

LITERATURE & POLITICS IN POLAND

by Robert D. English

If Westerners harbored any doubts about the role of the Catholic Church in sustaining the Polish national spirit, the recent visit of Pope John Paul II to his native land surely laid them to rest. And yet the Church's historic partner in the enterprise of keeping Polish nationalism alive is still generally overlooked. That partner is Poland's national literature.

Polish literature helped sustain the nation through centuries of oppression, and its role in the post-World War II epoch has been no less critical. From the Romantic classics of the nineteenth century to a (for Eastern Europe) remarkably free modern literature, Poland's authors and poets are its unsung heroes in the struggle to preserve an independent national culture.

The history of modern Poland is a chronicle of rebellion and oppression. From the time of the first partition in 1772 through the current tyranny, Poland has known only one brief period of freedom and sovereignty, 1918 to 1939. Not only was Poland physically divided among Austria, Russia, and Prussia, but each sought to "de-Polonize" it in some degree. Prince Metternich directed strict curbs on Polish language and literature in Austrian-ruled Galicia following the Treaty of Vienna in 1815, and the czars adopted similar but crueler policies in Russian-ruled Poland following the failed uprising of 1830-31. Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* squelched Polish literature and language in Prussian-ruled Poland, while resettlement and the forced exodus of Poles threatened Poland's very existence. Despite this prolonged assault, Polish letters and language survived underground and after World War I helped the nation revive with a magnificence and speed that was truly remarkable.

From the idealism of Zygmunt Krasinski and the lyricism of Juliusz Slowacki, to the Romanticism of the incomparable Adam Mickiewicz, Polish nineteenth-century literature is infused with strong currents of patriotism, defiance, faith, and hope. Wrote Krasinski in *Psalm of Love*:

My Poland! Holy Poland! Thou standest on the threshold
of thy victory. This is the last term of thy sorrows.
Let it be only seen that thou art the eternal foe of

evil. Then shall the chains of death be shattered, and
thou wilt be assumed to heaven, because even in death
thou wast with God.

As Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz has put it: "On the borderline of Rome and Byzantium, Polish poetry became a home for incorrigible hope, immune to historical disasters."

Not incidentally, strong anti-Russianism is also a persistent theme. The following passage from Mickiewicz's *Ancestors*, heavily ironic, is illustrative:

What does it matter if I must suffer banishment, hard labor,
chains, if only as a faithful subject I am allowed to labor for
my Tsar! When in the mines I have to hammer diligently and
skillfully, I say to myself: "This grey iron will some day
become an axe for the Tsar."...If they send me out as a colonist
and I become a hetman or boyar, then I will sow my field
with hemp, only hemp, for the Tsar!

So remarkable is classical Polish literature in its nationalism and messianism that British historian A. E. Tennyson wrote in his 1924 *Studies in Polish Life and History* that "The poets take themselves and their work in dead earnest. They are not artists first, but national missionaries who strive to keep alive in their countrymen, imprisoned in a world of oppression, repression, and misery, a high and splendid patriotic ardor." It is this literature which has helped sustain Poland through its darkest hours and defines so well the Polish political character.

Given the inherited bond between literature, politics, and the nation, how has Poland fared since the imposition of Communist rule? The answer is, amazingly well. While the postwar literature has developed with a freedom unknown in the other Eastern bloc countries, the classics continue to nourish today's writers—and activists—with traditions of nationalism, faith, and sedition.

From outside the country it is difficult to appreciate the fundamental ways in which the Polish society has escaped the pall that communism has cast over the rest of Eastern Europe. Collectivization of the countryside was abandoned in 1948, and the Church remains highly independent, of course. But less visible is the fact that intellectual intercourse and press freedoms have generally been circumscribed far less than in the rest of Eastern Europe. Each of these slight "freedoms" has contributed to a continuation

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of Poland's historic ungovernability and played a part in the uprisings of 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, and 1980-81. While it is futile to weigh the importance of each of these factors in the development of Poland's postwar political culture, literature has had an undeniably central role. Consider Milosz's 1951 analysis of Poland's future in *The Captive Mind*:

Even if one could eliminate this revered mainstay of irrational impulses [i.e., the Church], national literatures would remain to exert their malignant influence. For example, the works of the greatest Polish poets are marked by a dislike of Russia, and the dose of Catholic philosophy one finds in them is alarming. Yet the state must publish certain of these poets and teach them in its schools for they are the classics, the creators of the literary language, and are considered the fore-runners of the Revolution. To place them on the [banned] index would be to think non-dialectically and to fall into the sin of "leftism." It is a difficult dilemma....

A difficult dilemma indeed. As Milosz foresaw, Poland's national literature, revolutionary and anti-Russian, has kept rebellious traditions strong. The fact that intellectual/literary freedom has been somewhat greater in Poland than elsewhere in the bloc has only served to magnify this "malignant influence." Tadeusz Kowalik, a former member of Solidarity's National Commission and an advisor to Lech Welesa, confirms Milosz's predictions. He attributes Solidarity's rise to "a combination of semi-socialism with the patriotic, nationalistic literature that is obligatory in all elementary and secondary schools."

Today's Polish writer feels a special kinship with his predecessors beyond anything the Westerner can readily understand. Foremost among the reasons for this seems to be Poland's amazing historical continuity. Certainly the vicissitudes of twentieth-century history have not spared the Poles any more than they have the rest of Eastern Europe—indeed, Poland has suffered far more—but somehow Poland has been less changed by them. The Church endures, farmers remain independent and workers highly militant, and the nation is still dominated by a powerful neighbor. Thus, Poland exists today largely as it has for over a century of partition and foreign rule.

If this helps explain why today's authors and poets often look to the past for inspiration and sustenance, so too does the Polish language itself. Milosz relates that the language of classical Polish poetry is closer "in tone and sensibility" to modern Polish than is the corresponding difference in English—another reason why, as Milosz puts it, a work such as Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* remains "the bedside book of every Polish poet."

Again it must be stressed that this classical literature is remembered not only by Poland's intellectuals but by the nation as a whole. "Many romantic poets, who wished to write rather for the entire community than for themselves or a small group of 'kindred spirits,' treated their texts as a special form of script to be read aloud to 'the generality,' 'the folk.'" notes Maria Janion, professor of Polish literature at Gdansk University. "In this way the poetry was to be transformed into life."

"DEATH AT CLOSE RANGE"

If Poland's writers, past and present, help sustain this proud national spirit, how is it different in the rest of Eastern

Europe? Moreover, how are these differences in literary culture manifested in East European societies at large?

Consider, for example, the fate of Czechoslovakia. Once a proud, prosperous, Western nation with a democratic tradition and a highly developed literature (the land, tellingly, of Franz Kafka), Czechoslovakia was the last of the Eastern European countries to fall under Communist rule. Its national spirit was not definitively crushed, however, until the arrival of Soviet tanks in the invasion of 1968. Since then widespread cynicism has been attributed to a "new social contract" in which the people agree to shun political activity in exchange for a minimum standard of living and relative security. The few who have dared speak out since, such as the Charter 77 signatories, have been ruthlessly suppressed.

Though there are many reasons why Czechoslovakia's fate has been different from Poland's, literature is again at the heart of the matter. While the mainstays of Polish culture have endured to sustain a nation, Czech culture is in danger of extinction. "Not since 1621 has the history of the Czech people experienced such a massacre of culture and thought," writes the emigré Czech writer Milan Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979).

The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster.

Poland may be under the oppressive regime of a Soviet-supported tyrant, but the nation still lives. "The Czech nation," writes Kundera, "can glimpse its own death at close range. Not as an accomplished fact, not as the inevitable future, but as a perfectly concrete possibility. Its death is at its side."

Such "cultural genocide," practiced by a government upon its own society, is truly a twentieth-century phenomenon. As George Orwell wrote in *The Prevention of Literature*:

Literature has sometimes flourished under despotic regimes, but, as has often been pointed out, the despotisms of the past were not totalitarian. Their repressive apparatus was always inefficient, their ruling classes were usually either corrupt or apathetic or half-liberal in outlook, and the prevailing religious doctrines usually worked against perfectionism and the notion of human infallibility.

The means of controlling education, ideas, even thought at the disposal of a modern totalitarian state are positively "1984ish" in comparison with the crude efforts at Germanification and Russification visited upon Poland in the nineteenth century.

If, as Kundera writes, Czechoslovakia has been subject to such a campaign of cultural eradication since 1968, what of Poland? Having escaped a serious cultural onslaught under Beirut, Ochab, Gomulka, and Gierek, will Polish literature finally be squelched by the regime of General Jaruzelski? Some, such as the Polish-born political scientist Zygmunt Nagorski, fear exactly that:

Poland is undergoing what could be called a process of "purification"—a purge of artists, intellectuals and opposition

leaders that may be more dangerous and more far-reaching than anything witnessed in the Soviet bloc since the days of Stalin.

This process is intended to bring about nothing less than the transformation of Poland from a satellite to an outright colonial dependent—from a proud, rebellious nation to a powerless, horror-stricken prisoner.

Though resistance will be strong, "Poland may have little chance of escaping Czechoslovakia's fate," says Nagorski, echoing Kundera. "When a nation's cultural roots are systematically cut and its most creative members are eliminated, then it faces the mortal danger of ceasing to exist as a nation."

Certainly the current purge of artists and intellectuals, the crackdown on publications, theatres, and universities is severe. But before writing Poland's epitaph, one must consider several points:

- Most of the writers interned under martial law have now been released and a large-scale underground literary establishment has developed.
- A recent state-run television program broadcast interviews with workers who openly ridiculed the new government-controlled labor unions.
- An official Catholic newspaper criticized an article by government press spokesman Jerzy Urban as "vile," and



later published letters calling Urban "a pig, cad and skunk" who wrote "repulsive, distasteful, stinking rot."

These and other gaps and contradictions in the regime's otherwise tightfisted grip are puzzling. Why are the anti-regime and anti-Soviet plays of the contemporary Polish playwright Slawomir Mrozek still being performed? Why does there remain relative freedom in university classrooms despite widespread firing of faculty? Some believe that the regime has not yet decided whether to enforce really hard-line cultural controls or whether to relax a bit. Perhaps for reasons endemic to Polish politics a certain amount of chaos and contradiction is unavoidable, even under what the government intends to be the harshest of conditions. But no matter what the reason for the current confusion, the fact remains that Polish literature and culture are flourishing in an underground, quasi-legal, oppositionist fashion with which the Poles have two hundred years' experience.

THE "INVISIBLE BOND"

If the preceding has shown the important role that literature plays in East European political culture, perhaps in passing it has also shown the striking manner in which such works of national literature capture an "essence" of the nation's politics that either evades scholars or simply cannot be classified by them. Few scholarly works can offer such insights into the tragic, Kafkaesque world of today's Czechoslovakia as Kundera's *Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. And for Poland, Tadeusz Konwicki's *The Polish Complex* is equally enlightening. As the story drifts between the dismal reality of endless queues and the brave but doomed rebellion of 1863, Konwicki reveals "the tangled web of social attitudes, political pressures, troubled memories, historical circumstances, and everyday inconveniences—which both nourishes and imprisons." It is a story of poverty, struggle, and failure, but it also offers hope. The Czechoslovakia of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* has no past and, consequently, no future; Poland has both. These two books of Eastern Europe tell a story that no political scientist can.

The unofficial national anthem, "*Geszeze Polska Nie Zginela*," was composed in 1797, shortly after the third and "final" partition of Poland. Maria Janion notes that "the words ['Poland has not yet perished, while we are alive'] contain a special and perpetual truth...for as long as we have the fatherland in our hearts Poland has not perished." A collective memory is thus the key to the preservation of the nation. In his lectures at the Collège de France in 1842, Mickiewicz explained that the words to the anthem mean that

people who preserve in themselves what constitutes the essence of Polish nationality are able to prolong the existence of their fatherland independently of any political conditions, and can strive for its restoration...[N]o matter where a man may find himself, by the same token that he thinks, feels, and acts, he can be sure that at the very same moment thousands of his fellow-countrymen are thinking, feeling, and acting like him. That invisible bond unites nationalities.

What Poland's future holds we cannot guess, for, as always, Poland is largely at the mercy of powerful neighbors. But we do know that it will survive. Its history, literature, traditions, and love of freedom are too strong for it to do otherwise. WY