

“The Barbarians Have Come” to Poland

BOGDANA CARPENTER

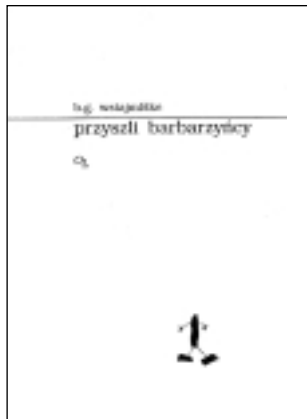
IN AN ESSAY entitled “The High Wall,” written in the mid-1980s, Polish poet Adam Zagajewski wondered what would happen if one day Poland recovered freedom in its political life: “Would poetry become—as it happens in the happy countries—the food of a handful of bored experts? Would that which has been rescued, saved from flood and destruction and even raised above danger like a high and beautiful wall created as an answer to the dangerous challenge of totalitarianism—would it cease to exist on the same day that the challenge itself disappeared?” That day arrived almost fifteen years ago, in 1989, when Poland became a free and democratic country after forty-five years of Soviet-controlled communism. Happily for Poland, poetry survived, and not only as food for bored experts. Although alive and well, it is not, however, the same. The publication of the anthology *Przyszli barbarzyńcy* (The barbarians have come) in 1991 signaled a dramatic change, as a new generation of poets—accompanied by provocative and loud gestures—burst onto the scene.

The most striking features of poetry by this new generation are its aloofness from politics and a programmatic absence of the historical consciousness that distinguished what became known in the West as the “Polish school of poetry.” Polish postwar poetry was organically tied to the two most important historical experiences of the twentieth century: World War II and communism. For forty years, history and politics formed a magic circle within which Polish poetry moved: they were both its strength but also, on occasion, its weakness. Excessive concern with politics was confining, at times leading to poetry that was narrow or read like political pamphlets. This is especially true of the poetry writ-

ten in the 1980s during martial law. On the other hand, attempts to ignore politics rarely led to poetic success either; the result was poetry that had no connection to reality, was artificial and aesthetically false.

The best poets of the postwar period avoided the pitfalls of either detachment or excessive commitment. They used language that combined the personal and the historical, the specific and the universal, the private and the public. Poems by Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Miron Białoszewski, and Wisława Szymborska—the foremost representatives of the “Polish school of poetry”—are firmly rooted in concrete historical experience, yet at the same time they inscribe this experience in a system of values that are transnational and transtemporal. In *Under Pressure* (1965), a book of essays on the writer’s relationship to society, the eminent British critic A. Álvarez explained the attractiveness of Polish poetry for a Western reader: “There is . . . in the best Polish art, the same inwardness and sense of complexity, the same tanglement, unease and probing individuality as you find in the best modern Western art. But with one major difference: it is directed outwards.”

The young poets, who in a provocative gesture call themselves “barbarians” in distinction to their illustrious predecessors, resist any commitment, whether this means siding with the authorities or being against them. They do not want to be either opportunists or rebels. Disliking what they see as a climate of “admonitions, exorcisms, and commandments,” they reject poetry that has any obligation toward a collectivity and strives to counterbalance the evil of history. For the poets born in the 1960s, political and



Cover of the 1991 anthology of “barbarian poets,” *Przyszli barbarzyńcy*

committed poetry, “poetry as witness”—the title of Czesław Miłosz’s Norton lectures at Harvard—is a “poetry of slaves.” They see politics through the prism of individual experience, not through the prism of a collectivity: “There is nothing about me in the Constitution,” complains Marcin Świetlicki, and adds: “I am the soldier of Another Army, / I nourish myself with a different bread.”

Rebelling against “poetry of meanings,” the new poets declare “the poetic latitude zero.” “Books burn in the hands,” says Andrzej Sosnowski. Breaking with convention and retreating from the intellectual poetry of their great predecessors, they strive to rehabilitate imagination and restore the rights of the individual “I.” This rebellion leads either to a depressive vision of the world as a cold, fearful, alien, and hostile place, a trap—as in the poems of Marcin Świetlicki—or toward a vision of the world as a carnival, a party, “a picnic,” a place “to enjoy life” even if deprived of meaning, as in the poetry of Andrzej Sosnowski, Dariusz Sońnicki, and Jacek Podsiadło. Despite and maybe because of its rebellion, the young poetry is more often than not optimistic, saying “yes” to life and above all to one’s own self. Underneath all the invectives against the world, underneath all the fear and repulsion, there is an ecstatic realization that “I am.”

The new poetry is loudly and programmatically egocentric: “In the beginning is my head,” says Świetlicki, “then from this spot circles go out until they encompass the entire world.” His statement is echoed by other poets: “I look at myself in the mirror,” “I listen to my voice,” “This is my sweat, my blood and saliva, this is my anxiety and my hunger.” An overwhelming majority of poems written today use the first-person singular, and in most of them the speaker is identifiable with the author. They speak of personal experiences, emotions, and reactions. The ability to universalize individual experience, the hallmark of poets such as Miłosz, Szyborska, or Herbert, is rare. The title of the most important literary magazine of the young generation, *bruLion*, which roughly translated means “first draft” or “a private notebook,” suggests that writing is for private rather than public use and does not aspire to finiteness and perfection.

Poems are turned into recordings of everyday events and personal experiences. Their subjects are characteristically and programmatically unimportant: a bad dream, a sight caught through a window, a trip to the store. They fulfill only one condition, that of authenticity. These events and emotions were indeed experienced by the speaker of the poem, which is emphasized by their titles, often specific dates of



Courtesy: Forest Books

Cover of *Young Poets of a New Poland* (1993), which includes poems by Koehler, Podsiadło, Sendecski, and Świetlicki

composition: “April 30, 1988,” “November 29, 1987.” They try to describe as closely as possible “normal” life. Many poems are short, brief flashes of reality; some could be described as “minimal.” To their credit, the new poets do not pretend that what they experienced or what they are writing about is important; they are egocentric but not megalomaniac.

One of the values this generation of poets appreciates most is the sense of freedom, but, unlike their predecessors, it is not freedom from a specific political reality of a totalitarian regime. It is freedom from politics itself, from any manifestation of public life. The mythology of political freedom of previous generations is now being replaced by the reverse mythology of personal freedom. It is a passive conception of freedom, freedom as a “state” rather than action. It abandons not only commitment,

patriotism, and Polishness but also the need to present a new poetic program, new aesthetics, and a new social sensibility.

The desire for freedom explains the popularity of travel and journeys, both as a symbol and a theme. On the symbolic level, other countries, other tongues have an attraction as antidotes to the excessive concern with things Polish. The exotic sounds of foreign names—Hancock, Wahiti, Rangers—evoke sensual beauty, are free from commandments associated with native speech. “We should endow our speech with foreign sounds,” says Andrzej Sosnowski, who calls himself “a displaced citizen of the world.” A great number of poems describe travel, vacations, trips, even leisurely walks, new landscapes and people: “Crimea,” “Qumran,” “Nouvelles Impressions d’Amérique,” “Time to Wander.” Many a new volume of poetry could bear Jack Kerouac’s title *On the Road*. There is a conscious affinity of attitudes between the American Beat generation of the 1950s and the Polish poets of the late 1980s and 1990s.

Travels, movement, and lack of stability, together with such other accompanying attributes as drinking, are all attempts to escape the deadly world of politics as well as the world of routine and philistinism associated with any establishment. The young poets declare themselves on the side of man and his “small, solitary rights,” and among those the idea of love figures most prominently. Sexually explicit, these poems have been viewed by some as pornographic; it seems more accurate to see in them a reaction against the puritanism prevalent under communism, a sense of joy that one can finally say everything.

The sense of freedom is also evident in a new attitude toward language, free of moral inhibitions and imperatives, language that does not “serve a cause.” Poetry is seen as a free game, “skipping stones on the water,” to quote one of

the poets. It abounds in poetic and linguistic games, puns, parodies of official or colloquial speech, such as the Polonized forms of foreign, mostly English words. Many poets follow in the footsteps of Miron Białoszewski and Stanisław Barańczak, masters of puns and linguistic games. Some reach even further back, to Polish prewar, experimental, avant-garde poetry. There is a strong ludic element in young Polish poetry that has opened the gates to humor, rarely found in the Polish poetry of the previous forty years.

The situation of Polish poetry in the 1990s parallels in many ways the situation in 1918, at the end of World War I, when Poland—after 123 years of captivity—regained independence. Among the most obvious similarities is the rebellion against the romantic model of national and messianic literature. An attitude that ascribes to writers a position of superiority, regards them as spiritual leaders, and requires them to be teachers or martyrs suffering on behalf of a collectivity—these are anachronistic and unacceptable for the young poets in the present situation. They rightly observe that this model functioned in all postwar Polish literature, regardless of the political convictions of individual writers, since it accommodated both the romantic ethos of the poet-bard and Marxist theory. The most frequently quoted expression of rebellion for the 1918 generation of writers is the line of a Skamander poet, Jan Lechoń: “And in the spring let me see spring, not Poland.” If the language was more abrasive and the tone more sarcastic, this line could have been written by one of the young poets today.

Critical reaction to the “new barbarians” in Polish poetry has been polarized. Accused of narcissism and nihilism by some, they are praised for pluralism and diversity by others. What is most appealing in Polish poetry today is its openness: openness to new experiences, new inspirations, new language. It is a poetry of transition, attractive not in what it proposes but in its search for new expressions; not in its achievements but in its daring attempts to present a new language. There are times, in history as well as in poetry, when a coming of the barbarians is inevitable, but one doesn’t know how much demolition will be done before another “high and beautiful wall” will be erected. **WLT**

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BOGDANA CARPENTER is Professor of Polish and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. She is the author of *The Poetic Avant-Garde in Poland, 1918–1939* and *Monumenta Polonica: The First Four Centuries of Polish Poetry*. Together with John Carpenter, she has translated Polish poetry into English, including seven volumes of poems and essays by Zbigniew Herbert. Recently she coedited (with Madeline Levine) a volume of essays by Czesław Miłosz, *To Begin Where I Am*.

Twenty-five years ago in the pages of *World Literature Today*:

“The poetry of Czesław Miłosz—winner of the 1978 Neustadt International Prize for Literature—has already been introduced to English-speaking readers in the collection *Selected Poems* (1973). *Bells in Winter* differs from that volume in its conception: instead of being a panorama of the poet’s various styles and stages, it has a thematic unity alluded to by the title and emphasized by a careful arrangement of poems. It is a very powerful and essential book, and its personal character makes it exceptionally moving. . . . In Miłosz the dialectician reinforces the Manichean, and the attitudes of the poet alternate between a sense of the apocalypse and a feeling of happiness, the knowledge of evil and the acknowledgment of beauty, the awareness of death and the reaffirmation of life. . . . For Miłosz, writing poetry is not a pleasurable exercise in language but the last resort in a situation which offers no solution, and it carries a moral responsibility.”—Review of Miłosz’s *Bells in Winter*, by Bogdana Carpenter, *WLT* 53:4 (Autumn 1979), 709–10.

Six Poems by Contemporary Polish Poets

SECOND POEM AGAINST THE STATE

JACEK PODSIADŁO

*I always hated all nations, professions and societies,
and all my love is directed at certain individuals.*

—Jonathan Swift

Demon of democracy, the monster of *raison d'état*,
hard will of the majority, collective whim,
everybody to the election urns, to urinals, to hunting
the wild beast of power, let's shout, bang, bellow,
beat club against club, wave rags.

If one were to take into consideration the mute, low voice of grass, of stones,
the shouting of trees and pronouncements of islands, dunes, ravines, and ruins,
the sharp comments of thistle, sarcastic sting of the nettle,
fiery speeches of dandelion and the sour oration of sorrel,
the ministers should be sent to a picnic, senators to pick mushrooms,
and the president should be stripped naked.

Let's pray, roars the cardinal, our prime minister lost power
in his legs, the left rightist hand is also succumbing to paralysis,
it would be a cardinal insult, an inexcusable mistake not to retain
life in the pink lips with which he rules the country,
let's pray, atone, love each other.

Collin Walcott, Don Cherry, and Nana Vasconcelos,
a wild song of life enclosed by the rules of ethno-jazz,
supersonic prayer in a stereophonic medium,
what joy in a solitary household.
Yet I would like to go back to the stone age.

To exchange the radio for a drum, a vacuum cleaner for a bunch of twigs,
in the dark to feel with touch instead of a lightbulb,
not pay taxes, not imprison words on paper.
And to throw a stone with good aim at the first democrat
who looks for someone like himself, so as to say: us.

05/24/91

JACEK PODSIADŁO, born in Szewna in 1964, published his early work in such literary magazines as the underground *Wolność i Pokój* and the Kraków-based *bruLion*. His book-length works include *Kompot z orangutana* (1989), *Wiersze wybrane, 1985–1990* (1992), *Niczyje, boskie* (1998), and *Wychwył Grahama* (1999).



MARCIN ŚWIETLICKI

holiday weather

The city seen from halfway up a hill
even the sky doesn't see me the sky is
resting
against higher chimneys filled with
smoke

I remain beyond the edge of shadow
the offense stayed in the city the offense is the city's affair
more than mine the barbarians
lie in ambush in shrubs parallel to me
we share the hatred but only they
will go down leveling the city
to the ground and I will look
into the eyes high on the spears

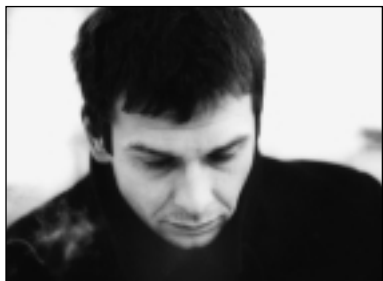


Photo: Eizbieta Lempp / Biuro Literackie

in June 1986

In June 1986
I often go past Majdanek.
It's hot, people are suntanning
on the lawn by the fence, some climb over
the fence, and there—inside—
they feel even
safer.



MARCIN ŚWIETLICKI (b. 1961) was one of the key poets featured in *Przyszli barbarzyńcy*, the anthology of "barbarian" poems published in Kraków in 1991. His other published works include *Zimne kraje* (1992, 1995), *Pieśni profana* (1998), *Czynny do odwołania* (2001), and *Nieczynny* (2003).

MARCIN SENDECKI



May(be)

Maybe everything can be explained more simply: like
now, when leaves of fire encircle the match and
slowly we rediscover ourselves in this weak, short
glimmer

MARCIN SENDECKI was born in Gdańsk in 1967. In addition to being included in the anthology *Przyszli barbarzyńcy* (1991), his published work includes *Z wysokości* (1992), *Parcele* (1998), and *Szkoci dół* (2002).



KRZYSZTOF KOEHLER

Untitled

Slowly the torch
of the eyes dies down
the world burns
and lasts

Untitled

Everything
clear:
the landscape
empowers
you
you are
you are
the answer
to death



KRZYSZTOF KOEHLER (b. 1963) has published the verse collections *Wiersze* (1990), *Partyzant prawdy* (1995), and *Trzecia część* (2003) and was also featured in the anthology *Przyszli barbarzyńcy* (1991). He has also edited the anthology *Słuchaj mie, Sauromatha: Antologia poezji sarmackiej* (2002).

Translations from the Polish
By John and Bogdana Carpenter