uprisings, the 1968 student protests, and the Solidarity movement. Yet, it is important to emphasize that it rejected, in a revolutionary gesture, the Romantic pattern that usually regulated the symbolic sphere of these kind of events. This pattern was based on the model of a mythical male community, united by the ideals of messianism and the rituals of Catholicism.² The 2020 protests irrevocably took on new forms of both actions and representations, significantly different from the established "procedures" in the Polish tradition. They were realized, firstly, in the form of acts that were radically comradely and egalitarian, civil and dispersed, based on horizontal networks of interdependence and trust, and devoid of hierarchical structures. These features are well reflected in the main slogan of these events: "you will never walk alone," captivating in its performative efficiency. Significant in it are the ordinariness and civilness of the projected gestures: its stakes are thus not elevated acts of struggle or sacrifice, but precisely unspectacular walking together. It is also iterative and atheological: "you will never walk alone" calls for horizontal, contingent and inclusive networks based on brief flows of egalitarian solidarity. Secondly, the protests used widely nonchalant and intertextual gestures towards Polish symbols and canon. Again, I will use the example from the banners: "they raised us to romanticize uprisings, and then they are surprised that we protest," one of them said. The richness of literary references, often quoting the (post-) Romantic masters of Polish literature (Juliusz Słowacki, Adam Mickiewicz, Maria Konopnicka, Henryk Sienkiewicz, etc.³), was seconded by an ironic,

2 See Maria Janion, *Do Europy tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi* [To Europe, yes, but together with our dead] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2000), 19–34. If not stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish are translated by the author of this article.

3 See Michał Rusinek, "Jarku, daj, ać ja pobruszę, a ty wyp***." Jak autorzy transparentów sięgają do literatury," *Gazeta Wyborcza. Wysokie Obcasy*, November 1, 2020, accessed June 3, 2024, <https://www.wysokieobcasy.pl/wysokie-obcasy/7,100865,26466977,jarku-daj-ac-ja-pobrusze-a-ty-wyp-jak-autorzy-transparentow.html>.

even mischievous ability in their creative transformation. Using the ephemeral and ontologically weak form of slogans written on cardboard banners, the protesters created a multi-author corpus that must be considered a key text of recent Polish culture. In this text, I would like to search for the traces of this alternative paradigm of national culture – based on radical civil solidarity and horizontal relations – in the post-war history of Polish literature.

Potential Histories

My search for other potentialities of Polish history (of literature) is also inspired by three theoretical formulations that propose a paradigm shift: by Ryszard Nycz, Maria Janion and Ariella Azoulay.

In his essay “Możliwa historia literatury” [A potential history of literature], published in 2010, Polish literary scholar Ryszard Nycz described his “dream of a potential history of Polish literature,” or rather, possible histories of literature, that would be “carried out in a specific time and place, in a particular milieu of authors and readers” and created in “acts of experimental interrogating”⁴ past reality. For, as it turns out, each “fragment of the past” can be subjected to multi-perspective approaches, and each conceptualization “is based on a different formative dominant, creates a different canon [...], leads to the prominence of a different list of problems.”⁵ Therefore, Nycz postulates a turn to the experiential dimension of learning about past reality, which “reveals its paradoxically unclosed character: it is open to reconceptualizations and reinterpretations [...] and even ultimately unfinished [...]”⁶ And it is not a matter of creating alternative histories, but of envisioning a possible history of literature, which rejects predetermined goals and is instead directed toward “continuous renewal of the vocabulary” and “unexpected orders of perception.”⁷ The precursor of such a method was Walter Benjamin with his analytical practice of constellations of concepts and dialectical images. Nycz proposes two models that enable “changing the way national history of [Polish – A. S.] literature is conceptualized”⁸: one based on various variants of dependency theory (operating within categories of center and periphery;

4 Ryszard Nycz, *Poetyka doświadczenia. Teoria – nowoczesność – literatura* [Poetics of experience. Theory – modernity – literature] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2012), 180–181.

5 *Ibid.*, 167.

6 *Ibid.*, 167.

7 *Ibid.*, 170.

8 *Ibid.*, 173.

domination, resistance and emancipation), and another derived from thinking about borderlands. I would like to propose another: a model of civil history of literature, based on principles different from those traditionally implied in Polish culture, namely empathy, horizontality, and dispersed protest.

The question of a potential history of Polish literature will therefore for me also be a question of potential Polishness: different models of national, cultural, affective, political, imaginary belonging and identification. This is why my second mentor in this attempt is Maria Janion, Polish feminist thinker (and the unofficial matron of the events of Autumn 2020), who in her essay “Rozstać się z Polską?” [Parting with Poland?] wrote about the need to “create a different Polish imaginary” and tell “a different history,” and through such actions attempt to “renew social trust and the capacity for empathy.”⁹ Moreover, in the context of the aforementioned protests, her speech “Solidarność. Wielki zbiorowy obowiązek kobiet” [Solidarity. Women’s great collective duty] that inaugurated the first Women’s Congress in Warsaw in 2009 is of particular importance. She showed in it how the “Solidarity” movement forsaked women by passing a law banning abortion in parliament in 1991. “Solidarity” movement, in its repertoire of symbolic gestures and, above all, in its forms of projected community, is completely in line with the romantic paradigm studied by Janion, dominant in Polish culture, which excludes women as agents of history and culture, relegating them to the position of supplement. Moreover, they are not alone in this situation:

We can reflect on the concept of the national canon and its persistence in the twenty-first century consciousness from the perspective of cultural minorities, such as women, Jews, all non-Catholics, as well as sexual minorities. The national canon in Poland is treated as something sacred, unchangeable. The understanding of the spirit of the nation is supposed to be determined by the Catholic Church and the tradition of the Armia Krajowa [Home Army – A. S.]. We rarely consider how much national culture can play an emancipatory role.¹⁰

Projecting potential histories of Polish literature, and thus potential Polishness, may be, it seems, such a gesture of discovering the emancipatory role

9 Maria Janion, “Rozstać się z Polską?” [Parting with Poland?], in *Niesamowita Słowniśzczyzna. Fantazmaty literatury* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007), 329.

10 Maria Janion, “Solidarność. Wielki zbiorowy obowiązek kobiet. Wykład inaugurujący Kongres Kobiet 20–21 czerwca 2009” [Solidarity. Women’s great collective duty. Inaugural lecture of the Women’s Congress, June 20–21, 2009] *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 27–28 June 2009, accessed June 5, 2024, <https://oko.press/prof-maria-janion-demokracja-w-polsce-jest-rodzaju-meskiego/>.

of national culture. "History of literature remains to be done" – Janion wrote as early as in 1973.¹¹

And a third theoretical parallel. Nycz's project of possible histories of literature resonates strongly with the concept of potentializing history proposed by Israeli-American scholar Ariella Aisha Azoulay in the context of Palestinian-Israeli history in particular, but also more broadly in the history of European imperialisms. Azoulay suggests that we should unlearn imperial thinking about history, that is, the seemingly objective ways of conceptualizing history in terms of progress, emancipation, citizenship, property, borders, and so on. For the history of European imperialism is a history of violence: of discoveries that brought enslavement, dispossession and rape; of a "differential rule" that divides people into those who can be citizens and those who have been deprived of this right, into those who enjoy the democratic right to admire museums and archival collections and those who have been robbed of the objects that make up these collections, and finally into those who belong to history and those whose historical agency has been erased. Potential history opposes treating the past as past and the present as determined, recovers various abandoned or forgotten scenarios to reveal their power to influence reality now, and speaks the language of "continuance, renewal, and repair" to think about the world in terms of co-citizenship without divisions. It is not "an alternative account of this already historicized world, but rather a deliberate attempt to pulverize the matrix of history, to disavow what was historicized by making repressed potentialities present again."¹²

Polish Civil Literature

Could we therefore potentialize the history of Polish literature in the framework of civilness, empathy, horizontal solidarity? Where to seek such overlooked precedents of civil Polishness? How to make the history of national literature more dense, how to show the alternative forms of social communities present in it, different from masculine-centered, hierarchical, based on the logic of property and war, patriarchal and exclusionary nationalistic?

I will argue that the key historical context for the discussion of civil Polishness must be the experience of Second World War, which reduced Polish identity almost entirely to its Catholic-ethnic version. An absolutely fundamental issue, although rather absent from the reflection on Polish culture,

11 Maria Janion, "Jak możliwa jest historia literatury?" [How the history of literature is possible], *Życie Literackie* 13 (1973): 8.

12 Ariella A. Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso Books, 2019) [e-book, no page count].

is the question of the civil solidarity of non-Jewish and Jewish Poles during the occupation. It is overshadowed by “ethical arrogance,” as Maria Janion, following Slavoj Žižek, called the attitude of moral superiority accepted in Polish culture towards the death of Jews who perished in camps, ghettos and mass shootings. This refers not only to anti-Semitic prejudices about Jewish passivity, but also to a general lack of appreciation for the forms of resistance other than military heroism and martyrdom. “The uniqueness of the Holocaust,” Janion wrote, “forces us to revise many beliefs. The heroic-martyrdom schemes of the nineteenth century, the stereotypes of ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ death, ‘heroic’ and ‘unheroic’ behavior, etc., often still weigh too heavily on us.”¹³ Film director Agnieszka Arnold, quoted by Janion, said in an interview: “still heroism can only be partisan – and ordinary human love of neighbor is not yet heroism. And I want the equality of these two heroisms.”¹⁴ In this optics, clandestine activities of “conspiracy” during the war, however trivial, are heroism because they are part of the vertical military order, helping Jews – based precisely on the horizontal order of solidarity – is not. “Wanda, Poland will prevail without you, stop distributing leaflets, save the Jews, one saved Jew means more than everything else,” Artur Nacht Samborski, Jewish-Polish painter, is believed to have said to one of the “Żegota” (underground Polish resistance organization) members.¹⁵ Jan T. Gross writes poignantly about this dynamics: “the most important difference between the two was that the work of the underground was surrounded by universal respect and that a lot of people were engaged in it, while in helping the Jews there were few people involved who did not get for their activity a wide support.”¹⁶ The context of the Holocaust highlights most strongly the monophony of behaviors considered socially desirable and ethically important in Polish culture.

And yet it seems that horizontal alliances of solidarity and the ideal of co-citizenship, visible during the 2020 protests, did not arise in a vacuum. I will show three of its literary antecedents, parts of this potential history of Polish civil literature: by Jan Kott, Miron Białoszewski and Magdalena Tulli. All of

13 Maria Janion, *Aneks o Zagładzie* [Annex about the Holocaust], in Janion, *Bohater, spisek, śmierć. Wykłady żydowskie* (Warszawa: W.A.B., 2009), 63.

14 Agnieszka Arnold, “Nienazwane i nieusłyszane. Z Agnieszką Arnold rozmawia Sebastian Matuszewski” [Unnamed and unheard. Sebastian Matuszewski talks to Agnieszka Arnold], *Kos* (2007), quoted in Janion, “Aneks o Zagładzie,” 75.

15 Quoted in Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, “Bez próby losowej” [No random sample], *Tygodnik Powszechny* 43 (2004).

16 Jan T. Gross, “Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej..., ale go nie lubię” [This one is from my homeland... but I don't like him], *Aneks* 41–42 (1986): 32.

them relate (to varying degrees) to the moment of violence I have indicated as crucial for understanding the contemporary landscape of collective affects in Poland, namely Second World War and the Holocaust.

A Different Kind of Heroism: Jan Kott

Jan Kott, Polish-Jewish theatre critic, in his essay “O laickim tragizmie” [On secular tragedy], published in the first issue of Polish postwar literary journal *Twórczość* in September 1945, reconstructs the philosophical stance of Joseph Conrad and André Malraux and shows how, for the former, the heroism of death constitutes “the highest value of life.” This particular manifesto – rather infamous in the history of Polish literature as evidence of the author’s Marxist befuddlement and read by his adversaries, including Maria Dąbrowska and Jan Józef Lipski, as an attack on the heroism of the Home Army and Warsaw Uprising – can be interpreted quite differently in the context of the signaled issue. Kott writes:

During the first years of the occupation, when the enemy began to take away our loved ones, this attitude often seemed supreme to us. Gradually, however, we all became familiar with death. We came to understand that while every death is equal, not every death is worthy of respect. We learned, instead of judging life by the measure of death, to judge death by the measure of life. That’s when we moved away from Conrad.¹⁷

The war, Kott argues, made people to counter Conrad’s “heroism of death” with “heroism of deed and thought,” the idea that life is lived in a world of history and values. Criticizing the “heroic choice of death, which testifies to one’s own imaginary greatness”¹⁸ the critic disavows the “hubris of solitude” and “moral narcissism” of heroes sacrificing themselves to an abstract cause, their “contempt for the real world.”¹⁹ Heroism as a defense of honor lacks efficacy, while “the inner moral drama influences the real world, the social world, and is always only [...] a choice of one particular form of action.”²⁰

Maria Dąbrowska stated with indignation that “Kott, in denouncing Conrad’s ‘allegiance,’ denounces the heroic allegiance of Polish Underground,

17 Jan Kott, *O laickim tragizmie (Conrad i Malraux)* [On secular tragedy (Conrad and Malraux)], in *Mitologia i realizm* (Warszawa: PIW, 1956), 168.

18 *Ibid.*, 226.

19 *Ibid.*, 212.

20 *Ibid.*, 216.

which fought for five and a half years [! – A. S.] against the Germans.”²¹ But we can read Kott’s stance as not so much a critique of resistance in general, but as suggestion to value different forms of engagement that may be “judged [...] according to their social effects.”²² Kott, who came from a Jewish family and whose father was killed because he was denounced as Jewish by the fellow inmates in prison,²³ was well aware of how easily life could be judged worthless in the face of an “unworthy” death. Perhaps in his fervent criticism of allegiance only to oneself we can see an unspoken apology for a different kind of heroism: one directed toward others, socially useful, in favor of solidarity and civil empathy. In 1981, during the Congress of Culture in Warsaw, Kott spoke about the need to work through the separation that defined the situation of Jewish and non-Jewish Poles during the war: “this tradition of two worlds, persistently sustained by history, by the actions of bad people and by misguided thinking, is still alive in the Diaspora.”²⁴ In a short article from 2001, titled “Zły wygląd” [Bad looks], about his experiences during the Holocaust, he noted: “I have written about these entanglements during the occupation before, but maybe I will write again someday. Maybe it will not be until our grandchildren are free of these entanglements.”²⁵ In these brief diagnoses by Kott, we can grasp the hope for recovering such scenarios of solidarity, which allowed those with bad looks to survive during the occupation, more important than soaring acts of lonely heroism.

Contingent Communities: Miron Białoszewski

Perhaps the most obvious choice for the constellation of a potential civil history of Polish literature is the work of Miron Białoszewski. After all, Maria Janion called his *Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* “the most civilian Polish prose about war” and analyzed the writer’s “anti-heroic and civil”²⁶ idiom.

21 Maria Dąbrowska, *Conradowskie pojęcie wierności* [Conrad’s concept of fidelity], in Wiesław Ratajczak, *Spór o Conrada* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, 2018), 143.

22 *Ibid.*, 212.

23 See Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne*, trans. Alissa Valles (London: Windmill Books, 2016).

24 Jan Kott, “Wystąpienie podczas Kongresu Kultury Polskiej” [Speech during the Polish Culture Congress], Warsaw, December 11–12, 1981, accessed June 5, 2024, http://www.artin.gda.pl/text/10-6_pl.php.

25 Jan Kott, “Zły wygląd” [Bad looks], *Gazeta Wyborcza* 71 (2001): 21.

26 Maria Janion, “Wojna i forma” [War and form], in *Płacz generała. Eseje o wojnie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2007), 139, 99.

Also, the reception of his not war-related writings is dominated by terms from the broad semantic field of civilianism: he is a poet of “the everyday,” of “the ‘clobber,’ ‘the peripheral,’ interested in everything that is mundane, ordinary, lowly. These are, certainly, valid diagnoses, and the uniqueness of Białoszewski’s artistic sensitivity is indisputable, but I would like to read his work here not so much as an oeuvre of a social outsider and collector of curiosities, but in the context of civilness understood as an ethical project. “For years I have made a clear-cut distinction between matters that serious and not serious,”²⁷ said Maria Janion in her speech quoted above. Białoszewski skillfully deconstructs this implicit opposition. Here, I will show how – in the context of both his *Memoir* and other works – the writer envisions contingent civil communities that are not obvious to the Polish symbolic sphere.

In *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*, Białoszewski describes his positional-ity as following: “yes, I’m speaking for myself – a layman. And for others. Also laymen. To the extent that we can speak because we were there. Laymen and non-laymen. All condemned together to a single history.”²⁸ Laymen are incompetent people, untrained in the field. But also lay as secular, on the principle of distinction separated from the religious group. Laymen of the Uprising – its civil participants, uninitiated in the narrative that would give meaning and purpose to the events they are part of, unable to make decisions – are confronted with history as an accomplished fact. And yet, in Białoszewski’s narrative, they seem to possess a weak agency and form a specific community, bound together by strong ties of experience, albeit with constantly changing components. “Underground Warsaw was communal,” the narrator of *A Memoir* declares, and this particular conglomerate forms a “primitive cave community,” a network in constant motion (“it was all coming apart. The group didn’t stick together. Everything was moving. Disappearing”), clustering in various configurations, soon to be dispersed. Family was also a contractual matter during the Uprising. Białoszewski the narrator spends this time in two groups: firstly, with his friend Swen and his relatives, then with, among others, his own father. The narrator refers to them both as the “so-called family,” treating this category as an arbitrary collection, completed on a contiguous basis: “pani Jadwiga preferred having her bed near us. In our cubicle. Because we made up a family. They – the two of them, that is, and Stacha, Zocha, Halina, Father, and I. Next to us, Pani Trafna. Other women, men, children. Entire herds.”

²⁷ Janion, *Solidarność*.

²⁸ Miron Białoszewski, *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*, trans. Madeline G. Levine (New York: NYRB, 2015) [e-book, no page count].

In a situation of total isolation and danger, relationships are formed quickly and strongly (“we became friends. Quickly. As people did in those days”) and depend primarily on topography:

I have also realized that in spite of myself I may be carelessly tying together or losing my various distant, more distant, and sometimes not quite so distant personae. But that’s how it was. People lost each other as suddenly as they found each other. They’d be close for quite some time. Then others became close. Suddenly these were lost and new people became important. That was common. A matter of herd instinct. It didn’t make any difference what herd you belonged to, as long as you were in a herd.

Because we worried about our own. And about those who were still nearby but already somewhat farther away – we worried, but somewhat less. About those even farther off but still at this address – even less, but still a little. And about the neighboring building? Or the one across the way?

Dominant in the descriptions of the social affects in these constellations are positive terms: in the basements under the rubble of Warsaw, there is a “kind of harmony,” friendships, chatter and solidarity, and instead of blood ties, relations of kindness count: “the tenants in number 23 knew us. We knew they agreed. And even had they not known us it would have been the same.”

Finally:

In times of war, it seems, there is always a return to matriarchy. And especially during that war. That uprising. Particularly with that descent underground, under Warsaw (into the anthill of the shelters). It was a relapse—an explosion. Of the cellars? The caves? What’s the difference? Masses of people. The mothers rule. Sitting underground. Hide! Don’t stick your head out! Mortal danger. Nonstop. Even if you don’t stick your head out. And coping.

The principle of matriarchy is radical civilness, in which death can be only a loss, and war is broken down into simple activities, being busy, and “coping.”

This horizontal order regulated by topographical adjacency, an accidental proximity in which immediate ties are forged, survived the Uprising and was often portrayed by Białoszewski in his not war-related prose. Insignificant events, which the narrator witnesses in trains, buses, trams or various public spaces (market stalls, cemeteries, staircases, streets), are shaped precisely by ad hoc relations, flows of understanding and alliance. This is evident in Białoszewski’s frequent public transport scenes: searching for bus stops, jointly determining the route of travel, giving advice to lost passengers, giving way

and validating each other's tickets are such basic "situational assemblages" [*zlepy sytuacyjne*],²⁹ which Białoszewski particularly celebrates both as a participant and narrator. "Now you, madame – I validate the ticket and pass it to the next passenger / – You have nowhere to sit? – I don't – Then let me move this package away"³⁰ (*Konstancin*); "There is a commotion in the tram, the tram is moving, the passengers are all sitting, they are calm. They explain. One says that this is not the way. That other that since you went one way, you can go back the same way. Finally I ask out loud"³¹ (*Rozkurz*). Also, the family that is not based on blood ties is the basic social form present in his prose: his love relationship with Le. (Leszek Soliński) and the multiple and changing circles of friends are part of a matrix of horizontal, open, fluctuating intimacies. *Rozkurz*, the third volume of his prose, is subtitled "Little philosophy [*filozoficzna* – A. S.]. Life flies. *Rozkurz*. Civil conspiracies,"³² which is an apt summary of his method. He records various clusters and dispersions, with a particular focus on their social forms, from the position of a "layman," a stranger to grand narratives: whether political, like "Solidarity" movement, or traditional-patriarchal, like the heterosexual family model. The civil conspiracies are present in social matter regularities, latent arrangements that the narrator-civilian persistently follows.

"In *A Memoir*, there is my personal involvement, my tenderness for people," Białoszewski was to say.³³ In *Rozkurz*, Le. says to the narrator that he has tenderness in him. "I laughed. – Tenderness of everything? – Yes, tenderness."³⁴ This beautiful phrase sums up the two coexisting essential dispositions of the writer's work: the epistemological sensitivity of recording reality, maximum susceptibility to stimuli, which the writer simultaneously performs in his prose,³⁵

29 "Szacunek do każdego drobiazgu. Z Mironem Białoszewskim rozmawia Zbigniew Taranienko," *Argumenty* 36 (1971): 9.

30 Miron Białoszewski, *Małe i większe prozy* [Small and larger prose] (Warszawa: PIW, 2017), 119.

31 Miron Białoszewski, *Rozkurz* [Demolition] (Warszawa: PIW, 2015), 63.

32 Białoszewski, *Rozkurz*, 97.

33 Małgorzata Wichowska, "Pamiętnik z powstania warszawskiego Mirona Białoszewskiego w Muzeum Literatury" [Miron Białoszewski's diary from the Warsaw Uprising in the Museum of Literature], accessed June 5, 2024, <http://muzeumliteratury.pl/pamietnik-z-powstania-warszawskiego-mirona-bialoszewskiego-w-muzeum-literatury/>.

34 Białoszewski, *Rozkurz*, 85.

35 See Ryszard Nycz, "Szare eminencje zachwytu. Miejsce epifanii w poetyce Mirona Białoszewskiego" [Gray eminences of delight. The place of epiphany in the poetics of Miron Białoszewski], in *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości. Poetyka epifanii w nowoczesnej*

and tenderness to people, animals, plants. To understand better civilness as an ethical stance in the writer's work, it is helpful to focus on the figure of Nanka, his father's sister, with whom he lived as a child, and who is portrayed by him several times: "Nanka liked owls and everything. After all, and Jews in the occupation lived with her and Michał;" "Nanka was certainly a saint. Because if not her, then who? Because she was good to everyone. When they led her [...] after the uprising in 1945, in the spring through Breslau, she passed crowds of fleeing Germans and she pitied them. [...] That's what Nanka was all about."³⁶ In *Rozkurz*, he gives a portrait of Nanka who after liberation tries to find water for a German woman she accidentally met on the road in western Poland.³⁷ Nanka is the ideal of civilian heroism – unconditional, unspectacular kindness. Also "owls and everything" as a peculiar imperative finds a continuation in Białoszewski's life writing: so he constantly feeds pigeons ("I am then on the side of the useless"³⁸), saves a moth from death in the heat of a lamp ("I managed to save it from perdition"³⁹) and a young maple tree during a storm,⁴⁰ a tender intimacy connects him over the years with a poplar tree on Dąbrowskiego Street, later with the dens of suburban Warsaw.

Alliance of Shame: Magdalena Tulli

The prose of Magdalena Tulli can also be included in the "new" canon of civil Polish literature. In her case, two issues seem particularly relevant: first, the insightful vivisection of the dynamics of violence that is generated in seemingly neutral communities under the state of emergency; second, the project of radical solidarity in shame.

"Concerning the matter of foreignness, then, the locals need only a single glance, accustomed as they are to recognizing it in all its shades. There is no need for the mind to exert itself, and it's hard to be mistaken,"⁴¹ the narrator

literaturze polskiej (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), 221–234; Tomasz Kunz, "Ja: pole do przepisu. Miron Białoszewski, czyli literatura jako forma istnienia" [Me: recipe field. Miron Białoszewski, or literature as a form of existence], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2006): 36–54.

36 Miron Białoszewski, *Donosy rzeczywistości* [Reports of reality] (Warszawa: PIW, 2013), 144, 117.

37 Białoszewski, *Rozkurz*, 23.

38 Białoszewski, *Małe i większe prozy*, 49.

39 Białoszewski, *Małe i większe prozy*, 53.

40 Miron Białoszewski, *Szumy, zlepy, ciągi* [Noises, clumps, strings] (Warszawa: PIW, 2014), 230.

41 Magdalena Tulli, *Flaw*, trans. Bill Johnston (New York: archipelago books, 2007) [e-book, no page count].

of *Flaw* describes the situation in an imaginary town where refugees suddenly arrive. Crowded in the square, confused, they arouse immediate resentment and distance among the locals. We never learn the perspective of the newcomers themselves; instead, we observe the trajectories of alienation and its arbitrary rules: “what sanctions could be imposed on the outsiders, and how could they be separated from the locals? What principle should be applied? The cut of their overcoats? The smell of mothballs?” Tulli traces the mechanisms of exclusion from visibility, the growth of resentful tension that ultimately contributes to the tragic fate of the refugees. The parabolic tale illustrates well what historian Mary Fulbrook has analyzed: the significance of seemingly minor and trivial behaviors of bystanders observing the Holocaust, viewing themselves as uninvolved ordinary citizens, that ultimately led to the exclusion of Jewish neighbors from the polis and thus their deaths.⁴² Just as important as the open acts of persecution is the “intimacy of violence”⁴³ that easily takes collective forms.

Also in her later, openly autobiographical books, *Włoskie szpilki* [Italian stilettoes] and *Szum* [White noise], the writer explores the mesh of tensions and affects, in which the social world is being divided into its full-fledged users and the excluded ones. This time she does so using a very concrete example: the fate of a daughter of a Jewish prisoner of concentration camps, in the realities of post-war Poland, that are told from the perspective of the now-adult narrator. Tulli unravels the estrangement of the child protagonist among her peers and the dynamics of violence to which she becomes a victim.

In one of scenes in *Italian Stilettoes*, the girl in another instance of bullying at school, is locked in a closet by her peers. When she is finally released from it, the teacher demands an explanation: not, however, from the children who harassed the girl, but from the girl herself. The teacher is especially concerned why she did not scream while imprisoned. “Finally, she had to testify, stammering, that when she found herself in the closet, she froze with shame. And she continued to be ashamed, standing in the middle of the classroom in front of the teacher’s table. Strange that she didn’t die of this shame.”⁴⁴ The teacher tasks the class with explaining the causes of “something antisocial that was in this girl,”⁴⁵ and it soon turns out that this is an impossible endeavor: the

42 Mary Fulbrook, *A Small Town Near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

43 Term by Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 133.

44 Magdalena Tulli, *Włoskie szpilki* [Italian Stilettoes] (Warszawa: Nisza, 2011), 118.

45 *Ibid.*, 118.

otherness of the child is so overwhelmingly obvious and natural to everyone that it is inexplicable. The scene has a peculiar affective intensity and dynamics. The girl “shuffles from foot to foot,” “feels the weight of many gazes on her back,”⁴⁶ which paralyzes her ability to speak. She is pulled out of her hiding place and put on display. “That’s the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality,” writes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. “In interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity.”⁴⁷ Shame is the basic affect that regulates the girl’s position in a network of relational dependencies. “The only thing [...] I have a stake in is shame,”⁴⁸ says the narrator.

Crucial to the embarrassing schoolroom scene is its prelude: the girl is chased into a closet and forcibly locked inside. The children are the beaters,⁴⁹ the girl is the prey, but the juvenile perpetrators are not to blame, as they remain in the safe position of the helpers, not the hunters: their actions are devoid of a finale that would be subject to evaluation. However, although nothing happened to the victim, the performative nature of the scene and its dynamics are no different from the real hunt – only the ending is different. Does the girl, by remaining silent, giving no sign of life, “frozen with shame,” equate the helpers with the hunters? But the girl’s guilt is also her humiliation, “and there is nothing more humiliating than the fate of an innocent victim.”⁵⁰ In a society in which war and the Holocaust did not cease to regulate social relations and collective emotions, which watched the extreme humiliation of its Jewish neighbors, it is not guilt but humiliation that is judged, not guilt but shame.

Can shame have a valuable potential? Kosofsky Sedgwick emphasizes the political aspect of shame: “Shame [...] generates and legitimates the place of identity – the question of identity – [...] but does so without giving that identity space the standing of an essence. [...] Shame – living, as it does, on and in the muscles and capillaries of the face – seems to be uniquely contagious from one person to another.”⁵¹ At the end of *Italian Stiletos*, the adult

46 Ibid., 118.

47 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 37, 36.

48 Ibid., 74.

49 On the role of Poles as beaters during the Holocaust see Tomasz Żukowski, *Wielki retusz. Jak zapomnieliśmy, jak Polacy zabijali Żydów* [Great retouch. How we forgot how Poles killed Jews] (Warszawa: Wielka Litera, 2018).

50 Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 54.

51 Ibid., 64.

narrator talks about herself, but also about herself as a girl she tried to help: “and so it is with us foxes. We will flit through the generations from one dream to another, from another to a third.”⁵² The solidarity of the foxes, a community bonded by shame, can be read as a possible political project of Tulli’s books. The fox is also an imaginary friend of the girl in her second life-writing book, *White Noise*. The fox helps the protagonist in moments of difficulty, does not worry about imposed rules, lives outside social expectations, but is also characterized by a natural sensitivity. He says to the girl: “no animal is prepared to endure humiliation. Don’t set yourself up to tolerate it forever. You would poison yourself to death.”⁵³

The relaxed, “weak” attitude of the fox may have, Tulli seems to suggest, the political potential to get out of the post-genocide dialectic of violence. To paraphrase Michael Werner’s words about dynamics of gay visibility: “the paradoxical result is that only when this indignity [...] [is – A. S.] leaving no one out, and in fact binding people together, that it begins to resemble the dignity of the human. In order to be consistent, we would have to talk about dignity in shame.”⁵⁴

The political project of shame is based on horizontal networks that break out of the “exorbitant criteria of normality”;⁵⁵ take off the odium of embarrassment from weakness, seeking community in what is supplementary and powerless. *White Noise* ends with such a fantasy: the narrator learns the story of her mother, who, having ended up in a stranger’s apartment just after the war, could not stop herself from telling them what happened to her, although only a logorrhea punctuated by sobs and silences comes out of her mouth. After that, she never shared her story again. But this brief moment caught her completely off guard. It was shame that forced the mother to suppress memory and empathy, but it is also shame that the daughter recovers from the past and with which she identifies. This shame allows her to tell the story anew and to create alternative ties in the present.

Shoulder to Shoulder

Janion’s speech at the Women’s Congress ended with an appeal: “today it is necessary to create new secular communities [...]. It is necessary to redefine

52 Tulli, *Włoskie szpilki*, 143.

53 Magdalena Tulli, *Szum* [White noise] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 2014), 79.

54 Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 36.

55 Tulli, *Szum*, 137.

community symbols.”⁵⁶ Designing potential Polishness, then, also means working on its cultural reservoir and “renewing the vocabulary” of its description. The three instances of potential civil literature presented here allow us to think precisely about horizontal paradigms of history and Polishness in general, and each of them projects different forms of solidarity based on empathy, not soldierly duty. In Kott’s case it is a call for different kind of heroism; for Białoszewski, contingent forms of community and alternative models of social relations; for Tulli – alliance of shame. Civil Polishness remains not only on the antipodes of militarism, but also of martyrdom, and projects a secular and inclusive society of “laymen.”

These three formulas of civil Polishness – so evident in social and creative dynamics of the 2020 protests – may be also encountered in more recent cultural phenomena. I will pair with them three telling examples. Therefore, the reiteration of Kott’s postulate of another forms of heroism may be found in the performative action by Zuzanna Hertzberg *Heroism of Life Itself*. In April 2023, for the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Hertzberg, an artist and activist, led the symbolic unveiling of the other side of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes. Created by Nathan Rapaport in 1948 simultaneously with the most famous front side, titled *Combat* and portraying fighters with arms in their hands, the reverse of the monument, named *The Last March* shows residents of the ghetto walking with their hands empty. As Hertzberg postulates, not only armed struggles deserve to be called heroism but the very life in the ghetto, and “laughing, taking care of one’s hygiene and looks, enjoying little things in life were an act of resistance.”⁵⁷ In this gesture, the artist puts herself in opposition to the most common acts of remembrance, but also to such problematic pop-cultural representations of Jewish fate as recent comic book published by the Museum of the Warsaw Ghetto *Getto płonie* [The Ghetto is burning], which glorifies female fighters of the uprising who decide to “not go meekly to the slaughter,”⁵⁸ reinforcing harmful stereotypes of default Jewish – and women’s – passivity.

As another contemporary incarnation of civil canon of Polish (popular) culture may be considered the song released at the very beginning of 2020, foreshadowing with its theme the autumn protests. The song *Shoulder*

⁵⁶ Janion, *Solidarność*.

⁵⁷ “Zuzanna Hertzberg’s Artistic Performance: Heroism of Life Itself. The Other Side of the Monument,” <https://polin.pl/en/zuzanna-hertzbergs-artistic-performance-heroism-life-itself>, accessed September 2, 2024.

⁵⁸ Tomasz Bereznicki, *Getto płonie* [The ghetto is burning] (Warszawa: Muzeum Getta Warszawskiego, 2023).

to *Shoulder* by Viki Gabor and Kayah, a Polish Roma and a Polish half-Jewish singers, may be interpreted as a civil take on call to arms. The refrain goes as follows:

Shoulder to shoulder
 we sail together
 we change this world
 supporting each other like this.
 For no lady
 will dance alone
 when she has so many sisters
 when she's among us.

By pulling the title gendered metaphor out of its usual military collocations, in which only men going to war may march shoulder to shoulder, the artists envision the possibility of an inclusive sisterhood, similar to Białoszewski's contingent communities. There are no special preconditions to be included among the sisters who unite in dance instead of combat:

You have a sister in me, you know it well
 In the darkness I'll grab your hand
 Be sure you won't get lost.

Finally, I would like to mention Nike-awarded novel by Zyta Rudzka, *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby* [Only those with teeth can smile] (2022).⁵⁹ In the story of a widowed hairdresser who makes efforts to procure coffin shoes for her deceased partner despite her poverty, old age and social marginality, the author creates a portrayal of a woman who never falls into indignity, or rather, to paraphrase Warner, in her persistence and resilience, carves her vulnerability and inferiority – conditioned by her gender, class, and age – into dignity of shame and fosters various alliances.

59 Zyta Rudzka, *Ten się śmieje, kto ma zęby* [Only those with teeth can smile] (Warszawa: W.A.B, 2022).

Abstract

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"You Will Never Walk Alone": Potential Histories of Polish Literature

The paper explores the potential civil history of Polish culture and pop culture that differs from the traditionally implied paradigm, male-centered and heteronormative, based on militarism, martyrology, and a patriarchal model of family. Dwelling on the concepts of potential history by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, potential history of literature by Ryszard Nycz, and alternative national canons by Maria Janion, the article seeks to trace a potential civil paradigm in Polish postwar literature and popular culture, that is based on empathy, dispersed protest, radical solidarity, and horizontal relations. Starting with the historical events of the 2020 protests against the ban on almost all abortions, which used "unspectacular" modes of social interaction, epitomized by the slogan "You will never walk alone," and employed many cultural references, I reconstruct alternative canon of Polish contemporary civil culture that would entail both works of "high" and popular culture.

Keywords

potential history, history of Polish literature, civil literature, new canon, solidarity